

ART @ BAINBRIDGE

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

Body Matters / Martha Friedman

May 20 – July 10, 2022



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There's something viscerally interesting to me about freezing a body in time and stopping the corpus from disintegrating [that is] not unlike many of my ongoing preoccupations as a sculptor.

– Martha Friedman

Martha Friedman explores the essential qualities of the human body in multimedia sculptures that incorporate choreography, printmaking, drawing, poured and cast rubber, mold-blown glass, plaster, wax, and concrete. *Body Matters* presents two new series by the artist, *Mummy Wheat* and *A Natural Thickening of Thought*. In creating these works Friedman draws on approaches to the body from various points in history: from ancient Egypt, the ritualistic care embedded in wrapping a mummified body; from the Greco-Roman period, the devotion to an individual revealed in casting portrait busts directly from a body; and from the early twentieth century, the drawings of neuroscientist Santiago Ramón y Cajal, whose studies of the brain and nerves present cellular patterns as a means of exploring the body as a dynamic system. Friedman samples aspects of the materials, processes, and visual languages of these sources, then combines them into layered explorations of the experiences and contradictions of inhabiting our bodies.

Rubber is the primary medium in Friedman's practice, and her artistic process amplifies the material's bodily properties. Like flesh, rubber is at once malleable and resistant; its mass bends to the pull of gravity; it is impressionable when touched yet returns to its previous form; and, like every living body, it requires both liquid and solid states. The figure at the center of *Mummy Wheat* is Friedman's long-standing collaborator, the dancer and choreographer Silas Riener, Princeton Class of 2006. Friedman coated Riener's upper body in rubber, a physically grueling process that involved covering his eyes, ears, and nose, leaving only a small slit for his mouth. Riener, a former principal dancer for the Merce Cunningham Dance

Company, embraced the physical challenge of holding a pose for the ninety minutes required to create a direct impression. For Friedman, this process was an exploration of the limits of Riener's physical training as a dancer. By suspending the expressive animation of Riener's body while creating this sculpture, Friedman holds him at a point between life and death.

After encasing Riener's bust in rubber, Friedman added a plaster layer around the rubber mold while it still covered him. Once that two-layer mold was removed, its interior was coated in wax. This wax became the form around which a refractory mold was built. After the wax was steamed out of the mold, a team of glassblowers worked with the artist to create a hollow, mold-blown bust that retains the details of Riener's body. This process echoes the classical technique of casting life-size, hollow bronze sculptures through the lost-wax process as well as the popularity of smaller mold-blown vessels in Roman times. Further, the outcome recalls conventions of ancient Roman portrait busts, a highly veristic style of portraiture in which every identifying aspect of an individual's countenance was recorded. In bronze or marble, these portrait busts were displayed prominently as a way to memorialize and honor a deceased statesman or venerable member of society, a tradition that continues into the modern era with honorific portrait busts. The varied dimensions of the pedestals in *Mummy Wheat* can call that tradition into question by provoking a visceral response from viewers, who variously gaze upward or downward at the glass figures.

For *Bust 2* and *Bust 5*, Friedman coated a bulb of molten glass with a type of Japanese gold leaf before it was blown into the mold, resulting in busts with a golden surface. In ancient Egypt, gold was associated with the skin of the gods and the radiance of the sun. Though gold was only permitted to adorn statuary of Egyptian gods, over time kings and elite individuals used gold leaf to cover the faces painted on coffins that encase mummified bodies (fig. 1). The willful collapse of historical periods and cultural practices in *Mummy Wheat* is essential to Friedman's approach: rather than historical replication, Friedman seeks to uncover potential synergies through her engagement with past practices and cultural inspirations.



FIG. 1
Egyptian, Middle Kingdom, *Inner Coffin of Nephthys* (detail), ca. 1961–1878 BC. Painted cartonnage, wood, gold leaf, Egyptian blue, calcite, carnelian, beryl, silver wire, faience. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1911

In *Mummy Wheat*, Friedman casts thin, translucent rubber ribbons in a color that she has mixed to evoke the interior flesh of a cheek and then weaves them around hollow glass busts. Here, rubber stands in for the linen in which mummies were wrapped. Linen was a luxury material in ancient Egypt and among the most valuable items within a tomb. However, millennia later, tomb-plunderers would hastily unwrap and discard the linen in search of precious stone amulets, an act recalled by the mound of rubber ribbon placed next to *Bust 5*. Friedman studied

the complex repeating patterns of the linen bands in which mummies were wrapped (fig. 2) before translating the process into rubber for the glass busts. In this series, in the process of wrapping the heads, Friedman restores the value of linen (now rubber) and the act of protection and care present in the wrapping of the body, explaining, “the wrapping as a discarded skin that was actually incredibly valuable became another interest of mine. I’m fascinated by things that are discarded. In the studio, I often mine the remnants and discards from my previous work and upcycle them into new work. I think discards can tell us a lot about our priorities and taken-for-granted assumptions.”



