Usdan Gallery, Bennington College

OVER

Sreshta Rit Premnath
with scores by
Mina Nishimura and Kota Yamazaki

Overbody: new works by Sreshta Rit Premnath
Usdan Gallery at Bennington College
September 16–December 6, 2025
Curated by Anne Thompson

This book contains two conversations:

1. Butoh artists and Bennington dance faculty Mina Nishimura and Kota Yamazaki created movement scores responding to Premnath's preparatory drawings for sculptures in the exhibition. The scores may be used as prompts for audience members to physically enact or think about when viewing the exhibition.

2. Usdan Gallery director and exhibition curator Anne Thompson and Premnath discuss the artist's practice and ideas motiving the work on view in Usdan Gallery.

4. Your left knee begins to draw a ritualistic, orderely pentagon.

3. Your chest begins tracing the letters of the word "zucchini" in a slick, slimy motion.

5. Your imaginary transparent left foot begins to step.

1. Your dropping eyes slowly begin to rotate.

"Then what happens to the afternoon lion?"

= Still

6. The impulse inside the neither

Try let out a soft 'ho'
= Can you fly?"

Try sliding off the back of a frog and taking off
can't fly?"

unfamiliar words

Your back begins to ripple

astral projection?

2. The calf of your right leg registers a disturbing space, something like 1/5th of a whole, and it's beginning to dissolve.

that is "me"
stomach goes
here nor there... it's in between.

back - and - forth
back - and - forth
back - and - forth
back - and - forth
- - - - - -
(till your body starts floating)

The Western sun
reflects off the water
and cast a shadow
over your face.

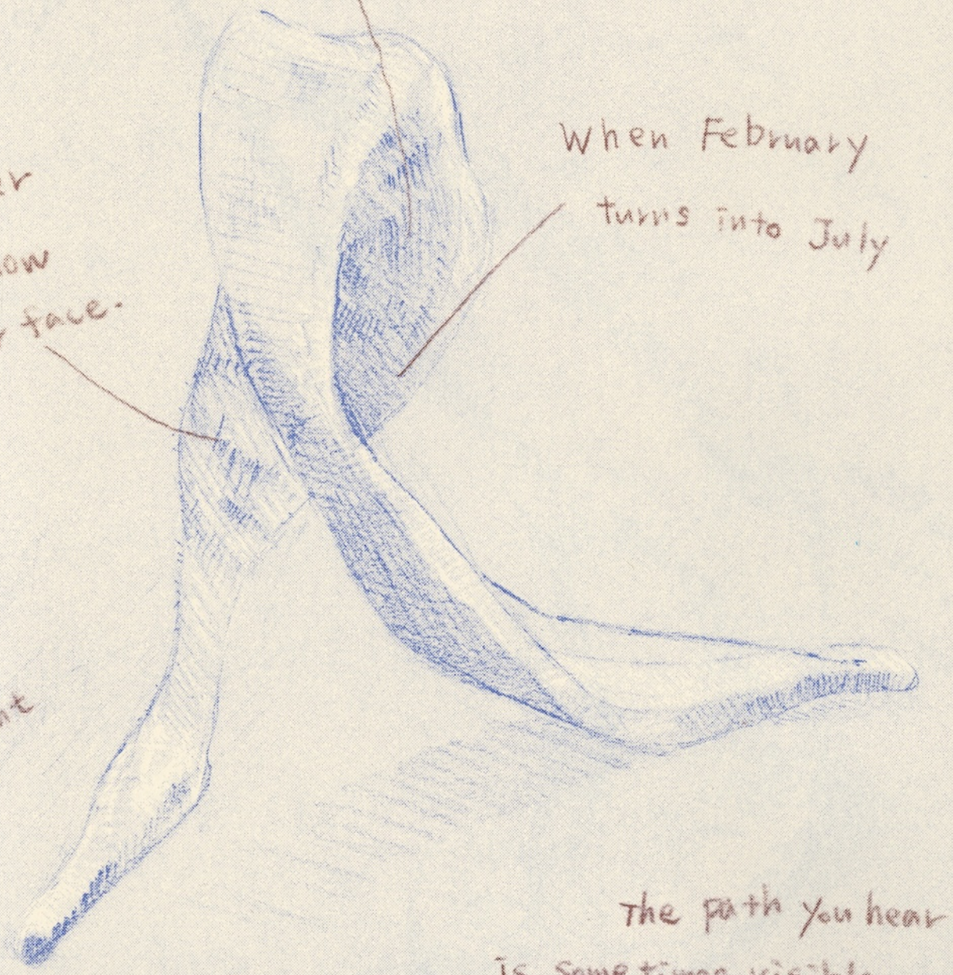
By stopping, more and more memories
rise up. From every part of your body,
they overflow.
(because they erupt simultaneously,
your body can move in any direction.)

