

The Karsh Award 2014  
Le Prix Karsh 2014

# Chantal Gervais





# **Surgery Without Anaesthesia: Chantal Gervais' Corpus**

by Lilly Koltun

C looks for her father in the tool archive. A garage, a closet, a heart, a lung, pain! Mesothelioma such a menacing monstrous word for not being able to take a breath.

In this drawer of screwdrivers? Screw that he would have said. C smiles. Why do we think people are where we bury their bodies?<sup>1</sup>

C has burrowed far into bodies — into intimate fat, flesh, the crooks of bones, injured limbs, her own scared, scarred heart, Leonardo's rigid ruled semaphore re-formed with her own sinews. What to do now with so much bodiless corporeal pain, memories heaving out of their burial places, regrets reviving...

Slam shut tear open  
slam shut non-stop  
hits  
You expect him to appear  
suddenly from behind a bench  
or partition, broken  
Well, well, girl what are you doing here?  
I came to find you  
supper's ready.

A line of tears intervenes  
WTF<sup>2</sup>  
Ok ok I'll be there in a minute.  
Let me touch here first and here and here  
Shut TF up

C opens the garage doors to light the treasures  
caress the bungee cords hung like gem necklaces  
woven by his fingers of torn nails  
and hammers and motors and glass jars  
flash hot about the heart

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<sup>1</sup> "What is your main point? Do you state it soon enough...?" (Barrett, Jerry, *Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Images*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Mountain View, Calif., London, Toronto: Mayfield Publishing, 1996. p. 166).

<sup>2</sup> What The Fuck. What. The. Fuck.

C looks around herself for herself  
Her life's work to look around for herself  
who slips and falls  
victim  
why do we look to machines to look at us?  
examiner, examinee infinitely  
ARE YOU LOOKING AT ME? ARE YOU LOOKING AT ME?  
Scan and split, scan and stitch — isn't that what women do?  
intent, in microseconds of control  
Are we victim of, I mean blessed by the voyeur machine?

Did he think of that too, the indistinct line between seduction and death? the prodding at the  
flesh to understand  
at least to press against the real, to be sure life still bloodied the mind  
and spilled over this part, that part, everywhere  
still forming, re-forming, doing, making

C's making emerges in the BFA in 1993, the MA in art and media ten years later, the Canada Council's  
photography prize in 2002, the multiple shows and grants and jury appointments and the reviews since,  
but most of all the teaching — for ten years instilling in students the demands of making, the cruelty of  
unsparing art.<sup>3</sup> No making without cutting; no cutting quickly, only slow, slow dissection, re-section...

where is the horrific in recombinations? in secret courageous listening  
to noises we cannot bear  
our scars stitched again with glistening nails like sweat-soaked tools  
Is *Discipline and Punish*<sup>4</sup> still relevant? is our will docile? is our beauty in our unregenerate bodies,  
exposing ourselves to reclaim our agency?

Acts of extreme violence are part of the culture of war  
against the threats buried inside; if inside out is ugly then let ugly save us  
by photo, video, nightmare MRI  
but what obsessive gruelling instruments!  
spiking chewing flashing into flesh, bones, backs, mouths, breasts  
buried in darkness and dirty density, resurrected in painful light

C puts her hands on light, on dark, on sharp, on soft, on sound, on flux, on stillness, to make the  
machine into clay, into void, into form, into ghost of document, into body of expression. An eye that  
does not quail before the blood of change. "The founder of evolutionary biology who did not even use  
the word 'evolution' when he first explained his theory, started out in medicine, but was repelled by the  
sight of surgery without anaesthesia."<sup>5</sup> C's evolution revels in raw surgery. And in vulva bivalvia LOL<sup>6</sup>

