

Gut Feeling: Martha Friedman, Dancing Around Things

By Erin Sweeny · February 2017

In negotiating the space between body and object, we rely on the memory of use and familiar patterns in a world where binary assumptions are common: in versus out, hard versus soft, resistance versus flow. The structure of our internal worlds, in contrast, is a bewildering maze of guts and emotion. In her current exhibition at Andrea Rosen Gallery 2, *Dancing Around Things*, Brooklyn sculptor Martha Friedman continues her investigation of object and choreography in pursuit of a more permeable membrane between the industrial and the corporeal—punctuated with her unique brand of levity and a hint of perversity.

In Gallery 2's entryway, a floor-to-ceiling panel of milky white rubber sways slightly. Projected onto the hanging panel is a video featuring dancer/choreographer Silas Riener as he interacts with a series of giant rubber bands installed in Friedman's studio, knotted and strung floor-to-ceiling with a series of metal hooks. The two are familiar collaborators, previously working together to create the staging for Friedman's 2015 *Pore* exhibition at Locust Projects in Miami, an ambitious installation centered around a series of large-scale rubber pours connected to wearable sculptures activated by Riener.

The edited compilation of movements in the video, *Tangle* (2017), feels both virtuosic and spontaneous. In one sequence, Riener's footwork skillfully navigates the grid of hooks on the floor after detaching the bands, at turns wrapping himself up in and suspending himself from them. After detangling in another clip, his standing undulations seem to mimic the residual energy and reverberations of the rubber as it settles. Friedman also makes an appearance (as do her pets, occasionally strolling through the frame or lounging in the background), leaning into the bands as she talks to Riener off-screen. The video is without sound, yet clearly communicates their process as well as the play between body and material. The effect is soft and loose, sensual.

Stepping into the main gallery, the contrast is stark. A metal table bisected by a grid of cut steel pipes commands the center of the room. Rubber tubes of various colors perforate the latticed structure, also punctuated by clusters of long spikes sticking out one side. Next to the apparatus, a sole spike rests on the table; on its other side, a glass jar of lubricant. The colors of the tubes, a recurring theme in Friedman's recent work, reference the four humors of the body: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. Reminiscent of a switchboard and charged with the

ambiguous title *Two Person Operating System* (2016), the sculpture and its curious tools allude to both past and future.

Behind, a series of four engineering prints hangs on one wall, documenting large blocks of welded steel pipes in Friedman's studio. Portions of rubber tubes are pinned directly to each print, breaking the two-dimensional plane to emerge from or enter into the depicted pipes at unlikely angles. Yellow rubber appears to squeeze out of the pipes in one print as if from a tube of frosting, left to droop and gloop. Small rubber circles appear like blood cells on others, clustering. Simulating organic material and function, the prints translate as blueprints for how the gallery's central form might be activated.

Two Person Operating System was conceived in collaboration with choreographer and fellow Princeton faculty member Susan Marshall. After co-teaching a class titled "Body and Object," in which students created dance works and sculptures to challenge boundaries between the two disciplines, the two sought to create a joint work exploring similar ideas. Marshall was drawn to Friedman's *Magician's Assistant* (2016)—an imposing sculpture incorporating three separate blocks of dark metal connected by tubes of various colors—inspiring Friedman to create a partner piece in the form of a steel cross section with moveable parts. Originally installed at NYU's Institute of Fine Arts as part of an exhibition last fall, *Two Person Operating System* also served as focal point of a piece performed by Susan Marshall & Company.

Running in thirty-minute loops over the course of two hours, the first iteration of Marshall's performance focused on two-person teams activating the sculpture and surrounding space with a sequence of tightly-choreographed actions. Binary assumptions returned with the introduction of each pair as they investigated the apparatus as form and tool: metal spikes sliding into various slots with audible effect, rubber tubes dropping from the steel table like coiled intestines, lubricated ends inserted with visible effort for stretching and weaving. Gendered sexual metaphors were confused as forceful movements were balanced with moments of humor and support, each pair enacting the same movements with slight but essential nuances. The performance's second iteration will take place at Andrea Rosen Gallery 2 on February 18 and March 4.

Working in collaboration with Riener and Marshall, Friedman's sculptures become records of and catalysts for movement—yet most compelling is her defiance of stasis even as the objects stand alone.