

The background is an abstract composition. The lower and right portions are dominated by a vibrant, saturated blue, which appears to be draped fabric with soft folds and highlights. In the upper left corner, there is a warm, orange-red glow, suggesting a light source or a specific material. A dark, almost black, silhouette of a person's head and shoulders is visible on the left side, partially overlapping the blue and orange areas. The overall mood is contemplative and artistic.

**ALULA IN BLUE**

Tamar Ettun

**FRIDMAN GALLERY**

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## ***Fight or Flight***

Claire Barliant

What does it mean when an artwork causes you to feel almost physical pain just from looking at it? The question arose while I was examining the cast of a breast tinted a pale flesh-like color, with a nail jammed into the tautened nipple. This was one of the several objects in Tamar Ettun's extensive, rambling, and considered body of work. One might be inclined to think of Duchamp, who painted and pasted foam breasts onto the covers of some nine hundred catalogues for a 1947 exhibition of Surrealist art. Except, unlike Duchamp, who called this gesture *Please Touch*, thus encouraging an erotic experience of dominance and submission, Ettun prefers all parties be on equal footing. Her sculptures, along with the performance she mounted at the Watermill Center for the Arts in March 2015, which she subsequently turned into a video, all stem from her belief in the importance of empathy, community, and collective engagement.

On a superficial level, though, the Duchampian resonance persists, as the small, fetishlike objects he made in the fifties, often cast from the molds used for his seminal work, *Etant donnés*, bear comparisons to Ettun's own odd and uncanny sculptures. Her 3-D works often begin with actual body parts, such as the swell of a hip, the curve of a jaw, all cast in plaster. Not to mention the many, many hands. Hands on their own are remarkably expressive; one of Ettun's influences, minimalist choreographer Yvonne Rainer, made a video of her hand in motion in 1966, while she was recovering from major surgery. But Ettun puts her plaster hands to work, having one clutch a piece of sparkly red mesh, while another balances balls on one finger, and another supports an assemblage made of lamp and instrument parts on its wrist. Even Ettun's pleasingly haphazard sculptures that do not include casts of body parts resemble bodies nonetheless—a construction built from plain white plastic piping resembles a fawn taking its first awkward steps; piano keys lick the air like many small tongues as they climb up a tall rod. Her pieces are assembled based on intuitive, physical decisions—such as sliding a mannequin head into a slide carousel, simply because the round opening was the right fit for the base of the head.

Ettun describes her sculptures as horizontal totems—they can be arranged in varying ways, and often the pressure between objects supports something, such as two plaster hands pressing on either end of a banana. Or, a series of hands supports among them a cone and a cylinder, as well as other shapes. So it is that Ettun's objects *need* one another to fulfill their ultimate function. The objects have the potential to be viewed in isolation, but they are more interesting together, as a group, composing and, should the artist choose to rearrange them, recomposing a new work. She thinks of her sculptures as making up “families,” and the term is appropriate, as the object groupings operate much like families and friends, who offer support and comfort to individuals who would otherwise be alone.

The collaborative spirit extends to Ettun's performance work, which she makes with a group she formed called the Moving Company. For the performance at Watermill, the dancers wore slithery, electric-blue sheaths. The video of the performance starts with the dancers rolling tomatoes under the palms of their hands, and then cuts to various shots of them squeezing the fruit between their legs, until the juice begins to squirt. When the Moving Company worked on the performance, every “mover,” as Ettun calls her dancers, chose a color, a shape, and a movement. Then, as she describes their process, they created “a vocabulary that can be put together in different ways.” A woman climbs facedown onto a board, and is then dragged some distance by another dancer. A person on a rooftop struggles to master an inflatable object before hurling it over the edge.

