

Neal Rock, *Flesh Poems*

March 1 - 26, 2021



Neal Rock, *Cynefin*, 2021

Flesh Poems takes its name from an essay by art historian Suzannah Biernoff on the life and work of artist and educator, Henry Tonks (1862 – 1937). Today Tonks is perhaps best known for his surgical drawings of WW1 soldiers whose faces underwent reconstructive surgery by one of the progenitors of modern-day plastic surgery, Harold Gillies. Tonks was himself a surgeon and longstanding teacher of drawing and anatomy at London's Slade School of Art, where he taught amongst others painters such as Paul Nash and Gwen John.

Tonks' surgical pastels, often depicting before and after renderings of Gillies' operations, possess qualities of intimacy and horror, abjection and the irreducible materiality of flesh, skin and bone. These works stand not in art museums or galleries but in medical and surgical archives. As such their status as cultural artifacts remain open, porous, open to hermeneutic doubt and ambivalence. Their current resting place is then a frame of sorts, one that is internal and external to Tonks' portraits.

In her essay Biernoff notes that Tonks referred to his pastels as *fragments* of the human. It should be clear that these are indeed literal fragments of war-torn faces. We could acknowledge torn psyches and bodies, irrevocably impacted by a carnage beyond words - here in these mute spaces Tonks' poems find resonance. They are, in such wordlessness, provoking the invention of language or at least some kind of semiotic that might grasp hold of something approaching meaning. These fragments, held within blasted faces and folded reconstructions, are potentially an opening chapter for an abstraction that enters consciousness through disfiguration.

In a recent catalogue essay for MoCA's Pattern & Decoration survey exhibition, LAXART curator Hamza Walker playfully inverts Clement Greenberg's notion of *homeless figuration*, a term used by Greenberg for an emergent abstraction containing floating fragments of representation. Walker observes a homelessness rooted in the kind of work championed by Greenberg, and poses a question as to the cost of such insularity both then and now.

These faces bearing human brutality and tenderness are, in their very dislocation and disfiguration, a home of sorts - a focus on limits and boundaries as a means to regenerate meaning and value. Tonks was known for his privileging of the haptic as an art educator, his touch is just one of the many latent places where an ethics of abstraction could take root, face to face.

David Edward. February 26th, 2021

Flesh Poems: List of Works



Neal Rock, *Prosopon*, 2016-21

1. Neal Rock, *Boston Elbow*, 2021
2. Neal Rock, *Tŷ Bach*, 2021
3. Neal Rock, *Cynefin*, 2021
4. Neal Rock, *Fauna*, 2020
5. Neal Rock, *Prosopon*, 2016-21
6. Neal Rock, *Aftercare*, 2020
7. Neal Rock, *Lepsis*, 2021
8. Neal Rock, *Bubba*, 2020
9. Neal Rock, *Zzyzx*, 2021

ABOUT NEAL ROCK

Neal Rock is a Welsh visual artist who was born and raised in the industrial steel town of Port Talbot, South Wales (UK). A naturalized American citizen, he currently lives and works in Charlottesville, Virginia & San Bernardino, California. He holds a BA (Hons) in Painting from the University of Gloucestershire, UK; an MA in Fine Art from Central Saint Martins School of Art & Design, London and a practice-based Ph.D. in Painting from London's Royal College of Art. With a visual art practice that encompasses interdisciplinary approaches to painting informed by histories of prosthetics, abstraction & embodiment, he has exhibited extensively internationally since the early 2000s. His work has been featured in commercial solo exhibitions in London, Amsterdam, Paris, New York and Los Angeles, and Rock has participated in international survey exhibitions at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH; Contemporary Art Museum Houston, TX; The John Moores Painting Prize, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, UK; New York's Storefront for Art & Architecture; London's Royal Academy of Art & ICA, amongst others. In 2009 he had his first public gallery solo exhibition; *Fansestra & Other Works*, at the New Art Gallery Walsall, UK. He was the recipient of the 2015-16 Grant Wood Painting Fellowship at the University of Iowa, alongside other residencies and fellowships including, MASS MoCA, Yaddo, VCCA and South Dakota State University. He is currently an Assistant Professor of Studio Art; Painting at the University of Virginia.

RUFFIN GALLERY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

Since 2008, the Ruffin Gallery is an active part of the Studio Art program. Each year the gallery hosts four to six exhibits that serve as the University's most important showcase for contemporary art and are an integral part of the Studio Art experience. Students are involved with the production and installation of these exhibitions and gain valuable experience in the handling and hanging of important works of all types. The gallery hosts a show by each year's Ruffin Distinguished Artist-in-Residence. Every spring the gallery is the site of the Fourth-Year Thesis and Aunspaugh Fellows Exhibitions. The openings are important occasions when the whole studio program gathers to celebrate the successful completion of the major. In addition to the Ruffin Gallery, student and visiting artist work is frequently shown in the RuffStuff and Media Galleries on the first floor of Ruffin Hall.

ON VIEW

March 1 - March 26, Ruffin Gallery
To make a reservation to view Neal Rock,
Flesh Poems, visit <https://tinyurl.com/y6ch59mt>.

PRESS CONTACT

Liza Pittard, Marketing & Visiting Artist Coordinator,
University of Virginia Art Department
eap4dg@virginia.ed
Press release by Olivia Pettee '24

ADDRESS

Ruffin Gallery
179 Culbreth Road
Charlottesville, VA 22903

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more content about the exhibition,
follow the UVA Art Department on social media:
Instagram: [@UVA_ArtDepartment](#)
Twitter: [@Art_UVA](#)
Facebook: [@UVA.Art](#)