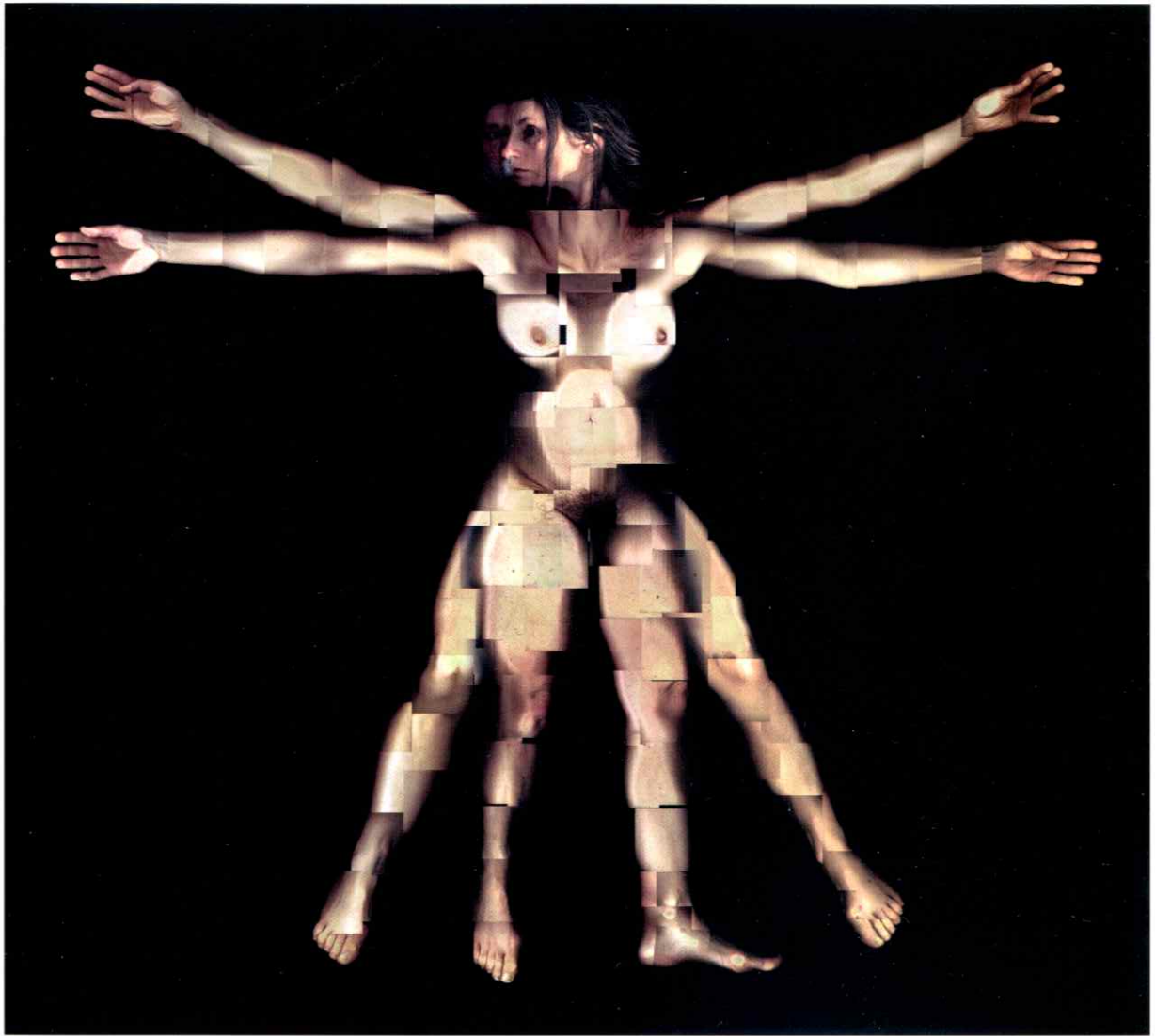
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<sup>3</sup> see: [www.artengine.ca/cgervais](http://www.artengine.ca/cgervais)

<sup>4</sup> Foucault, Michel, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Alan Sheridan, trans. © 1977. New York: Random House. 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Eassom, Simon, "Charles Darwin" in: *Great Thinkers A-Z*, Julian Baggini, Jeremy Stangroom, eds. London, New York: Continuum, 2004. pp. 71-3.

<sup>6</sup> "Do you provide evidence for your interpretations?" (Barrett, *Criticizing Photographs*, p. 166).



our hanging parts emerge in luscious beauty bruises  
restitution to re-establish the floating extremes  
secret intimacies of the body <sup>7</sup>  
scream down the nighttime streets  
the fragile long term solution  
reality  
repeat <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Gervais, Chantal. [www.artengine.ca/cgervais](http://www.artengine.ca/cgervais). *Duality of the Flesh* 1996-1997. Accessed June 22, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> "Is the final paragraph a clear and forceful conclusion?" (Barrett. *Criticizing Photographs*, p. 166).