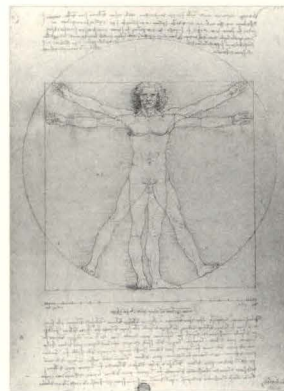


## EFRAF EL-HANANY / Public Bodies

The upcoming 2010 winter Olympics calls to mind the visual tradition of images of athletes and their achievements. Heroic depictions of male nude athletes appeared with the games taking place at Olympia in ancient Greece, and were perfected by the fifth century BC. The winner of an Olympic event was received with much honour, especially in his hometown, and sculptures of victors were placed in the entrances of temples to show respect for the gods. Over 2500 years later we find a copy of Myron's famous 5<sup>th</sup> century discus thrower, the *Discobolus*, standing in a courtyard of Vancouver's Centennial Museum. Set against a backdrop of mountains, glassy highrises, and ocean, the nude athlete is depicted at the peak of motion, about to release his throw. With his muscles knotted, his face is concentrated but calm. His body and arms form a perfect circle, an ideal manifestation of symmetry, rhythm, harmony, and balance. Myron's original work, as well as many other Roman copies of ancient statues of athletes—the *Doryphoros* (spear-bearer), *Diadumenos* (diadem-bearer), and *Discophoros* (discus-bearer), all attributed to the fifth century BC Greek sculptor Polykleitos—shaped the image of the male nude, giving us an ideal of beauty and physical perfection that lasted until the early twentieth century. Polykleitos was a key contributor to the Classical Greek style, one of his most important achievements being the introduction of a relaxed bodily posture accompanied by the shifted weight balance later known as *contrapposto*. Equally significant was his treatise, the *Canon*, which tied the male nude to a system of ideal mathematical proportions. These became the norms of physical beauty in Western art and society. Celebrated Renaissance works such as Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man* (c.1487) or Michelangelo's *David* (1504) show the later application of such Classical ideals. Leonardo's famous



*Discus Thrower*



Leonardo da Vinci, *Vitruvian Man*, 1487



Michelangelo, *David*, 1504



Jacques-Louis David, *Oath of the Horatii*, 1784

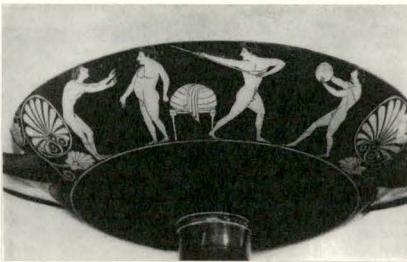
and pedagogical uses: Jacques-Louis David's famous Neoclassical painting *The Oath of the Horatii* (1784), now in the Louvre, conveys a message of strength and sacrifice for the French nation as manifested by the "perfect" athletic bodies of the Horatii brothers. Later, artists of Soviet Russia used the classically athletic body to invoke ideas of strength for the patriotic cause. In Vera Mukhina's sculpture *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* (1937), for example, the ideal bodies of both male and female athletes create a sense of strength and triumph that celebrates the greatness of the Soviet regime.

As with the ancient *discobolus*, these works do not depict an individual but rather an idea of the perfect image. Although the ancient *kourus/kouroi* statues were intended to celebrate the achievements of a particular athlete, their facial features have a generically Classical profile. Their bodies do not copy actual male anatomy, but follow a canon of precise proportions to create a heroic image of the ideal athlete. An Attic vase of the



Vera Mukhina, *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*, 1937

early fifth century BC conveys the disapprobation that confronts the violation of the ideal: here a fat youth in a gymnasium is mocked by a slim athlete. In the background are two equally trim youths, one throwing a lance and the other a discus. The physical difference of the chubby athlete was evidently seen as shameful and ridiculous.



