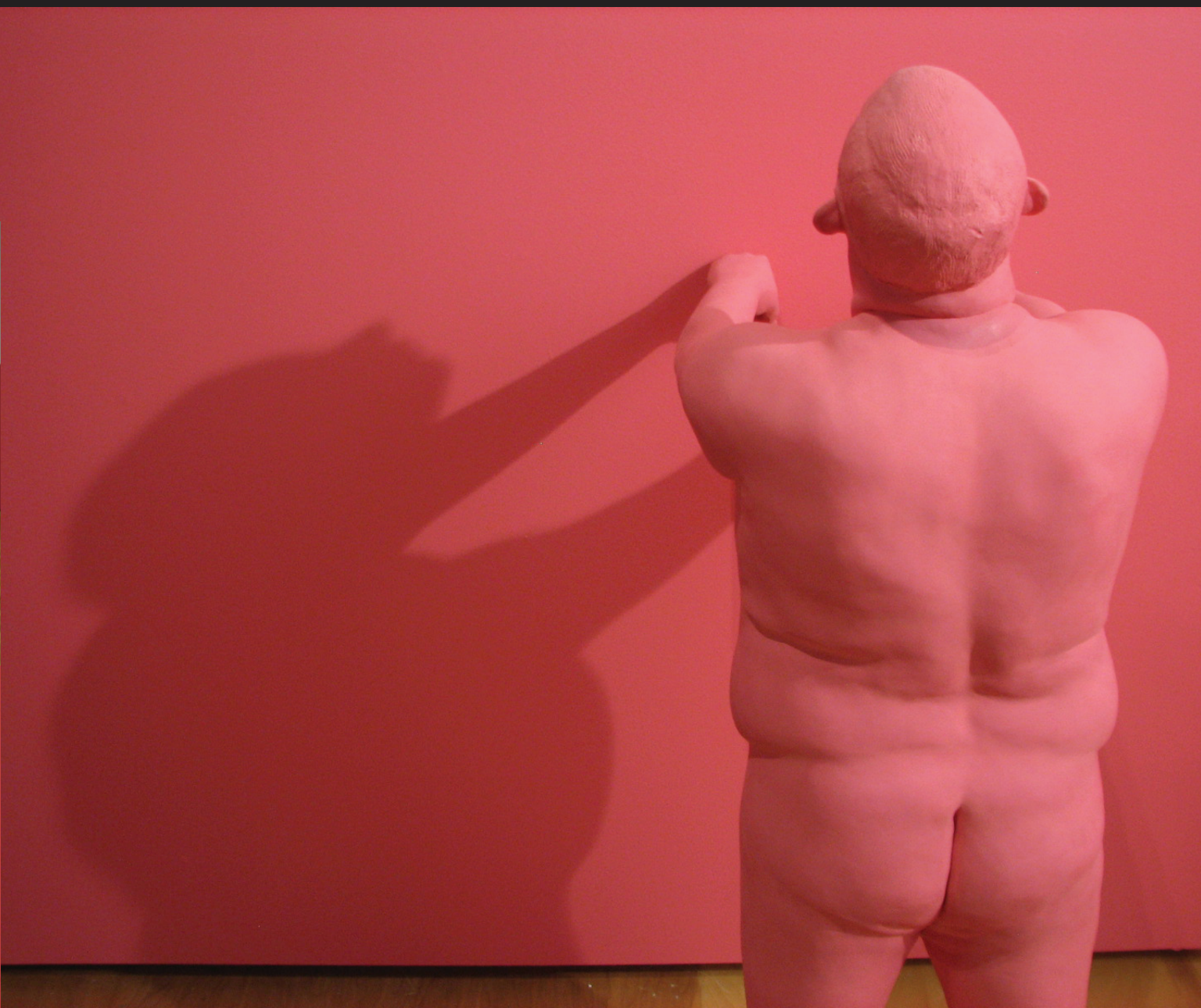


Christina West *Shadows and Fog*





In the work of Christina West, deceptive simplicity is a conceit that veils multiple layers of suggested meaning. Working within a medium with deep historical roots, West's work belies many of the conventions of that history. Absent are the heroic, mythic, and grandiose themes typically associated with acutely-wrought versions of the human form and in their place is a studied vacancy and ambiguity of narrative that amplifies a pervading sense of anxiety and uncertainty.

