

In Heat: Plum Cloutman and Nettle Grellier

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In Heat is charged from two sources - comedy and shameless body-neutrality. The title conjures up images of wild sexual urgency, like when a dog won't stop shagging your leg: very natural, very funny. It's bang on the mark for this show.

Cloutman described the exhibition as 'something the viewer can laugh at', Grellier adding that the work also 'doesn't shy away from the grotesque and difficult-to-look-at elements of our femininity'. Key to the show is the centuries-long Non-Disclosure Agreement that we all automatically opt-into at birth, agreeing never to talk about bodily functions in nice society: no shit, no blood, and certainly no cum. The NDA is particularly strict if you're fitted with a womb - we'd rather you kept all of it to yourself.

Honesty about the female experience is culturally shocking – honesty about the male experience is a comedy night.

Consumer culture doesn't want us to love how our bodies function. Even adverts about constipation relief always star a lovely well-dressed lady with a charming wink speaking in hushed tones about 'natural ingredients'- we never see her sat on the toilet sweating and sobbing because she's worried she'll rip her anus.

We need to celebrate our bodies, including the comical and grim bits: farting during sex, thrush, being a bit sick in your mouth. I can imagine Grellier and Cloutman's figures having hangover diarrhoea in a way that the *Mona Lisa* just wouldn't. And I love them for it.

The show comes fresh from national lockdown. Months at home have made many of us more aware of our bodies than ever – and the onslaught of 'lose lockdown weight before summer' chat is adding to a building sense of shame. The show's title *In Heat* can be read as a nod to the women's magazine of the same name, ever-filled with tips to getting your body 'beach ready' and blindingly white smiles.

With many distractions removed– experiences that make us briefly metaphysical, like the cinema, parties, romances – I certainly feel more contained within my body, as though the ozone layer of my body has thickened. The pieces in this show have that same weight to them. I relate to Grellier's naked figure who rides slowly away on a slug, and Cloutman's bathing figure who desperately seeks relaxation in the bath but has her view disrupted by her floating breasts, probably can't forget her proximity to her open toilet, and is dealing with a thrashing dog on her lap. Sometimes a bath bomb isn't enough.

Nettle Grellier's works are small-scale and intimate, their raw paper edges mirroring the imperfections of her (and all of our) characters. Her figures turn away from the viewer, avoiding eye-contact, and we are denied the intimate encounter that we are used to in traditional portraiture. Women have been put on full, beautified display throughout art history – through direct eye-contact and welcoming grins, we are given intimate access to the muses and models of visual culture. Grellier's figures are having none of it. They owe you nothing.

Alegories of woman-as-garden are littered throughout art history, however Plum Cloutman's topiary figures have a bite to them that you don't get in Renaissance paintings where the Virgin Mary is symbolised by a lily, or in a Dutch portrait where a rose denotes a harlot's promiscuity. In one work, two botanical breasts sit severed and I am reminded that women, too, grow, and are trimmed (and

untrimmed) under the peering stare of society. Cloutman's figures, a topiary morph sitting in a topiary armchair, a square dog-cloud, two mermaids who are almost entirely fish, are truly joyous.

There's something literary about the characters created by Grellier and Cloutman; I imagine them house-sharing in a Georgian country manor - Jane Eyre-esque - looking out onto foggy moors. They feel like snapshots from an infinitely long day of keeping yourself entertained; even Cloutman's topiary figures are killing time. There is a loneliness that is powerful in them. The characters both human, botanical, canine and fish all co-exist in this same house, trapped there by a new set of gravities.

Blue Shop Cottage is a perfect home for this exhibition. The space is distinctly domestic: The gallery was once Jean's Café, and Ocki Magill – Blue Shop's owner – lives in the apartment behind the exhibition space. Cloutman and Grellier's characters live here.

The amount of talent in the trio of Magill, Grellier, and Cloutman is jealousy-inducing. It's like when you find out that seemingly unrelated celebrities or politicians were once childhood friends - "did they know how important they would all become?".

I have no doubt that visitors to this exhibition will come away questioning the way they relate to their own physical form. This show really could be the epicentre of a cultural revolution in how we display the female experience. *In Heat* is a call to action: let's reclaim pride in our grotesque, hilarious, messy bodies.