

FINANCIAL TIMES

How women artists reclaimed the female body

From the staunchly realist to the abstract and surreal, two London exhibitions this summer go far beyond just nudes



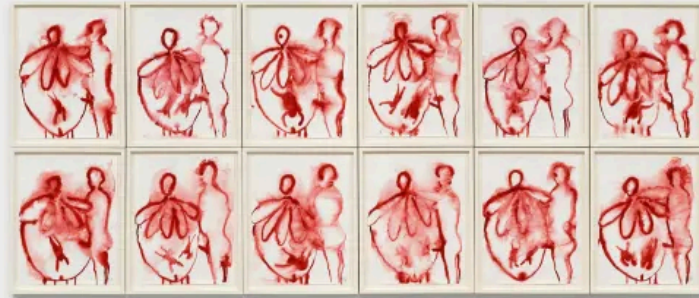
Chantal Joffe's 'Self-Portrait Naked with My Mother II' (2020) © Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro gallery

Jackie Wullschläger 2 HOURS AGO

Nothing in western art is more contested than the female body, whose nude depiction marks almost every turning point in the history of representation: the paleolithic Venus of Willendorf, Botticelli's and Titian's Venuses born from the sea, Picasso's "Demoiselles d'Avignon", de Kooning's massive-breasted, threatening "Woman". Fertility references abound — transferred in Christian art to the Madonna. How do women artists unpick that pervasive iconography?

Two strands emerged in the mid-20th century, both initially ignored, then both decisive. One was the discomfiting assertions of realist painting, pioneered by Alice Neel. The other was deflecting the narrative conceptually, unpacking images of the body and maternity in abstractions and surreal disfigurings, the vein inaugurated by Louise Bourgeois.

Both approaches are on show in London gallery exhibitions this summer. *Chantal Joffe: Story* at Victoria Miro presents striking, empathetic new paintings around ageing and motherhood by the artist most imaginatively indebted to Neel. *Body Topographies*, a group exhibition at Lehmann Maupin, stars important works by Bourgeois and the marvellous Swiss sculptor Heidi Bucher.



'The Family' (2008) by Louise Bourgeois © Estate of Louise Bourgeois/ the Easton Foundation. Courtesy Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and London

In 2007, aged 95, Bourgeois painted a raw, tremulous, blood-red gouache suite of 21 paintings, "The Family": a female figure abstracted into a blurry, bulbous form, with multiple dangling breasts and huge belly. Seen from the side, a male figure with erect penis draws close and sometimes blends into her. Gestural and simple, tender yet brutal, these look back to fertility goddess statues while summing up a lifetime's consideration of intimacy, sexuality and possession.

In "Avenza Revisited" (1968-69), the theme is transformed into a monstrous, surreal bronze sculpture with gleaming silver nitrate patina. Rounded cones like breasts bulge and cluster together as if for protection; there are spurts of pointed elements, dips, gaps. Sculpture's formal oppositions — horizontal/vertical, open/closed — are sexualised, landscape allusions (the title refers to a Tuscan site) anthropomorphised. Bourgeois called this "a landscape of udders".

"Our own body", she said, "could be considered, from a topographical point of view, a land with mounds and valleys and caves and holes . . . Our own body is a figuration that appears in mother Earth . . . Picture a female dog, or a cow; you put her on her back and you have a very interesting, moving, live and flexible landscape."



'Untitled Dragonfly Object' from Heidi Bucher's 'Libellenrochen' series (1978-83) © Estate of Heidi Bucher. Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin

In a celebrated 1975 photograph, Bourgeois wore a multiple-breasted garment, a latex cast of “Avenza”. Around the same time Bucher, working in Los Angeles, created wearable foam pieces, decked with lace, some intended to cover the body completely and turn the wearer into a freely moving sculpture; an untitled 1974 example of these iridescent, fragile works is here. Bourgeois, daughter of tapestry restorers, was interested in the emotional, healing resonance of fabric; for Bucher, textiles connected women’s labour (“We’ve made it all ourselves”) with women as capital and chattels (“The trousseau and all that”). She used fabric to reframe and liberate domestic space in latex casts of interiors, known as “skinnings”.

