

Francesco Dama

Fragmented Bodies in Rome*

a cold sweat comes over me, trembling
seizes me all over, I am paler
than grass, and I seem nearly
to have died.

But everything must be endured, since...

Sappho, *Fragment* 31¹

ABSTRACT: In her 1994 lecture *The Body in Pieces*, American art historian Linda Nochlin puts in relation the representations of incomplete human figures with the idea of modernity, by looking at art works from Neo-classicism and Romanticism to Impressionism, Surrealism, and beyond. Taking into account's Nochlin's intuition, this paper examines the representation of fragmented bodies in the works of three figurative contemporary artists: Celia Hempton, Wardell Milan, and Paul Mpagi Sepuya, which were included in the exhibition *Fragmented Bodies*, held from 5 April to 8 June 2024 at Galleria Lorcan O'Neill, Rome. The paper also acknowledges the particular relationship of the city of Rome with fragments of bodies, from the many mutilated ancient Roman statues to the Christian cult of relics, considering the psychological interconnections between the past, history, and memory.

KEYWORDS: Celia Hempton; Wardell Milan; Paul Mpagi Sepuya; Rome; body.

In her 1994 lecture-turned-essay *The Body in Pieces*, art historian Linda Nochlin puts in relation the notion of fragmented bodies with the idea of modernity, locating the transformative series of events that ushered in the modern period at the end of the 18th century.

The scholar argues that with the French Revolution fragments turned from expressing nostalgia for the past into symbolizing «the deliberate destruction of that past or, at least, a pulverization of what were perceived to be its repressive traditions»². Two illustrations included in the essay speak volumes in this sense: a scene of the destruction of the equestrian statue of Louis XIV in Place Vendôme; and an etching of the guillotined head of Louis XVI.

* This text was originally written as an introduction to *Fragmented Bodies*, a contemporary art exhibition held from 5 April to 8 June 2024 at Galleria Lorcan O'Neill, Rome. Curated by the author of this paper, the exhibition featured works on paper, photographs, and oil paintings by three figurative contemporary artists: Celia Hempton (b. 1981), Wardell Milan (b. 1978), and Paul Mpagi Sepuya (b. 1982).

¹ Neri 2021, p. 428.

² Nochlin 1995, p. 8.

In visual arts, fragmented figures have been often put in relation to the representation of modernity and the construction of modernism as a style.

When Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas first painted cut-off views and cropped compositions of people, the majority of the Parisian public perceived them as highly experimental and “modern”, making them ideal companions to the scenes described in *The Painter of the Modern Life* by Charles Baudelaire. Some decades later, Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso introduced paper shapes on the surface of their Cubist drawings, opening up a whole new world of possibilities. In the same way the collage was recognized as a rebellious technique opposed to oil paint, disregarded as an old-timer medium, other European artists employed photomontage from a perspective of disruption, elevating it as a new kind of art object.

Spellbound by psychoanalysis, the surrealists developed entire narratives around parts of the human body. Their favorite pastime, drawing *cadavres exquis*, was a collaborative way to compose figures out of different parts³.

The works of Celia Hempton, Wardell Milan, and Paul Mpagi Sepuya, the three artists featured in the exhibition *Fragmented Bodies* at Galleria Lorcan O’Neill, look at this tradition with fresh eyes, re-visiting some of those visual codes and techniques.

Born between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, Hempton, Milan and Sepuya share an interest in representing the human body as a fractured site rather than a unitary entity.

In her paintings, Hempton isolates details of the human body to uncover their vulnerability. Because these are usually titled with the first name of the model who sat for her, they could be considered a visual expression of synecdoche, the figure of speech in which a part is made to represent the whole: the fragment speaks for its (lost) entirety.

From this perspective, Hempton works consciously within the traditional tropes of nude painting, to challenge the conventional roles of male artist and female muse, revealing some of the contradictions typical of our society, split between the normalization of exhibitionism and the persistence of sexual taboos.

Rooted in photography, the work of Wardell Milan and Paul Mpagi Sepuya share a common ground that intersects race, gender, and sexuality.

³ Translated in English as “exquisite corpse”, the *cadavre exquis* is a game in which each participant takes turns writing or drawing on a sheet of paper, folding it to conceal their contribution, and then passing it to the next player. The game gained popularity in artistic circles during the 1920s.

Milan's practice incorporates a wide range of media, combining drawing, painting, and collage, including elements from magazines, pornography, and film stills. His composite figures inhabit ambiguous landscapes of painted abstraction; his collages are made of cut-out body parts carefully excised and arranged to emphasize the interactions of folds, edges, and negative space.

The photographs by Paul Mpagi Sepuya in the exhibition are part of his project *Daylight Studio/Dark Room Studio* (2021-2023), which continues the artist's exploration of the complexities of identity and representation. Inspired by a meticulous research on the early age of photography, Sepuya creates layered images by staging mirrors, velvet curtains, and other studio props, pushing the boundaries of portraiture, inviting the viewer to reflect on their own assumptions.