West exercises her sculptural skills with the vigorous craftsmanship of an old master. It is the essential point of entry, without which all else would collapse. It is this high degree of naturalism that establishes the forms as believable and convincing, no matter what conceits will follow. It plays off the viewer's familiarity with traditional forms. There is nothing obviously exaggerated about West's figures. All the subtle gestures of form and muscle and posture are realized in a

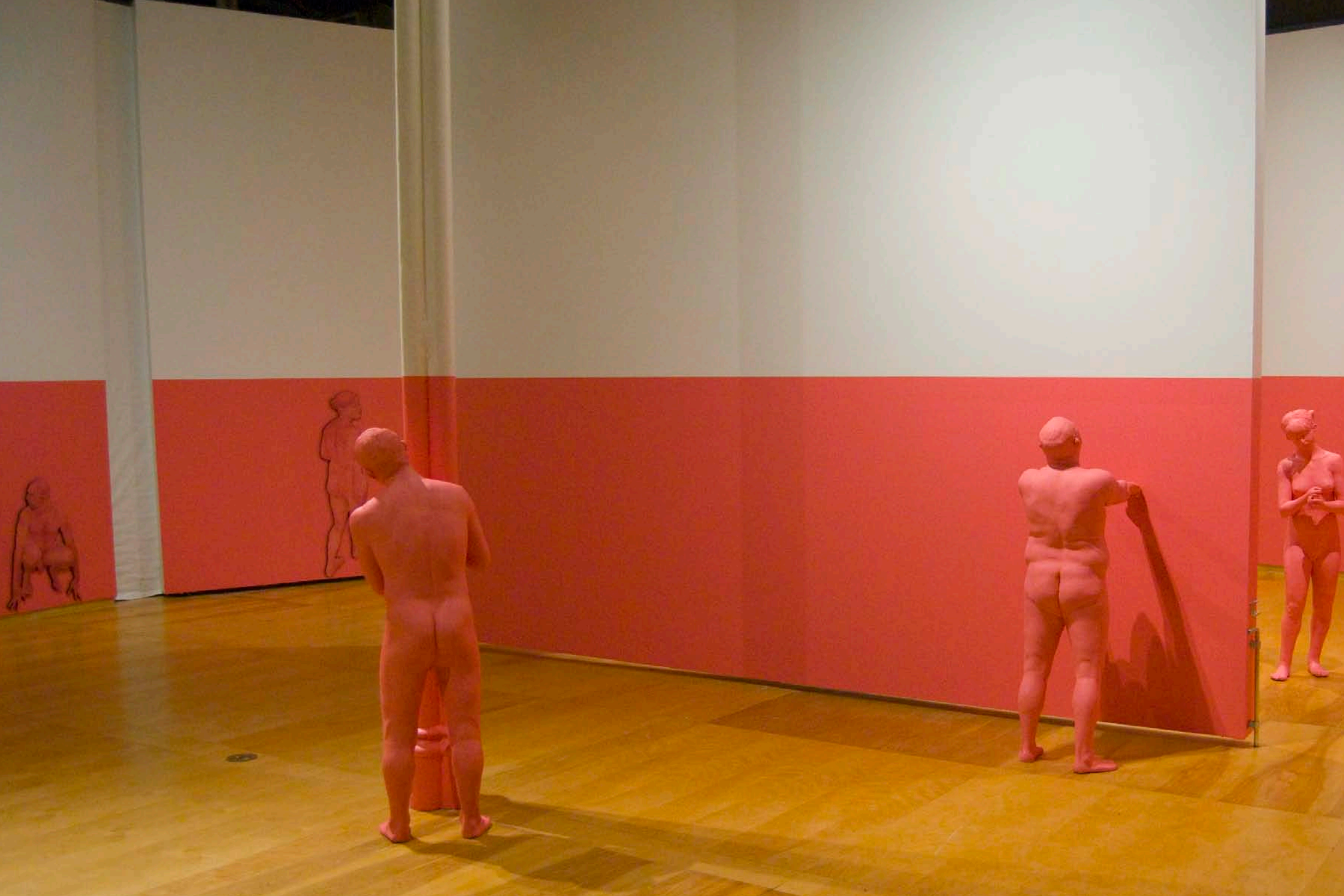
manner that is unaffected and, if anything, emphasizes a lack of embellishment and underscores its acute realism.

