

Sensual/Virtual: Two Coloured Sculptures

A new display in the Fitzwilliam Museum's Octagon Gallery focuses on our reactions to the juxtaposition of two hyper-real male figures, both recent loans in: St Sebastian made by Spanish Renaissance artist Alonso Berruguete in the 1530s, and Action 125 made by Iranian-born, London-based artist Reza Aramesh in 2011. Although sculpted nearly 500 years apart, the materials, scale and the idealization of the male body are similar.

Both sculptors have focused on pain and suffering, fear and submission. On defiance and martyrdom. And these lone, semi-naked, bound and exposed male bodies also speak of beauty, and even erotic desire. Their uncanny naturalism humanises their suffering – encouraging empathy – but also makes them, as a saint for example should be, more than human.

The visitor is confronted with two youthful victims in extreme physical and psychological anguish. Do these works provoke horror and anger or pity and disgust? Their realism might cause the viewer discomfort, but do we turn away or do we feel fascination? Despite, or even because, of their subject matter, are these works of art images of erotic desire? The display ends on Sunday 25 October 2020.



Alonso Berruguete (c.1488–1561)
St Sebastian Photo: Mike Jones



Reza Aramesh (1970–)
Action 125: Tikrit city, Iraq, Prisoner of war, Monday April 14, 2003. Photo: Mike Jones

The Fitzwilliam's Director, Luke Syson, said: *"We are delighted to have these two extraordinary and powerful masterpieces of coloured, unnervingly naturalistic sculpture on loan, which speak so eloquently to our annual theme of Sensual/Virtual. I'm very grateful to the owners for helping us make this happen. Both mesmerisingly beautiful but gritty sculptures focus on the challenging subject-matter of martyrdom and subjugation. They conjure up a whole range of emotions from sexual desire to stomach-wrenching disgust. We hope that visitors will find the juxtaposition exceptionally relevant as we continue to grapple with the C-19 pandemic and violent protest and suppression across the globe."*

Berruguete's recently discovered and conserved St Sebastian is a masterpiece by one of the most talented artists of Renaissance Spain. The statue portrays a well-known story, that of St Sebastian, a Roman army general who was martyred for his Christian faith by the anti-Christian Emperor Diocletian in 283 AD. The cult of St Sebastian became widespread in Catholic Europe from the 1400s, as it was believed that he could cure believers of the plague. The Martyrdom of St Sebastian was also a subject favoured by Renaissance artists as it gave them a legitimate excuse to portray an almost nude, idealised male body, in a religious context. Berruguete's statue may have been made as part of a large multi-figure altarpiece or, more likely, as a stand-alone sculpture that could be carried through the streets in holy processions.

Berruguete had been to Italy and Sebastian's pose is based on a famous work by Michelangelo. But this was not intended as an elevated work of art. Instead this was a piece made to inspire popular religious devotion, to make a community feel protected. Church commentators at the time worried however that the realistic nudity of such images would cause inappropriate desire. It would be interesting to discover whether St Sebastian, beautiful and suffering, was always associated with gay identity, as he is now.

In contrast Action 125 is a contemporary secular subject. Its subtitle reveals it to be a Muslim Iraqi prisoner of war captured by invading American forces in Tikrit, Northern Iraq, on 14 April 2003, at the start of the Iraq War (2003–2011). Seen here as a stand-alone piece, it was made in 2010–11 as part of a larger series of nine sculptures, each representing an act of subjugation. The sculptures show a lone male victim – exposed, humiliated, forced to strip down and so rendered horribly, temptingly vulnerable.

Aramesh's haunting and unnerving 'icons of beauty and terror' derive from a number of visual sources. These range from beautiful, highly-finished Renaissance and Baroque sculptures and paintings of ecstatic saints – like Berruguete's St Sebastian – to shocking, hastily-snapped reportage photographs of victims of war, conflict, and displacement from Algeria and Korea in the 1950s to present-day Iraq and Palestine. Aramesh's aim is to 'create a dialogue between icons of European art history and images of contemporary political conflicts'.

Reza Aramesh's reflections :

"The sculptures in the Action series carry layers of historical and contemporary reflections on race, class, and sexuality. They are in conversation with, and refer to, the Western understanding of anguish and survival as represented in traditional Renaissance iconography, especially the figure of St Sebastian. My objective in this series is to challenge the idealised notion of the European Renaissance and its presumed superiority with regard to beauty, religious ecstasy and torment.

The Action figures aim to critique the still-prevalent idea that the Renaissance is the highest point of artistic reference for a superior European civilisation. Unlike Renaissance statues which usually portray noble men, holy personages or mythological figures, my sculptures depict working class, vulnerable men of colour from the Middle East, Asia and Africa. They are hand-carved in limewood, painted and varnished, using the same techniques and visual language of traditional Spanish polychrome sculptures but they are meant to glorify the everyday, ordinary man. They aim to represent symbols of strength, resilience and power.

I think it is great how belief – whether political, cultural or religious – and sexuality come together in this pairing. Berruguete's St Sebastian (made within the context of a Catholic Christian iconography) with Action 125 (a symbolic depiction of a prisoner-of-war in Iraq and a representation of the violated body of a Muslim) are both very active subjects, who have been subjugated because of their strong beliefs. In some ways, they are both rebellion subjects. Their juxtaposition should raise many questions including the subjectivity of the idea of martyrdom, and how our belief systems are mere constructs and loaded with historical fictions."

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Notes to editors

Alonso Berruguete (c.1488–1561) St Sebastian

Spain, probably Valladolid, unknown date, probably 1530s

Pinewood, canvas, and rope, painted and with partial gilding

On loan from Colnaghi Ltd.

Reza Aramesh (1970–) Action 125: Tikrit city, Iraq, Prisoner of war. Monday, April 14, 2003

England, London, and North Italy, 2011

Limewood, painted, with glass eyes; and concrete breeze blocks (plinth)

On loan from a private collection

About the Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum programme, funded by The Arts Council. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of coins, Asian arts, ceramics and other applied arts. The Fitzwilliam is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

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The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB | Free admission

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