

Hannah Valentine

Your body often knows more than you do

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Chloe Lane

On Tāmaki Makaurau’s west coast next to the house where I grew up, an exposed clay cliff walls one side of a steep gravel track. The track winds downhill through the bush to the beach. Over the course of the forty years I have walked this track, the cliff has eroded severely in places and in others hardly at all. In parts where it is protected by trees from the westerly wind and rain it looks much as it did when I was a child. Up high, where it is exposed, the surface of the cliff’s forehead has been run smooth. Down below, at human level, where it might be smooth, it is not.

I can’t tell you how many times I used a stick to etch my name into that clay. I recently visited my family home. When I walked the track, I was reminded that not a single Chloe remains. Nor the initials of the boys I loved as a teenager. Nor any of the hearts busted through with an arrow. The rich ochre of the clay has weathered to black, grey, and white in places. Some of the names that are still legible have survived a long time—those that were carved deep. They were probably made with real tools—metal chisels, screwdrivers. It would have taken time. My marks were only ever made in the buzz of the moment, as I was passing through. I would scout around for a stick, one that wasn’t damp or rotten, a fresh break if possible, so it didn’t crumble in my hand as soon as I applied pressure to the cliff’s face.

Hannah Valentine’s small bronze sculptures, the ones that look like meteorological instruments, knuckle dusters, or impossible hand-tools, would be good for graffiti-etching your name into that clay wall. And Valentine wouldn’t be entirely opposed to visitors lifting one from its hook on the gallery wall for this purpose. Earlier sculptures have been intentionally interactive—inviting viewers to touch them, engage with them. With the works in her first solo exhibition at Pōneke’s PAGE Galleries, titled *Your body often knows more than you do*, the potential for action is enough.

The smaller of these new sculptures are from a series she has been working on for a couple of years known as the “anytime” series. It gets its name from the Anytime Fitness chain. Visually, this tracks—these sculptures also resemble exercise equipment or rock-climbing gear. The imperfect bronze triangles, loops, spheres, and other hand-pressed and

molded shapes from this series are predominantly suspended from the gallery wall using rock-climbing cords. Valentine likes that her objects touch on functionality—another space of *potential*. But this is a material that must meet certain safety specifications. It is a material that while it looks good—pleasant colourways, jazzy patterns—is all functionality. “In climbing,” she says, “you rely on your rope with your weight, with your life.” A small, light bronze sculpture doesn’t need such an intense support—it could hang quite happily from a length of cotton thread. But Valentine doesn’t want us to forget ourselves—this is these objects’ real function. That we might look at them, look at the molded bronze lengths, the artist’s hand and fingerprints so visible, and think of our own hands and fingers, our own bodies, and imagine them—the whole weight of them—suspended there too.

Valentine’s practice has for some time now explored body-space boundaries. A collection of larger bronze works, known as the “body form” series, develop this through the lens of pandemic life. Five sturdier pieces hang from the wall by hooks. They were made using a length of wax the height of Valentine’s shoulders, which she wrapped around parts of her body before casting in bronze. The result: irregular, twisted outlines of herself. Some look a little like the shapes you might make with your arms if you were giving someone an awkward, distanced hug. The urge to pick them up is strong. Franz Erhard Walther has been an influence with these works. “He was quite radical in the way he turned viewers into active participants,” Valentine says, “giving a work form through their interaction. I was thinking about this in relation to texts I’d been reading by Moshé Feldenkrais, who talks about how little we really understand about our bodies and how they work. According to Feldenkrais, habits are built young, and changes in how we control ourselves can go so far as to change our attitudes and personalities. His is a slow, contemplative method—a little like the way I imagine engaging with a work of Walther’s, self-aware—which seems to hold a quiet, if powerful potential.”

Two free-standing works from the “body form” series take the premise of the shoulder-length pieces a step further. Here, Valentine has cast lengths of wax more than double her height. As with the Erhard Walter sculptures that require viewers to stand next to them, on them, inside them, in order to *activate* their final form, Valentine’s sculptures shape-shift as viewers move around them. She is interested in how covid has affected how we think about the space around our bodies, how we interact with other people and objects. “I like the idea that the works contain body and space,” she says. “Viewers can fill the space around them, but for all that the freestanding works are made of bronze, they are still fragile. They are thin, light, and a touch sends them into a quiver.”

