

SHAHRYAR NASHAT

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‘How will I die? Who will carry me? Who will feel my after-effects?’ These plaintive queries recur during the 18 minutes of *Image is an Orphan* (all works 2017), the looped video that is the beating heart of Shahryar Nashat’s ‘The Cold Horizontals’. It gradually becomes evident that the disembodied female voice who utters them is embroiled in a debate with her inner other. This is cast as a dialogue between ‘Body’ and ‘Image’, one composed of ‘water and cells’ and the other of ‘zeroes and ones’. Presented on an imposing bank of abutting monitors, the imagery oscillates between the languid scrutiny of recognizable interior settings and the presentation of more obscure, sometimes digitally distorted objects, surfaces and the head and shoulders of a briefly-glimpsed young man. These more contemplative sequences – accompanied by a free-floating voiceover and new musical score – are punctuated by explosively violent chunks of internet footage, at once comical and wince-inducing, featuring bone-crunching indignities visited on the human body.

Placed together in the expansive, sparsely installed main gallery, the cocktail of visual seductions and visceral assaults of *Image is an Orphan* contrasts with the deathlike presence of the pair of sculptures made of cast synthetic polymer: *Cold Horizontal (IMAGE)* and *Cold Horizontal (BODY)*. Despite being incongruously perched on steel cubes wrapped in cellophane these works bear more than a passing resemblance to mortuary slabs. While the spectre of minimalism is clearly invoked, these sculptures’ lines are far from clean, their edges seemingly crumpled or disfigured by something resembling outsized bite marks on a giant chocolate bar. There is something of Paul Thek in such haptic geometries.

As such echoes suggest, Nashat has never been shy about the influence of enabling precursors, including the tutelary spirits that haunt *Image Is an Orphan*, Andy Warhol and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. These are invoked through his camera’s protracted examination of what amount to home-made versions of the former’s 1964 *Electric Chair* and the latter’s 1991 *Untitled*: a photograph of an empty, unmade double

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bed, originally presented on billboards in New York shortly after the death of the artist's partner. As it happens, while 'The Cold Horizontals' was self-sufficient, it also retained a memory of the exhibition that preceded it, 'Service No. 5: Dare to Keep Kids off Naturalism', by artist-choreographer Adam Linder, Nashat's partner and occasional collaborator. Several elements assigned a functional role in the previous presentation came into their own as autonomous sculptures in Nashat's show, including a twin set of snow-white queue barriers whose braided ropes were discreetly adorned with flesh-coloured transfers bearing obscure image-details gleaned from the pages of porn mags.

'Dead bodies, fake bodies, real bodies, strong bodies, weak bodies...', the voice-over in *Image is an Orphan* intones. The body, it appears, may be either brutally absent or brutally present. Or it may affect to be both, as in *Player*, a handmade canvas and rubber crash-test dummy, slumped in a side-gallery, whose customary identity as anonymous Everyman is accentuated by the absence of a head, hands or feet. Bodies leave imprints, have effects, produce residue. As the recurring image of the eye in several works attests, the body is both perceived and perceiving. Ultimately, perhaps, body and image become one, as Maurice Blanchot once suggested in his description of the cadaver as the epitome of the image, 'similarity *par excellence*' – a self-resemblance of passing strangeness.

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