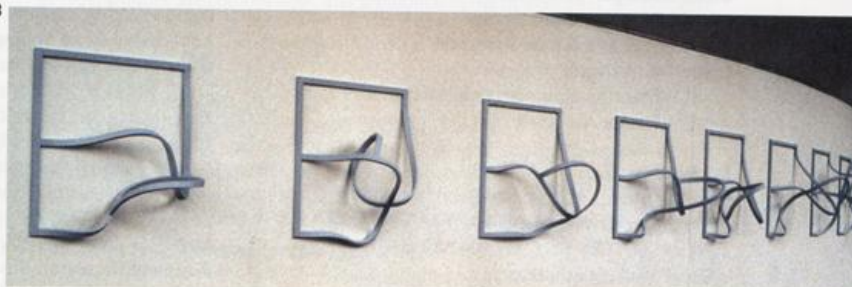


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On the Cover: Doug and Mike Starn, *Big Bambú*, 2010. View of installation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photograph: Doug and Mike Starn, © 2010 Mike and Doug Starn / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



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The Metamorphosis of Tory Fair

BY FRANCINE KOSLOW MILLER

Forty-one-year-old, Boston-based sculptor Tory Fair likes to think of herself as a “late bloomer,” and the evolution of her artistic career is allied with her varied experiences as an athlete, environmentalist, traveler, and spiritualist dreamer.¹ For her second solo show at South Boston’s LaMontagne gallery in spring 2010, Fair created three life-sized, self-portrait figures designed (literally and metaphorically) to look beyond the conventional boundaries of the white walls. The “In the Wall” figures—cast in resin from Fair’s own body and seen from the rear—appear to be in the process of submerging their heads into the wall or floor. Sensual and strong, these hybrid figures are animated with hundreds of hand-designed and hand-cast resin flowers.

A desire for growth, exploration, and self-discovery guides Fair’s alluring images. Her self-reflective works seek to connect with the viewer in what she describes as “a shared sense of humanness and vulnerability.” As in her entire body of work—which ranges from small rubber balls to ball courts inspired by ancient ritualistic game-playing, to full-scale flowering figures—Fair’s latest sculptures blur boundaries between the mundane and the metaphysical, representing an artistic vision clearly in full bloom. Installed in public space, these lithe figures invite open relationships with viewers, leading us into a process that teases out a variety of meanings. Two pink nudes—*In the Wall I* (2010) and *In the Wall II* (2010), balanced against the walls—occupy an ambiguous silent space. Their resin skins offer fertile ground for hardy perennials. Alternatively, the flowers could be interpreted as enveloping the human frames and transforming them into mythic vegetation. Fair’s crossbred self-portraits are modern descendents of William Blake’s pastoral maidens and Bernini’s *Daphne and Apollo* (1622–25), in which the nature-loving nymph begins her metamorphosis into a laurel tree to escape pursuit by the amorous sun god. Myths of metamorphosis are even more appropriate in *Sleeping* (2009), an earlier cast of Fair’s entire body. Here, a bright red

Opposite and detail: *In the Wall I*, 2010. Resin, mica, and foam, 43 x 36 x 24 in.



In the Wall II, 2010. Resin and sand, 26 x 49 x 21 in.

female figure lies asleep on her left side, her legs bent and her head resting on florid hands; she is covered head to toe in shiny cone flowers that follow her contours and gestures. The visceral red of the shiny surfaces (created by coating the entire figure with automotive clear coat) implies that Fair becomes a latent primordial woodland goddess while absorbed in her dreams.

As the nude figure of *In the Wall I* leans over, back flat and left hand pressed against the wall, she appears to be peering into the space behind the surface (the sculpture is cropped at the chin to give this illusion). Dozens of pink and flesh-toned sunflowers, daisies, and cone flowers, whose domed centers resemble nipples (both sensual and nurturing), emerge from the shiny pink body. The bubble-gum pink figure of *In the Wall II* balances on her toes in a deep