The inflatable is a recurring form in Ettun's work, and like all of her other pieces, it works best in conjunction with other elements. In the gallery, for

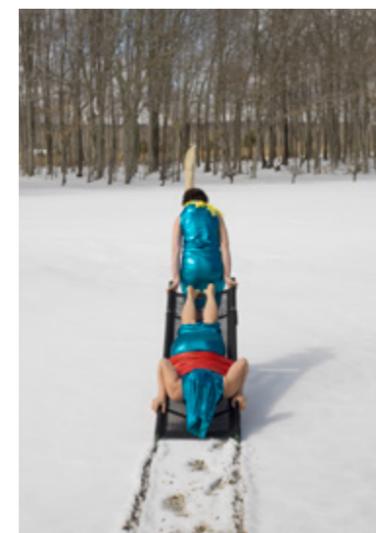
her exhibition *Alula in Blue*, the inflatable is a vivid, Yves Klein-esque blue, and it squeezes between the columns of the space, filling it like a giant, exotic bird. In fact, the word “alula” refers to a joint in a bird's wing that helps it fly. Ettun was drawn to the word for its connotations of flight and movement, and also because it's a palindrome. The palindrome, of course, can be read both ways, and in that sense evokes a mirror. This was important to the artist because of her interest in the way children develop by mirroring the behavior they see in others. As a baby learns to interact with other people by watching her parents interact, so it is that if the baby's mother feels sad, her child will also feel sad, even without knowing or understanding the cause of this feeling. Ettun's interest in this profound yet ordinary phenomenon stems from personal experience—as an Israeli, she knows firsthand what it is like to live under constant threat of violence, and she is particularly interested in the way that Arab or Israeli children who grow up close to the Israel-Palestine border are affected by the region's ongoing conflict. Studies have shown that, tragically, these children often suffer from PTSD, which impairs their mirroring abilities, and thus their ability to empathize.



Previous Page: *A Mauve Bird with Yellow Teeth Red Feathers Green Feet and a Rose Belly, Part One: Blue* 2015, HD Video, 13'08"  
[video still]

*Blue Glove with Yellow-Green Glove with a Ball*, 2015  
Plaster, paint, cardboard  
12 x 9 x 6 in

*A Mauve Bird with Yellow Teeth Red Feathers Green Feet and a Rose Belly, Part One: Blue*, 2015



It would be impossible to grasp the powerful subject matter undergirding Ettun's work simply by quickly scanning her sculptures and videos, if only because on first glance they seem wonderfully childish and playful—bits and pieces of instruments; bright, Pop colors; and ethereal abstract inflations. Which brings me back to the nail in the breast. Challenging as it is, this work, and the rest of Ettun's oeuvre, achieve that elusive goal that so much art aspires to and rarely achieves—to make the viewer *feel* something, and to feel it keenly, on a visceral, emotional, and intellectual level.

## ***For Love of the Triangle***

Natasha Marie Llorens

Tamar Ettun's *Mauve Bird with Yellow Teeth Red Feathers Green Feet and a Rose Belly* is a tetralogy. The video entitled Part 1: *BLUE* was produced at Robert Wilson's Watermill Center in the Hamptons and will premiere in the fall of 2015 at Fridman Gallery in New York City. A new video installment will follow yearly until 2018 and each part will be based on a color and a season: Blue for winter, Red in spring, Yellow for summer, and Orange in the fall. *Blue* is the first installment of the work and is itself part of a larger constellation of projects that also encompassed a performance, *Open Rehearsal*, at the Watermill Center on March 22, 2015. For Ettun, the performances and the videos in each installment are related the way parts of the body are connected; a hand and a knee, a lung and femur bone.

All the faces belong to people sitting around a large wooden table. Behind them is a cinderblock wall. On the table in front of them is a pile of tomatoes. Each person is also holding the large bloom of a chrysanthemum flower between his or her lips. The flowers obscure the lower half of each person's face, replacing the mouth with an explosion of very faint pink tendrils anchored to a dark-green center. They picture speech as something fragile, organic, and polymorphous.

