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Threshold Spaces: Rethinking Eleven Figures during Quarantine

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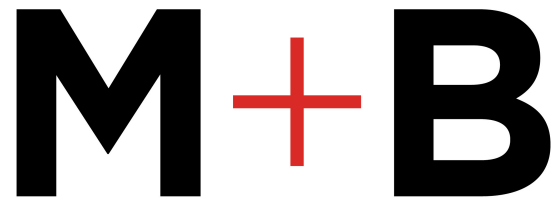


How we view art depends on the experiences we bring to it. In the months leading up to Covid-19's insertion into every aspect of the California quotidian, Santa Barbara City College's Atkinson Gallery held an ambitious two-part exhibition featuring eleven Southern California artists working in figurative representation. Much of *Eleven Figures in Two Parts* was an exploration of figurative, psychological and social constructs of the human form; however, by opening night of the second part, our collective view of the human body had already begun to shift.

A stunning example is Mario Ayala's "Mending Acquaintances" which depicts a crash-test dummy covered in warning symbols of an infectious disease. At the Feb. 21 opening, the 2019 piece was a clear presage to Covid-19. Months prior, the chain link fence referencing detention centers or the "black face" mask questioning the basis of racial tensions might have struck viewers first. However, on that night, there was no more salient news than the growing confusion around Covid-19.

Perhaps even more prescient is the way Ayala's "infected body" is depicted taking off its mask. In the weeks that followed, Covid-19's stealth incubation period had many begin to adopt a similar mode of thinking: everyone you meet or touch, might be a contagion under the mask of health. In art, the human figure can act as a "carrier" of certain values and codes; during Covid-19, bodies are literally carriers of disease.

In their 2019 paintings included in Part II, "Prism and Lens" and "The Peripheries of Love," Zoe Walsh recodes the proto-male body in archival '80s gay pornography, creating a space for trans subjectivity and casting figures and sets as "threshold spaces." In an interview with *Cultured* magazine last summer, Walsh described this subjectivity as "watching from a distance, imagining something that is not actually there." Walsh has hit upon the Zeitgeist of pandemic life—the threshold experience—a blurred space, where different realities are



juxtaposed and what is or is not “actually there” is uncertain. Covid-19 has devastated the underpinnings of how human, community and state bodies interact without a clear substitution.