

The Body In Winter

Artists are taking on themes of aging, transformation, and decay

BY LILLY WEI

‘My body betrays me. It ages, I don’t,” Marcia Tucker, the exuberantly feminist, shoot-from-the-lip founding director of the New Museum declared in her posthumously published 2008 memoir, *A Short Life of Trouble: Forty Years in the New York Art World*.

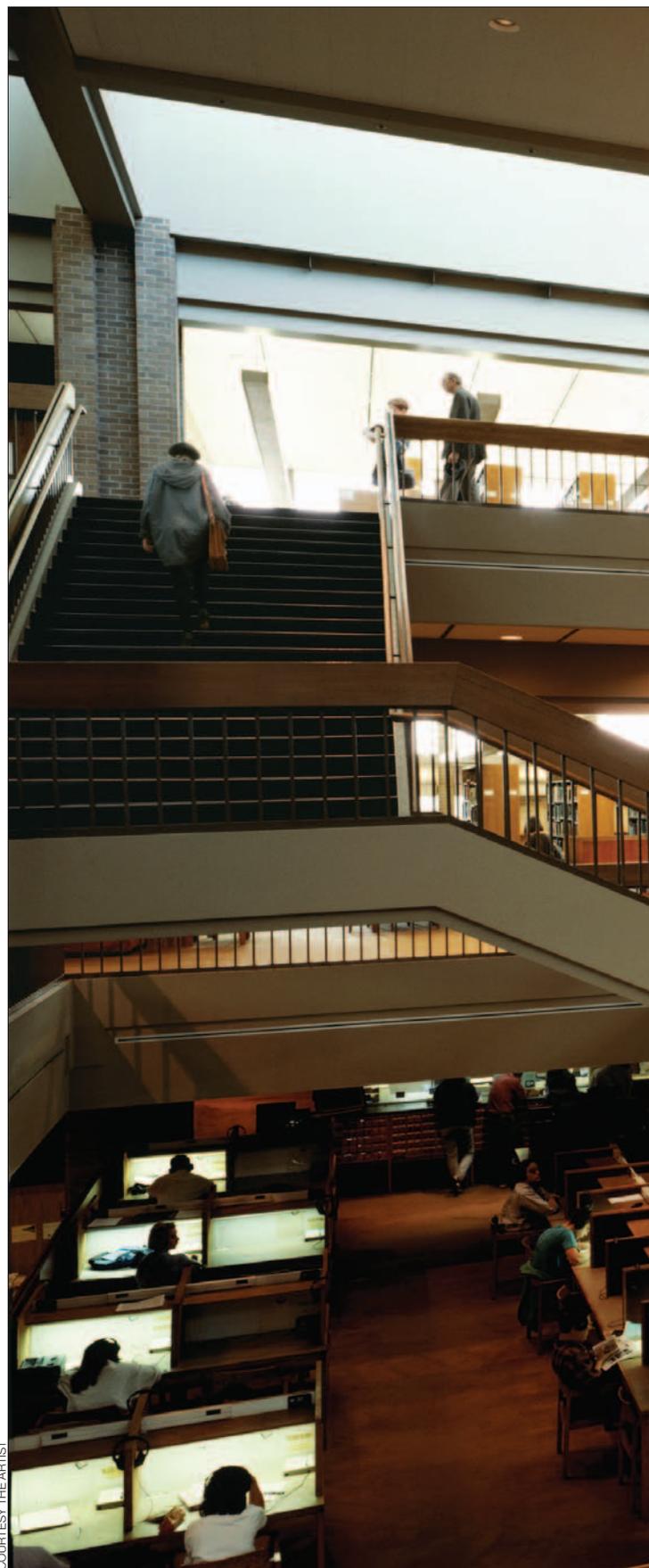
While her observation is widely shared—won’t we all feel that way eventually?—it also raises troubling questions about aging and ageism. Aging is inevitable, but ageism warrants reexamination, especially in a culture as besotted by youth as ours has become. The baby boomers, alas, have boomed, and despite cosmetic and medical advances, despite yoga, marathon runs, endless hours in the gym, vegan diets, and juice fasts, immortality is not yet an option. “Getting old sucks,” Leon Golub (1922–2004), the painter of social protest and mocking, existential angst noted in one of his late paintings.

