

Sculptures become actions with titles like *Positioner*, *Objectifier*, *Muter*, and *Penetrator*. Julia Phillips creates objects that threaten to do something. Although made with elegant restraint, her works are at once menacing and attractive. They are simple and efficient forms, yet they suggest complex scenarios. Combinations of extreme psychic, social, and physical situations and interactions are evoked by her sculptures. Resembling esoteric tools, with such direct and instructional titles, Phillips' ceramic sculptures are active objects, even when resting on the wall or another support structure. The body is directly engaged with her works, it shapes and alters its behavior, sensation, and perception. Her sculptures are minimal pieces that connect to the human form, either by suggesting entry or augmentation.

In a series of objects that attach to the body, such as in *Tuner* (2016), Phillips has created a ceramic collarbone form with a butterfly screw attached to the center point, which would fall at the Adam's apple. With unglazed ceramic straps—resembling leather that dangle frozen in place with the entire object resting on a metal bracket on the wall—*Tuner* indicates something to be worn and tightened. However, it is unclear what effect it achieves, what point it stimulates or constricts. This ambiguity of purpose invites the viewer to speculate on what it would be like to wear it, or if instead, they would prefer to put it on another person. Wondering, who turns the screw? *Protector II* (2016) is another work that attaches to the pelvis with ce-

ramic straps affixed to the ceramic body. Resembling a jockstrap, the area for the crotch (also ceramic) is hinged to easily open and close. Is it a device for protection from harm or from potential engagement—as with a chastity belt?

Objectifier II (2014) is a cool white ceramic object, like a prosthesis or medical tool; the elongated sculpture is unmistakably formed to be in contact with the body. Resembling a complex chin rest, the need for the tool prompts questions into the type of repose it assists. The object puzzles human anatomy. It engages with the imagined space between its parts, it makes visible the internal and external facets of the body, anatomical and psychic. It is part of a grouping of five *Objectifier* sculptures; each also suggests an external affixation as a type of prosthesis with a vague purpose. Although, perhaps they are meant to “objectify” as their title suggests. Their presence in proximity to a body turns the user into a thing; in these depictions the body's role is to activate the sculpture. The sculpture makes the negative space between the chin and whatever other surfaces it uses to prop it up. A work like *Penetrator* (2016), however, has a more forceful relation to the invisible spaces surrounding the body by moving into its interior. Resembling a fire poker, the salt glazed ceramic has a lip that fits to the human mouth—pun intended—with the double-pronged edge entering, and most likely piercing the throat. The fifth in the series, *Objectifier V Slightly Used* (2015), rests on a table; its title underscores the nar-





rative of “almost” functionality within Phillips’ work—suggesting that the object has been retired from use.

These objects that could be worn, or in other cases, inserted, are endowed with a perverse sense of humor. The directness of the forms and the titles of the works are befuddled by the incongruity of their proposed use and their material fragility. Ceramics, a domestic and delicate material, brings the severity of the objects into a more intimate realm. Could these objects be found in the kitchen cupboards, next to the mugs and bowls? The glazed ceramics are shaped into restrictive forms, however their organic quality and texture summons domesticity and the decorative. The warmth in the hand-worked quality of the material is put into contrast to the coolness of the objects and the assertiveness of their proposed functions.

The performative violence of some of Phillips’ objects is mitigated by the more subtle quality of others, however they all put the body into a particular perspective, such as in *Positioner* (2016). A partial ceramic cast of a face from the nose down, features an agape mouth. The mask is suspended on a metal structure that includes ceramic handles to place the hands. Ceramic straps hang from the face, suggesting that a person holds on to the armature and is strapped into place. On the base of the sculpture are ceramic tiles, with a few drips of glossy blue paint on, the same blue that covers the interior of the face. The exterior of the face is a matte black. Standing only 44 inches high, whoever is implicated in the sculpture must be on their knees to fit into it, a position emphasized by the presence of glaze prints that suggest an imprint of knees on the tile base. It is a position of discomfort, but not of acute pain. It is related to another work, *Observer* (2016), where a pair of binoculars rendered in ceramic rests on a metal

pole at 5 feet 9 inches tall. Hovering at the height of the artist, the binoculars place us in her perspective. One that is impossible to achieve.

With *Muter* (2016), another salt glazed ceramic piece is attached to a ceramic strap that could fit around the head. Pressing on the mouth, the ceramic form would potentially silence any wearer. The absence of speech suggested by this work becomes an essential element of Phillips’ investigation. The thing that isn’t said, the space that isn’t visible, the subjective position that is unattainable. Absence and impotence run through Phillips’ works. Violence is paired with absurdity. Hardness is joined with delicacy. The direct address of Phillips’ works pit action against restraint, the objects are active while their effect on bodies is one of restriction, filling, or subduing. These are some of the effects of the actions her objects could perform. The visible aggression of the objects emphasizes the invisible and immeasurable impacts on the space of the body—taking on subjective conditions such as silence, objectifying, and observing, as much as the physical directness of penetrating, tuning, and protecting. The ungraspable experience is key to her work, as Phillips’ sculptures articulate and adjust to the negative space in and around the human form and psyche.

Bender, 2014-2015 (opposite page) Positioner, 2016 (detail) (p. 183)
Objectifier I, Slightly Used, 2015 (p. 184) Connector, 2015 (details) (p. 185)
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