It hints at some distant void.

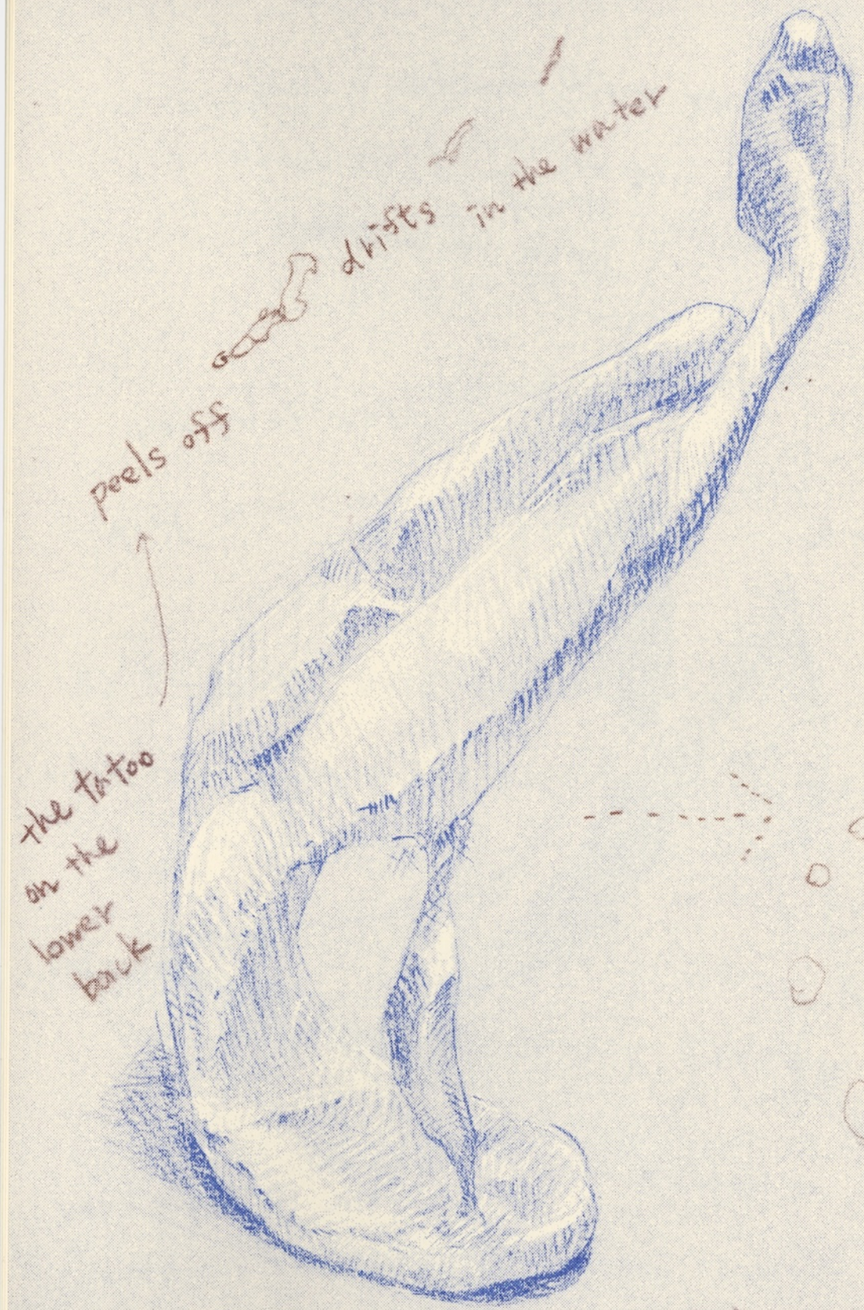
This might be what human motion
will be like 1,000 years from now.

The way your moving shadow
feels changes, like the skin's sense of
touch in motion.

When February
turns into July



The path you hear
is sometimes visible,
sometimes not.



To fly infinitely slowly,
to feel the subtle changes
in the body the moment you leap - and
to forget that you ever had a self

a wind-object
that belongs to
no
particular
place...

Exhausted emotions transform the body into such a form.

BEETLE: "This dotted line of excitement follows me everywhere."

GHOST: "The CONFUSION of stars and urns."

BEETLE: "The crevice of a spark that doesn't know it's never been awake."

GHOST: "A stride toward your far shore Whispering, 'I was never searching ...'"

GHOST:

"Behind the maroon curtain, the beetle occasionally walks upward, shakes itself. I watch gently restrain you, unnoticed? Even if I ask that, there's no reply .... (sneeze)

BEETLE:

"Maybe ... I'm just your illusion?"

