

ART21

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## KATHLEEN RYAN: WEIGHTLESS AGAIN AT GHEBALY GALLERY

by Lindsay Preston Zappas



Kathleen Ryan, *Rise and Fall*, 2017, stucco, chicken wire, 56 1/2 x 246 x 167 inches

What appears to be two sets of eyelashes, heavily laden with mascara, rest on the floor of Kathleen Ryan's current exhibition, *Weightless Again*, at Ghebaly Gallery in Los Angeles. Cast in iron from two curling palm fronds, the pair (like so many pairs found on the body) seems significant and, alongside other subtle caricatures of the feminine across the main gallery, leads to a slowly emerging personification.

The body of this female would be *Rise and Fall* (all works 2017). Its tubular form twists around itself, reclining. Made onsite with stucco and chicken wire, the contours of the abstract work recall Henry Moore's lounging female figures. While it is the largest object in the room, the work has an airy presence that doesn't demand the same attention as other, more gritty works in the exhibition. Featuring a dramatically clever scale shift, *Pearls* is draped over a large wall; the work comprises bowling balls of various shades of pink, threaded onto a thick pink rope, resembling a giant strand of hot-pink pearls. This work also lends itself to a personification: the wall becomes the figure's square and broad shoulders. This implied female figure looms over the viewer, gentle yet firm in her presence. In Ryan's recent solo show at Josh Lilley Gallery in London, she exhibited an oyster-like sculptural form, with a single bowling ball resting in its belly as the pearl. At Ghebaly Gallery, it seems the artist has plucked pearls from a number of such sculptures and presents them in a different state, elevated from raw oyster to manufactured bodily adornment. The relationship that Ryan makes across these of bodies of work (which were exhibited six months apart and on different continents) displays a honed finesse in creating a robust narrative across her oeuvre.

In the back gallery, Ryan's signature parrot-like figures rest atop a skeletal outdoor umbrella in *Parasol*. With little preciousness, Ryan champions these sloppy green ceramic objects, pocked with her fingerprints, making them animate on their lofty perch. Still, unlike the work

*Between Two Bodies*, which commands the front room with its massive presence, Parasol sits alone and feels a bit cast aside, as if demoted to the kids' table in the back. But in this room, the backside of *Pearls* is revealed: two arms of the necklace reach down the wall, seeming to reach toward the parrots for connection.

In *Between Two Bodies*, three ceramic oranges are set between two large blocks of granite. As if by magic, the ceramic fruits are uncrushed and seem to support the weight of the massive block above. The title is erotic in its evocations—two bodies suspended delicately apart, an eventual release implied. Despite this playful sensuality, the work exists in the realm of formal sculpture. Ryan's subtlety and lightness of touch is almost irreverent in the face of the canonized male modernists; one can almost hear the mantra, "backwards, and in high heels."

In truth, I hesitate to cast Ryan's work in such a gendered light, modeled against her male counterparts in the field of sculpture. Although female sculptors seem to be rare, their constant classification as such is tiring. Ryan's solo exhibition at Ghebaly follows her participation in *SOGTFO (Sculpture or Get the Fuck Out)*, an all-female sculpture show at the gallery in 2015. Despite the fantastic work in that exhibition, the grouping of women artists and the exhibition's aggressive name smacked of tokenism.

Yet, in *Weightless Again*, Ryan's display of large-scale sculptures feels more like Aretha Franklin's recording of "Respect," a song that was originally written and recorded by Otis Redding. As written in *Rolling Stone*: "She sang from higher ground... A woman calling an end to the exhaustion and sacrifice of a raw deal with scorching sexual authority." The art world has its own version of this kind of reclamation, with artists like Elaine Sturtevant leading the charge. Though Sturtevant evaded the description of her practice as feminist, her work, at least in retrospect, was a staunch form of female empowerment.

While Sturtevant took care not to overtly gender her works, Ryan's exhibition embraces a holistic feminine perspective, in its most root sense. Feminine as in *The Goddess*: a femininity that is clear of cultural conditioning or reactionary feminism, that celebrates a woman's unique and commanding peculiarities rather than comparing them to a man's. Overt in its sensuality and strong in its execution, the exhibition *Weightless Again* subverts the weight—both physical and historical—of sculpture, through its light touch and sensuous mystery. Here, showing that the female body is a powerful tool and an important ally, Ryan's works reclaim the feminine.