

Elizabeth Houston Gallery

Photomonitor

Chloe Rosser / Form and Function

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Interviewed by **Christiane Monarchi**

Chloe Rosser's current exhibition in London, with L A Noble Gallery at Photofusion, comprises bold photographic images which conflate the genres of portraiture, still life, performance, even sculpture. Rosser has exhibited extensively across the UK, and has been featured in numerous publications and awards. She is currently crowdfunding for her publication 'Form and Function' which relates to her current exhibition, both of which are closing on 18th June.

Below, Photomonitor asked Rosser about the background to these innovative works.

Christiane Monarchi: *I'm intrigued by entering your current exhibition to be confronted with exquisite studies of human subjects – portraits if I may – but the most original configurations of bodies imaginable. These images make me look again and again to try and read them, and wonder how they were made. What was your first inspiration in creating these compositions?*

Chloe Rosser: I started working in this style about six years ago. I had already been photographing the body for a while, abstracting it in different ways, but then I took one photo which really changed the direction I was going in. The photo was of just a torso from behind, with no legs, arms or head showing, so that it was this strange fleshy cube. It was so inhuman and grotesque, while also being very much alive. I was struck by it. It made me consider this person's relationship to their body. I think it was because I wasn't actually cropping any of the body out of the image, I was including the whole figure as it appeared in that moment.

I continued on this exploration of how we connect with, or are in disconnected to, our own bodies. I planned and shot other poses that had this inhuman quality to them. That became the first part of this work, 'Form'. Since then, still working with the human figure, I have shifted the focus of the images. The compositions of 'Function' are far more about the interaction between the forms and capturing almost a movement beneath the skin.

I actually went through an experience that changed how I felt about my body. It made me realise it's abilities and strength were not as solid or reliable as I thought. I had severe and debilitating sciatica. Luckily, I made a good recovery but the experience shook me and made me think about the function of my body. It was alienating, I even felt betrayed by my body. That fed further into my work as I questioned the assumptions we make about the function of the body, hence the title.

Much of my inspiration comes from not only the human body and photography, but also sculpture. One of the artists who inspires me is Berlinde de Bruyckere. She's a sculptor who works with wax, creating these human figures that have so much character and emotion about them. They are imperfect, incomplete and anatomically incorrect. They also don't have heads and in fact look almost corpse-like. But their gestures are so beautiful and emotive. There is an intimacy to them which I love.

CM: *I am engaging with the pure joy of looking offered by your large and detailed images – imperfections, hair, skin, and more skin – they yield feelings of specificity but also, without identifying tattoos or indeed heads, anonymity. How have you decided on the models you have chosen?*

CR: I have chosen people with a range of skin tones, body types and also genders. There are male and female models included, but also gender fluid. I wanted to be inclusive and also to treat everyone the same in the photographs. Some of the models did not know each other before the shoots, and some of them are actually couples. That variation of relationship is interesting I think. It's great working with couples because they know their way around each other's bodies so well. There is an ease with which they move together. But with strangers who don't know each other, there is a different feel when they are modelling together. There can be more of a tentativeness in the poses sometimes because of this.

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It is true, I have left out identifying features. That's because we react with the figures differently if we can see their face or other features that might elude to their character. If I had not omitted these, we would look at the figure and try to understand their character, maybe compare this to ourselves. But although I want my figures to be individual, I want us to focus on the base qualities of the body, it's form and function, not the character of the individual. We empathise with someone's face in a way that we don't with their back. Interestingly though, in one of the early images, 'Form 1, 1', the figure actually has nail varnish on their toes. I decided to keep that and run with the photograph anyway because I felt that it subtly added a human quality to the image, without being too descriptive, especially as it is quite hard to notice.

CM: *Could you tell us a bit more about your studio, process, and how long it takes to create each image?*

CR: The shoots normally take a couple of hours, but before I get there I have already planned out the poses and compositions I want to achieve. I even sketch the images I want to make, often including the lines of the space. I take inspiration from many different mediums of art, or sometimes objects I've seen, or just sitting and thinking about the way the body can move. When I started this project I was photographing myself, so I know how the poses feel and often try them out myself before asking other people to do them. When we're on the shoot, I will always demonstrate the pose I want them to take on. Everyone's body works differently so different people are able to do different poses. It becomes almost a discourse with the model, finding what poses suit their body. We will often adjust the poses I had in mind on the shoot, moving a leg here or turning the torso further that direction. So the poses can be quite personal to the model.

Sometimes we will set up the pose and it will work almost immediately, but sometimes it will take lots of adjusting, or maybe end up not working at all. But the poses are very hard to hold for a long period of time so I will set the models up roughly how I want them, and then only when everything for the shot is ready, will I ask them to fully go into the pose. Then they will hold it for 10 – 30 seconds, depending how hard it is, and I will take the shot. There can be quite a lot of coming out of the poses and then going into them again, until I get the perfect shot.

CM: *Have there been some that haven't worked out visually afterwards?*

CR: Yes, sometimes I have an idea about how I want two forms to fit together, or just a single figure, but then it doesn't quite work. We can't hide enough limbs or can't get the edges of the forms neat enough to achieve a sufficiently strange effect. The body needs to be abstracted to the point that it looks surreal, sometimes even impossible. It's a shame when an idea doesn't come together, but I then go away and try to figure out if there are any alterations I could do to make it feasible. It often depends on the models as well. I have tried poses with some people where their bodies just didn't bend in that way and they weren't able to do it, but then when I have done the same pose with other people, it has turned out beautifully. In fact, every time a model goes into a pose it can be different. As the positions are so hard to hold, when shooting one setup the models may go into the pose and come out of it a few times. Often, when they take it up again, it will be a little different and may or may not be as successful. This is especially true when working with two or more figures entwined around each other. I think this is because the individual has the muscle memory of how they were in the pose a moment ago, but cannot always remember exactly how they were connected to the other figure. So it can be very hard to recreate an exact pose. I watch how a pair might go into a pose so that when they repeat it, I can tell them who put what where and when to help them match the desired 'sculpture'. It is so exciting though when someone goes into a pose and it works so well this time! When we've finally perfected it and it is strange, beautiful and unbelievable. I absolutely love that moment.

CM: *Have you done any commissions with this project?*

CR: I have not. I have shot the whole project as personal work. It is fun having a mixture of personal and commissioned work though, as they make you think in different ways. Sometimes boundaries can allow you to push a project further in another direction and explore a side of it you hadn't considered. But creating work entirely as a personal project can be thrilling. I get so excited to show

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people what I've made. I have a few friends who I always share personal work with as soon as I've shot it.

CM: *What is next for you, in terms of project ideas you are working on?*

CR: I have various routes I am potentially going down, but still working in the vein of the human form and the spaces we inhabit. Some of the images in the show were very freshly shot, and this is the first time they have been printed, let alone exhibited. So all of this work is still very much in my mind. When coming to the end of a project, it's hard to stop thinking about what else you could add.

Chloe Rosser has exhibited extensively across the UK, in shows such as *Fresh Faced + Wild Eyed*, *The London Art Fair*, *FIX Photo Festival* and solo exhibition, *Forms*, at The Vaults Gallery in London. She was selected for *The Catlin Guide 2014* as one of the "40 most promising new graduate artists in the UK", and was a finalist in the *Renaissance Photography Prize 2015*. In 2016 she was a winner in the *ArtSlant Prize*. She was longlisted in the 10th edition of the *Aesthetica Art Prize*, shortlisted in the *Belfast Photo Festival Competition 2017* and chosen for the Editor's Pick by *Life Framer* in 2018.