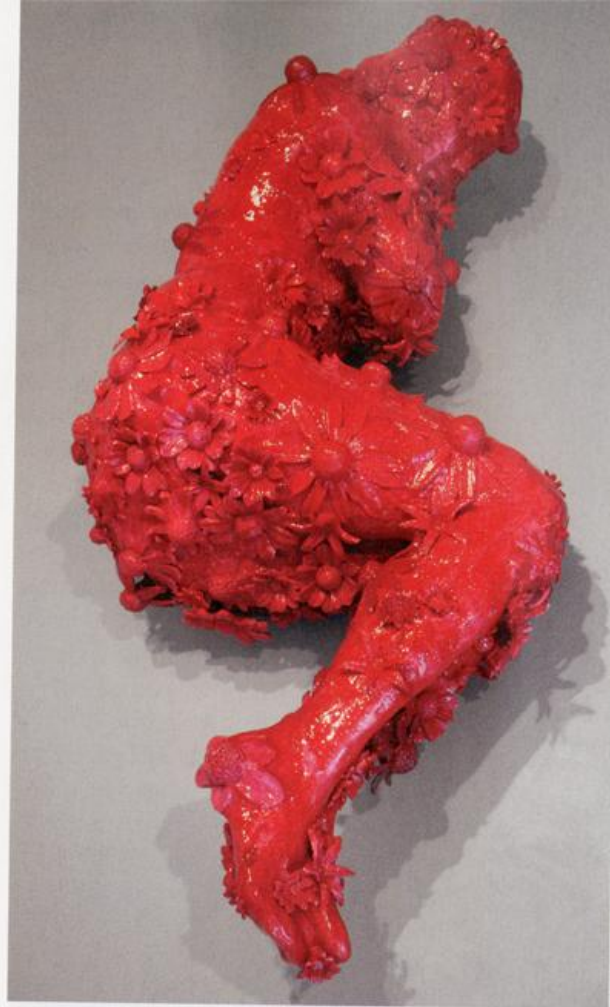
squat, her hands and head in the process of changing into flowers. A third figure, *In the Floor* (2010), is a charcoal-gray self-portrait (colored with graphite in the resin), in which the figure lies prone like a daydreaming adolescent, legs up at knees and face apparently buried beneath the cement floor. Flowers cover her ponytailed head and lower arms and engulf her face. For Fair, the seamlessly attached flowers “are a symbolic element in that they represent an idea and its potential to expand and grow.”² As perennials, the flowers also symbolize spring, rebirth, and resurrection.

Fair defines sculpture as a performative act, inspired by the “direct narrative, humanism, and endurance” of 1970s performance art. The “*In the Wall*” series, for instance, was inspired by Paul McCarthy’s slapstick *Plaster Your Head and One Arm into the*

Wall (1973), a photo-documented performance in which he plastered his head and left arm into one side of a wall, as if his body were trapped. According to Fair, “I’ve always been inspired by images of this work and the blunt literal follow-through of McCarthy to look past the conventional boundaries of the wall. And by doing so, to then leave himself in a submissive position to the rest of the room, backside vulnerable to any passerby.”³ Fair adapted McCarthy’s candid response to looking inside a wall, the element of physical endurance, and the suggestion of psychologically activated architectural spaces with the viewer as witness. Unlike McCarthy, who eventually revealed his head and arm and the other side of the partition, Fair shows only the rear sides of her figures and implies the existence of an ambiguous existential stillness beyond spatial boundaries.

Besides being a deep thinker and art history buff, Fair is a down-to-earth borrower from popular culture. She openly acknowledges her fondness for the crude humor and crazy physical stunts enacted by the Jackass world crew and admits to a thematic alliance between her sculptures and the often corny coming-of-age movies “about that moment in time when you feel invincible, when your innocence compels a drive to question and explore everything.”

Fair’s life-size human/flora hybrids are fabricated from resin colored with acrylic paint and mixed with mica, sand, graphite, and glitter. Working in her Somerville, Massachusetts, studio with assistant Arthur Henderson (an emerging Boston sculptor), she uses plaster-impregnated gauze to capture her body in a particular pose. After the mold is removed from her body, Fair presses resin into its surface. A fully formed life-sized figure usually requires six separate casts. The set time for the resin is about 12 to 14 hours. After pressing the resin into all parts of the figure, Fair puts the mold back together with clamps and fills the body with expandable foam to create a light structure behind the resin. After the foam sets, she breaks off the plaster and finally gets to see the resin figure, whose surfaces



Above: *Sleeping*, 2009. Resin, mica, and foam, 2 x 4 x 3 ft. Top right: *In the Floor*, 2010. Resin, glitter, and foam, 44 x 84 x 23 in. Right: *Walking*, 2008. Resin, glitter, and foam, 7 x 5 x 5 ft.

she lovingly smooths and contours by hand. The flowers are first modeled in clay and then cast in resin. After letting them set to just the right consistency (the flowers can be pulled from the molds before the resin has hardened completely, allowing them to be re-shaped), Fair removes each flower and prunes it with scissors to refine the edges. Finally, she epoxies the flowers onto and around the figures.

