

# Project Gina Czarnecki

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Rather overexcited by the invention of photography, the great French novelist Honoré de Balzac developed a theory that things gave off images of themselves all the time. Houses shed pictures of themselves and always had. Only cameras allowed people to catch and keep these shedding skins, these projections. It had something to do with ghosts. Balzac along with the rest of the 19th century being obsessed with the return of the dead from the other side was happy to find this quasi-scientific device appearing to demonstrate that the pictures of the past could stick around into the present - like ghosts. Weird enough if you think of it in terms of ectoplasm. But really not so bizarre if you drop the idea that this might be science, and instead think about it as sociology. Or psychology.

Things probably don't project outwards but people surely do. What we wear, how we carry ourselves, personal grooming, choice of scents, the way we use our voices and gestures are all ways of projecting out into the world some inner essence. We talk about actors projecting, about politicians oozing charisma, sports stars exuding charm. Projecting is part of what we do when we are being human.

Science – and photography – tell us that vision – and photography – are possible because light bounces off things. Shine a light on something and some of the light will reflect back. And some of it will be absorbed. It is a spooky thought: when you light someone to take a picture or to record them to video, you have to light them, and when you do some of the light never comes back, it enters their skin and never comes out again. As you walk into a video installation and some of the light scatters over you, some of it is going into you, making subtle metabolic changes. Remember looking round in the cinema at all the faces raised to the screen? How they were all lit up with reflected light? Whenever we go near a projector, we always end up getting projected on.

Light that bounces around a room where there's projection going on bounces from face to face, screen to skin to skin again. Cameras catch light from the biggest projector of them all, the sun. They store it on strips of plastic made from oil, which comes from fossils, which come from plants and animals which come from the sun.

Ancient sunlight trapped in chemical ooze under the bedrock for millennia. Sunlight with nowhere to bounce to anymore. Does it feel the release, when it's been turned into magnetic tape or optical discs? Maybe it thinks, here I am, trapped for millennia, and they want to use me to trap more light, store it away, bring it out from time to time when the kids are fractious or they want to remember a holiday.

One of the names Marcel Duchamp used for *The Bride Stripped Bare* was *Delay in Glass*. He talked about glass that would slow the light down as it came in, and would come out the other side days, weeks, years later. Which is, when you think of it, a perfectly good description of glass plate photography.

Somehow projection seems to delay things. Perhaps, when they slow down, things do begin to project themselves out into the cosmos, like little cold suns. Perhaps, when you take away their clothes and their scents, people slow down enough to project something more indefinitely themselves than the personalities we normally more artificially project.

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You would think it would be the simplest thing in the world, to have, to be, to live in, with, through the or a body. And then it isn't. And you would think that pictures of bodies would be about as straightforward as a picture could be. And then they aren't.

Not just because bodies get cold, pained, hurt, tense but because even when stripped and numbed a body can't help projecting, and projecting things that not only escape awareness but escape personality altogether, like the smell of burning hair is never the smell of your hair but just human hair. Naked as they are in Gina Czarnecki's work, these people are both people and examples - samples of a species. Strange, because we always think that when we give ourselves to someone wholly, totally, give them everything, we do it naked. But a picture can as readily remove that intimacy as it can intimate it. A pin-up or a portrait as often as not seems to be an invitation to some personal relationship, but what then?

William Carlos Williams, the doctor poet, wrote once of a tense temptation to adultery

Take off your clothes

I didn't ask you to take off your skin

But which tender portrait includes an electron microscope scan of a sample of mucus and a DNA profile charted from it? A nude is always a potential sexual partner, but nudity is also the terrain of medicine, of the clinical gaze, where the objective and the abject rub shoulders, where the sick and injured surrender to the institutional eye, feeling like a broken toy. You put your self to one side when you submit to a medical examination, and your body speaks in a language that the doctor has to retranslate back to you, a language of bloodpressure and pulse, temperature and blood sugar. It is not you. It is an animal, at the kind of threshold that Czarnecki once examined in an abattoir between flesh and meat.

So when in *Silvers Altar* and *Versifier* Czarnecki involves you in genetic selection, the projections mix and bounce around the room like light in a projection booth. From the ancient past the human genome projects onto the assembling cells its map. It has been shining this light, beaming this message, for a million years. Large tracts of the human genome are not only the same as chimpanzees. They are damn near the same as mice. As starfish. Not much more distinguishes human DNA from an amoeba's. After all, much of the work ('build me a cell for converting sunlight into vitamins') is pretty much the same for pretty much everything that slithers. Genes shine down the long aeons of time into the present, and where they shine their light, molecules assemble themselves into the shape of that projection. And from the tiny thing, so small a copy curls up in every one of the trillion cells in these bodies of ours, a light radiates that builds the epidermis in its image.