Scrutinized, reflected in mirrors, broken apart and then reassembled, the bodies represented by Hempton, Milan and Sepuya shed light on crucial tropes of contemporary culture: desire and intimacy, the social construction of gender roles, the urge to be seen and represented.

Bringing their work to Rome, where contemporaneity inevitably has to deal with the past, leads to suggestive thoughts.

Once the solid capital of the ancient world, today Rome is a city of fragments. Its current urban fabric includes extended archaeological areas; its modern buildings stand on the ruins of others. The city's archaeological collections overflow with fragmented bodies. The Colossus of Constantine, the Belvedere Torso, the Apollo Belvedere, Laocoön, Pasquino: they all miss limbs, when they don't lie in pieces. Sculptures of heads, arms, hands, genitalia, legs and feet, as well as inner organs, fill the cabinets of many museums in the city. Offered in sheer numbers to Greco-Roman divinities to obtain health and fertility, these artifacts were later assimilated by Catholicism and became popular offerings to ask for grace. The churches that display those ex-votos are the same in which the remains of saints are preserved and venerated. In Rome, the cult of relics endured the centuries and it's still a widespread practice. As peculiar as it sounds, there's almost no church in the capital that doesn't keep a piece, however small, of the body of a saint. Locks of hair, limbs, skulls: clad in the most precious metals or displayed in gilded shrines, these body parts have been spared from the oblivion that comes with decomposition to act as tangible memories of their own holiness.

Living among the ruins of a once mighty empire, everyone in Rome is constant-

ly reminded that the past is fragmentary, almost by definition. We're so used to conceiving classical antiquity as fragmented that the discovery of an intact artifact – whether it is a scroll, a statue, or a fresco – makes the news.

What is arguably the most famous poem to come down to us from antiquity is a fragment, too. The last verses of *Sappho 31*, by the Greek poet from Lesbos, leave us on a cliffhanger: «but everything must be endured, since...».

Although later reconstructions have given us plausible versions of its ending, we'll likely never know it for sure. It is a fortunate coincidence that the poem describes the disjointed sensations of physical discomfort that complicated love puts us through, outlining a further fragmented body.

If the essence of the past is to be fragmentary, memory also follows a similar path. For what is memory, if not our personal rendition of past events?

Like a kid who has caught a butterfly ends up squashing it for fear of letting it get away, the more we try to preserve the integrity of a moment, the more it seems to fall into pieces. What we are left with is memories. And so we cherish them, because they take us back to that feeling of completeness we are so fond of.

Perhaps, the fragmented bodies in the works of Hempton, Milan and Sepuya are a reflection of these mental processes. Perhaps, their way of conceiving the body comes from a specific way of looking at things around them, of remembering them, a way of making experience of the world, one fragment at a time.

Time dictates its own tyranny: it slowly consumes us with diseases and old age, it silently dims faces and events once vivid in our minds, it turns bodies into fragments.

... «but everything must be endured, since...».

Bibliografia

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Figure 1. *Fragmented Bodies*, Exhibition view at Galleria Lorcan O'Neill, Rome. Courtesy of Galleria Lorcan O'Neill.



Figure 2. Celia Hempton, *Ben*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 180 x 140 cm / 71 x 55 in. Courtesy of the artist and Galleria Lorcan O'Neill.

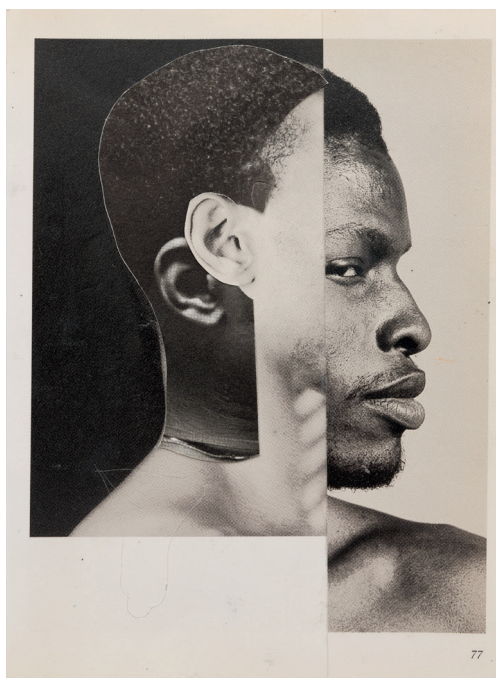


Figure 3. Wardell Milan, *Raymond, NYC*, 2023, Collage on paper, 76 x 101.5 cm / 30 x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist and Galleria Lorcan O'Neill.



Figure 4. Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Mirror Study (OX5A7387)*, 2018, Archival pigment print, 131 x 88.5 cm / 51.5 x 35 in. Courtesy of the artist, Galleria Lorcan O'Neill, and Galerie Peter Kilchmann.