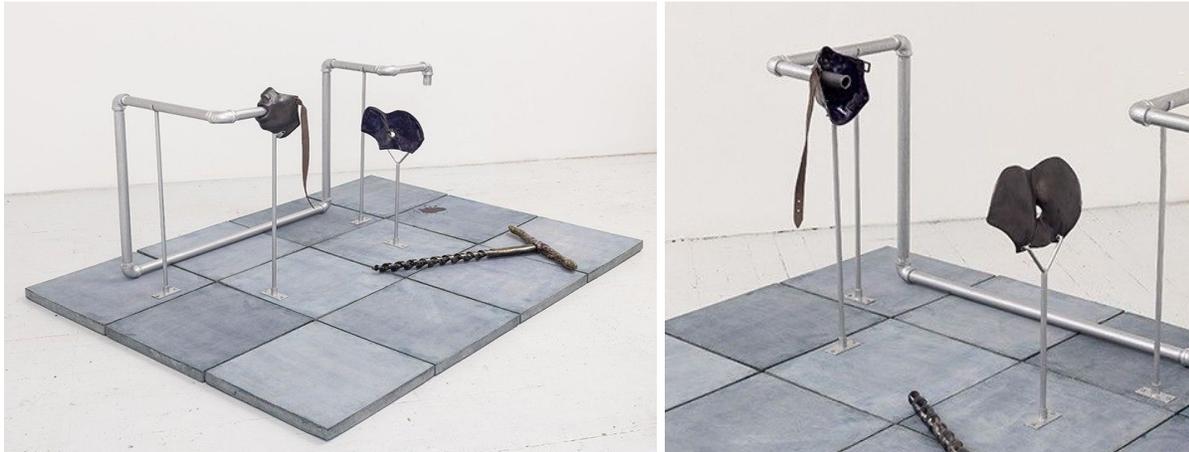


## Julia Phillips and The Body in Pain



*Extruder (#1) (2017)*

In “The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World”, Elaine Scarry stressed torture “not only converts but announces [...] every conceivable aspect of the event and the environment into an agent of pain”. “This pain” she persisted – “does not simply resist language but *actively destroys it*, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries human being made before language is learned”(1).

In the realm of artistic expression, Scarry’s writing has invoked not only lost language from the inhuman crime but more urgently *language to be spoken about such loss*. While depiction of human suffering is ubiquitous in art and literature, the horrid reality of torture has the capability to render words and interpretation ludicrous. Artistic venture to transfer the pain of torture outside of the victim’s body into accessible objects and expression often risks more contrived response than sympathy, hence the difficult task German-born New York based sculptor Julia Phillips tackles. As an attempt to offer the antithesis of the victim’s destroyed language in honest visuality, her sculptures portray muted voiced in volume, the unspoken pain in gruesome physicality enclosed within a visual connotation that is delicate, withdrawn while no less piercing.

Relentless translation of body pain abstract subject into pain objects is through painstaking decision making. In *Extruder (#1)*, two fragments of glazed ceramic bodies, one resemble a head, another a buttock. They are suggestively positioned on metal stick with just enough distance to invite an invisible filling in the emptiness in between, while remain fragmented from one another. They are real human size, hand sculpt ceramic pieces with one side matte black glazed suggesting the exterior of the body (skin) and the other glossy glazed –

the interior (organs or blood). The most disturbing moment is that they are actively exhibited in states of being, or has just been tortured. The mouth of the head/mask is forced opened for insertion of a metal pipes that runs from the mouths interior toward the other end of the pipe where ceramic glaze drips off implying body fluid extraction and their source. The butthole is explicitly opened with a penetrating tool falling on the floor nearby, suggesting a recent act of penetration. Large concrete tiles compositional gather the objects together while infusing an industrial, cold and impersonal aura.

In *Positioner* a similar head/mask is hung from metal bars, with handlers suggestion of hands holding on to two sides of the top bars, and drips of glaze falling on the floor suggesting body fluid. The mouth of the mask is wide-open in a scream without sound, and on the floor there are four footprints informing cruel act by implication of a second party who performs the violence in the position behind the victim body.



Positioner (2016)

Sometimes the painful body isn't physically present but through their absence. In *Operator*, on the metal operational table there lied pieces of abstract pony, sharp metal objects. Each, through their names, *Blinder*, *Muter*, *Penetrator*, *Aborter* is directly tied with a violent torture functioning, whether to penetrate or to silent. A glance at them can send physical body wincing by the damage they can inflict on the vulnerable flesh.



Operator (with Blinder, Muter, Penetrator, Aborter) (2017)

The success of these sculpture lies in conscious distance from an agenda. The language to be spoken about torture is delicate as torture is historically tied with sovereign power while the direct result of torture – pain – belongs to the body and their private, personal realm. Julia Phillips, while explicitly about the skin color of her figures (also the skin color of her own) does not comment on political events but rather, on pain. In relational aesthetic practice, the anger in relation to detailed historical torture can exclude the objects making them the subordination to an advocacy instead of suffering. Phillips by carefully drawing between subject-object also walks on a line between pain as political advocacy and sentience. The anonymity of her objects implies instead of finger pointing. Viewers are to be respected as spectators by actively participating in imagining pain while simultaneously abolishing their psychological distance with the subject. Or perhaps in the face of such crime, abundant information is hollow, absurd. Perhaps in such circumstances, only silence can speak the loudest. Maggie Nelson advocates for *The Art of Cruelty* which she defined as “not art that expressively aims to protest ameliorate, make meaningful, cast blame or intervene in instances of brutality” (2) . Instead, the art that demonstrates suffering as it is other than trying to alleviating it for it

“shows what life is worth living by showing that it isn’t”. Nelson finds this paradox particularly charismatic, for it depletes the two opposing ends of the moral stick: cruelty and compassion for the sake that arts which honestly portray cruelty are more powerful in their compassionate intent. Direct in her approach, Phillips’ sculptures move from alleviation to witnessing, from didacticism to affect. When I think of her work, images of naked bodies in torture, their muted scream, the vulnerability and the helplessness they incite, I sense more haunting gravitation than distance. In the act of looking at certain pain in the face, there rise the “real” that is much needed, to be wounded, shaken with the object presented. Julia Phillips unveils an experience that requires braveness and delicacy, honesty and consideration in order to echo the unattainable voices of torture and the body in pain.

#### Notes

- (1) Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. Print.
  - (2) Nelson, Maggie. *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2011. Print.
- Images. Phillips, Julia. Julia Phillips, [www.juliaphillips.org/](http://www.juliaphillips.org/).