



Jason Briggs

Not-so Private Parts

Flirt. 2006. Porcelain, hair and nail polish. 12 x 7 x 6 in.

*Fantasy, abandoned by reason, produces impossible monsters;
united with it, she is the mother of the arts and the origin of marvels."*

— Francisco Goya

Article by Stephanie Stuefer

RIPE WITH CONFRONTATIONAL SUBJECT MATTER, JASON Briggs' highly detailed porcelain sculptures are visual marvels meant, in part, to elicit the desire for touch. Paralleling that desire is a sense of unease when the viewer confronts the explicit rendering of mysterious parts in such a private fashion.

Each infant-sized sculpture is painstakingly rendered over the course of several months. Working on one piece at a time, each stage of the process is a series of tedious steps. From applying labour-intensive detail at the leather-hard stage to multiple firings to implanting tiny hairs one by one, Briggs makes it easy to imagine the countless hours he spends with these objects. The intensity of this process becomes

an inherent conceptual thread that the viewer understands on an instinctual level. His obsessions with the formal ideas, combined with a mastery of the craft that removes the artist's hand but points toward devotion to detail, manifests into the mystery of the work.

Whether you consider the work disturbing, grotesque and/or compelling, it is powerful, thought-provoking and undeniably complex. Beyond the provocative attention to the tiniest of details, his sculptures are layered with potent concepts. Over the past several years, Briggs' consecutive series of sculptures have been, in part, inspired by his reflections upon our advertising and entertainment



Pinch. 2006. Porcelain, hair and rubber.
14 x 7 x 9 in.

industry's bend on twisting our sexual desires as a means to sell products. Our sex-obsessed culture is both expressed through and encouraged by media and marketing tactics that idealize the human body to unrealistic extremes. Briggs is turning the tables by distilling the absurdity down to raw abstractions. Including, but not limited to, pubic hair, vaginas and scrotums, all is laid bare in Briggs' interpretations, spawned from his subconscious. His conscious mind is more blatantly focused on associations from imagery he sees around him on a daily basis – often bodily but not directly sexual (such as an elbow crease close-up or the wrinkle of a horse's nose). He seems to be exploiting these otherwise innocent parts and tricking us into realizing what dirty minds we have, too. The work has that rare ability to both repel and attract the gaze. Touching upon the subject of shock value he states, "a sense of unease is critical because it encourages the viewers to consider carefully what they are seeing and what is compelling them."

We are invited to unravel our own personal histories through the intricacies of his forms that remind one of genitals juxtaposed with non-bodily surface and imagery. The mixture of imagery that exists within each sculptural composite seems to serve as a reminder that what we are fed by media and advertising about sex and sexuality are convoluted specimens of plastic proportions that have tainted our expectations of the real human body. Briggs also seems to enjoy provoking the thought that everyone has a dirty mind, as many of his visual influences come from non-sexual body parts. Is our tendency to sexualize a result of what we have been visually conditioned to do or is it just a natural habit to be fixated

on that which ultimately continues our race – a biological alertness to the sexual? More than this, Briggs creates a web of mysterious abstractions that cause the viewer to endlessly reinterpret these objects on a very personal and subjective level.

Some of the sculptures in the series are displayed with metal rods extending from a stainless steel shallow box, emphasizing the connotation to a specimen. Other works are displayed on cushy, slick, black rubber or nesting in a sling of white gauze mounted by metal rods. The pieces, on average, are 12 inches in length and six inches tall. Though an image of the work from only one angle conveys a highly complex system of imagery, the viewer is limited unless the work is seen in person. Every angle is different; crevices and bulges flow wilfully and unexpectedly to reveal new fleshy secrets. Each detailed area referencing obvious genitalia collapses into another, possibly more ambiguous, private part.

The title of one of his sculptures, *Pinch*, represents Briggs' desire that his work elicit an active, sensory identity with the act of pinching. A single tiny fingernail protrudes from a crevice. The nail is painted with cherry-red Revlon polish and appears as an unnatural growth that has been painted red to draw attention, instead of being concealed as one would expect. Poking fun is one of Briggs' many abilities. Red fingernail polish is meant to be sexy, but here it is quite the opposite. Examining *Pinch* further, one finds a row of tiny hairs within a skin-like fold inadequately reaching toward an ambiguous orifice – a beautiful, pearly pink opening. The orifice could represent an anus or a belly button. The surrounding characteristics are not a proper rendering of our backside, but



Eve. 2004. Porcelain, hair and rubber.
20 x 8 x 8 in.

instead reference the curvature of the skin around the navel. Each ambiguous opening, wrinkle, hair, pouch and crevice is in close proximity to each other. These vignettes trigger the mysteries of sexuality and how we both sensationalise and sanction sex within our culture.

A viewer is taken in another direction by the upholstery-like surfaces that Briggs reiterates in many of his pieces. They are skin-like, yet twist our assumptions and interpretation of the sculptures. The work is not only about surrealistly interpreting our private parts but also gives us a broader path to interpretation, a more complex medley of identifications to discover. The upholstered areas are embedded with tiny silver pinpoints where creases stretch inward to convene. The skin-like surface seems to have been meticulously stretched and tanned to function as an ambiguous domestic article with reference to furniture. These sections of fabric-like cushioning conjure domesticity, creepiness and vulnerability.

