

In a scene reminiscent of a psychological thriller, the visitor to the Brooklyn Fire Proof Gallery is beckoned up the building's lonely stairwell by distant voices.

There is no axe-murderer or brain-eating zombie at the top of the stairs, just an installation that proclaims "All Natural." The voices are not demonic voices, but rather the dissonant montage of five videos running at the same time.

But some New Yorkers will not sigh with relief. For many, the premise of the exhibition is more frightening and maddening than any horror film they know: fat.

Superfat, that is.

The *Superfat* exhibition is the brainchild of curator Joshua Altman, who titled his show as a response to the Takashi Murakami exhibition, *Superflat*. Whereas Murakami's show emphasized the two-dimensional, magical world of Japanese anime, Altman's show is anything but divorced from reality; he explores the materiality of the body, all three of its dimensions, which are sometimes obese and sometimes anorexic.

These subjects are deeply private and controversial, and it seems that the arts—which provide a forum for equally sensitive questions—have avoided obesity in prior exhibitions.

"There have been exhibitions on food as a theme, as well as eating, but no exhibitions that deal directly with obesity. It seemed odd to me when I thought about all the subjects that are no longer considered taboo for the ongoing discourse in the arts. However, when I started to poke around and do some research, it seemed like the subject of obesity was considered inappropriate," Altman explained.

And yet *Superfat* is very appropriate in its cultural relevance; the show responds to what Altman calls the "American Fat Phenomenon," or the American obsession with

altering the body in pursuit of “beauty.” He cites the prevalence of reality television shows that feature surgical procedures and “make-overs.”

“I am an avid fan of reality TV: *The Biggest Loser*, *America’s Next Top Model*, *The Swan*, *Extreme Makeover*, et cetera. Our fascination with obesity is at a high, and clearly, I thought, there are artists who are addressing these issues.”

Altman’s show features nine such artists, their works occupying the intimate space of the gallery, inviting the visitor to get close and engage in a sometimes shocking, sometimes emotional, and overall very personal dialogue with the works.

Many of the works are sexual in character, exploring the idea of appeasing appetites for food and sex.

“What surprised me, as I continued my research on the exhibition,” Altman explained, “was how ‘sexual’ the show became. More and more my interest became focused on oral fixation, which then lead directly to sex; that is, the need to consume not only food, but also to fill ourselves with the ‘other.’ When I think of obesity, I think about the void that people feel compelled to fill rather than the aesthetics of obesity.”

One of the more blatant musings on oral fixation was Patty Chang’s video installation, *Hand to Mouth*. Sometimes described as a Chinese-American version of Cindy Sherman, Chang like Sherman captures herself on camera. *Hand to Mouth* features Chang dressed in a blazer and dress shirt, bangs combed down her forehead, looking like a schoolgirl. A hand holding a condom filled with water enters the camera and Chang begins screaming things like, “Give it to me now!” The hand squirts the water on her face, she opens her mouth, and she becomes progressively more profane and demanding of the water.

The images are at once comical and disturbing, and the viewer is forced to acknowledge the similarities between sexual satisfaction and that of eating.

Martha Rosler, in two video pieces from the late 1970s, takes a different approach to sex and food. *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, from 1975, is a piece that rejects gender roles in the realm of food production.

“[The piece] invokes the cooking show genre in an attempt to subvert the medium of television and its impact on women and domesticity,” Altman said.

Rosler “shows and tells” various kitchen utensils in alphabetical order, mimicking how each is used. She slashes, mashes, and creates a tense viewing experience that questions the stereotypical image of a woman in a kitchen.

Yet *Superfat* is not entirely sexual in nature. One drawing, *Obese Genes*, by John O’Connor contemplates the role of genetics in the physical transformation of the body.

“I thought about the area between what our genes lay out for us and how we work within that area or against it,” O’Connor said.

He recorded his weight every day for a period of time (the length of which he no longer recalls) and plotted the numbers on the drawing. He then connected the points and created what looks like the image of an extended chromosome. The color in the drawing occurs in bands, suggesting radioactively marked genes that glow on chromosomes seen under microscopes.

O’Connor’s drawing, the only drawing in the show, contemplates the most fundamental of all reasons behind obesity and the neuroses that it creates, and thus the medium—the most primordial of artistic media—wonderfully contextualizes the videos and photographs that explore the psychological wanderings induced by obesity.

His drawing reminds the viewer of our genetic predisposition to look one way or another—to be fat, thin, or in between: “My weight is seen *within* the form of the genetic material,” he explained. His piece concludes that an attempt to alter the body is an attempt to override what is genetically programmed from birth.

The final overarching perspective in the trilogy of approaches to obesity, including the psychological and the genetic, is religion.

Jeph Gurecka’s photograph *Cherry Pie* is part of a series that he referred to as “Eating My Demons.” An enticing cherry pie with pentagram-shaped dough on top occupies the entire frame of the photograph. Gurecka is known for creating Satanic edibles, including a bread skull which is also displayed in *Superfat*, making a clear attempt to explore the connections between sinning and the ritual of eating. This topic has been often been broached in the arts, examples dating as far back to Dante’s *Inferno* and perhaps before, yet Gurecka’s works make *Superfat* a more comprehensive show.

“The religious element is certainly an interesting one that might have crept into the show consciously or subconsciously,” said Jessica Lin Cox, Director of the gallery.

Though it may seem ironic for a show concerned with largeness to feature only 15 works in a small space, *Superfat* uses the works of nine talented artists to create a hefty, powerful, and probing discourse on obesity.

The show runs until October 9th at Brooklyn Fire Proof, 101 Richardson Street. Gallery hours are 12-6 pm on Saturdays and Sundays, or by appointment.

Artists featured:

Monica Abend
Nayland Blake
Patty Chang
John J. O’Connor
Don Doe

Superfat / Nicole Oncina 5 / 25 September 2005

James Gobel
Jeph Gurecka
L.A. Raeven
Martha Rosler
Erwin Wurm

WORD COUNT: 1,081 (Sorry, I will cut more for the next deadline)

SOURCES:

Joshua Altman, Curator *Superfat*, Joshua@stuxgallery.com

Jessica Lin Cox, Director Brooklyn Fire Proof Gallery, friends@brooklynfireproof.com

John O'Connor, Artist, 413-478-0078