I am reminded of the iconic photograph by Bernie Boston from October 21, 1967 of a young man protesting the Vietnam War by delicately placing carnations into the rifle barrels of the National Guard soldiers. His gesture seems to break the objective discourse of the gun, silencing it, making it mute and ridiculous by stuffing its mouth with flowers. By the same token, an ordinary chrysanthemum in Ettun's work imposes silence. The flower comes to signify the story these people might have told. In the absence of adequate human testimony speech falls to the objects themselves.

The destruction of the tomatoes takes place in two phases. First, they are withdrawn from the pile on the table and lodged in the spaces between the performers, whose legs line up imperfectly with their neighbors', or at the

place where the thighs of a body begin to run together. Then the press begins: body against body, limb against limb. Some of the tomatoes are only slightly damaged, leaking down a leg in an exploratory dripping line. Most fall to the ground, lightly bouncing. As much as such a thing is possible for a tomato, they appear unaware of their intense vulnerability to the shuffling feet, the jostling limbs.

In the second phase, a pair of legs appears, holding a line of tomatoes between them. Powerful thighs and calves begin to squeeze and a tomato bursts toward the top of the knees, exploding outwards under the pressure. Again, the emphasis is not exactly on the death of the object. *Blue* marks an interest in what an object communicates about its experience of movement and pressure.

This time, when the tomatoes fall, they fall under the feet of a performer who destroys them. Muscular toes and strong ankles pulverize the fruit until the viewer loses sight of the bright red tone of its outer skin as it is torn apart and mashed into its seeds. This moment is graphic but very brief, signaling the end of one kind of relationship between the performers and the objects they use.

The tomato's death is followed by another scene that signals the end of something: a woman eating the flower bloom that has been obstructing her face. She chews just enough to bring the flower deeper and deeper into her mouth until it is gone. The disappearance of the object obviates the need for symbolic silence. Now the work of forgetting can begin in earnest.

A triangular shape is made of parachute silk colored a playful spring green. It dances and jerks as the performer beats it with what appears to be a broom, while holding onto it with another hand so that it can not escape. In the foreground, a body on a stretcher is dragged through the snow, leaving a trace of tomatoes on the dirty white ground. If not for this body, the other thing might look less like a beating. It might look more like someone cleaning a rug, vey thoroughly.

Sheathed in iridescent blue fabric, the body beating the triangle of synthetic silk is far from impassive. There is some force that moves the performer, some meaning for this person in the violence. The destruction of the tomatoes could have been play aimed at discovering the limits of the object—how does a tomato feel under my toes?—but the beating of the triangle takes place in the gray light of late winter, with an eerie reflection of its agony mirrored in a metal railing. The broom rises and falls, aiming at the center of the triangle's form. Unhesitating, methodical.

The blows reach a crescendo as the body becomes exasperated. It gathers up the fabric, almost furiously, and throws it over the railing. As the triangle arches into the air we see the body watch it hit the ground below and slump into inexpressiveness, finally. We see the body withdraw from the railing slowly, arms hanging limply, breathing in the winter air. Yet this body's attention (and therefore the viewer's attention) is watching a void, an emptiness where the triangle used to be. It is the object we are meant to find beautiful, to find mysterious in its pain, to empathize with. The triangle fills the screen, even in its absence.



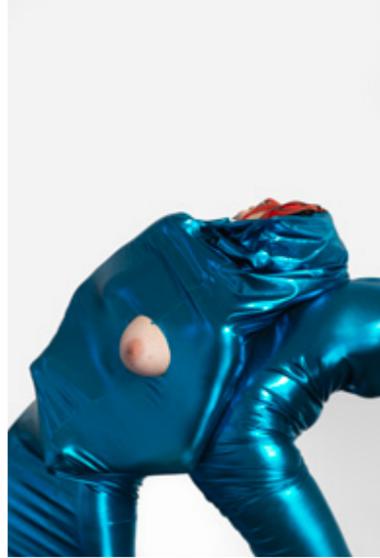
*Screwed Hand on Yellow*, 2015  
Plaster, metal, paint  
12 x 17 x 18 in