Of course, there is mutation. Every now and then some trick of fate flips a switch, and brings a useful trait like immunity to malaria. Or a less useful one, like sickle-cell anaemia, which, cruelly enough, is the same mutation as malaria resistance. Without the mutation, you might not live long enough to breed. With it you might live long enough to suffer its unkind sibling. No-one said life was kind.

And so Czarnecki brings us into the room full of projections and naked patients waiting for their treatment who are also lovers waiting for our response and asks us to mutate them. And for what?

Isn't the landscape of a human hair enough, projected to the size of a wall? Isn't the sight of platelets of blood? There's something here about congenital defects in eyesight, but who would risk messing with genes that might turn out to be the ones that are resistant to some vile disease or that correct the eyes but at the same time

disable some crucial gland? After all, now the genome is mapped, there's the even vaster task of mapping the human brain, and no-one has much of an idea how that works at all. Messing with eyes is, anyway, like messing with the brain - so close together, and hardwired. Two of the participants didn't even know they had the defect so how useful is it to fix it anyway?

Because it is important to know what we are doing. Genes are very conservative. They don't like change, and usually change has to be forced on them by cosmic radiation or something equally unanswerable. But we change. Whether we want to or not we make history day by day. We project ourselves willy nilly onto everyone else. We select partners, have their kids, change the fate of the world hour by hour, year on year. All the unborn lie numbly round our feet, cluster like dumb ghosts in the dark that surrounds the long project of DNA.

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As if to have a body, be a body, were easy, or as if to see a body were in any way any more natural. Rotoscoping, a kind of tracing, ties Czarnecki's imagery to drawing: a kind of digital tracing, painstaking, frame by frame, that separates the body from its ground, makes it more naked by erasing the world. As if, to get the penny to drop, you had to remove the floor. Each sequence, sometimes each frame, goes through anything up to sixty digital iterations through industrial image processing software, Photoshop, AfterEffects, Apple's Shake and the ominously titled FinalCut.

But everyone knows that in the digital arena there is no final cut. There is no definitive moment when you stand back from the canvas and say, there, that's it, that's perfect. As Mallarmé said of poems, these works are not finished – they are abandoned. But that act of abandonment is what finishes the artist's work, and doubly. The first time, these naked souls, bare below the flesh, are abandoned by their maker, thrust out like fledglings from the nest. The second time round, they are abandoned to the tender mercies of their audiences, who in interactions or in the visceral and mental reactions the works evoke, remake the work. Are these bodies tortured, anorexic, brutalised, laid out on the operating table to incriminate everyone who looks? Or are they undiscovered beauties, like the tales the first microscopists left of the unparalleled beauty of fleas?

Traced, retraced, reimaged, divorced from their origins, blended, coloured, a drive simultaneously into increasingly embodied embodiment and increasingly virtual virtuality, the figures and their own taut disciplines of muscle and motion – are they

ripped apart by contradiction or resolved in the mystical rebellion of the flesh and the machine? Even the doctor accused of the institutional control of looking has to acquaint themselves over and over with the frailty and the unbearable resilience of bodies, bodies in pain, bodies that, no matter how thin the thread that hooks them onto life, refuse to die. Like the stretched figures of petroglyphs, these stylised, elongated and compressed frames, curled to a foetus or laid out like a deposition at the foot of the cross of the Son of Man, require our tenderness, our pity.

A circle then, for *Infected*, the ancient cycle, and in its braided coil surrounded, lifted out of gravity, the bodies vibrate suspended between unutterable age and unendurable futurity, a timelessness ravaged by eternal return. In *Luminary*, a project with Mike Stubbs, Czarnecki beamed vast images from a lighthouse, and sounds invisibly to nearby car radios tuned to secret frequencies. Not landscape format, but the landscape as recipient, for miles around, of a projection it alone was big enough to encompass, perhaps even to see.

Digital artists cannot and do not get away with shoddy work. Czarnecki's craft is as intense as tapestry. Each phase and frame is carefully polished, reframed, filtered, flared, and each element of installation worked on in hands and mind, like *stages elements* and its twin nine-metre by two metre screens, its band of one-way mirrors, audience as spectacle in a frame whose dimensions owe nothing to the cinema, the TV or the beaux arts. Few artists have made projection truly their medium, interrogated its possibilities, tuned image to canvas as Czarnecki has. The space of projection is a zone of sculptural, architectural, public space in which we confront images of power, grace and terror – images that speak of the necessity of being bodies, of the loneliness of existing inside an epidermis, of the ecstasy of pores and exhalations, the agonies of escape. A record of impossibilities in a space made other. Irrational times in a the space of movement. Projections into time of spaces that make these times in the gallery other, confronting them with their own alienation. An empathy printed on the world and its retinas. A project, a projectile, a projective geometry (where points and lines are interchangeable). As though my body was projected onto me.

Projections of furious compassion for the condition of being us.

Projections of compassionate fury for the condition of not being us.