GHOST:

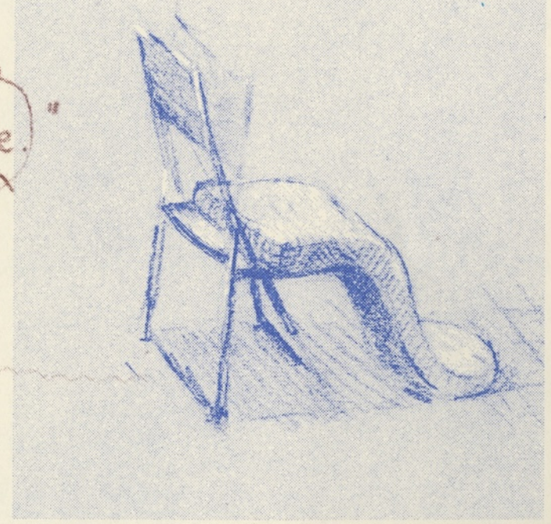
"You don't know the Eskimo's S-garment, do you?"

BEETLE:

"The question of gaze."

GHOST:

"The object that is evasive paper (sigh ...)."



SHADOW / FOLD:

A conversation between Sreshta Rit Premnath and Anne Thompson, conducted Friday, August 8, 2025, at Premnath's studio in Williamstown, Mass.

AT: Let's start with the "overbody," a defining concept for your new sculptures and one that emerges from earlier ideas about something you call the "slump."

RP: The "slump" developed from thinking about ways the body is shaped by outside forces: how the social and political get turned into architecture—physical and intellectual spaces—and how the body is supported by and shaped by those spaces. The "slump" was a bodily form, not a literal representation but a way of thinking about relationships between body and site, contexts that can be supportive and allow for some freedoms yet also be coercive and controlling. Then the "slump" became a way of thinking about relationships between bodies. Not just individual bodies in spaces but bodies supporting or waiting with each other. My thinking here was influenced by the essay "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," by Judith Butler.

AT: ... incidentally, a Bennington alum.

Rit Premnath: ... oh, I didn't realize that! In that essay she talked about the space between people when we gather and protest as a space of political emergence. That moment of gathering and protesting constitutes a way of being in the world that is utopian. It's like in that moment of gathering, you constitute a future world in the present.

I've been thinking about people who are not formally part of a society and not given the privileges of political agency. Undocumented immigrants, or, to a lesser extent, "resident aliens," which I was when I first moved to the U.S. as an international student. There's a sense of being someplace and feeling that one has rights—a right to exist, a right to express oneself, all of that—but knowing those rights can be taken away at any moment. The existence of certain people, certain bodies, is always on the edge. Their relation to where they are fluctuates between belonging and being outside. I began to think of the shadow as a metaphor for this condition. The body-on-the-edge exists on a plane perpendicular to other bodies—spectral, there and not there. One might say the shadow is an "underbody," the result of a force that acts on the body and writes it into the world as a specter. And the forces that shape this shadow-realm could be called the "overbody."

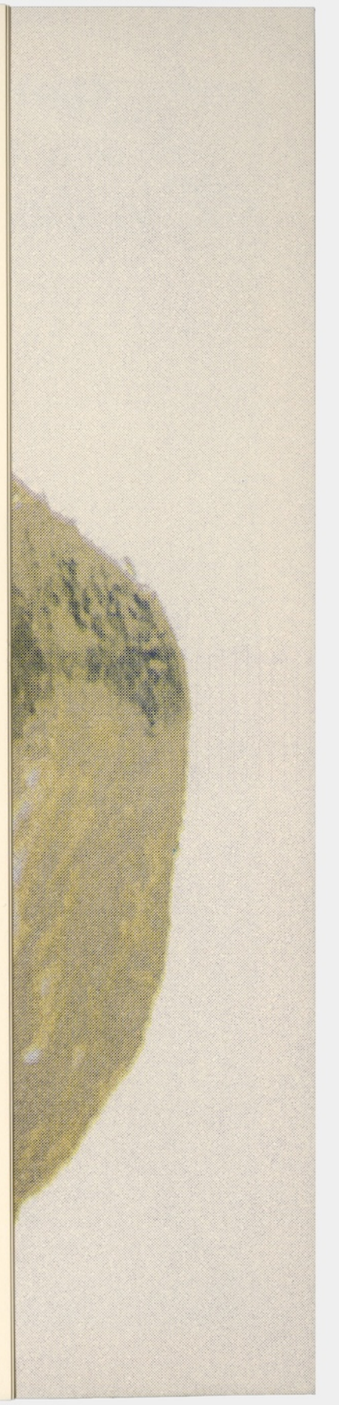
AT: Since we're talking about physical objects—sculptures as well as bodies—I'm thinking of physical or natural forces like gravity alongside abstract but equally pressurized forces like systemic structures. If the "overbody" is a control pressure and the "underbody" is the resulting shadow, it sounds like the human body could occupy either of these conditions and also float someplace in the middle.