Their realization at $\frac{3}{4}$ human scale does not diminish their impact—if anything, the reduced scale intensifies their emotional impact, ratcheting up their quietly unnerving psychological mojo. Add to this West's decision to use an unnatural coloration and the unsettling tone of the installation is established. The shade of salmon used for figures and walls in *Shadows and Fog* is somewhat sickly, queasy, off-putting—an undesirable hue that accentuates the unexpected sensation brought about by the scaled-down forms and positions the work as emotionally-skewed.

Despite the acute facility with which the figures are sculpted, there are less finished areas as well—like the hair—and an overall texture that avoids the glazed slickness with which one can readily finish clay work. Their matted, abrasive skin suggests a slightly degraded ambience. A somewhat coarse surface does not denote anything specific, but is another subtle touch by West to remove her figures ever further from reality. Scaled down, unnaturally colored, and with an unfinished surface, West has taken forms readily recognizable and extracted them from reality, inserting understated layers of distance between viewer and viewed.

An added layer of visual and psychological distance is provided by wall figures, another iteration of the figurative shadows/sculptures that occupy West's salmon-tinged fog. The drawn figures are essentially two-dimensional, with just enough depth to enable a sharp black outline to pop—another slight, but effective gesture. The wall forms replicate the realism, scale, and color scheme of the sculpted figures. Halfway between two and three dimensions, they contribute to the pervading unreality of the scene.

All of these judicious formal details exist in service to the presentation of an atmosphere defined by alluring unknowables. The tensions



wrought by the disjunctive tropes West employs suggest an omnipresent emotional core, but of what is that core comprised? The figures are seemingly caught within a suspended moment in which some kind of narrative is playing itself out, but the certainties of this narrative are as elusive as fog and drenched in as much ambiguity. The figures we encounter are distinctly on their own, though they exist in sufficient proximity to one another to imply some kind of social dynamic. Or the possibility of one. Or the residue of one.

Their nudity—a metaphor for revealing all that can be revealed and an aspect that further demonstrates West's facility at rendering form—is another ruse that momentarily distracts us from the far more active agents of their eyes. Strangely dead and vacant, all the eyes emanate a thousand yard stare and appear alternately wounded, lost, troubled or indifferent. Their fixed stares land in the spaces between each other, achieving proximity to another but not quite connecting. Simultaneously, these same vacant gazes function to suggest an inward direction, a consideration or lamentation of their own psychological terrain.

Despite the viewer's ability to directly address and confront West's work—walking and musing alongside it in the gallery—each gesture within the work functions to create greater distance from reality. Scale, color, texture, and ambiguity of narrative all contribute to take the work further from the real, despite its striking representational realism. In a sense, the work is minimalism veiled within a representational guise. Again and again, West opts for the subtlest gestures that will still elicit maximum impact.

John Massier
Visual Arts Curator





Christina West received a MFA in ceramic sculpture from the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University in 2006 and a BFA in painting from Siena Heights University in Adrian, MI in 2003. She has been a resident artist at the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, MT and currently is a visiting lecturer at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Christina is the recipient of fellowships and grants from the Archie Bray Foundation, The New York Foundation for the Arts, and most recently from the George Sugarman Foundation who generously supported the creation of this most recent body of work.



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