

Aesthetics/Ethics of the Flesh

In his posthumous book *Confessions of the Flesh* (Pantheon Books, 2021), Michel Foucault (1926–1984) analyzes how early Christianity considered sexuality. This fourth instalment on the sexualized body follows the volumes published in his lifetime—*The Will to Knowledge* (first English edition in 1978), *The Use of Pleasure* (1984) and *The Care of the Self* (1986). His study of the body begins in the 18th century from the perspective of what Foucault calls “biopower,” then shifts in the second and third volumes to the philosophers and physicians of Greco-Roman Antiquity, and lastly to the religious approaches of the Church Fathers. In this final work, the experience of the flesh is subject to abstinence, virginity and marriage. While the relationship to the flesh may well be the site of several interdictions in this philosophical-theological context, it remains essential to our subject-being. As a “mode of experience, knowledge and transformation of the self by the self,” the flesh is part of the subjectivity associated with our sentient body.

Etymologically, the word *flesh* comes from the Old English *flæsc*, which means meat, the predominant component of the human or animal body, essentially composed of muscle tissue covered with skin. Yet the notion of flesh also evokes skin colour, which is certainly not singular but comes in an infinite variety of tones. Furthermore, in certain expressions, it refers to a person’s physical aspect. Flesh therefore does not only belong to me, but is also identified with other people or groups of individuals. According to the principles of biopower, the living body, the one that corresponds to the flesh, is often subject to forms of control, if not submission. This is true in a religious context, but also when it involves race, gender or various minorities. *Cette chair* (2017), a work by Haitian-born artist Stanley Février, is one example. The plaster sculpture is a life-sized reproduction of the artist. It shows him clothed only in underwear, kneeling with his arms raised, as though he is being threatened. Coated in white paint, the work implies a negation of his natural skin colour on behalf of one symbolizing the dominant culture. This is the spirit in which this issue’s feature section, edited by artist and Assistant Editor Didier Morelli, reflects on the subject of the flesh. As “a material and sentient understanding of being,” flesh is not experienced through a mode of asceticism. Intrinsically political, especially when associated with diverse cultural communities, we express the flesh through how we understand ourselves, but also through how different bodies of power perceive us.

In Western art history, the physical aspect of the body has long been represented in painting. Often depicted in Biblical scenes, it has been gradually transposed to figures, making them appear more sensual. An expert in 15th to 17th century European art, Itay Sapir writes about the paintings of Venetian artist Titian (c. 1488–1576), which draw inspiration from Greek mythology and are presented in four art museums. Although he also painted canvases related to religious themes, his works that *The Metamorphoses of Ovid* (43 BCE–17 CE) inspired are an ode to female flesh. Yet for Sapir, they also represent a sexist view of flesh and of the violence committed against the female body. For this reason and despite Titian’s immense talent, it is important to view these paintings “through the lens of our time” and to place the images of the past in dialogue with the art of the present, “particularly when the subject is flesh.”

It is possible that flesh has long been a matter of pictorial depiction because sculpture has mainly been concerned with form. It would take the advent of contemporary art for the exploration of “sculptural skins” to address the idea of flesh in other ways. In her essay, Sarah Moore Fillmore, Chief Curator and Deputy Director of Programs of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, analyzes the work of artists Lucie Chan, Janice Wright Cheney, Ursula Johnson, Amy Malbeuf and Sarah Maloney. These artists think of the body “as a site for investigating colonialism, racism and sexism.” They use “the body’s corporeality”