RP: Yes, the idea that a person exists in a shifting, interstitial condition—I could be here, or I could be taken away from here. I don't think of these two forces as necessarily inside or outside the body but rather as an entwined power relation that we move between. We might, in different aspects of our lives, occupy more or less of one of these positions. But your use of the metaphor of gravity is useful, because gravity acts on the body. You have to work against gravity to stand up. And when you succumb to gravity, you fall. It's a force that orients and shapes us, and one that I draw attention to in my sculptures. I try to make forms that are figurative enough so viewers identify with them but abstract enough to allow for thinking about a broader set of relations between entities, not just humans with particular identities. Their precarity, the way they lean and tilt, creates a sense of vulnerability.

AT: Gravity and social structures—and the acknowledgement and resistance of both as forces—are considerations within [the Japanese dance form] butoh, which you've been thinking about with your latest work. How did butoh start influencing your practice?

RP: The initial world of ideas that I was drawn to was that of Georges Bataille and his concept of the "formless." I liked his thinking about grotesqueness and aspects of embodied life that we shy away from or keep hidden, at least in Western culture. And that by paying attention to and revealing those "ugly" aspects of the body, something real can emerge. The corpse, for example, was something that Bataille was interested in for this reason.

And, arguably, the Surrealists and German Expressionists were also attracted to an anti-aesthetic, something that resisted Western norms of beauty. I see a similar interest in butoh,



which developed in relation to the postwar Western influence on aesthetics in Japan. There was a desire in that moment, in the mid-to-late '50s in Japan and other parts of Asia—including India—to reimagine modernism in a national, and in some cases postcolonial, context. An aesthetics of ugliness was already part of Japanese traditional dance. And so, for butoh dancers, there was an avant-garde effort to invent a new language that broke from ballet, as well as a return to aesthetics rooted in Japanese culture and philosophy. The first time I saw videos of butoh dancers, there was something about that grotesqueness—the corpse-like quality of the body and the dancer pushing the body into forms that were awkward and strange—that really attracted me. I didn't know what it was about. I didn't know anything about its history. It was the form that drew me in, and the fact that they painted themselves gray and white like the sculptures I had been making.

AT: Butoh is often called the "dance of darkness," and part of that description operates in references to death.

RP: One thing that's interesting to me is the difference between, say, Buddhist notions of death and Christian notions of death. In Buddhist philosophy, death is a point in a cycle, and in Shintoism, death is a transition to the spirit realm. In Christianity, when you die...

AT: ... you go to heaven—or maybe hell. Christianity has its own corpse element with Jesus, a kind of zombie reanimation that could function as grotesque, although it ultimately gets sanitized. The body gives way to spirit, and that's its final state.

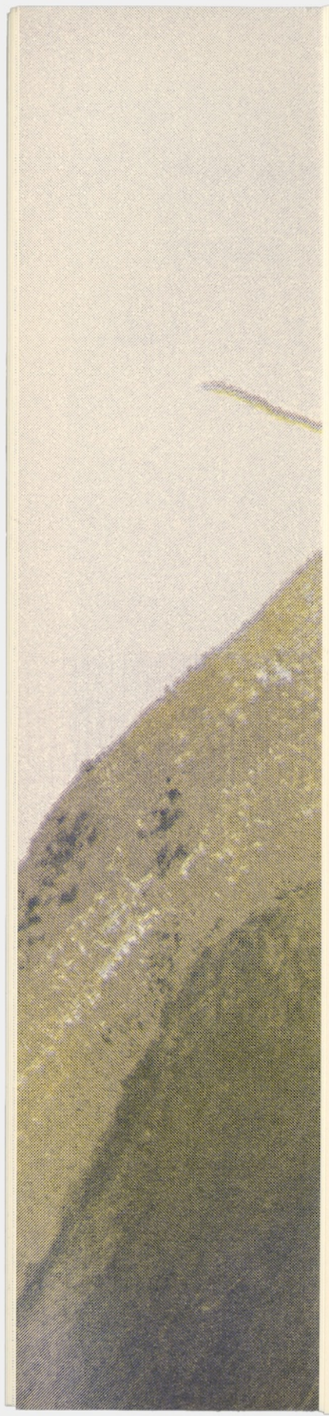
RP: But with butoh, although the dancers adopt this corpse-like quality, it's not about death as an end. It's a threshold, it's a state of transformation and possibility. I came across the term Rikyu Grey in a lecture that Trinh T. Minh-ha gave, also on the topic of moments of transformation. The architect Kisho Kurosawa coined the term in the '70s to describe a color that was not neutral—usually how we imagine gray—but rather the mixture of all colors and therefore a shade from which any other color may arise. I've been using encaustic, a wax medium, and working with a wide range of grays, albeit within a very limited palette, for the surfaces of my sculptures.

