

Between Cavities, Hard as Flesh

On the Work of Leontios Toumpouris

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You want to imagine futures. You want to create futures' objects in your mind and hold them there, until your mind turns into the shapes of these objects. The practice of imagining turns into the rightness of action, according to the metaphysics of the ritual, so that flowers formed by the hands become the fruits of the practice become abolition's efflorescence.

—Nisha Ramayya *States of the Body Produced by Love*¹

In making work, Leontios Toumpouris asks us to imagine futures with him in a deeply intimate and embodied way. His practice delicately treads a fine line between tangible fact and speculative fiction, focusing on an entanglement of ideas chiefly concerning matter, language and narrative. This work not only manifests through installation, sculpture and object-making but also through collaborative projects and pedagogical praxis.

Toumpouris, in certain respects, is guided through his work by alchemical discourse: that is to say, he often uses ancient alchemist methodologies, replete with symbols and ciphers that hint at transformative processes to propose new ways of considering a particular material, gesture, or situation. In a historical sense, alchemical work began by merging craft traditions, scientific exploration and philosophical thinking in order to try to better understand humankind's relationship to the universe. With this definition in mind, one might consider Toumpouris as a kind of contemporary alchemist: an artist blending physical and chemical examinations with immaterial hypotheses that hint at vestigial knowledge and incomprehensible stretches of meaning and imagination.

To speak first on some specifics of matter, clay has been somewhat of a constant in his work since 2016. An age-old substance, it has been at the origin of so many creation myths: from Prometheus molding men from water and earth in Ancient Greece, to the Sumerian god Enki making

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humankind from clay and blood in Ancient Mesopotamia. And of course many religious texts, from the Bible to the Qur'an, posit the miraculous birthing of bodies through the manipulation of clay. In his practice, Toumpouris also considers this material as it relates to a gloriously diverse variety of bodies, both real and imagined.

In the process of making, he is interested in corporeal qualities of the substance, such as porosity and mutability, and how it can transform through the firing process into something rigid and fragile but still eminently tactile. The objects he then crafts connect representationally to the physical vessels our souls inhabit: evoking flesh, partial limbs or human fascia when presented in an exhibition context. These forms are often found held together as part of skeletal-like metal structures and assemblages, sometimes connected further by other raw materials, such as leather, that overtly hint at surface tissue and skin.²

However, Toumpouris does not want to simply posit a consideration of a raw material such as clay on a visual level; his desire is for something much more experiential, more explicitly bodily.

In recent projects he has explored the effects of calcium bentonite clay on both the interior and exterior of the human form, inviting viewers to come into direct contact with this substance through touch and ingestion. Calcium bentonite, when mixed with water and applied as a salve, can be used to absorb heavy metals and other impurities from the skin. When ingested, it travels through the body eliminating toxins from the intestines, binding pathogens to itself as it moves along the digestive tract. Toumpouris deftly folds these biological processes into his practice, and has become known for eliciting small acts of healing as part of his installations: offering a liquid bentonite elixir to be drunk as part of an exhibition in 2018,³ and most recently sprinkling residues of this clay upon takeaway printouts for audiences to touch and take ownership of.⁴

These intimate and generous material gestures speak to Toumpouris's desire to connect in multiple ways with others through his practice, and to ensure that ideas of narration and meaning within the work are not solely authored by the artist alone. He has always been hyper aware of the distribution of agency in systems of artistic production, and regularly collaborates with other artists, performers and participants to further his research. This particular way of working allows for a community of voices and bodies to be brought into his interrogation of any given subject or concern, carving

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out polyvocal spaces that resist linear interpretation and normative categorization.⁵

Aside from expressions of intent made directly through materials such as clay, metal and leather, Toumpouris furthers speculative narratives in his work by using language to communicate across different spheres of comprehension. Some of these modes of address are precise and direct, others are more slippery and oblique.