Can we learn to embrace the alteration in our appearance, to see beauty in the last phase of our lives? Can we see something else? Can we regard our aging bodies more sympathetically, without distaste or shame? Aging bodies are largely invisible or ignored, yet they are an increasing presence as our life spans lengthen and we live into our 90s and 100s.

Lately there have been signs of a perceptual shift in attitudes. Hollywood films, other mass media, and even the marketplace have, at least occasionally, been acknowledging that love, sex, and physical allure exist beyond their

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COURTESY THE ARTIST





Alice Neel reveals herself in *Self-Portrait*, 1980, naked and nonchalant.

target demographic of 18 to 49. Nonetheless, youth is still beauty.

But this hasn't stopped a number of artists from facing and tackling the inevitable. In the late 20th century, Ivan Albright (1897–1983) labored over his gnarled, knobby, time-battered, ultra-real riffs on Old Master paintings, so much so that his subjects appear as petrified substances, witchy and indelible. Now they are a staple of modern art-history surveys. The work of Lucian Freud (1922–2011), on the other hand, is more immediately gratifying. He transmutes his sitters' flesh and his own, no matter its actual condition and age, into dense, indecorous, ravishingly gorgeous paint.

Equally undaunted was Alice Neel. A lifelong nonconformist, she revealed herself at 80, nonchalantly seated in a chair, naked. And more recently, Chuck Close made a series of arresting photographs of undressed mature bodies.

Photographers too have dealt with the aging nude. Jeff Wall's curious light-box image *The Giant* (1992) depicts a modern library interior with the colossal figure of a naked older woman digitally inserted onto the landing of the staircase like a classical statue of a disrobed Athena. Apparently ignored by library visitors, the figure underscores the invisibility of the aged in art and life, although, ironically, this old woman's body remains remarkably whistle worthy.

Ron Mueck's realistic, moving sculpture of his dead father's naked body was the work that gave birth to an art

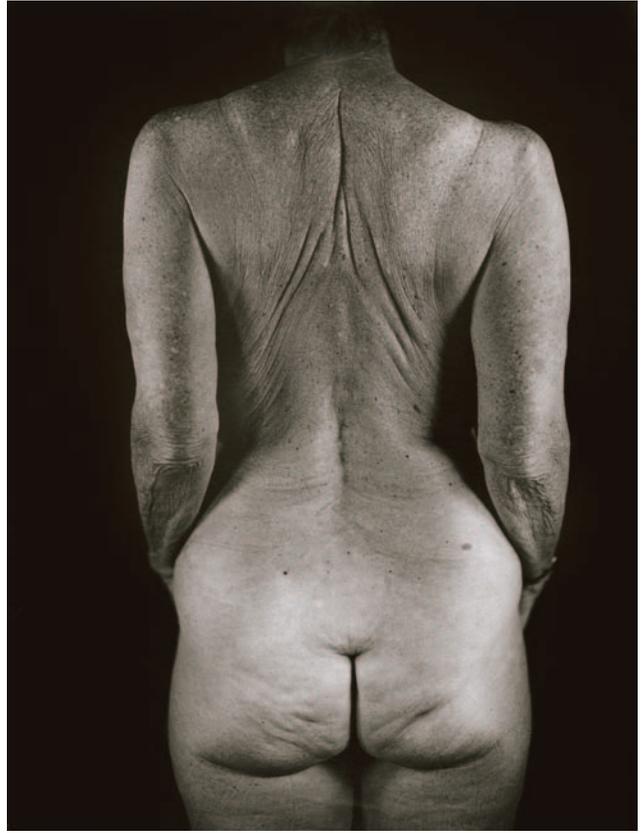
star—a tale of fathers and sons—when it was shown in the 1997 “Sensation” exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. Then there are Eric Fischl's nods to the aging male's paunch in his “Krefeld Project” (2002) and “Bedroom Scenes” (2004), among other sightings. Whereas for these artists the aging body has been an intermittent subject, for others age has been a long-running critical theme. Dieter Roth (1930–98), the great multidisciplinary artist of time and decay, turned the cameras on himself in a 131-video-monitor installation, *Solo Szenen* (Solo Scenes), from 1997–98, a non-stop, dispassionate recording of all aspects of his daily life, including the most intimate.