AT: I've heard butoh described as something that takes you deep into yourself. Your movements are self-determined and self-actualizing—improvisational—yet at the same time you lose yourself. It's not negation but a going into the self to get away from the self and as a result, to come back around to being more anchored in the self. Which strikes me as something very Buddhist. Last spring, you and I took a butoh class with [Bennington faculty] Mina Nishimura and Kota Yamazaki. We did exercises like "lie on the floor and move like a starfish" or "your body is pressed down by gravity but your leg is floating against gravity." What was that experience like for you?

RP: That was the first time I had done butoh. I've never trained in dance. Any interest I have in choreography is purely conceptual! One thing I found eye-opening was that they explore abstract notions—like the "body without organs"—but operationalize them in a physical way. For me, it felt like making my body strange to myself, in an environment that didn't feel like I was doing dance at all. They set up a structure in which we were all exploring something very weird together with the help of two guides, rather than teachers. For part of the class, I had my eyes closed, just to take myself out of myself, as you say, and not feel self-conscious about things I was doing on the floor. Then, at a certain point, they invited us to follow each other around the room, grouping together if we wanted to. I tried repeating other people's gestures or getting close to them and joining in their movements. It was a very organic way of exploring something that I had been thinking about with my "slumps." About a space of relation, the space between bodies.

AT: I had a similar experience, tuning things out so I could be unselfconscious in responding to the prompt and really going for it. And then opening my eyes and having a heightened awareness—where I am in the architecture, where the other people are—and then, in this heightened state, responding to a prompt to interact with objects or people. It's not following a prescribed pattern or enacting choreography but discovering your own way of operating.

RP: And part of that, too, is taking up positions physically that give you a very different perspective.



AT: Like, you're twisted sideways on the ground, looking up under your bent leg.

RP: Or you've been lying for a long time, staring at some corner of the ceiling, which you would have never otherwise paid attention to. Or seeing other people who you were just sitting next to and talking to, like a group of regular human beings, and now they're wrapped around a railing or sliding down stairs or whatever. It changes my relation to myself but also to others, and makes me take up points of view or perspectives that are potentially alien to me.

Which is something I think about with sculpture. Figurative or figurelike sculpture provokes a point of view or position, because there is an aspect of mirroring, where you imagine yourself as the sculptural body. With abstract sculpture, the object has a more architectural quality. The viewer imagines themselves in relation to that object: occupying it, moving around it, being blocked by it, these sorts of things. This is why I've become fascinated by these old forms of art making—figurative sculpture and painting—and how something figurelike in size or shape, something lumpy or fleshy, creates a doubling that doesn't happen easily with architectural forms.

AT: Talking about doubles makes me think about pairs in your work. With the "overbody" sculptures, you have two things in opposition, but the nature or duration of that tension is left open. Things might shift. There's a similar ambiguity in your word-pairing wall pieces. They riff on the form of the "exit" sign but contain two different words—one on each side—that are disconcertingly similar. Like "grave" and "grove." Just one letter changes, "a" to "o," and the meaning shifts from something about death—the grave—to something suggesting life—the grove or garden.

RP: The desire to hold distinct things next to each other or in relation to each other, not necessarily opposites but maybe two things you might not immediately know how to synthesize: that's something I've been interested in for a long time. In the text pieces, the gap between the words is also a key element, the hinge that holds two ideas together and apart.

Presenting contradictions is something visual art has an ability to do particularly well. With a book, you can't see it all at once. You can read the prologue or cover blurbs, but the only way to get the whole thing is to take the time to read the whole thing. The same goes for music. But you see an artwork all at once and immediately have an idea about it. You then focus on disparate parts or come closer and explore surface textures and so on. It has this capacity because it implies that there's a reason for elements to be together, forcing the viewer to make connections, whether or not they are obvious.

I think of it like this. On the one hand, there are existential questions we struggle with as humans, and that's on one register. And then there are social and political issues—you know, immigrants being imprisoned in some horrible place called Alligator Alcatraz or being abducted to other countries to be imprisoned there. These are things happening to people that cannot be abstracted into metaphor. And then there are more private aspects of life that may seem banal but are also fraught. We experience all these registers at the same time. And the beauty of art is that it allows us to approach all these ways of being in the world at the same time, without having to pick one and make a statement about it.

For example, the founders of butoh, Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, don't expressly speak about the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But I think it's absolutely present—it's the condition that shapes and informs the grotesqueness, absurdity, and deathliness of their dance. There are certainly artists I look at and think about for whom the existential aspect is more pronounced, and specific political issues less so. But for me, the political is an equally important dimension as the existential.