These were the subject of a revelatory show at Parasol Unit in 2018, and are referenced here in the latex-on-rice-paper relief “Haus mit Libelle” (“House with Dragonfly”) (1981). Bucher’s wafer-thin skinnings sometimes resemble giant translucent wings, and her most beautiful works are latex and mother-of-pearl insect sculptures such as “Untitled Dragonfly Object” from a series that occupied her from 1978 to 1983. Their subtext is transformation and renewal through a lifecycle of shedding skins, of freedom — from the fixed image, from societal expectation. Made just after Bucher’s divorce and return to Europe in her fifties, they express hope of metamorphosis.



'Passengers' (2018) by Mandy El-Sayegh

At Lehmann, these connect to fragmented representations by a younger artist and by an older one. Mandy El-Sayegh's collage "Passengers" (2018) features a purple nude, seductively splayed, transparent, built up from and set against layers of images — mechanical diagrams, news headlines, movie advertisement, silkscreens of her father's calligraphy: a young woman's body as cultural signifier. From Chilean performance artist Cecilia Vicuña there is the painting "Thenar Eminence" (2021), a multicoloured hand fading across the soft fleshy area at the base of the thumb that controls movement and causes the 72-year-old artist chronic pain.

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It is the hands that are desperately conspicuous in Joffe's "Self-portrait in Striped Shirt with My Mother II" (2019): Joffe's long painter's fingers, streaked pink over flesh colours, outsized, claw-like, poised at the centre of the picture, contrast with her mother's small pale hands, passive, clasped together, cropped at the canvas edge. Joffe's face with

downturned mouth is as jagged, grim, unhappy as in recent mid-life self-depictions, but the dynamic here is between her own solid, angular, resilient body and the elderly woman dwindling, receding, dissolving into more abstract slashes.



'Story' by Chantal Joffe (2020) © Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

Joffe makes it look easy, whereas the skill with which she manipulates her loosely applied paint, sometimes fluid, sloppy, dribbled, looping, sometimes clotted and slabbed on, allows her to fix unease, awkwardness, common feelings about our own misshapen bodies and selves. Working from photographs, she plays with scale, distortion, a touch of the freakish: Diane Arbus as well as Neel is in the background.

Joffe is a monumental middle-aged nude, saggy, creased, defiant, larger than life-size, in "Self-portrait Naked with My Mother II" (2020), her clothed mother shrunk at her side. One reading is the child-parent shift in power, and the separateness of the figures, each embattled at their own life stage. Another is resemblance — both their gazes at once warily sidelong and outward-looking, shared features and postures, legs slanting, shoulders slightly hunched — implying closeness.



'My Mother in a Blue Shawl in her Doorway' (2020) by Chantal Joffe © Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

In the titular “Story” (2020), Joffe distils her memory of “how you worship your mum, everything about them is so beautiful. They’re gigantic and they’re powerful and everything they say, you just love it.” The picture recalls her younger self and her sisters in white dresses encircling their mother reading to them. This is the third gallery show in a trilogy of family tales, the first two focused on Joffe’s daughter and on herself at 50; these latest works are the most gripping and painterly.

Joffe has always referenced Matisse, the swirling fabric backgrounds of the odalisques repeated in her patterned sofas of humdrum domesticity. In “My Mother in a Blue Shawl in her Doorway” (2020), the claustrophobic wartime Matisse of dark abstract panels comes to mind: Joffe’s mother peers out from her hallway, huddled between luscious vertical stripes in red, beige, black. It is a painting about seeing, painting — focusing, framing an image — and the extent to which we allow a slice of ourselves to be known. It is also an immensely affecting lockdown picture of what we all remember, standing at doorways, emotion across distance — and how, as Joffe aims throughout her oeuvre, “some of that memory and time got caught in the paint”.

Lehmann Maupin, June 16-September 4, lehmannmaupin.com
Victoria Miro, to July 31, victoria-miro.com