Femininity, Seen through Ceramics, Darkly
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Susan Sontag was already on my mind when I first saw *Updo Stump* (2010), specifically her essay "A Photograph Is Not an Opinion. Or Is It?" that accompanies over one hundred photographs of women by Annie Leibovitz in the book *Women* (1999). Both Sontag's essay and Leibovitz's photographs call into question conventional ideas and ideals about beauty and femininity, offering a meditation on and celebration of diversity and individuality.

For me, Misty Gamble's *Updo Stump* complicates and undermines stereotypes about beauty and femininity. The figure's hair—a long-held signifier of beauty—is abundant and appears organic as it sweeps across the face, disabling sight and speech. Initially, this woman, blinded and muted, reminded me of the surrealist René Magritte's infamous *Le Viol* (*The Rape*) of 1934. In his misogynist conception of a woman, Magritte replaces the female face with her torso (breasts for eyes, navel for nose, and genitals for mouth), reconstructing what it means to be a woman in terms of female sexual anatomy, while also rendering her face turned body as phallus. Magritte's image is disturbingly sadistic. Perhaps knowing Jennifer Chambers Lynch's *Boxing Helena* (1993), a horror film about a surgeon so obsessed with a woman that he amputates her limbs and holds her captive, influenced the making of *Updo Stump* prompted me to think back to Magritte. Gamble's work, however, is markedly different, neither as crude nor as cruel.

Nonetheless, Gamble's title is brutally descriptive; *Updo Stump* ("stump" instead of "bust" or "torso") depicts a woman without arms and legs. Sontag writes about how the "identification of women with beauty was a way of immobilizing women," and I am more interested in this figure's inactiveness than her potential attractiveness.[1] In contrast to the woman's writhing strands of hair, her body is a blue, immobile pillar. *Updo Stump* questions normalcy, challenges conventions, and, in my opinion, begs for some reflection about disability. Thus the contemporary British artist Marc Quinn comes to mind. Quinn made a series of marble sculptures of people without limbs, people too often unrepresented. For example, his controversial *Alison Lapper Pregnant* that was temporarily installed on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, London from 2005 to 2007 shows Lapper, a friend of Quinn's who was born without arms and with shortened legs, unclothed while eight months pregnant. Quinn puts forth, in his words, "a new model of female heroism."[2] Lapper describes her portrait as a "modern tribute to femininity, disability and motherhood."[3] Quinn's figurative sculptures are of real people, whereas Gamble's *Updo Stump* takes the form of caricature.

I would like to see *Updo Stump* in the same gallery as John Currin's *Cripple* (1997), a painting of a young woman, with blown-out hair and a corseted body, who grins widely and whose left hand grips the curved handle of a white cane. Like many other portraits by Currin, the figure in *Cripple* is shown in a posture one would find in the pages of any fashion magazine, though more exaggerated, contorted, and distorted. Currin's *Cripple* is calculated, satirical, and darkly humorous. For me, Gamble's *Updo Stump* is all of those things, too. If *Updo Stump* addresses societal pressures of women to conform to expectations of beauty and femininity, then I wonder just how crippled is that figure's identity? How might she be psychologically immobilized as well? And what is the degree of ridicule and interrogation by Gamble?

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[1] Susan Sontag, "A Photograph Is Not an Opinion. Or Is It?" in *Women* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. 30.
[2] Marc Quinn quoted in "Quinn sculpture inaugurates plinth project," BBC, 2005, revised 2008, http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/articles/2005/09/13/quinn_sculpture_feature.shtml, 7 October 2011.
[3] Alison Lapper quoted in "Quinn sculpture inaugurates plinth project," BBC, 2005, revised 2008, http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/articles/2005/09/13/quinn_sculpture_feature.shtml, 7 October 2011.