AT: When I first visited your studio, your work made me think about Giacometti. I'm thinking about him again now, as you talk about existentialism alongside traditions of figuration. There's that story about Giacometti and the Surrealists in Paris—how he couldn't work purely from his subconscious and so returned to drawing and sculpting from life models. And when he admitted this to André Breton, the Surrealists basically kicked him out of their group. So looking at and thinking about the reality of

a physical body was arguably the only way for Giacometti to reach the existentialist ideas present in his work. What's your relationship to this history, to Giacometti and his approach to the figure?

RP: I love Giacometti's work, particularly his drawings. They have this vibrational quality, almost like he's searching for some core aspect of the figure by drawing and redrawing it. I've loved his drawings for a long time, and if you had asked me this question in high school, I would have provided a different answer. It might have been teenage angst. But the body on the edge of disappearance has always been powerful to me.

AT: While we're talking, I can't help looking at one of your sculptures. It seems to be doing many of the things you're saying about a figure "on the edge" or in a state of ambiguity. Not quite life-size, it looks like a body made up of body fragments, like a head and a neck and a finger combined. It seems like it's doing a somersault, or trying to do a headstand, not unlike some moments we saw in butoh class. It has a corpse-like quality; it seems bony, maybe a little emaciated or decayed. The gray color verges on brown, purple, and green. The surface is shiny and matte. And part of it is encased in burlap, reminiscent of hair or clothing, like a long sock, or maybe a bandage. It looks scratchy, and you seem to have stretched or messed with the weave to expose more of the gray underneath. Yet the burlap grid is present enough to form a counterpart to the chainlink grid you use in other works. The whole thing is strange and familiar, awkward and graceful, ugly and beautiful, all at once.

RP: This is the first time I'm showing this body of work, so I just want to echo what you're saying, because the work is strange to me as well. Which is what we want as artists, really. To be in a place where you make something and you're like, How did this even happen?

AT: Can we talk about the tongue? Of all the sculptures, it's the most representational. It's literally a tongue, a body part, but gigantic and out in the world with a kind of autonomy and a weird authority—maybe because it's sitting on a chair.

RP: What can I say about that? I really don't know.

AT: Okay, that's kind of ironic.

RP: I'm tongue-tied! Of course, the tongue relates to the speech act, a form of asserting laws and control. Especially the tongue on a chair, the chair being a place for the body, but also, in some cases, a place from which you speak from a position of power. But there's another side to it, which relates back to the grotesque, the formless. Battaile was fascinated by the big toe. I think there's something about the tongue, the toe, the thumb, the penis—weird body parts that belong to us but also seem very odd and alien when we pay attention to them.

AT: And sexual as well.

RT: Tongues are both rational and sexual. They're associated with language and taste. And the other aspect of the sculpture is the chair, which is a famous modernist chair—the 40/4, designed by David Rowland to be stackable and comfortable to suit the standardized, modern office worker. So this large, bulbous, gray, heavy-seeming tongue is precariously sliding off this tasteful chair. A slip of the tongue. I think it's Henri Bergson who, in his essay on laughter, talks about humor as the recognition that we have a body. There's something about the formality of the chair versus the awkwardness of the tongue that feels funny and maybe a little sad to me. There's something vulnerable about it.

AT: The other explicitly figurative works are your paintings. Except they don't actually represent bodies but shadows or reflections of bodies. As you said about the "underbody," they're there but not really there.

RP: The paintings started from a direct reference to particular shadows: those of people migrating within India during the COVID lockdown. Making them became a way of thinking about the shadow as a metaphor for a body that is out of place or does not belong—in this case, laborers who had lost work and were trying to return home by foot.

The horizon line was another thing on my mind while making

these paintings. This is a device and metaphor I've used before, thinking about a zone of desire but also of loss. I'm particularly focused on what happens below the horizon line, often in relation to the floor. Whether that means sculptures that feel like they're falling over, or, in this case, shadows as figurative elements. And the area above the horizon is mostly black, but there's a lot happening in the monochromatic areas of ink, and that dense, fluid zone above the horizon is important to me. I think of it as analogous to the grays in my sculptures, as a space of emergence but in this case also a force of oppression—the overbody.

AT: It makes us question what or where the action is. Is what's above the horizon line the reality? Like, yes, that's the ground, or the place where these figures are understood to be located, but it's the least legible thing in the painting. So this infers that the ground you're standing on, the place you are, is dark, not understood, abstracted. While the figurative realm—the understandable narrative of the painting—is shadowy and fugitive. The representational content of the painting is, in fact, not really represented.

RP: And the figurative realm below the horizon also vacillates between negative and positive space. In some cases, what pops out first is an unidentifiable shape, the negative space between the shadows. And you find your attention moving back and forth between the shadow and its background. I mean, it's something artists have been messing with for a long time, and here it takes on a political valence.

