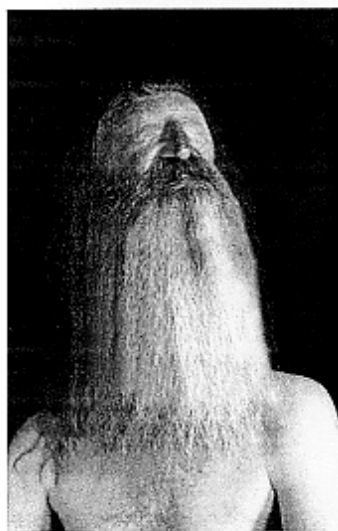


ARTSCENE™

NAIDA OSLINE

(Acuna-Hansen Gallery, Downtown) We are owned by "our" bodies to a degree that few in the West, and even fewer in contemporary America, can acknowledge without embarrassment or terror. The occasions that force such acknowledgment are almost all unpleasant: hunger, addiction, distress, fatigue, pain, aging, and death. Our "beautiful minds" (to borrow a phrase from Barbara Bush) prefer denial.

Puritanical hatred of the body and of its appetites and frailties translates into the peculiarly American drive to aspire to the impossible. The flipside is the belief that the poor and weak have only themselves to blame, and can only be helped by being made



Naida Oslina, "Untitled" from the "variance" series, 2004, digital chromogenic print.

to suffer--the compassion of compassionate conservatism. The good American is unstintingly proactive, an unvacillating triumph of the will. Model overachievers live by a martial code. To quote the title of a recent self-help bestseller, they strive to "unleash the warrior within." No pain, no gain: ownership of the body has to be constantly asserted through punishing exertion, starvation, and, when these do not suffice, by recourse to surgery. The goal is to transform the given into the self-made. The hard body is sleek, high-performing, machinelike. Transcendent. No longer a body at all, but the embodiment of an idea.

Against the background of this fascist ethos it is significant that in her latest body of work, Naida Oslina uses her bag of photographic and digital tricks to play with the idea of a hyper-elastic body. Where the hard body is a fetishistic expression of the drive to achieve rigid, invariant identity, the images from Oslina's variance series explore the shape-shifting possibilities of a body that eludes the expectation of stability.

Inevitably the results are freakish and unsettling but also witty. Oslina takes turns of phrase like "bent out of shape" and "twisted like a pretzel" and runs with them. Heads corkscrew and threaten to self-reproduce through mitosis. A torso is wound up like a rubber band. Feet acquire numerous extra digits and start to resemble roots. Tendril-like fingers extend from gnarled arthritic hands. A face with sealed eyes and mouth sprouts a wizened beard.

The clinical focus on body parts set against flat, empty backgrounds tends to pathologize the mutations portrayed. To that extent they dwell within the limitations of the freak show and the horror genres, which picture otherness as disease, and the point of view of the artist remains that of the manipulator not the manipulated. Unlike, say, Cindy Sherman's grotesques, Oslina's seem like passive accomplices to the voyeur's gaze. Thus, these images become part of rather than mitigate our national defense against abjection.

For the moment Oslina seems content to revel in the almost unlimited plasticity and conjuring power of the

digital medium. The plasticity of any medium, however, is only a potential at the service of the far greater plasticity of the imagination. It is the ability of the imagination to stretch beyond the ego boundary that makes empathy possible. Elasticity, in that sense, is the basic stuff of compassion. The alternative is dissociation and the experience of the body as sculptured meat--an experience that yields the absurdities Oslina touches on in her photographs.

Mario Cutajar