

BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



Julia Phillips, *Mediator*, 2020. Ceramic, stainless steel, granite, nylon hardware, 69 x 112 x 112 inches.
© Julia Phillips. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

JULIA PHILLIPS

Julia Phillips
New Album
Matthew Marks Gallery
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BY JARED QUINTON

The sculptures in *New Album*, Julia Phillips's first solo exhibition at Matthew Marks, align in a haunting, slightly sinister mise-en-scène. With delicate ceramic body fragments on armatures of steel and stone, Phillips beckons

viewers into an ambiguous physical and psychological space, where agency and desire meet subjugation and violence.

As usual, Phillips has titled her works with tool-like functions, whose human implications are directed by ceramic elements cast from her own body. Until now her sculptures have embraced a darkly psychosexual ethos, mostly conjuring single bodies, coded female, and subjected to violent penetrations, as in the particularly vicious *Positioner* (2016) and *Extruder* (2017). These latest works offer something slightly more neutral, suggesting mutualistic exchanges between two agents. In *Mediator* (2020), for instance, two partial upper torsos

glazed in contrasting skin-like tones balance at either end of a suspended metal rod, each angled to face a central stainless-steel microphone. The large circumference of the work's granite base keeps viewers at a distance, even as the angle and scale of the cast forms seem to invite intimate human engagement. *Negotiator (#1)* (2020), meanwhile, consists of a large wheel with opposing handles and grips molded for use by two imagined participants—handles which also restrict the wheel's range of motion. Positioned with its "gaze" over the rest of the exhibition, *Observer II* (2020) is a fleshy set of two-way binoculars that suggests the potential of both looking and being looked at.

Phillips' works can sometimes seem overtly didactic; it's tempting to read them as Foucauldian commentaries on the subjugation of bodies within systems of social control, especially given her stated interests in feminist, psychoanalytic, and decolonial theories. Viewers are invited to participate in this discourse by "using" or imagining using the implements and thus implicating themselves in the brutal power dynamics. And yet, Phillips does a lot to undermine this implied functionality, most notably in her use of delicate ceramic itself, the fragility of which is exaggerated by its proximity to rigid metal. In *Mediator*, the delicate sternums of each body casting are pitilessly bolted to their armature; the ceramic spokes of *Negotiator (#1)* look precarious enough to collapse at the slightest touch.

Perhaps even more ambiguous is the artist's treatment of the body itself, which she indexes in familiar ways and yet subjects to uncertain ends. "By showing the body

in fragments I am hinting at a potential presence," she says. "What exactly the suggested body is doing with the parts that aren't visible is up to the viewer to imagine ... Letting viewers fill in the blanks hopefully allows them to adjust the work to fit their own realities and imaginations."¹

It is from this troubled space between recognition and alienation, implication and estrangement, that Phillips's work draws its uncanny energy. Interior is made exterior, and subject is made object. It feels fitting that Phillips should be showing with Matthew Marks, the longtime champion of Robert Gober, whose likeminded embrace of an aesthetic of body horror makes equally apparent how grotesque desire can be, and how alluring abjection can be. Despite her keen awareness of history and theory, however, Phillips's work is unlike anything being made today.

1. Brandon Sward. "Witness and Event: Julia Phillips Interviewed by Brandon Sward." BOMB Magazine Online. November 11, 2019.

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