These sculptures are personal. Valentine's body is on display. Her fingerprints, each intimate press and roll, are also there for us to see on the bronze surfaces. "I really like the way bronze is able to pick up and hold imprints of the body," she says. "Similar to working with clay, but there is something about its permanence I'm drawn to. In a culture where so much is thrown away, I like that working with bronze is so solid, so present and lasting. I love those areas on public sculptures that you can see thousands of hands have rubbed. It's a material that people tend to understand, too, though usually from the perspective of monuments, rather than objects on a personal scale. I like that it responds to touch. It warms up, it likes to be held." *I like that it responds to touch. It warms up, it likes to be held.* She could be talking about her chosen material, or she could be talking about us.

When I look closely at her sculptures I find myself thinking about a moment in an essay from Annie Dillard's 1982 collection *Teaching a Stone to Talk* called "Living Like Weasels": "I don't think I can learn from a wild animal how to live in particular—shall I suck warm blood, hold my tail high, walk with my footprints precisely over the prints of my hands?" The picture of a weasel, and Dillard imagining herself living a weasel's life, laying each of her back footprints in the marks left by her front—there is something oddly moving about it. Maybe it is in Dillard's desire to mimic, to have what is for the weasel a natural, unthinking action. An action that is for her so unnatural, so wrong.

The title of Valentine's exhibition is taken from a quote by Laurie Anderson: "Your body often knows more than you do, and when your body speaks its mind it's important to listen." This is all very well, but what about now, in this pandemic world, where what might have once been intuitive—holding hands, hugs, standing close—is impossible? "She's actually talking about pain and emotion held in the body in the segment," Valentine says. "How you feel loss or sadness in your heart, anger in your jaw, panic in your legs. But I like the way you can take it out of context and it talks more broadly to the sorts of knowledge you gain and hold in your body. It's the sort of thing some are acutely aware of—say athletes, musicians, or surgeons, but the notion goes further than the idea of trained actions."

Another one of Valentine's series is comprised of three large sculptures—long lengths of bronze bent to demonstrate three different angles. "The angles are approximately 60, 75 and 90 degrees," Valentine says. "They are large enough to be a little unwieldy alone, but still manageable. I wanted to work with things in sets, where there is some sense of progression, stages or difficulty levels. A little like loading extra weights onto the bar, but here it comes down to form and your handling of it." There is something extra impossible about these pieces, maybe because of their scale. Standing next to them, it is as if we have

been shrunk down to weasel size and stumbled upon a kid's pencil case—pens, pencils, protractor, and compass spilling out on to the earth in front of us. The pieces are both exciting and baffling. What are they good for? They emanate a curious potential.

I have a distinct memory of myself as a kid standing on the track beside my family home and gazing up at the unblemished forehead of that tall clay cliff, and knowing I had to get up there. I used the unstable protruding roots of a couple of half-dead trees to climb. I wanted to carve out my name above the rest. Once I made it to the top, there was nothing to hold onto though. All I could do was cling there, in full Spiderman mode. When I tried to scratch out my name, I fell before I'd hardly begun gouging out the shallow first letter.

The rest of the Annie Dillard quote, the before and after the weasel, is this: “I would like to learn, or remember, how to live ... but I might learn something of mindlessness, something of the purity of living in the physical senses and the dignity of living without bias or motive.” There is an incredible tension here—between what Dillard desires, and what she can actually do. As in this pandemic world there is a new layer of tension in our lives between what we can and cannot do. Valentine has captured some of this. Her works are comfortable in this awkward space we reside in, between what we can and cannot have, what we can and cannot do—with her strange tools, with our bodies. Dillard is imagining an impossible thing. Yet she does it with such conviction and generosity that it is hard not to listen, to imagine a weasel's life for ourselves. Valentine's conviction and generosity—what she puts on display, of her processes and herself—makes me believe her too. I want to pick up her tools. I am picturing something strange to do with them, and something simple, and something impossible. And I have not forgotten myself in the process.