

Mary Beth Heffernan, No. 7, 1993, from the Becoming series, at Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica.

Mary Beth Heffernan at Craig Krull Gallery

A rhizome has no heginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo ... The tree imposes the verb "to be," but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, "and ... and ... and ..." This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb "to be." Where are you going? Where are you coming from? What are you heading for? These are totally useless questions.

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,

A Thousand Plateaus

... For you can tie me up if you wish, but there is nothing more useless than an organ.

—Antonin Artand

n A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari write of the essentially heterogeneous reality of language, in which there are no universal or ideal linguistic moments, but rather "only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialized languages." From this we can understand that the body "becomes" sexed, taking on a gendered identity at the moment when scientific, medical and educational discourses appropriate the genitalia as readable objects, as a "language" unto themselves.

The ten untitled black and white photographs selected from Mary Beth Heffernan's Becoming series are presented in a deceptively straightforward manner. These small-scale images contain what looks like organs that have been drained of excess fluids and carefully positioned on a dark tabletop. Upon closer inspection, however, their puckered folds of skin appear pudendal in form and texture. Some contain membranous sacs and multiple protrusions, another a shiny, hard, tumorous nub nestled within folds of tissue. Most display labial apertures as well as phallic protuberances, giving the appearance of a hermaphroditic mass severed from any

sort of body, human or otherwise.

Heffernan creates these curiosities from discarded poultry skins, meat and giblets, sculpting them into forms that resemble human genitalia. In their clean, bloodless presentation, the anatomically impossible objects are simultaneously clinical and culinary, and the average viewer, unfamiliar with the anatomy of the chicken, must read the artist's accompanying statement in order to appreciate the joke: these organs are fowl, not human.

Heffernan's use of discarded organic material invites comparison to those abject artists who depict the body in terms of waste, disease and excess. However, while the abject artists trace the disappearance of the physical body as a material and historical entity in the age of AIDS and cyberspace, Heffernan's scrupulous forgeries playfully confound the scientific construction of gender. She creates both-and-neither sexual simulacra, kitchen-culled counterfeits that "prove" the gap between identity and anatomy.

It is precisely Heffernan's intention to make sex and gender incommensurate by constructing a body that she describes as "unreadable in a strict binary way." Her elaborate meat puppets defy our efforts to describe and classify. Like the rhizome, they are always in a state of becoming, and therefore will never be anything but beautiful and useless, and in their hermaphroditic excess, these organs without bodies resist containment while remaining insistently material and eternally present.

—Claudine Isé

Mary Beth Heffernan: Becoming closed October 14 at Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica.

Claudine Isé is a freelance writer in Southern California.

24 Artweek