



## NATURALCULTURAL NIGHTS III | BWG GALLERY

### ***EARTHLY BODIES OF THEN, NOW & WHEN***

The present geological epoch lays bare the indelible traces left by humanity upon our planet, the magnitude of which is compounded by the proposal of an entirely new age that recognises human force – the ‘Anthropocene’. In tandem with this shift comes a critical re-examination of what it means to be ‘human’: the overhauling of the *Vitruvian Man*, an ideal present in Western thought and visual culture since the fifteenth century. This presiding model saw ‘man’ as an animal elevated above other species through its faculties for reason and language – one that is contented by new modes of humanist, anti-humanist and post-humanist schools of thought.

**BWG Gallery’s 20-artist group exhibition *Earthly Bodies of Then, Now & When*** takes as its inspiration the potency and abundance of emerging definitions of human – definitions that although vast, all forgo anthropocentrism in profound search of expanded possibilities for subjects and species. Curated across two spaces, the exhibition literally and abstractly navigates a primeval, archaic past of ‘then’ and a Post-human future ‘When’, occupied by earthly bodies that are at once reminiscent and unfamiliar. These hybrid beings are, amongst other things – romantic and elemental, surreal and biomorphic, cyborgian and transhuman: inhabitants of real and fictitious landscapes.

***Earthly Bodies of Then, Now & When*** encourage viewers to see the show as a visual itinerary, a non-linear genealogy of ‘man’ that calls into question its homogeneity and limitations. In the world unravelled by its primeval past, sensual, nude figures in the works of **Lina Papageorgiu** and **Maxim Burnett** are ‘earthly’ as they are otherworldly. Both artists’ reverence for harmonic form recalls classical humanism, where the virtue of beauty can inspire care for the natural environment. Meanwhile, the same nakedness in **James Mortimer** and **Lisa Ivory** casts voyeurs in radically different landscapes: scenes that depict feral, untamed, even esoteric forces outside of social propriety. Together, these narratives of intimacy and estrangement, subjugation and emancipation exemplify the hierarchies that have been placed on the human. **Conor Quinn** does away with epistemological categories altogether, in an extraordinary envisioning of the self as an animal puppet – a poignant exploration of free will and queer experience. Where do the boundaries between things, animals and beings lie – those that act and are acted upon? Through artists’ compelling and beguiling visual languages, one slowly sees the destabilisation of the human, and its ‘troubling dualisms’ of ‘self/other, mind/body, nature/culture’.<sup>1</sup>

The exhibition’s ‘posthuman’ future harnesses the idea of collective entity, manifested in the rich symbolism of **Harry Rüdham**’s ouroboros or **Jody De Schutter**’s interlocking hands. Infinitely weaving and writhing imagery encompasses paradoxical truths about perception and the relational subject. Posthumanist thinkers have argued that the notion of human has been sustained by ‘reiterative formulations of symbolic others’<sup>2</sup>, a theme directly explored by **Cami Brownhill** and **Cas Campbell**, who each embed personal, often painful memories of ‘otherness’ in their ceramics. This pain is ultimately usurped by an empowering engagement with natural matter, where experiences are literally and metaphorically forged through new surfaces. In the post-human environment, we are also crucially implored to

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century’ in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p.178

<sup>2</sup> Francesca Ferrando, ‘The Posthuman: Philosophical Posthumanism and Its Others’ (Doctoral Dissertation, Università di Roma Tré, 2013), p.25. Archivo Aperto di Atenio database.



think about the intersection between human and technology. **Theo Viardin's** colossal figures, seemingly on the very cusp of human and alien, depict lucidly how our contemporary earthly bodies might be seen as 'bio mediated'<sup>3</sup>. In posthuman thought, technology affects not just how humans do ethics; there is a dissolution of 'man' and machine that can offer less dualistic, more transversal relations amongst species<sup>4</sup>.

The sprawling and enigmatic journey embarked upon ***Earthly Bodies of Then, Now & When*** is reflective of the breadth of philosophies found in each of its twenty-one artists, whose radical ideas both converse with and contradict one another in equal measure.

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<sup>3</sup> Patricia T. Clough, 'The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedica and Bodies', *Theory Culture Society*. 2008; 25, 1. DOI: 10.1177/0263276407085156

<sup>4</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013) p.89-95

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