*A Mauve Bird with Yellow Teeth Red Feathers Green Feet and a Rose Belly, Part One: Blue*, 2015



In her introduction to *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth argues that literature is especially important to those working with trauma in some capacity because of its “interest in the complex relationship between knowing and not knowing.”<sup>1</sup> She suggests that trauma produces not only the inability to control one's actions but also the inability to recognize one's actions as one's own. It becomes possible to do without knowing, or to act out the compulsion to repeat without awareness. Trauma, argues Caruth, “is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in an attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise accessible. This truth,” Caruth continues, “in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language.”<sup>2</sup> The wound that cries out is that which we do not know—do not master with knowledge—in the gestures we make and the stories we tell.

If there are wounds out there in the world crying out a truth they know and we cannot see, then there can be no totally objective notion of “real life” in which “factual things” happen, or factual in the sense that they are “true.” And if there are wounds out there, and they themselves are crying, then the task of empathy must grow to accommodate them as wounds and not simply as people. This, in part, is what Ettun is doing with the Moving Company in the work associated with Blue. She is producing a world of objects and action that is governed by a complex system of knowing and not knowing, of truth and fiction. She is creating an ecosystem of objects that are crying, like externalized and reified wounds. She is asking the viewer to empathize with the object.



*A Mauve Bird with Yellow Teeth Red Feathers Green Feet and a Rose Belly, Part One: Blue, 2015*

*A Mauve Bird with Yellow Teeth Red Feathers Green Feet and a Rose Belly, Part One: Blue, 2015*  
Performance at The Watermill Center, NY



*Open Rehearsal* used up all the unused space in rooms usually meant exclusively for looking at objects. Viewers had to back into corners as the piece spread out across the floor and the ceiling alike. Silk balloons getting caught in the hanging lights and performers spilling sand all over the floor. The performance was impolite in its expansiveness, like a beautiful, oblivious houseguest, unaware both of its transgressions and its seductiveness.

The crisis involved the woman in the bubble and the totem poles. The woman was zipped into a large, body-sized plastic sphere that had been filled with air using a handheld leaf blower. The sequence of her gestures inside the bubble—not exactly dancing—had phases. She would begin a movement and then continue it with more and more energy until its momentum was exhausted. She began to throw herself against the walls of the bubble, rushing across the room. Then, just as forcefully, she threw herself back against the opposite side of the sphere. The bubble would leap out and then snap back, stung by the recoil of her body.

I watched the bubble, with its angry gestural movement, approach a cluster of totem poles standing demurely against the back wall of the central exhibition space. These were weathered, slim and elegantly carved. I watched the woman and the bubble stagger together toward an actual collision with these objects that had so obligingly made space for the performance in their museum, their neocolonial domestic space. Each time she withdrew from the confrontation, I felt justified in my belief that the performer was in control and that the necessary boundaries between objects

would remain intact. But the woman betrayed me, she crashed the bubble into one of the wooden sculptures, then retreated to a shocked silence from the audience. And then she did it again, making the ancient wood totter in its metal holder. The curator hurried forward to stand between the woman in the bubble and the historical objects. The bubble and its woman retreated to the center of the room without acknowledging the transgression.

There is a simple thrill in watching objects attack each other inside the confines of a museum, where things are supposed to be still, dead, drained of their own desire to act. There is a simple thrill in watching a woman act out her entrapment so explicitly, and in watching her resist that entrapment so relentlessly, sweat pouring off her and clouding the interior walls of the bubble with condensation. Was it an accident? I thought so for a moment, but I am not sure—this moment of crisis was not unlike the final destruction of the tomatoes, the consumption of the flowers, or the death of the triangle at the hands of the blue person. All of these erupted from an otherwise languid, almost accidentally curious relation between objects and performers. I chose to read this moment, whether or not it was planned, as a moment when the performer succumbed to aggressive impulses.