AT: Given the influence of butoh on your new work, we invited Mina and Kota to collaborate by writing butoh scores in response to your preparatory drawings for sculptures. Their scores—printed in this catalog with the drawings—form a parallel conversation to the one we're having right now. And, for the audience, they offer prompts for approaching your work: physically, by moving in the space, or philosophically, by contemplating abstract or poetic ideas. For you, what resonates most about the scores?

RP: I enjoy the sections that verge on the absurd—for example, the conversation between a ghost and a beetle. It's surprising and strikes a chord, because spectral figures appear throughout the exhibition. The scores address "the question of gaze," something I'm thinking about, especially in the sculpture Vanishing Point. Yet the "hip-thrust movement" implies a sexual connection between the two figures, something I hadn't intended or noticed. This is what's generative about collaboration. Another artist's mind and process becomes commingled with mine. I hope their scores can be interpreted and performed in the exhibition this fall. It's like a game of telephone.

ENDNOTES

Butler, Judith. "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street." Transversal Texts, September 2011, transversal.at/transversal/1011/butler/en.

Minh-Ha, Trinh T. "Between Dog and Wolf." Soundcloud, https://soundcloud.com/oneperson/between-dog-and-wolf-trinh-t.

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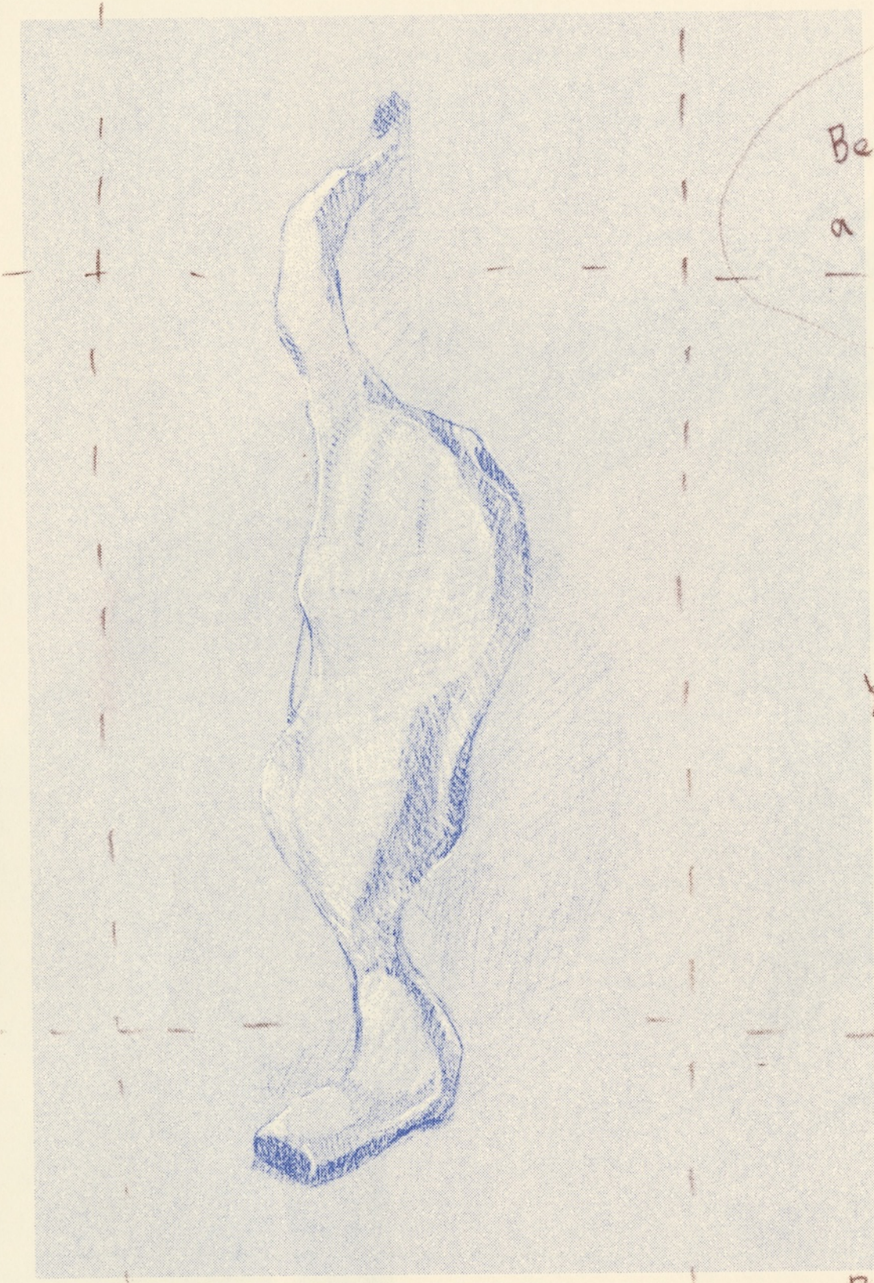


Behind your eyes,
a chaotic construction site

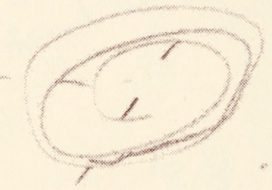
Let's suppose ten fingers
are at your waist, and
they twitch slightly.

