

ABSTRACT BODIES

By Matthew Cheale

'I think I knew right then, but sometimes knowing comes in layers', the lesbian and transgender activist Leslie Feinberg says in *Stone Butch Blues*, a revolutionary account of the complexities of gender, first published in 1993. The first work I saw by the British artist Ro Robertson, about a year ago, was a sculpture resembling a body, on and around which were strewn various items of clothing, a sheet of jesmonite and a box of matches. The piece was titled *Torso I* (2021), and it included, beneath a white vest, a pair of sports socks – an item I failed to recognise at first. With Robertson, it's easy to be captivated by the painterly layers and steely surfaces and miss the more obvious references in their eloquent, metallic work. In the case of *Torso I* (2021), a putative connection between sculpture and the queer body. ('They are appendages of the Queer body', Robertson has said of the found objects, 'which act as a thin barrier between the body and external forces'). If anything, Robertson's work is always about a serious attempt to look under the surface of things.

Like Robertson's drawings, their sculptures are anti-mimetic, creating the impression of a body rather than an exact likeness. Biomorph and leggy forms are upright and frontal, with features almost painterly in their texture and garments, stretched like canvas, in spaces that your body might occupy. Robertson quite regularly underscores anthropomorphic references with blatantly figural titles, such as 'torso', 'between two bodies' and 'stone (butch)'. But there is something else at play, too, something devious. Like Sarah Lucas and Senga Nengudi, whose borrowings from everyday life – white vests and stuffed pantyhose – pushed bawdy, ballsy bodily associations into the expanded field of sculpture, Robertson mines the bodily and sculptural semantics garments can be made to convey. Stuffed with mulch, hung from steel protrusions in *Torso I*, the pair of sports socks evoke flaccid yet bulging testicles. In *Torso II* (2021), a white vest wraps and twists around their forms paying tribute to the elasticity of the human form. (It riffs, too, on an arrangement in Lucas' *Bitch*, 1995). By contrast, boxer shorts – folded and set aside – in *Torso III* (2022) were used for Robertson's performance, *birthbuildshift*, on a secluded beach near Land's End.

The question of metonymy and implication is complicated by Robertson's own references: art-historical, literary and biographical. A white vest, for instance, is not just a static motif, but a reminder of working-class culture at work across Robertson's sculptures. (They grew up in Sutherland and Robertson repeatedly references their industrial past). The 'torsos' of the titles subvert idealised representations of the human body's trunk: Apollonius's *Belvedere Torso* (1st Century B.C.) or Brancusi's *Torso of a Young Man [I]* (1917-22). Paint, Robertson said, in a nod to Feinberg, is 'a raincoat layer', exposed to external and hostile forces. Colour is also a series matter in their sculptures. They are invoked as symbols of 'femininity' and 'masculinity'. The great swathe of pale pink in *Torso III* (2022) – a heavy, headless reclining form – is distinctly fleshly yet plays on

simplistic, rigid gender codes: pink for girls, blue for boys. With Robertson's sculptures, there is always one more iteration, another obscure attachment, a formal or conceptual hinge about to give way, like a human body, never to resume its original shape or meaning.