Pioneer child-psychanalyst Melanie Klein's work on the formation of the drives in infancy suggests a deep relationship between the drive to destroy the other and the drive to love, or to mend what aggression has broken. In fact, Klein argues that aggression is the primary drive and that love develops in some sense as a response to it.

Very schematically, she claims the following: the baby is gratified by his mother's breast, sexually and in terms of the nourishment it gives him. When the breast is withheld for whatever reason, the baby becomes enraged. He experiences both hatred and the desire to destroy the provocative object. He is enraged because the absence of the breast makes clear his own powerlessness, his attachment to the breast and by extension to the mother. But because he is dependent on both object and person, he also experiences loss when it is withdrawn from him, and guilt that his fantasies may have been the cause of the mother's and her breast's (apparent) destruction or disappearance. Thus the baby's love for the mother develops out of a sense of relief that he has not, in fact, destroyed the thing/person that he needs more than any other. This relief produces the will to reparation, which will become the basis for an adult understanding of love as the willingness to accept difference and to compromise in order to stay in relation to others.<sup>3</sup>

Aggression is therefore not some drive exterior to love, since it constitutes the conditions for love's development. This dialectic is perhaps most violent in infancy, but Klein maintains that it is also at the center of subject formation more generally. An awareness of one conditions the capacity for the other in the child and the adult alike. It is not, in other words, psychologically sound to imagine one's self as all sweetness and light.

The thrill in Ettun's work with the Moving Company is that she both admits and allows the audience to identify with aggression inflicted upon objects. Like children, acting out fantasies

of retribution against the things we need and desire that refuse us, we watch, and perhaps we (I) delight.

There is also the question of desire, which remains unanswered in both aspects of *Blue*: traditionally beautiful bodies wrapped in shiny, sparkly, bright blue spandex laying about on smooth wooden floors slowly tugging on, and folding themselves into giant, silken balloons. This aspect of the work is more pronounced in the performance than the video, but even in the video there is no way to miss the fact that these performers are lithe and strong inside their attractive sheathes. The sexual nature of their costume is of a piece with their aggression, I think. Seduction is essential to the viewer's consent to watch the violence done to object.

## ALULA IN BLUE

<sup>1</sup>Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>2</sup>Caruth, 3.

<sup>3</sup>Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation & Other Works, 1921-1945* (New York: Delacorte Press/S. Lawrence, 1975).



*Hand with Twisted Fingers and Hand with a Brush*, 2015  
Plaster, plastic, wood  
12 x 12 x 8 in



*Two Gloves with a Banana*, 2015  
Plaster, glass, paint  
9 x 9 x 5 in









Previous Page

Left: *Hand with Blue Ball*, 2015

Plaster, paint, cardboard

10 x 8 x 5 in

Right: *Mask with Blue Wire*, 2015

Glazed clay with wire

17 x 7 x 5 in

*Hand with Golden Beads*, 2015

Plaster, metal, golden beads

14 x 9 x 9 in







Pages 28-29

***A Mauve Bird with Yellow Teeth Red Feathers  
Green Feet and a Rose Belly, Part One: Blue***, 2015

Pages 30-31

Left: ***Work Gloves with a Flower***, 2015

Mixed media  
28 x 23 x 18 in

Right: ***Cookie Violin***, 2014

Mixed media  
17 x 7 x 4 in

***Hand with Red Fabric on a Basket***, 2015

Plaster, wood, fabric  
23 x 10 x 10 in



*Boob with a Nail*, 2015  
Plaster, metal, paint  
6 x 6 x 5 in





Previous Page

Left: *Hand with Green Gel*, 2015

Plaster, plastic, paint

22 x 5 x 6 in

Right: *Teal Glove with a Tower*, 2015

Mixed media

31 x 10 x 5 in

*Woman with Tina's Hip*, 2015

Mixed media

50 x 17 x 17 in



*A Mauve Bird with Yellow Teeth Red Feathers*  
*Green Feet and a Rose Belly, Part One: Blue, 2015*





