

A person is wearing a shiny, metallic, hooded costume. The costume has large, stylized eyes with pink and green details and a large, stylized mouth with pink and green details. The person is holding a pink object in front of their chest. The background is a solid, light pink color.

AMANDA
WOLF

TOUCH ME
I'M SICK

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STRANGE NEIGHBOUR

Touch Me I'm Sick

It could be said that it is a curse of the human condition to cringe from that which we find awkward, ugly or uncomfortable and yet, much of our lives are spent seeking closeness and contact with others. We desire intimacy, yet censor those parts of ourselves that we present, shying away from completely exposing ourselves to another, or from accepting their complete exposure to us.

A glance over **Amanda Wolf's** catalogue of work shows her interest in those parts of ourselves that we find uncomfortable or ugly. Her work has often explored themes that many would consider private – sexuality, voyeurism and, in *Touch Me I'm Sick*, desire, disgust and the leaking body. Wolf takes what we instinctively cover up and exposes it, us, and herself in this exhibition that is bold, evocative and playful.

Ugliness is at least in part a social construct, dictated by social norms and graces. Current attitudes may seem more accepting on the surface, however in a way our perception of what is ugly has shifted towards what could be seen as a lack of control by the individual over their own body. We are expected to have control over our emotions, and in many ways leaking is seen as a lack of that – tears, ejaculations, even a running nose when we are upset gives the impression that our desires have weakened our self control, and as a result made us something to at best be pitied, or at worst, scorned. As she explores the literal and figurative 'leaks' in the human body, Wolf invites viewers of the work to evaluate their own hang-ups and relationships with both their bodies and each other's.

Touch Me I'm Sick provokes a response that is equal parts discomfort and sympathetic. On the one hand we are confronted with spectacles that tend to disgust – bright garish figures on film gyrating as material spews or streams from the holes in their stitched bodies. On the other, the work evokes sympathy in response to their pain, the way they are begging to be loved, in the way they offer themselves up so completely. In their wanting to give so much of themselves, the figures in Wolf's work leave us with no choice but to respond with an equal wholeness, whether that response be a positive or negative one.

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The techniques used in the work seen in this exhibition, although fluid and playful, are filled with the artist's intent. Bright colours drag our eye to each figure, forcing us to look where we may want to look away. This brightness though, the curved lines and variety of soft fabrics also create a safe space. They invite us to play, to touch, to respond. Although the artwork pokes our vulnerability, it does so in a way that is inviting, accepting. We are encouraged to look beyond the tendency to feel disgust or awkwardness in these moments and to see instead the possibilities of existing in a state of vulnerability with another – the consequences of which may be painful, or potentially exhilarating.

The work in *Touch Me I'm Sick* could be considered confessional art. Wolf clearly puts herself into the narrative of the exhibition. This is echoed in the creative process. Each piece of the work has been hand sewn. The art of stitching something by hand could be seen as a thematic extension of the deterioration of the human body. Needles can pierce the skin. Fingers can bleed. Stitching is imperfect and impermanent. In the artist's own words 'the bodies are fabric, like the living flesh, they are unfixed. They will age, unravel, crease, decay [and] tear.' Wolf says that she has spent months in the creation of this work, and that many pieces were stitched in bed. From a space of physical and emotional vulnerability, she has become the Dr Frankenstein of these figures, pulling together bodies through fragments, scraps and desire.

Despite Wolf's approach to her art being playful and unplanned, there are stylistic similarities between her earlier works on paper/canvas, and these figures. When asked about the transition from drawing to sewing and the connection between the two, Wolf responds that although she approaches sewing as an extension of her drawing practice, the stitched bodies seen in this exhibition were not drawings first. The figures in *Touch Me I'm Sick* seem like the natural

evolution of her work though. Her earlier work, which always showed a playfulness, intricacy, and a tendency towards fluid, continuous lines, is taken to the next level here. These colourful giants seem almost to have risen from the ideas and techniques explored in her earlier pieces, and it is no surprise that Wolf herself sees live performance as 'the next frontier'.

Although both the male and female form are represented in the here, there is a significant exploration of the current culture of awkwardness to the functions of the feminine body. It is an exciting site to explore, as the feminine body is ideal in many ways to consider the notions of the body as a pleasure site versus our responses to its other functions. Looking at figures with leaking breasts for example, one could think equally of sex, but also of motherhood. Both are pleasuring, but in fairly oppositional ways. Women (and men) are expected to compartmentalize their bodies – function, public, private. Often these categories are conflicting and can lead to shame, or heartache, but Wolf reminds us through the playfulness of her work that this exhibition isn't designed to incriminate, but to encourage. Although it will provoke a variety of responses, the work is ultimately encouraging, taking us to a place where the body is pleasing and playful, even at its most vulnerable.

Bec Kavanagh, 2014
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Cover: Amanda Wolf, *Touch Me I'm Sick* (film still) 2014

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