Attic vase of the early fifth century BC



The ancient tradition of validating and publicly commemorating the achievements of athletes continues today, of course, but with greater recognition of individuality. Artists of the mid-twentieth century began to question the Classical ideal by portraying the athlete more naturalistically, with greater emphasis on the recognizable, individual features of their models. In Vancouver, for example, a bronze sculpture of local runner Percy Williams by Ann McLaren (1996)



Ann McLaren, *Percy Williams*, 1996

is sited outside the BC Sports Hall of Fame at BC Place. Williams, once known as the “World’s Fastest Man,” is shown at the starting position of the 100- and 20-metre races at the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam, both of which he won. (His victory was such a surprise that the medal ceremony was delayed while officials looked for a Canadian flag!) McLaren is known for her life-like figures created from plaster molds of actual people. Here, using a photograph for reference, she captures Williams with his muscles tensed, his forehead wrinkled, and his face with a determined look. He crouches, the tip of his fingers barely touching the ground as he waits to lunge and run. There is no attempt in McLaren’s work to beautify or idealize the proportions, facial features, or bodily pose of her subjects. She follows her model closely and produces a near-photographic resemblance to Williams—respect for individual identity has outweighed respect for Classical aesthetics.



Jack Harman, *Harry Winston Jerome*, 1986

Other bronzes in Vancouver celebrate the achievements of twentieth-century athletes in a similarly realistic style. In his monument to Harry Winston Jerome (1986) in Stanley Park and his bronze *Miracle Mile* group (1967) at the PNE depicting the historic race between Roger Bannister and John Landy at the British Empire Games of 1954, Vancouver artist Jack Harman stressed individual facial expressions and tense bodies caught at the peak of their accomplishment, thus commemorating their achievement (and in one case failure). Harman shows Landy looking over his shoulder on the final turn of the last lap as Bannister passes him on the right (he based his figures on a famous image by *Vancouver Sun* photographer Charlie Warner). Landy is known to have commented wryly on Harman’s bronze:



Jack Harman, *Miracle Mile*, 1967

“While Lot’s wife was turned into a pillar of salt for looking back, I am probably the only one ever turned into bronze for looking back” (Steil and Stalker 41).

McLaren and Harman’s naturalistic bronzes merge seamlessly into the currents of avant-garde art movements of the 1960s. Sculptors like George Segal (1924–2000) and Duane Hanson (1925–1996), for example, introduced a hyperrealistic approach to their life castings of real people. They made no attempt to

beautify their subjects or to hide their human flaws. Hanson’s celebrated *Supermarket Shopper* (1970) presents an overweight and unkempt housewife, curlers in her hair and a cigarette dangling from her mouth, as she pushes an obscene amount of food packed into a supermarket trolley. Such artists took sculpture to a new level of realism, not only through the precision of their castings but by introducing a radically new kind of model. Here life and art merge: models and subject matter that past artists would have found unsuitable for public display now mount the pedestal—or, more often, lie on the floor. (Locally, the absence of a pedestal will be familiar to Vancouverites and tourists from J. Seward Johnson’s playful bronze group *Photo Session* (1984) in Queen Elizabeth Park.)



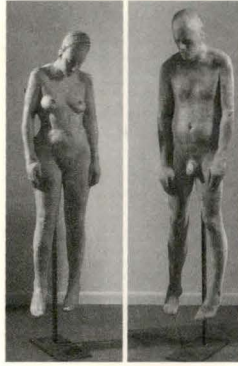
Duane Hanson, *Supermarket Shopper*, 1970

From the late twentieth century the hyper-realistic approach entailed ever-closer examination of the human body. Artists now acknowledge and represent bodily functions or aspects of physicality that would traditionally have been considered impure or inappropriate in a work of art. This approach received wider attention after a controversial exhibition of 1993 at the Whitney Museum entitled *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*. In the sculpture of Robert Gober and Kiki Smith, for example, pathetic, flawed models present us with the opposite of Classical perfection: dismembered body parts in Gober’s *Untitled* (1990) and the representation of leaking bodily fluids in Kiki Smith’s *Untitled* (1990). While the casual viewer might find the display of these bodies repulsive and provocative, contemporary artists in fact attempt to validate the integrity and beauty of their





Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1990



Kiki Smith, *Untitled*, 1990.



Jenny Saville, *Branded*, 1992

subjects. An interesting example is Jenny Saville's painting *Branded* (1992), in which an obese woman is painted from a dramatically low perspective (*da sotto in su*), making her look even bigger. Saville notes, "I am not painting disgusting, big women. I'm painting women who've been made to think they're big and disgusting, who imagine their thighs go on forever" (Slatkin 271).