*A Mauve Bird with Yellow Teeth Red Feathers  
Green Feet and a Rose Belly, Part One: Blue, 2015*





*Alula in Blue*, 2015  
Fridman Gallery, NY  
[Installation view]



*A Mauve Bird with Yellow Teeth Red Feathers  
Green Feet and a Rose Belly, Part One: Blue, 2015*  
Performance at The Watermill Center, NY

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**Education**

- 2010 MFA (Sculpture) Yale University School of Art, New Haven, CT
- 2008 BFA Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Fine Art, Jerusalem, Israel
- 2007 BFA The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, Fine Art, New York, NY

**Selected Solo Exhibitions and Performances**

- 2016 Uppsala Art Museum, Uppsala, Sweden (upcoming)
- 2015 *Alula in Blue*, Fridman Gallery, New York, NY
- 2015 *Mauve Bird with Yellow Teeth Red Feathers Green Feet and a Rose Belly, Part One: BLUE*, The Watermill Center, Water Mill, NY and The Knockdown Center, Maspeth, NY
- 2014 *My Hands are the Shape Of My Height*, Transformer, Washington, DC
- 2014 *One and One, One and Two, One and Three, One and Four*, Braverman Gallery, Tel Aviv, Israel
- 2013 *The Lion Who Liked Strawberries*, Art Production Fund, Las Vegas, NV
- 2011 *One Thing Leads To Another*, PERFORMA 11, Recess, New York, NY and The Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, IN
- 2011 *One Thing Leads To Another: Part 2*, Andrea Meislin Gallery, New York, NY
- 2009 *Empty is Also*, commissioned by PERFORMA 09, X-initiative, New York, NY

**Selected Group Exhibitions and Performances**

- 2014 *Out to See*, South Street Seaport, New York, NY
- 2014 *Last Day of Folly*, Madison Square Park, New York, NY
- 2013 *We Live With Animals*, PERFORMA 13, Van Alen Institute, New York, NY
- 2013 *Goods*, Bat Yam Museum, Bat Yam, Israel
- 2012 *Emerging Artist Fellowship (EAF 12)*, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, NY
- 2012 *Trees, Art and Jewish Thought*, Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco, CA
- 2011 *Odyssey Of Iksa*, The Herzliya Biennial, Herzliya, Israel
- 2011 *Israel from Within and from Without*, Boston University Rubin Frankel Gallery, Boston, MA
- 2010 *Hand Held History*, Queens Museum of Art Video Summit, Queens, NY
- 2009 *Reinventing Rituals*, Rite Now: Sacred and Secular in Video, The Jewish Museum, New York, NY
- 2009 *Post Traumatic Trance Dance Disorder*, Center of Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, Israel

**Selected Awards / Residencies**

- 2105 Franklin Furnace Fund for Performance Art
- 2015 Iaspis, Swedish Arts Grants Committee
- 2015/3 Lower Manhattan Cultural Council
- 2014/5 The Pollock Krasner Foundation Grant
- 2014/5 The Watermill Center
- 2014 MacDowell Fellowship
- 2013 Art Production Fund Grant and Residency Program
- 2011/09 Artis Contemporary
- 2011 RECESS Activities
- 2010 The Alice Kimball English Traveling Fellowship, Yale University School of Art
- 2009 WPP, The World Performance Project

Tamar Ettun  
*ALULA IN BLUE*

September 19 - October 28, 2015  
FRIDMAN GALLERY  
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Exhibition Manager: Cia Pedi

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Performed by The Moving Company: Tina Wang, Lisa Park, Rebecca Pristoop, Sabrina Shapiro,  
Ivan Sikic, Tamar Ettun  
Costumes design by Ella Dagan  
Music by Shaul Eshet  
Videography by Jeff Ayars and Dan Rosen  
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