

IF ONLY YOU HAD SPOKEN

Dialogues with Hermann Haller's Sculptures

Lisa Biedlingmaier, Renata Burckhardt, Athene Galiciadis, Pipilotti Rist und Loredana Sperini

Atelier Hermann Haller

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Herman Haller (b.1880 Bern, †.1950 Zürich) is one of the most important and well-known Swiss sculptors from the beginning of the 20th century. He belonged to a generation of sculptors who devoted themselves to the idea of the human form with a new and unconstrained freedom. These days opinions about Haller's predilections for depicting the female form vary. While his obsessive preoccupation with his subject is still very topical on one level, his work remains formally anchored in a tradition that understood art's function as an emulation of nature. The exhibition *If Only You Had Spoken* situates Haller's work in a wide-ranging contemporary context that questions this image of humans that the artist strove to capture. Haller's aesthetic ideas are contrasted with contemporary positions that focus on the possibilities for representing human sensibility.

Herman Haller worked primarily on the idea of the human form, predominantly the young, dynamic and strong female form, that for him embodied the primal phenomenon of the statutory art. He modelled his sculptures without recourse to any theoretical analysis, but from a sensory immediacy, that allowed him to work directly, without first sketching, in kneadable materials like clay. The essential power of his female figures is derived from the erotic tension between the sexes, whereas his male figures were inspired by a certain physiognomy, foreign facial features or a mastery of movement. From today's perspective, Haller's image of women raises many questions. His sculptures, mostly resulting from encounters with attractive artists, dancers and actresses, primarily embody strength, beauty and youth. They stress principally the purely aesthetic aspects of femininity, without taking into account its intellectual, social or societal dimensions. Any understanding of physical and mental struggle, such as illness or existential fear, was also far removed from Haller's work. The work of Lisa Biedlingmaier and Loredana Sperini deals explicitly with exactly these aspects of being human.

Lisa Biedlingmaier's work is imbued with a deep understanding of alternative medicine. She is particularly focused on the handling of knots of energy or energy blockages in the body, whose release is a decisive factor in holistic healing. For her, knots are symbols of both bodily balance and susceptibility, Biedlingmaier's sculptures, which are inspired by the knotting technique Macramé, focus on the complex and often precarious balance between mind and body, health and sickness, and they appear accordingly both imposing and fragile. While the dimensions of the metallic supporting-structures echo the proportions of an adult human, their 'inner life' offers a symbolic image of the emotional or psychological states that are evoked in those that perceive them. The materiality of the works recalls associations with the erotic practice of bondage which summons up a connection to Haller's work, especially on the level of unmediated perception.

The language of **Loredana Sperini's** work oscillates between objectivity and abstraction. Her way of working is characterised by a strong fascination with the experimental use of materials, which often leads to surprising, very technically refined compositions. Central to the work is an examination of notions of physicality and transience. On display in the exhibition is, on one side, an enigmatic porcelain figure from the collection of the city of Zürich. Made by Sperini in 2011 from broken ornaments that come from the mountains of rubble in Berlin left-over from the Second World War. Its historically charged materiality is reminiscent not only of the past, of those broken times, but also of current human preoccupations like fear, anxiety, disruption and escape. In addition to which the artist has created a spontaneous reaction to the studio situation by converting the shelf, once filled with Haller's tools, into a new arrangement of sculptures. Models for sculptures, bronze casts, busts, completed and unfinished works stand unpretentiously beside each other, creating completely new emphases on the chosen works presented by the artist.

The image of the female body is ever-present. Thematic treatises on this can of course be found in art history but also in feminist studies. These are often a reflection on the contradiction between the subordinate role of women in public life and the simultaneously omnipresent image of the female body in public space. Since the 1990s **Pipilotti Rist** with her unbounded openness, absurd humour and almost childish naiveté, has been engaged in the audio-visual depiction of feelings from a feminist perspective. Eroticism and physicality form the centre of Rist's work. Characteristic of her video works are spectacular camera movements and transfixing images, which together with distortion, blurring and associative montages transform into dreamlike sequences. In the video installation *Mutaflor* (1996), which deals with the

analogy between digestion of food and the forming of mental impressions, the viewer's gaze is swallowed, digested and excreted in an endless loop by the artist's naked body as she crouches on the floor. Rist reduces the moment of digestion to a dark nothingness, denying us the view of the inside of her body that we might have expected. Instead, we as viewers are thrown for a fraction of a second back on ourselves as looking bodies or subjects to 'be digested'. As a result we are invited to reflect on what we have seen and the impressions that are called fourth by it.

An interest in the reciprocal relationship between painting and sculpture is central to the current work of **Athene Galiciadis**, which revisits the classical form of the still life. The artist places her paintings in a spatial relation to her sculptures, while sculptures are painted or reproduced in her paintings. The work of Herman Haller would also not have been possible without an earlier engagement with painting. After one year studying architecture in Stuttgart he decided to study painting in 1904, only to go on and decide definitively upon sculpture after one of his first trips to Rome. In this year's exhibition, Haller's painting *Tannenwald* will be again on display in the studio after many years, providing a contrast with Galiciadis' interplay of constructive-geometric and biomorphic forms. Galiciadis has developed a series of new works for the exhibition which engage with and rediscover the cultural and historical frameworks that align women's bodies, vessels and fertility, with the aid of new materials such as synthetic resin and coloured plaster. The work *The deconstruction of myself* (2020) is constructed from a plinth made of beech, on which three pear-shaped casts of the same sculpture are presented. While the wooden frame of a helix turns on its axis as it rises up in the air, we perceive the inevitable influence of gravity in the form of the coloured sculptures. It is precisely through this tension between these two opposing movements that visitors find their own view of Haller's female figures.

The exhibition's title comes from the book *Desdemona, If Only You Had Spoken. Uncensored Speeches by Incensed Women* by Christine Brückner, published in 1983. In eleven strong-willed and quick-witted monologues, the German author enables eleven well-known women from history, literature and mythology to have their say, in this way exhibiting a purely female perspective on the conventional relations between the sexes. The direct reference to Brückner's work provides a programmatic framework for a work of the same name by Renata Burckhardt. Burckhardt is an author who is difficult to grasp in her many facets. Transdisciplinarity perhaps best describes her creative output. **Renata Burckhardt** writes plays, scenes, columns, prose and radio satires. Alongside which, this lecturer in art history also

writes artist's texts or stages interventions in exhibition spaces and museums. For this exhibition, Renata Burckhardt has created a new work, a fictional conversation between Haller's figures that is presented as an audio installation. Nude sculptures of men and women are to be found in museums, collections and art galleries the world over. Hermann Haller's sculptures, however, are almost exclusively naked female figures that relate to actual women from the artist's life and they have stood in great numbers in his lakeside studio for decades. Standing in their silent numbers the sculptures form a kind of collective, one that has lived through the 20th century together. Burckhardt's audio installation *If Only We Had Spoken* is a homage to this collective, finally giving these women a voice.

Atelier Hermann Haller is an institution of the City of Zurich

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