Flirting seems to become the theme in *Flirt*, where the upholstery surface is applied to represent a covering layer for the fleshy happenings, a device to purposefully conceal. As in the act of flirting, hints are dropped and innuendoes are made in a variety of mannerisms and intensities. *Flirt* is an object that does so without much reserve or subtly. While some things are under the cover of the upholstery, much is on display. A stretch of narrow skin reaches from one end to the other, revealing areas of high relief under the upholstery. Like soft forceps, this expanded stretch of narrow skin pulls the ends back to lay exposed areas of hairiness. Is Briggs revealing flirting as merely a diluted practice of foreplay meant to insinuate the

desire for sex without actually asking for it? While flirting can be innocent and playful surface conversation; its projected conclusion is fleshy, hairy, visceral penetration of the surface, the most intimate of physical and psychological connections for many. Flirting is a practice that feigns concealment of the truth but never actually manages to conceal visceral desire.

An allegorical connection is made in *Flirt* through strategic use of a surface akin to red lipstick. Red lipstick and blush exist for women as an attempt to replicate the physiological changes that occur during sexual intimacy – this is why it creates the appearance of being ‘sexy’ and ‘attractive’. The surface symbolizes the natural reddening of the labia, the lips and the cheeks during sexual arousal. When women plan to flirt, they typically come dressed with lipstick and blush, intent, at least subconsciously, upon the act of seduction. There is a bold and wry sense of humour in punctuating the hairy, grotesquely pristine, sexual specimen with fire-engine-red shine. In examination of *Flirt* the viewer is faced with the seriousness of sex and flirting, as well as the absurdity of our social habits.

Other works such as *Eve* and *Age* investigate birth and growing old by carefully crafting the umbilical cord and portraying more mature flesh. Associations are made to the female body in its youth and the physical inevitability of growing old. The life cycle is on display to be interpreted as genuine and realistic, unashamed of the wrinkles and sagging of a woman’s most private region. His most recent sculptures, *Baby* and *Venus*, continue the evolution of the series and alter the viewer’s emotional response with their presentation. These pieces, in contrast to the



Above: *Baby*. 2009. Porcelain, hair and chiffon.
12 x 15 x 9 in.

Left: *Baby* (Detail).



specimen-like presentations of previous work, are displayed with bases made of chiffon and lace, reminiscent of grandma's coffee table. Their environment is moved from the laboratory to the living room. As is customary with each new sculpture, the level of craftsmanship continues to elevate as well, as the surfaces and forms become more distinct and finely tuned. They seem to be coming alive, which heightens the awareness of the biological and the sexual.

Our inhibitions revolving around nakedness are as old as the Puritan ideals that still bound the Western psyche, even in our midst of the constant

streaming of sexualised advertising. Ironically, those in charge continue to censor nudity while relying on sexually sensationalised imagery to sell products (everything from red lipstick to liquor to cars). Briggs is fascinated by these concepts and their paradoxes. Fashion magazines are a source of inspiration for him. While obvious elements of anatomy serve as a main source, Briggs also draws his content in form and orientation from the subconscious and non-sexualised imagery. Youth, aging, sex and birth, male and female are being explored through the lens of the biological. While the figure has been used historically to depict the human condition, Briggs is delving deeper into its midst with an active imagination and keen sense of humour that he unleashes onto these rare abstractions.

Briggs is poking fun at how we are embarrassed when confronted with our own genitalia and the resulting reality of our natural human bodies and private parts. Instead of dressing them up, he bares all in a condensed collage of pristinely rendered genitalia and abstracted imagery. There are elements of gross humour intermingled among the fleshy curves and crevices of his sculptures. Everything centres upon luscious physicality but they appear to be hybridized and newly invented, or recently born objects. Jason Briggs confesses, "I know that sometimes my work looks naughty. Or just plain dirty.



Venus. 2009. Porcelain, hair and chiffon.
12 x 8 x 9 in.

Or filthy, indecent, improper, immoral, perverted, perverse, profane, nasty, raw, rude, crude, or juvenile... but what can I say? It's natural... Obvious sexual references, along with an extravagant, fetish-like attention to surface, can arouse a yearning to touch as powerful as the act itself. In this way, a parallel can be drawn with pornography – my first encounter with *Playboy*, for example. My emotional response, utter fascination, depended upon the compelling desire to touch flesh."

When encountering his work, it seems that the objects were spawned from a biological phenomenon. It looks as if our unmentionables left our human bodies and went off on their own to create brand new specimens in their image. Psychologically, the sculptures put sex under a microscope for us. Calling to the voyeur in our natures, the abstractions and curious representations seep into the parts of our minds that we keep private. They poke at questions about the philosophical base of our sexuality. Why are we both embarrassed by and attracted to the private parts of our bodies? Where do our sexual inclinations reside in our psyche and with what do we associate our desires and fetishes? How have our sexual fears and desires developed from our own experiences and the influences we are under as a society? These probing questions linger as each viewer grapples with repulsion, marvel or both.



Venus (Detail).

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