FIG. 2
Egyptian, Roman Period, *Mummy with an Inserted Panel Portrait of a Youth*, 80–100 AD. Encaustic on limewood, human remains, linen, mummification material; l. 169 cm, w. 45 cm, panel as exposed: h. 38.1 cm, w. 18 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1911

Friedman’s series *A Natural Thickening of Thought* is inspired by Santiago Ramón y Cajal’s groundbreaking studies of the cellular structure of the central nervous system, which earned the neuroscientist a share of the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1906. Responding to the way Cajal’s drawings make visible a body’s inner systems of vision, smell, healing, and aging, Friedman once again turns to rubber. She hand-mixes multiple colors of liquid rubber and draws, paints, pours, and sculpts with it, bending skeins into arcs before layering the rubber into the bed of her mold. Finally, Friedman floods the mold with a translucent clear rubber to cast the composition into its final form. She backlights these cast rubber paintings in

wooden lightbox frames, noting that “having the paintings sit on top of a source of light alludes to a slide in a microscope. It’s meant to invoke the idea of learning or searching or trying to understand what something looks like—so that the pieces become representative of the process of visualization and materialization.”

Friedman’s sculptures do not replicate Cajal’s compositions; rather, she is drawn to the visual language he developed in his drawings, both to document the neurological and sensory structures he observed through the microscope and to communicate his hypotheses. *Floating Thought 12*, for example, transforms the nest of coiling elements that develop around the paths of nerves as they age into a wildly expressive gesture; in *Floating Thought 18*, Friedman’s composition animates Cajal’s study of the potential for severed nerves to regenerate (fig. 3).



FIG. 3
Santiago Ramón y Cajal (1852–1934; born Petilla de Aragón, Spain; died Madrid, Spain), *A cut nerve outside the spinal cord*. Cajal Institute

The artist takes particular interest in drawings that depict structures related to the activity of neurons—the ways they change over time, their ability to heal, and how they respond to external stimuli. *Floating Thought 11* reveals the design of light-responsive photo-receptor neurons in the retina, showing

both cell bodies and light-sensitive appendages of the eye that convert light into electrical signals. On occasion, Friedman combines elements from multiple drawings, as in *Floating Thought 15*, which layers pathways in the olfactory bulb of a rodent with the intricate connective tissue of a human hippocampus, the region of the brain essential to forming memories. In evolutionary terms, smell and memory are cornerstones of individual survival. Here, they are also intertwined to maximize their visual dynamism.

Body Matters / Martha Friedman brings together these two series of sculptures to consider the potential for discovery that emerges from the artist's recombination, transformation, and rescaling of historical practices. In *A Natural Thickening of Thought* and *Mummy Wheat*, Friedman mines the space between visceral and intellectual experiences of the body to consider the ways in which our physical forms shape our understanding of being human.

Mitra Abbaspour

Haskell Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art



Mummy Wheat

Bust 2, 2021

Mold-blown glass, silicone rubber, concrete,
mirrored glass, and gold



Bust 3, 2021

Mold-blown glass, silicone rubber, concrete,
and mirrored glass



Bust 4, 2021
Mold-blown glass, silicone rubber,
concrete, and mirrored glass



Bust 5, 2021
Mold-blown glass, silicone rubber,
concrete, mirrored glass, and gold

A Natural Thickening of Thought

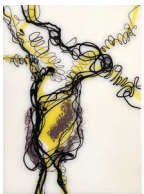
All works are silicone rubber in backlit frame



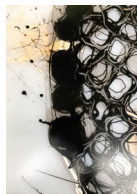
Floating Thought 11, 2022



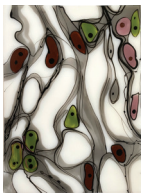
Floating Thought 16, 2022



Floating Thought 12, 2022



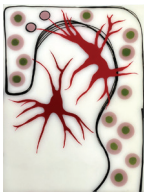
Floating Thought 17, 2022



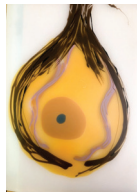
Floating Thought 13, 2022



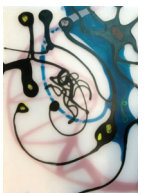
Floating Thought 18, 2022



Floating Thought 14, 2022



Floating Thought 19, 2022



Floating Thought 15, 2022

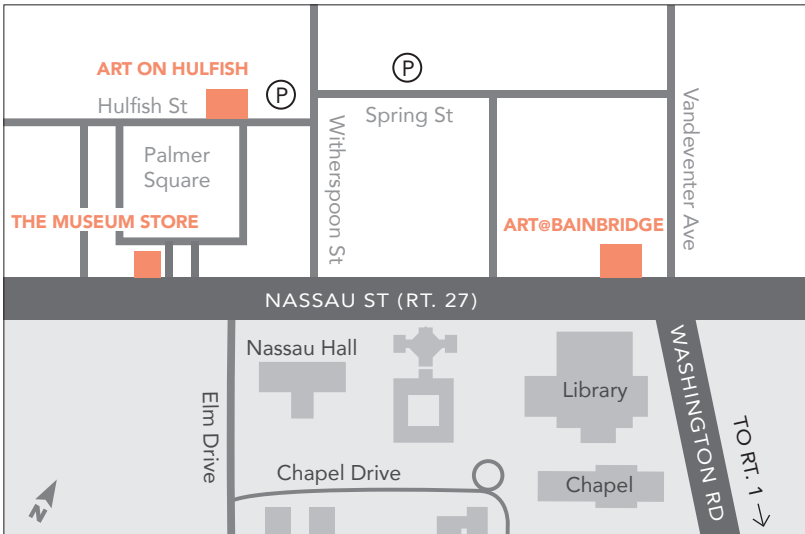
Unless otherwise noted, all works are by Martha Friedman (born 1975, Detroit, MI; active Brooklyn, NY) and are © Martha Friedman. All works are courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco. Works in the series *Mummy Wheat* were photographed by Kristine Eudey.

Body Matters / Martha Friedman is curated by Mitra Abbaspour, Haskell Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.

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