John Coplans (1920–2003) was in his 60s when he began photographing himself. His images are belligerent, tender, humorous, and disconcerting—an objective but also insistently intimate view of his body and body parts. Subverting ideals of male beauty in beautiful black-and-white prints, often monumentally scaled, his steady scrutiny of his hands, feet, knees, legs, and much more revealed baroque swags of skin, odd eruptions of hair, broken nails, and rosy veins—a willful over-sharing poised between documentary and performance.

Another who didn't shrink from the realities of the flesh was Hannah Wilke (1940–93), who began in the 1970s with her controversial, flamboyant nude self-portraits as a beautiful young woman. The images were considered a betrayal of the feminist cause by critics and a deconstruction of feminine narcissism by supporters. Her self-portraits

Manabu Yamanaka, *Gyahtei* #17, 1995. The images in this series provoke discomfort that gives way to empathy.





Chuck Close, two diptychs, both labeled and dated *Untitled Torso Diptych*, 2000.
In these photographs, the bodies of old people are strong and sculptural.



**Harriet Casdin-Silver, *80+1*, 2007,
posed semi-naked at 81, just over a year before her death.**

DANIEL VAN ACKERE/COURTESY THE ESTATE OF HARRIET CASDIN-SILVER AND GALLERY NAGA, BOSTON

culminate in the poignant, difficult late images “Intra-Venus” (1992–93), taken by her husband, Donald Goddard, when she was ravaged by cancer. They show her with hair gone and face and body bloated. It was a death foretold by Wilke’s 1978–81 work devoted to another cancer victim, her mother.

Best known for visually stunning, explicit, sexually charged paintings of herself and her lovers from the 1970s, Joan Semmel continues to celebrate the body and its erotic appeal with undiminished attentiveness and candor. A recent work, *Triptych* (2009), portrays the artist—now nearly 80 but still voluptuous—in the nude, three times, as if in motion, the last figure blurred like a multiple exposure, its identity less fixed. Another is *Crossed Legs* (2011), a painting of the artist’s body today, which reprises with greater restraint the sexuality that has been integral to her work throughout. Her hand that once reached to pleasure herself and others is now visibly veined, resting lightly, quietly on her bare thigh.

Harriet Casdin-Silver (1925–2008), a pioneering holographic artist and feminist, focused on women and nudes, usually her friends and family as well as herself. One of her best-known works is *70+1+2* (1998), a life-size, full-length, alarmingly present three-dimensional hologram of the artist at a majestic 71 years of age, seen frontally, paired with a similarly scaled photographic collage of herself in the same pose seen from the back.

The most startling renditions of elderly people, however, might still be those of Manabu Yamanaka’s haunting “Gyahtei” series, devoted to social outcasts, which also includes street children, the homeless, and the physically deformed. These black-and-white life-size photographs of naked women in their 90s posed against a pure white ground, as if they were already in another world, were shocking when they were first shown, about 12 years



John Coplans, *Knee and Hands, No. 5, 1993*. His explorations of his own body are intimate but objective.



In Joan Semmel’s *Crossed Legs*, 2011, the sexuality is more restrained than in her earlier work.

ago, when the artist was in his early 40s. The exposure of the women’s withered bodies to the public gaze was also unsettling, particularly because Yamanaka was raised in a culture that venerates age. But after the initial instinctive recoil, more empathetic responses assert themselves. This is another form of veneration, as Yamanaka depicts the transition between life and death—the “pain” of life, he once said, that is part of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism.

Our interest in aging often correlates with our age. Not many younger artists take on the older nude, as Yamanaka did. Younger artists do, however, focus on death, decay, and transformation, as Berlinde de Bruyckere does. Her fascinatingly deformed and twisted subjects, half abstract, half figurative, with their own decadent beauty, parallel the ravages of age.

But death is less of a query or an abstraction in our late years, and older artists often want to focus and hold on to their present bodies as entities utterly real, a refuge from the end. And in so doing, some have found that the aging face and body, with its translucent patina and complex patterns, can reveal a one-of-a-kind, cumulative beauty—the beauty of a long life fully lived, illuminated by a multitude of stories. ■