Your back has the color and contour of a persimmon.

Your eyes shine,
trying to capture
something certain.

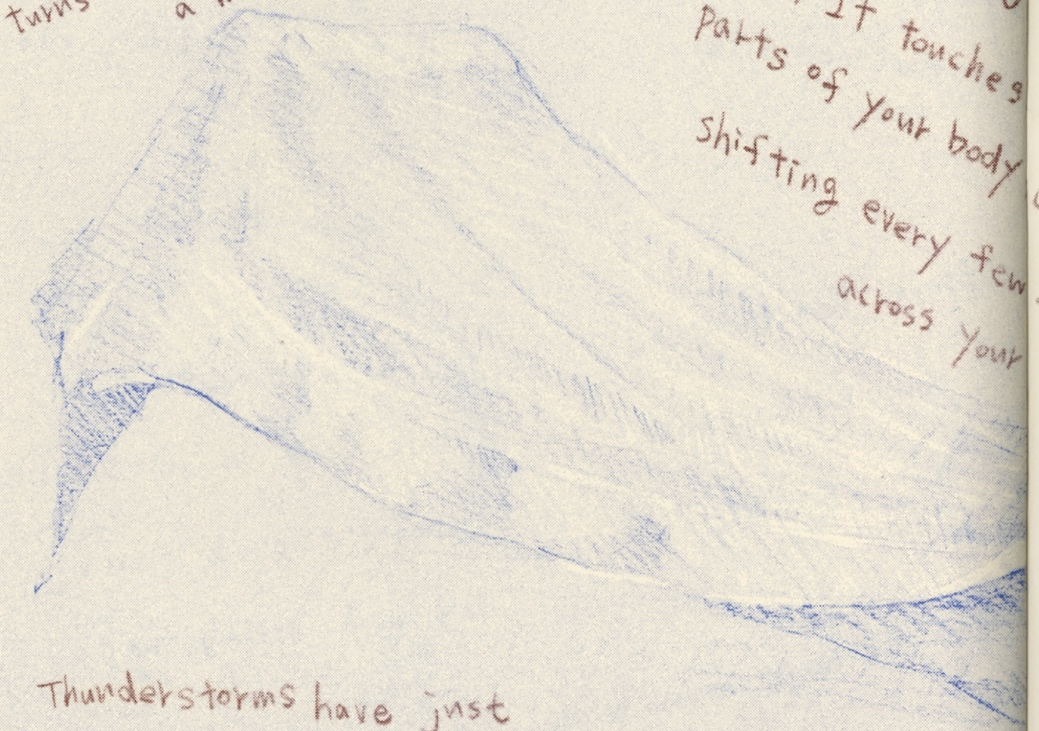
Behind her more scaffolding continues, endlessly.

A chill runs through
your left eyebrow
like ice stabbing in.



For a moment, your
whole body becomes like
a snake's shed skin,
dry and trembling.

The pale face
turns into
a mask.



The overlapping sensation
of mind. It touches
parts of your body
shifting every few
across your

Thunderstorms have just
begun inside your lungs;
rain begins at your toes,
with movements as if
never touching the ground.

Can you feel a whispered anecdote
alongside the curve of your ribs?

different
constantly there is no arrow to be found here.
seconds (No striking memory!)
skin.

"To go, whether
Someone is there or not...
that is the decision."

Body parts prismatize.

(wind)

no where

(will = 'what')

Softly lower your hips, back and forth, for joy.

Your legs break away

and

grow taller than you are.

Run slowly, don't feel the ground, let your heels bounce.

(You ask again.

"I never came back,

did I?")

(The words

"where are you going?"

float like

damp tissue.)

Intentionally remembering
never having sat in a chair

(The GHOST)

But in time,
they change into new variations

doesn't suck its finger,
and when spoken to, only
the left eye slightly loosens...

only discovered
this place.

Even your cells are surprised.

("Look! There, it's changed again.")

The wind you create becomes particles,
dispersing everywhere.

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Curated by Anne Thompson, director and curator of Usdan Gallery

Opening reception: Tuesday, September 16, 6-8 pm
Artist talk: Tuesday, October 21, 7 pm, Tishman Auditorium

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