

THE FINGER

James William Murray's ongoing *Also Men* series makes tangible the contradictions and ambiguities of queer experience. His sculptures prompt multiple interpretations but frustrate any direct reading. Playing with layers of cultural association and with keen awareness of the haptic, Murray selects and manipulates the materials, processes and forms of his works to hint at meanings that are never fully disclosed.

Murray's use of diverse media draws attention to the impact of materiality on the viewer's reception of his sculptures. The beeswax he uses is natural, familiar and ancient. It signals a history of representation, record and reproduction. Wax modelling is linked to a history of death masks and anatomical models. Its qualities of tactility and semi-translucency offered a substitute for human flesh and captured the trace of human features. Murray's casting process also links the objects he makes to a long history of representational figurative sculpture. Wax is famously 'lost' in bronze casting processes that result in an immutable copy. Murray's wax and metal finger sculptures indicate such processes, which are also proffered as analogies for the binary axes of presence/absence, sameness/difference and change/stability. For Murray, the medium is also the message. He chooses wax because of its tactility and smell, as well as its delicacy but ability to withstand degradation. In this way, he mobilises wax as a metaphor for the fragility and resistance of human life and bodies. The vulnerability of the wax finger and Murray's privileging of it as an art object constructs a suspended jeopardy.

Small but life-sized, Murray's finger sculptures are presented as equivalents to human digits, severed and independent from an undisclosed, phantom body. Their origin is anonymous, but we are prompted to understand these fingers as simulations of Murray's own. Such a seemingly direct link is a leap of imagination in the absence of the artist, who in any case retains his hands intact. These finger copies take on agency and suggest narratives beyond Murray's experience. They appear to evidence a scissure, a moment of schism for a human body or its sculpted representation. Simultaneously, we accept their unitary tranquillity, the inert calm of the museum specimen or archaeological fragment. These sculptures advertise their artificiality but retain persistent linkage to recognisable corporality. They are both particular and general. Index fingers with fingerprints, they challenge and riff on the possibility and authority of indexicality. They act as evidence both false and real, which points to a missing identity. Murray's cast sculptures are the positive results of a negative void. They are fetishistic substitutions for a real body and identity. They suggest fantastic alternatives that compensate for a lack. They stand in for and placate the anxiety of an absence comparable to the unspoken open secret of queer subjectivity, but also demonstrate their insufficiency.

In their reiteration and subtle differences, Murray's finger sculptures destabilise readings of any essential meaning or identity. Repetitions of the same form are differentiated by their diverse materials and finishes. This undercuts their persuasive claim to human corporeality, in an exercise of queer reproduction. Their displacement and reiteration renders them by turns, surreal, sorrowful and comic. They are

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positioned as analogous to the performative construction of identity. They testify to past presence and make a bid for the future, in a paradigm of queer pathos. They are dislocated from contemporary time, while they continually assert their material presence.

The finger casts tap into a history of classical sculpture, not only in their process of construction but in their signification. Classical, renaissance and neoclassical sculptures famously lost their extremities as a result of the vicissitudes of time and the project of nineteenth-century prudishness. The latter drew attention to sexuality, just as it sought to cover and amputate the carved male genitalia that signified it. This artistic censorship was concomitant with the naming of the homosexual as a newly categorised and pathologised type of person. With humour, Murray recuperates this history by his focus on a different bodily appendage. Firmly immobile on metal rods, his finger casts replicate museum presentation of classical sculpture. As with artists, writers and thinkers before him, Murray keys into the queer resonances of classicism and a history in which male sexualities and masculinities were understood differently. He selects an ignored feature in sculptural representations of human subjects, one also prone to damage and loss. The face is considered the pre-eminent site of identity in portraiture, while the classical torso is the solid core which so often survives. In prioritising the finger, Murray stakes a claim for the marginal, the ambiguously gendered, the first and final sensory outpost.

Engaging with a history of homoerotic representations of idealised men in classical antiquity, Murray rather casts his own finger to create objects anchored in human reality. A finger is a locus of touch, with all its connotations of connection. Murray paradoxically disconnects the fingers he makes, suggesting their thwarted potential. Unlike the idealised figures and invited gazes of classical sculptures, the eroticism of Murray's finger sculptures is situated in the touch they both invite and signal. They suggest an intimate touch, a caress, but also a jab, a poke. They represent gestures without a discernible purpose. They ask an unintelligible, perpetual question and point forever to an unattainable answer. They have lost their host and their object of attention. They point to the vague distance and strive to identify a particular entity close at hand but now absent. They are static representations of a fictional moment, a false promise of possible comprehension, which equates to the fallacy of complete self-knowledge. They strive to inform, a clue from a fictional victim who points to their killer. They are melodramatic and quotidian, linked to grand tradition and humble reality. They are the enigma of Leonardo's fingers that point to heaven and the majesty of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*. They are miniature mimics of the *Colossus of Constantine* and the ghost of the *Apollo Belvedere's* gesture. They are archaeological finds, laboratory specimens and sanctified relics. They are the results of gory Tudor punishments and joke shop pranks. They are nouns and verbs, both sensuous and vulgar, intimate and public, suggestive and accusatory. They are serious sculptures shaped by camp tactics.