



Julia Phillips, *Extruder (#1)*, 2017, partially glazed ceramics, nylon screws, metal struts, metal pipes, concrete tiles, lacquer, 33 7/8 × 51 1/4 × 68 1/8".

Julia Phillips

MOMA PS1

Blinder, Intruder, Distancer, Muter, Aborter: Julia Phillips titles each of her sculptures after its purpose. Who carries out these functions? Ambiguity menaces the German-born, New York-based artist's work, in which intimacy, race, and power are *interrogated*—to use one of art criticism's most trite verbs, but one that aptly captures the spirit of Phillips's first museum solo exhibition, "Failure Detection," whose austere rooms conjure both torture chambers and medical facilities.

Ceramic utensils meant to sunder and separate flesh lie grimly on a hospital trolley with white handle grips in *Operator II (with Opener, Destabilizer, Distancer, [R]Ejecter), Partially Dismantled*, 2018. *Distancer*, two black facial casts linked by a thin metal pole, sits beside *Opener*, a fanged shearing device (made the same year). In the nearby *Drainer*, 2018, a black female pelvis, its interior glazed with weals of purple and pink, dangles from cables above a steel drain. Phillips's ominous confluences of desire and trauma are explicitly demonstrated in the smallest pieces, such as "Expanded, In Treatment," 2013–, a

quartet of what seems to be delicately hatched Rorschach tests monoprinted with ripped, mottled hosiery. The show's centerpiece echoes MOMA PS1'S exposed piping: *Extruder (#1)*, 2017, includes two ceramic casts—of an ass and a partially rendered head with a pole rammed down its throat—held at roughly the same height by metal stands bolted to a cement-tiled platform. By abbreviating the figure to only two orifices, Phillips invites viewers to complete, and imagine the gender of, the body in between. The metal pipe kinks at right angles from the mouth to an anus, under which pool a few drops of inky, oleaginous liquid on the platform, where a phallus-handled auger augurs future evisceration. In some ways, Phillips's work cuts to the chase: One person's aftermath is another's opportunity.

“The absence of pain is a presence of world; the presence of pain is the absence of world,” Elaine Scarry tells us in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985). “Across this set of inversions pain becomes power.” Phillips realizes this idea with works whose fragmented states convey the indivisibility and thus invisibility of a person in pain, while masks, buckles, and straps—objects claimed by the realms of both hurt and pleasure—insist upon an intimacy that tests the limits of safety. If industrial and clinical motifs such as metal piping and tile allude to systems of oppression, the ceramic casts—some molded from the artist's own anatomy—evoke bodies in their thrall, and how easily they shatter. Rather than provide emblems of security, works titled *Protector*, 2016/2018, and *Fixator (#2)*, 2017, offer those of dystopic bondage, suggesting the harm meted out by institutions of “care” such as asylums, profit-driven health centers, and, indeed, museums.

In the opening weeks of the show, visitors could find Phillips's *Fixator (#1)*, 2017, at the New Museum's 2018 Triennial, “Songs for Sabotage,” which ostensibly addressed art's ability to tamper with colonialist structures. This vertical fixator resembled its twin at PS1: a gag and a pelvic cast fastened to silver poles on a tile platform. Like many of the exhibition's offerings, *Fixator (#1)* proved less an act of interference with the status quo and more of a diagnosis, or even a gesture of futility. Still, in a triennial that often appeared more of a shrug than an act of sabotage, Phillips achieved an ambitious defeatism, and “Failure Detection”—the title a phrase for preventative measures against computer crashes—arose from a generative kind of failure. By eschewing both bodily representation and entirely abstract forms, Phillips demands that viewers discover the gaps

in their own imagination and empathy. For instance, are the five wall-mounted, medieval-looking sculptures, *Manipulator I–V*, 2016–18, meant to serve as weapons of abuse? Or might they be reclaimed as tools of redemption? Scarry asserts that tools make, weapons unmake. But as Phillips’s art implies, some things do both.

—Zack Hatfield

All rights reserved. artforum.com is a registered trademark of Artforum International Magazine, New York, NY.