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ART

## A New Kind of Body Language

*If there is a connection to be made, Carol Eliel will find it. She searches LACMA top to bottom for 'Head to Toe.'*

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"This is something I really enjoy, because it allows me to work with Modern and contemporary art, and I love all of it," says Carol Eliel, a curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. "Most curators tend to focus on one or the other, so I guess I am an unusual bird."

This unusual bird has flown far and wide in the 13 years that she has been working in the museum's Department of Modern and Contemporary Art on exhibitions as varied as "Degas to Picasso: Modern Masters From the Smooke Collection" in 1987 to the critically acclaimed survey of works by contemporary French artist Annette Messager in 1995. Aspects of both undertakings can be seen in her most recent exhibition, "From Head to Toe: Concepts of the Body in Twentieth Century Art," a selection of works from LACMA's permanent collection, on view through April 27 at the museum.

The wide-ranging show includes works by Cubists, Conceptual artists and some who are locally based. "I think the show relates to my eclectic interests as an art historian in that it is not a show that focuses very narrowly on one part of the century or on one medium," says Eliel. "I've done exhibitions on everything from early Modern art to very contemporary art. So I have very eclectic tastes, and this is a beautiful way to accommodate those tastes."

The exhibition is pioneering in another way. It is one of the first to draw from the collections of many different departments at the museum--photography, prints and drawings, decorative arts, costumes and textiles, as well as 20th century painting and sculpture--in service of a larger analysis of the ways in which Modern and contemporary artists have conceived the body.

A petite woman of 43, with short chestnut hair and large blue eyes, Eliel admits that the museum has never before undertaken an interdepartmental collaboration of this scale--57 works are included in the show. Standing in a partially installed exhibition gallery, with the deafening sounds of preparators' hammer blows in the background, she calmly says, "I think it tells us that the museum has broad holdings. The permanent collection tends, in the normal course of events, to be installed by department, each in its own galleries. This was a nice way to integrate things in ways that they are not normally seen. It was more interesting and more fun.

"It's also a way for us to toot our own horn a little bit and show the community what we have," she adds. "People come and see the temporary exhibitions but may not spend as much time with the permanent collection. Ultimately, museums are as great as their collections. This is the backbone.

"We were thinking of issues that 20th century artists have faced and at the moment, the body is at the forefront," Eliel says to explain how the topic for the show came about. "We were looking at ways that we could use our collection more. I had to sit down with my colleagues and ask for their suggestions of what

would work from their departments."

As a result, the exhibition juxtaposes a photograph of a female nude by Edward Weston with Picasso's drawing of a face composed of lines and planes. L.A.-based artist Jim Shaw's computer-generated self-portrait is morphed into Cubistic shards. Brightly colored prints from Matisse's 1947 book "Jazz" show the shape of the body alongside the shape of a vase.

Eliel hopes that visitors will be pleasantly surprised by such unexpected visual collisions. For the first time, the museum will be able to present a few works recently added to the permanent collection, among them two photographs and a sculpture by New York-based Kiki Smith and a bronze figure by the early 20th century master Alberto Giacometti.

A surprise of a different sort is the inclusion of fashion items, such as the pleated silver dress by designer Issey Miyake and a topless bathing suit by Rudi Gernreich.

"Particularly when you are dealing with the body, fashion is not an unreasonable direction to look," says Eliel. "There are a number of designers who think of their work not simply as clothing to be worn. They think of how it exists sculpturally in space. Gernreich and Miyake are two who very much think of their creations in those terms, so it seemed a logical and great addition."

According to Eliel, until the end of the 19th century, the human figure was treated by artists as a subject to be depicted as a portrait, as a nude, or within a narrative context. During the 20th century, however, artists have conceived rather than depicted the body. Eliel says, "There is a more calculated notion of deconstructing the body currently, but in the early 20th century, artists already were conceiving the body rather than depicting it.

"The whole Renaissance notion of a painting as a window onto nature broke down in the late 19th century, and the human figure was one of the elements in that window. Artists began to analyze, to synthesize and, more recently, deconstruct. We don't necessarily have to have the figure depicted for us in realistic terms but are able to look at it in a more cerebral way, breaking it down in various ways, whether this means abstraction, fragmentation or metaphorically, the three topics I chose for the exhibition."

In the gallery devoted to abstraction, Eliel has hung works by such disparate artists as Yves Klein, Roberto Matta, Robert Mapplethorpe and Tom Wesselmann, among many others. She admits that her categories easily overlap, that some pieces are fragmented as well as abstracted, for instance.

The earliest work in the exhibition is actually from the 1880s--an Eadweard Muybridge photograph. "Because of his ability in technological and intellectual terms to fragment the body, I decided it would be wrong not to start with him," she says.

Picasso, however, is the true progenitor. "In the early 20th century, artists were breaking down old traditions, and Cubism is generally agreed to be the movement that most emphatically shifted the course of 20th century art, opening up possibilities in a variety of ways. Picasso's 1909 'Head of a Woman' is crucial here in terms of how artists conceive the body in 20th century art," she says.

"I think this is a phenomenon that spans 20th century art and presents a distinctive break from 19th century art. To a great extent, we are all in many ways egocentric. The body is readily accessible and can be conceptualized in so many ways. One of the many reasons the body has come to the fore in contemporary art is that certain political and social issues--like the AIDS epidemic, and feminist issues like abortion--have focused people on the body."

Eliel has worked at LACMA since completing her doctorate in art history at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. She was raised, however, in South Bend, Ind., where her father was a chemistry professor at University of Notre Dame. Although there was little art to be seen in South Bend, her family regularly made the 90-mile trip to Chicago to go to the opera and to visit the Art Institute. "So art was always a part of our life," she says.

As an undergraduate at Yale University, Eliel studied both art history and political science. "Social history and politics are always very much involved with art, and I like that aspect of art history, though I love working in a museum because you get to work with the objects. A lot of art historians today are so caught up in the theoretical aspects of art history that they lose the pleasure of the object. To see the works go up on the walls, to see the Peter Shelton next to the Giacometti--I knew them well individually, but to see them next to one another, they look great. It's exciting, the physical aspect of being a curator."

Eliel has benefited from what she perceives as a perquisite of life on the West Coast. "The vestige of the frontier mentality is here. In L.A., all things are possible. If you want to make them happen, you can. There is much greater freedom, and that manifests in the museum world," she says. "I think the art being made here is as good, if not better, than anywhere else. It's a great place to be an art historian, or a curator.

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"FROM HEAD TO TOE: CONCEPTS OF THE BODY IN TWENTIETH CENTURY ART," L.A. County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd. Dates: Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, noon-8 p.m.; Fridays, noon-9 p.m.; Saturdays, Sundays, noon-8 p.m. Ends April 27. Prices: \$6; \$4, college students, seniors; \$1, ages 6-17; free, under 5. Also free on second Tuesday of each month. Phone: (213) 857-6000.