



Title

Beth Collar

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Beth Collar

by Carl Gent • 25.04.2019

Nine terracotta body fragments and skeletal forms sit, kneel, step and collapse on the bare floorboards of Dilston Grove, London, the deconsecrated church that houses Beth Collar's exhibition *Daddy Issues* **FIG.1**. The six sculptures in the nave are all feet and legs. They are positioned parallel or perpendicular to the church's raised east end and seem to step reverentially towards an invisible altar. The first terracotta foot the visitor encounters is clothed in a medieval shoe-thing, its sole up, its owner kneeling or prostrated **FIG.2**. Other feet step flat against the floor and entire lower legs are in kneeling posture **FIG.3**.

In contrast to the sculptures in the nave, the host of forms in the east end demonstrate zero deference to the approaching pilgrimage of legs and feet **FIG.4**. Up here, the body-bits are engaged in all kinds of less measured interaction. Two hip bones (with too many bones to their hips), sitting on their clay-boney butts face each other with their absent genitals, close enough that if fully fleshed they could be copulating **FIG.5**. Further from the entrance, a collapsed torso has been left shattered and face down: what looks like a thin leather cap covers what would be the back of the head and contorted skin stretches across clay ribs and a clay spine, as an enormous plant-form sprouts from its back **FIG.6**.

Meek authority seeps through *Daddy Issues*, the display conveying an indifference to the viewer that feels proper. Criteria emanating either from the interior of the works or a previous societal era seem to guide the drama, and any conscious or otherwise effect on the viewer feels of minimal consequence to the work itself. The comparatively diminutive scale of Collar's sculptures in this cavernous space **FIG.7** resembles both the scale of the visitor and the scale that the medieval era or the Renaissance takes up in my head: minimal. Despite an intense interest in pre-Modernist Europe, the foundations my knowledge of this time period rests upon are fragile and vaguely-formed, inherited from bad historiography and the biases that lend Modernism and its offspring their authority in the first place.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Daddy issues: Beth Collar* at Dilston Grove, London (Courtesy the artist and CGP London and Matt's Gallery, London).

As a space, Dilston Grove presses in on a person. It feels like a tall body of damp air that is being temporarily intruded into by art or an art audience. This vast hollow seeps into the sculptures' insides too. Open to the air, many of the works' interiors are also hollow and the structures of their visible innards follow neither rudimentary sculptural necessity, nor anatomical accuracy (in contrast to their faultlessly lifelike exteriors). Internal dividing structures outgrow their hosts, sprouting into tree-like clay spikes or splitting like honeycombs and plant-cells that funnel pockets of air into their porous clay muscles.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Daddy issues: Beth Collar* at Dilston Grove, London (Courtesy the artist and CGP London and Matt's Gallery, London).

Grotesque mutations and dissections aside, the sculptures are also comic. Floppy pointed shoes with stockings and toes, faithfully rendered but cartoonish in their form, sit wildly with the laborious physical work that is self-evident. The intimate devotional gestures paired with the violent deconstruction of bodily form push the viewer into a space of low-level voyeurism, while the melodrama beneath our knees reduces the sense of historical specificity. These are stand-ins and tropes of a Dark Ages that acts as 'a signifier for plastic time' for Collar. They are homogenised objects pulled from Collar's head, my head, any head and slapped into the room. Tropes summoned from a presumed past. Weird seeds, no doubt harvested from crudely and incorrectly sketched or re-enacted pasts, that have sat, germinated and mutated. Collar has seen what they have grown into and made them flesh (clay). But instead of echoing the presumptions that our inner voids of knowledge run on, *Daddy Issues* shows us how these wraiths look and act. Makes them solid and refutable, precisely by showing the imprecision of our conceptions of any remotely experienced zone (or time).

The press release informs us that the works in *Daddy Issues* found their origin in an encounter with a 'group of ecclesiastical terracotta sculptures by Niccolo dell'Arca in Bologna'. Collar has marshalled for her own work what she describes as the 'not-quite-rightness' of dell'Arca's fifteenth-century sculptures. An unruly flatness occurs between the flesh and the fabric that are both equally rendered in clay, a flatness that erupts into disarmingly

powerful moments throughout the exhibition. On one bent shoe, crease lines where toes meet the foot look too realistically like leather; it is not clear whether Collar carved them, falsifying each crease, or sculpted a whole shoe and then bent it back. The knuckles of the dead hand of the final corpse-form have a similar effect: they are at once too lifelike and too clearly sculpted from terracotta. Like all dead forms they look monstrously small. The encounter of these hyper-real yet clearly clay body-bits beside your own feet and legs troubles and contaminates. My own feet look stupid, my own shoes improbable.

In *Daddy Issues* legs, feet, hipbones and a face-down corpse sprouting an oversized sprig of mistletoe show their hysterically rendered interiority as alive and aligned with the lived materiality of a history that is violently feminised. A reproductive fuel for a topsoil of phallic parasites. Their clayness and their muteness, their silence in the space, speak in tandem with the disused church walls that drip alive with moss and lichen.



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Daddy issues*: Beth Collar at Dilston Grove, London (Courtesy the artist and CGP London and Matt's Gallery, London).

Returning to the east end, it is unclear who is doing the flaying and the slaughtering here. If these slices of people are in differing states of dress and decomposition, what are the forces that decided to cut them up? Which gusts or spores caused these plant-bone-fabric cross-pollinations? Left untended, dumb thoughts mutate. Through implantation in the shadows of countless minds, poorly formed ideas and sketches creep through time and turn into even odder iterations than their botched ancestors. After

visiting *Daddy Issues* it remains unclear whether it is better to tend to such weeds – to edit them down – or let them grow unchecked. Dumb thoughts can mutate through attention just as well as inattention. Could certain attempts at historical accuracy render less toxic fruit or merely poison the well further? In *Daddy Issues*, Beth Collar has created a remarkable body of work that is able to give flesh and form to such questions of historical accountability.



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Daddy issues: Beth Collar* at Dilston Grove, London (Courtesy the artist and CGP London and Matt's Gallery, London).



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Daddy issues: Beth Collar* at Dilston Grove, London (Courtesy the artist and CGP London and Matt's Gallery, London).



Fig. 6 Installation view of *Daddy issues: Beth Collar* at Dilston Grove, London (Courtesy the artist and CGP London and Matt's Gallery, London).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Daddy issues: Beth Collar* at Dilston Grove, London (Courtesy the artist and CGP London and Matt's Gallery, London).

Exhibition details **Beth Collar: Daddy Issues**
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