

BOOB

BIAS OBJECTS OBJECTIVE BODIES

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Words by Sophia Cai

Is it true to say that in the twenty-first century, the female body remains a site of deliberation and contention? From Instagram users' long-running campaign to #freethenipple from its "community guidelines" (i.e. censorship), to recent events in France around the attempted ban of burkinis, it seems that female bodies and their representation, portrayal and appearance, continue to be heavily contested in both the media and everyday experience. The biopolitics of gender, and the entanglement of power, control, bodies, and sexuality that continues to the present day demonstrate the ongoing internal and external struggles waged against female (and female-identifying) bodies, a struggle that does not appear to be alleviating or going away any time soon.

This messy ground of gender politics, assumed definitions, and identity provide a fertile ground for subversion and artistic intervention by Karryn Argus, Stephanie Leigh and Caroline Phillips. Collaborating and exhibiting together for the first time, these three artists share a common interest in the relationship between bodies and objects with a particular focus on materiality and abstraction. While working disparately across a variety of tactile mediums including fabric, rubber and timber, the three artists are united in their common interest in examining female narratives and experience. Their abstracted sculptural works suggest and provoke, rather than define and describe.

The starting point for this collaborative exhibition is indicated in the title of the show itself, BOOB, which stands for Bias Objects Objective Bodies. At once playful yet didactic, the exhibition invites viewers to unpack and unload their own assumptions and expectations, in particular as it relates to the depiction of feminine symbology and forms. The idea of bias and preferences comes to a fore through an affective reading of the work, an interpretation that is fuelled by a viewer's own expectations and understanding.

It is intuitive to read the works in the show, which share a common visual theme of pliability and roundness, as a challenge to traditionally phallic imagery and symbolism. From Argus's softly coiled mounds, to Leigh's moveable sculptures that invite physical interaction and Phillips' floor installations of round rubber disks with protruding pink detailing, the physical forms in the exhibition appear as embodied female objects, simplified forms that deconstruct and evoke links to the feminised body. However, to merely deduce or interpret the works in this manner would be to miss the range of meanings, as well as the potential of abstraction to operate outside of language and representational value. The works in the exhibition operate on the cusps of double meanings, as objects of seduction yet subversion, as works of consent and dissent, and as a show that reveals the interplay between subjectivity and objectivity.

There is a strong focus on materiality of the medium, whether through handmade or industrialised processes. For Argus and Phillips in particular, the process of making by hand and the material properties of their chosen mediums are essential to the work's meaning and delivery. With a tendency towards textile and craft-based practice, Argus' approach to art-making is intuitive and informed by her own felt experiences and personal histories. Her resulting soft conical sculpture, *Blanketing the Self*, expresses the artist's inner state and her concern that the art object's materiality be maintained through the making process. Phillips shares a similar interest in craft history and handmade processes, although she takes her material inspiration from recycled objects gleaned from industry. By using contrasting materials such as rubber and rope in the work *Spherical Object #1*, which signify ideas of tension and torque, Phillips creates a work that activates a relationship between movement, freedom and the material body.

By contrast, materiality is embodied in Leigh's sculptural work *Acquiescence* through its tactility and invitation for direct interaction. Working with timber, Leigh has created five black timber voids that hang on springs. Their tear-shape is evocative of breasts, alluding to the bodily form. Leigh invites viewers to don gloves to manually bounce the breast shaped boards, playfully investigating ideas of consent and power surrounding both art objects (don't touch) as well as women's bodies. In doing so, Leigh's works challenge assumptions of gender politics, to consider the broader implications of consent both in and through physical interactions.

This focus on the bodily is significant in relation to the broader discourse surrounding objectivity and subjectivity. Feminist art history in the West since the 1970s has had a strong tradition of body-centred art as a means to politicise and embody female experience and issues. The artists in BOOB by contrast, approach the theme of the bodily through an abstracted language, thereby drawing attention to unconscious gender biases in the viewer and the manner by which we 'read' bodies and sexuality through suggested shapes and forms. The use of the colour pink is also significant in this context, as pink signifies flesh and the bodily, but its use with discordant materials like rubber, plastic, and fabric, challenges gender assumptions and normativity.

BOOB is an exhibition that considers the convergence of disparate and opposing forces in order to illuminate a deeper reading of objects. Operating between representational and abstract, softness and hardness, flatness and roundness, hand-formed and machine-made, gendered and non-gendered, the works of Argus, Leigh and Phillips reveals a potential for understanding female experience and embodiment from a range of perspectives and interpretations.

*Sophia Cai is an independant curator, writer and art historian, with an interest in contemporary Asian art as well as craft based practices. She completed a Masters in History of Art at the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London and previously graduated from the ANU with an Honours degree in Art History and Curatorship.*

BOOB - Bias Object Objective Bodies

Karryn Argus, Stephanie Leigh, Caroline Phillips

KINGS Artist Run, Melbourne, Australia

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[www.karrynargus.com](http://www.karrynargus.com)

[www.stephaniefredaleigh.com](http://www.stephaniefredaleigh.com)

[www.carolinephillipsart.wordpress.com](http://www.carolinephillipsart.wordpress.com)



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