In several works the artist has invented fictional languages and cursive scripts that appear seared into and across leather appendages—branded hides for viewers to decipher. Evoking the cryptographic tendencies of medieval alchemists, these new languages speak across gallery spaces, connecting fragments of work together, building inexplicable murmurs within different architectural interiors. These voices, it seems, are not to be heard by human ears, or shaped by human mouths: the knowledge being transmitted here goes beyond us, goes elsewhere. In this crafting of new languages, Toumpouris asks us to question the means and methods of communication we use in our everyday lives. Although mysterious, this aspect of the artist's work is not intended to be deliberately withholding; he isn't himself in possession of any sort of translatory wisdom. Instead, these scripts hint at the simple human curiosity that Toumpouris hopes to engender within and share with a viewer: to create spaces that allow imagination to flourish, to allow us to be held and collectively wonder together.

In many instances, the longer one lingers with these works, the more comfortable one becomes. After a time in their company it can start to feel like sitting amongst a family who are not your own. A family who perhaps do not speak your language, who may be gleefully communicating with one another in a tongue alien to yours, but who nevertheless make you feel welcome, nurtured and cared for.

Elsewhere in his practice Toumpouris employs more direct means of communicating narrative, whilst still generously leaving space for meaning to be collectively assembled and shaped by people engaging with the work. Recently, he has been positioning reams of paper within installations with particular words or partial sentences printed upon them. These linguistic insertions once again nod to historical alchemical texts; where slippages often occurred within rational, scientific instructions to allow for more mystical and poetic discourse to emerge. In an act of further refusal of linear narrative, Toumpouris invites viewers to take pages from these piles over the course of any given project. Thus with each leaf removed, a new word or phrase appears and builds on a potential story being told through the work, in real time, across the weeks or months of an exhibition.

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These participatory tactics of course call to mind the queer subversion of the straight-white-male dominated sculpture of the sixties in the early nineties by artists such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who produced stacks of endlessly reproducible prints to be taken away by viewers, literally eroding the brutal machismo and patriarchal strength of minimalism.⁶ Forbearers such as Gonzalez-Torres paved the way for contemporary artists like Toumpouris to continue pushing beyond singular forms of artistic authorship and agency, extending our understanding of sculpture and object making through democratic, collaborative and inherently feminist methodologies.

Gestures such as those enacted by Toumpouris through his work remind us of the vital importance of focusing on the idea of journeying without fixating on any definitive destination. His is an invitation into the imaginary, much like that articulated by writer and poet Ursula K. Le Guin in her seminal essay “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction.”⁷ In this remarkable text, Le Guin champions artistic positions “full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations” and joyfully declares that imagination “even in its wildest flights, is not detached from reality: imagination acknowledges reality, starts from it, and returns to enrich it.”

This same energy moves through Leontios Toumpouris’s work. His is a bright constellation of associations and connections that imagines futures through states of the body. His is a resistance to conclusion that wallows in a queer, hybrid state of flux and perpetual germination. His is an act of ongoing labor attempting to decipher the world around us; an act wilfully undertaken with the knowledge that this infinite process of demystification has always been and will always be an impossible undertaking.

Nisha Ramayya, *States of the Body Produced by Love* (London: Ignota Books, 2019)

² For example, a 2018 solo exhibition, *Phyle*, centered around the emergence of an earthen, primordial tribe growing and gestating across the gallery spaces at Custom Lane, Edinburgh.

³ As part of the artist’s 2018 solo exhibition *Suggestions and Encounters: Physical or Otherwise* at the Telfer Gallery, Glasgow.

⁴ As part of the 2019 group exhibition *Hypersurfacing* at NiMAC, Nicosia.

⁵ Within various exhibition projects over the past five years, the artist has worked with performers, writers and sound artists to make responsive works as part of or adjacent to his own objects and installations. It is also worth noting that ongoing work conducting workshops and developing public programming with a wide range of participants, from school children to disenfranchised community groups, also feeds into his conception of artistic labor and praxis.

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⁶ For an exhaustive and enlightening overview of how Felix Gonzalez-Torres transformed understandings of sculpture in his lifetime, please see the artist's comprehensive monograph edited by Julie Ault, republished by Steidl in 2016.

⁷ Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" in *Dancing at the End of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York: Grove Press, 1989)