

“Behind this mask, another mask; I will never be done with removing all these faces,” wrote artist and poet Claude Cahun in 1930. Throughout the twentieth century, artists have imagined the human body and ideas of the self as fluid and open to ongoing transformations. Taking MoMA’s collection as a starting point, this exhibition includes over one hundred artworks by artists from around the globe who question what it means to be an individual within a larger society. Whether through the intimacy of a sketchbook or the monumentality of large-scale sculpture, across media they ask how social categories that are shaped by conceptions of the body—such as gender, race, disability, and identity—are connected to abstraction.

Abstraction is a way of moving away from observable reality; as a method for artists, it is especially generative and open to productive ambiguities. In particular, abstraction’s boundless capacity for varied meanings makes it a useful strategy for artists whose embodied experiences may not align with dominant cultural narratives—including those who are women, gender-expansive, queer, and/or people of color. Some artists explore how we project, distort, and create identities through performative acts of play, empathy, or control. Others focus on the body’s interior—both real and imagined—or look to the world outside, creating newly conjured combinations of human and nonhuman forms. The artworks gathered here suggest radical and imaginative expressions of the body. At the same time, they illuminate how artists reflect on abstraction in its broadest social senses while exploring what it is to be vibrantly alive in the world with others.

Organized by Lanka Tattersall, Laurenz Foundation Curator, with Margarita Lizcano Hernandez, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings and Prints. With thanks to Simon Ghebreyesus, former Studio Museum in Harlem and MoMA Joint Curatorial Fellow, and Nicole Kitsberg, former Curatorial Intern, Department of Drawings and Prints.

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We invite you to explore the accompanying publication, *Vital Signs: Artists and the Body*, which is available in the Museum Store.

What’s abstract about having a body? Hear from artists and writers on this question. Scan the QR code to listen on the free Bloomberg Connects app.



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MIRRORS

“For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture.”
—Louise Bourgeois

Looking at a person is no simple matter. The experience may produce a sense of profound empathy as well as a sense of difference, sometimes in the same instant. This dynamic was a rich terrain for artists in the twentieth century, an era marked by wide-reaching shifts in definitions of what it means to be human. The result of cultural, industrial, and political transformations around the globe—from movements for civil rights to the development of the video camera—how people perceive their place in the world and with each other has continually evolved.

Within these fluctuating dynamics, the human body remains a generative and malleable theme for artists. As the artworks in this gallery suggest, the body—including the artists’ own—is a subject to be mirrored, taken apart, and observed from a distance, opening up questions about the relationship between the self and society.

SPECTRUMS

“I am ambiguous, completely. My pieces are all ambiguous. They don’t deliver the truth directly, but show an open vision.” —José Leonilson

Girl and boy. Sturdy and fragile. Black and white. Sick and healthy. Friend and foe. From early childhood, binaries are introduced as a way to simplify, clarify, and suggest an overarching logic in a complex and at times incomprehensible world. However, for many of the same reasons that they are useful, binaries can also perilously flatten, reduce, or erase much broader and more nuanced spectrums of human experience.

Employing materials ranging from fire and language to oil paint and embroidery thread, the artists here evoke some of the binary structures and systems used to define people. They do this not to affirm but rather unravel and challenge strict dualities.

EXTERIOR INTERIORS

“I started to blend the body with its surroundings, questioning and exploring the lines that separate the two.” —Ann Leda Shapiro

Across centuries, the desire to peer inside the human body has linked the technological, the mystical, and the creative. Especially in the twentieth century, evolving scientific understandings of the body have influenced the ways artists represent the line between self and other, between interior experience and exterior form. In this gallery, artists turn the body inside out, upending assumptions about the body's physical boundaries and its capacity to hold memory, feeling, and sensation.

Whether evoking muscles, bodily organs, electric impulses, or powerful visions and dreams, some of the works here hint at the human figure. At the same time, they shift and metamorphose in and out of easily recognizable forms.

SELF-CONSTRUCTIONS

“I swear to become my body.” —Greer Lankton

Social and political norms and laws powerfully shape how we live, what rights we have, and how we are regarded by others. For some, the very act of living as the person they are can be loaded with risk. The works gathered here hint at the imagination and persistence required to endure and flourish in confining realities. They range from Greer Lankton’s sketchbooks—articulating her powerful desire to embody a changing self as a transgender woman—to the depictions of constrained yet dynamic bodies by artists across this gallery.

Stretching, fragmenting, binding, and ornamenting the represented figures, these creative acts of self-construction and self-determination hinge on abstraction in its broadest sense. Pulling away from the ordinary physical world, these works point to ways of being alive that are beyond the readily perceivable.

MULTITUDES

“My purpose is to create an experience that will vibrate with the connecting thread.” —Senga Nengudi

A person becomes a unicorn. A body multiplies into smaller selves. An artist crosses continents and decades with an unfolding artwork that connects a universe of collaborators. In the works in this gallery, artists suggest ways of being that are open ended, multiple, and collective, rather than confined to a solitary sense of the body or the self.

Expanding and merging the human body into new entities, some artists turn to myths and dreams to propose imaginative ways that humans and other beings might coexist. Others turn to industrial objects—like car hoods or bicycle inner tubes—to explore deeply rooted human drives and experiences.

“The ancient books say there are ways humans can be something else,” observed the writer Kathy Acker, suggesting that an ongoing desire for transformation is as old as history.

SYNC TOUCH

“Radical content deserves radical form.”

—Barbara Hammer

In *Sync Touch*, the experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer shares a manifesto-like theory of the connection between tactility, vision, sexuality, and filmmaking. Perceiving that ~~lesbian~~ ~~life had~~ been invisible in the history of cinema, beginning in the 1970s Hammer made films that exuberantly celebrate the multifaceted, erotic dimensions of lesbian experience both for the spectator and for herself.

In this film, Hammer emphasizes the primacy of touch as a way to understand the world. For the artist, the physicality of cinema was a path to pleasure as well as action. “I am using abstraction not only for perceptual pleasure and multiple possibilities of meaning, but also because I believe the viewer must be active,” Hammer once wrote. “The active audience members don’t lose a sense of themselves while ~~they~~ ~~experience~~ the physical sensations of abstract cinema, but feel more the possibility of being.”