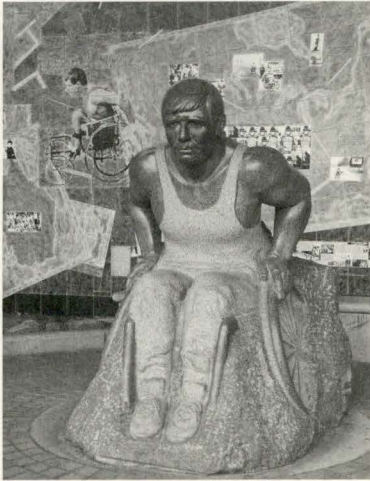
From a Classical perspective this new display of the imperfections of the body would be puzzling. But the shift in norms of beauty in the late twentieth century itself forms the subject matter of many contemporary works, such as Marc Quinn's controversial portrait of Alison Lapper (2005). Quinn's three-and-a-half metre-high representation of the disabled and eight months-pregnant Lapper was set on a pedestal in Trafalgar Square in London. Lapper was born with no arms and shortened legs due to a chromosomal condition. Oddly, Lapper's image is continuous with the Classical tradition, for it clearly refers to the famous statue of the Venus de Milo, the goddess of love and beauty which today stands on display in the Louvre. Though missing her arms, she is a paradigm of Classical perfection. If viewers are meant to look at the fragmentary Classical statue with touristic awe, they are equally meant to see in Lapper's body beauty, personal courage, and defiance. As Marc Quinn has stated, "For me, Alison Lapper Pregnant is a monument



Marc Quinn, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, 2005



Venus of Milo, 130-100 BC



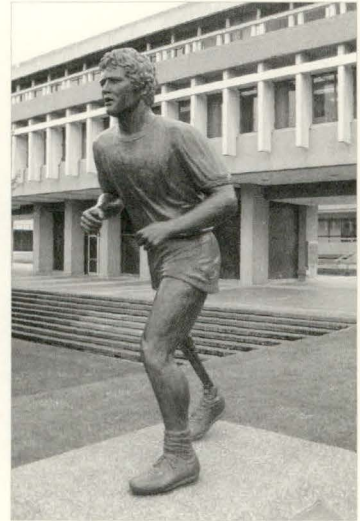
Bill Koochin, *Man in Motion*, 1997

to the future possibilities of the human race as well as the resilience of the human spirit” (Lewis).

Returning to Vancouver, there are celebratory works such as Bill Koochin’s portrait of Rick Hansen in his wheelchair, known as the *Man in Motion* (1997), or the famous bronze statue of *Terry Fox* in the Academic Quadrangle of Simon Fraser University (2001). Artist Stephen Harman (son of Jack Harman) said of his Fox portrait: “We wanted the statue to express the intensity and the dignity, as well as the fatigue factor, without too much of the agony” (Hearn). Harman captures Fox’s determination and tensed muscles, focusing on his legs:

one pulls him forward to his goal while his prosthesis seems to pull him back and slow him down, an image of pain and courage. This realistic display of Terry Fox’s heroism is represented across Canada, from Beacon Hill Park in Victoria (by local artist Nathan Scott, 2005) to the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa (by John Hooper, 1983). The late twentieth century evidently introduced a new category of heroic art, where disability and “imperfection” can be celebrated.

The Classical ideal and the Classically athletic monument have been replaced by a more personal and individual display of heroism. Terry Fox’s monuments commemorate an extraordinary act of courage in the face of severe physical compromise. So where does this leave the “perfect” body and the Classical ideal? Is the legacy of Myron and Polykleitos dead? The Classical ideal lives and thrives, not in the world of statuary and art but in images designed to engage consumerism. The worlds of media, glamour, and marketing still celebrate the Classical ideal in their campaigns. The uneasy co-existence of Terry Fox’s bronze and a fashion advertisement displaying the Classically “perfect” features of a semi-nude male model is evidently a contradiction that our age is able to tolerate.



Stephen Harman, *Terry Fox*, 2001

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