Fair's flower people strongly reflect the circumstances of her life. Born in 1968 in Washington, DC, she spent most of her youth in an 18th-century farmhouse in Morris County, New Jersey, on property bordering the Great Swamp, a wildlife refuge of over 7,500 acres. Her mother (a gardener with a degree in landscape architecture) developed a deep love for untouched nature and founded the Great Swamp Watershed Association. Several of Fair's drawings (which often evolve into sculpture) contain detailed studies of lady's slippers, black-eyed susans, and daisies. In a 2009 statement accompanying the first public showing of her cast full-body sculptures (featured in "And the

Fair Moon Rejoices: Contemporary Visionaries in the Wake of Blake" at the Mills Gallery, Boston Center for the Arts), Fair described her commitment to nature and the environment: "My work addresses the often-troubled relationship between nature within our bodies and our communities and nature that surrounds us...My sculptures are premised on the perception that nature is the imagination; that nature is ourselves; and that nature is our surroundings, however urban, deserted, bucolic, or wild." Fair's aspirations to integrate body, imagination, and nature into a discourse on the place of humanity in the environment was nurtured by her home, her education in art and religious studies, and her rich experiences road tripping across the United States. She first came to Massachusetts as an undergraduate at Harvard University, graduating with a degree in sculpture and religion in 1991; she received an MFA in painting and printmaking from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design (MCAD) in 1997. A 1991 Gardner Fellowship allowed her to drive across the U.S. to study Native American





Installation view with (on wall) *Borderfield*, 2008, cast rubber; and (on floor) *Block Bloom (cream)* and *Block Bloom (flesh)*, 2008, cast rubber.

sun daggers, medicine wheels, and sacred mounds. After graduation, she moved to Flagstaff, Arizona, for four years to work as an assistant to James Turrell at his Roden Crater Project. Recalling her experiences in the Arizona desert, Fair says, "You do feel humble in the presence of geological time. A lot of what influences me from that time was meeting people committed to living with the land. You could say that it is why I am an artist: to live non-vicariously in a direct relationship with my surroundings."

Fair considers herself a "tomboy feminist." She and her husband, artist John Axon, got to know one another while playing on the same Ultimate Frisbee team at MCAD. In 1997, she joined the fine arts department at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, where she teaches sculpture. Her first significant sculptures—created in 1998—took the form of small black balls. These playful minimal works, which she called "bon bons," were created by ripping up her student paintings, coiling them, and covering them with rubber. Motivated by the desire to put her balls in space, she created a contemporary version of the ancient Mesoamerican ball court, complete with vertical hoops on either side, in *Lolly Ball Court* (2000). She followed that up with *Game Time Series* (2002–05), which takes the dimensions of gallery spaces and lays them out like various courts and ball fields, punctuated with high-keyed cast rubber field lines. Flowers became part of the playing field when Fair started to think about playing in her mother's gardens with her two brothers. *Dodging Daisies* (2006) featured a corporeal pile of fertilized soil and grass, dotted with real daisies and artificial silk flowers. The garden figure's splayed appendages consisted of cast rubber lines referring to soccer field corner markings; the lump of silk flowers dashed with yellow lines marked the middle of the field. "This piece referenced how my brothers and I



Block Bloom (black), 2008. Cast rubber, 18 x 48 x 48 in.



Driving, 2009. Cast rubber, foam, and steel,
5 x 4 x 4 ft.

encroached into my mom's garden as we played our games," Fair recalls. Large flowers sprout from game fields in such works as *Sideline Bloom* (2006) and *Ready Set Bloom I and II* (2007–08). Fair continued to experiment with materials in fabricating her blooms, including 3-D computer technology and wood carving. Eventually the rubber lines of the playing courts became flower stems. For her first solo show at LaMontagne gallery in 2008, Fair returned to rubber in the "Block Bloom" series. Her statement explains that the "Block Bloom" works "developed out of an interest to

translate the idea of a lily, fragile and fragrant, into the more aggressive presence of rubber."⁴

The rubber block sculptures combined with giant Easter lilies growing from arm-like stems were decidedly anthropomorphic. Fair began to feel physically and emotionally connected to these "Block Bloom" sculptures—as if they were describing her in a very specific way. She decided to use her own body as a way to get at personal narrative more directly, beginning with *Driving* (2009), a work in which she appears to be driving a carriage of flowers that emanates from her. Fair explains, "Where the flowers emerged or plugged into the base of the 'Block Bloom' sculptures, now they would

be directly linked to me...they lift my body and transport me into the steady daze of road tripping. Curator Jen Mergel described *Driving* as 'down to earth yet uncanny.'" Fair is currently designing an installation for the terrace of the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park.

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the artist are from interviews and correspondence with the author.

² Tory Fair, artist statement 2010, <www.toryfair.com>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Tory Fair, artist statement, 2007–08, <www.toryfair.com>.

Francine Koslow Miller is a frequent contributor to Sculpture and a critic for Artforum.