

Seven Minute Dream Machine

Jordan Wolfson's
(Female figure)

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Writing on Jordan Wolfson and his work usually ends one of two ways. Either the writer has consolidated their sense of breeched morality into a few cutting, cross-armed lines; or they concede with almost pagan relief that, while Wolfson's output is the assholic germ of extreme white privilege, nonetheless, it is a powerful and important oeuvre. It is polarizing rhetoric, even without the collector/director class speaking of Wolfson in the future-perfect tense of guaranteed art history. I'm not going to do any of that. But I'll begin like the rest—with a confession: the work is violent, baiting, and profoundly antisocial. And there's something in it that I like. Hence, maybe, the slight uptick in my anxiety as I journeyed downtown to the Broad Museum for my appointment with Wolfson's *(Female figure)*—as if I was meeting an old acquaintance for a drink, and reviewing why we aren't friends.

At first, the opportunity to "preview" *(Female figure)*, breathlessly billed as an "immersive environment" (read: a white room with a door) "on view for the first time" (true only with many qualifications) wasn't hard to pass up. I'd seen the piece when it debuted four years before at Zwirner in New York. It was.... fine. Funny, disturbing, indulgent, shameful to

watch, like someone getting ritually teabagged to detuned Robin Thicke. More to the point, I don't like watching the same movie twice. L.A. seems to get seconds on these blockbusters, even when they're born here. Never mind that it was the promise of movie magic that drew Wolfson to Los Angeles, where he now owns a house; and to Spectral Motion, the team of Hollywood engineers that built *(Female figure)* to his specs. Four years is a luxuriously safe lag for a West Coast premiere of what is, by now (after 2016's *Colored sculpture* and 2017's *Real violence*), Wolfson's third-most shocking artwork. Circa 2019, the opinions have been voiced; the essays written, the Instagrams insta'd.

Of course, The Broad Collection is reliably risk-averse. Accordingly, it treats Los Angeles like a second-run venue for focus-grouped entertainment. *(Female figure)*'s status as a breakthrough work, indeed, was synchronized well before Broad purchased one of the three editioned robots (+1 AP) in 2014, straight off the Zwirner shelf, then announced the buy with a press release. At half a million dollars, *(Ff)* is too expensive to fail. And still, to hear it spun, this is our avant-garde—we're told as much, in the way that the "media" won't let me forget that my life will unfurl against the ululating background of 9/11, the *Rain Room*, and Donald Trump, whether I like it or not. So why not have a look...? Who wouldn't?

(Female figure) is the robot stripper, Wolfson's Robot, the bride impaled on her stripper pole, even. But then, none of that is really true. A chrome rod, something like two inches in diameter, runs from the robot's abdomen to a vertical slot in a mirror on the wall. Via this slot, it has a vertical range of motion of around two feet, meaning it can get low, or raise the roof, or whatever—but cannot, under any circumstances, move laterally; the robot will never turn, slide, or shimmy. This rod isn't something external to the robot—it is a crucial piece of the machine.



Jordan Wolfson, (*Female figure*) (2014), installed in Jordan Wolfson, David Zwirner, New York (2014).
Image © Jordan Wolfson, and courtesy of the artist,
David Zwirner and Sadie Coles HQ, London.
Photo: Jonathan Smith.



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The rod is an umbilical cord: a supply of electricity and other animating substances; a feed of bits and chits from whatever computer runs the face-recognition routine, the dance routine, cues the music. It dances and coaxes, but it never picks up its feet, and it is not dancing for *you*. Not for the artist either. The performance is a tight, narcissistic monologue performed with the understanding that one to four people at a time will be watching. One more thing: it doesn't strip. Strippers usually face the customers, scanning the crowd for their next mark and zooming in between songs; and, technically speaking, it seems just as easy to run the controls into the small of an automaton's back as into its "stomach," the way (*Female figure*) is. The robot could face us, in other words, but the artist won't let it. If the effect of the femmefigure's eyes locking yours in the mirror is unsettling, this is partly because the feeling that you might be worth noticing is quickly overcome by the knowledge that those "eyes" are the limited inputs of an unthinking machine, and that, if you weren't there, it would still dance its unthinking dance, just as in its absence you would queue up for some other timeless feat of art. This is (*Female figure*)'s most enduring insight: that today's spectacle and spectator are as woefully codependent as they are interchangeable.

Like it was at Zwirner, like it is for other selfie heavens like Kusama's *Infinity Room* (also a Broad staple), you will always need to wait your turn to enter (*Female figure*)'s presence. You will never have all the time you want. But this scarcity also intensifies the experience; folks in L.A. choose their art the way they pick a party or a ramen bar: by whichever line is longest. The robot appears to notice you in its mirror, and you pretend not to notice the other two or three people in the small white room, doing their best to ogle the sculpture seriously. You don't just see the sculpture; you see its show. The robot is given and the robot

is taken away. As promised, at the second time through the Lady Gaga number, the docent opened the door and made us leave.

Wolfson is an intuitive artist in the first degree. He cultivates, through meditation and exercise, an artist's freedom to face his own impulses—even if that means wearing what looks like blackface and humping a Parisian park in *Raspberry Poser* (2012); titling a scowling redheaded marionette *Colored sculpture* (2016); then, after all that, stating in public that he isn't comfortable talking about race. He gives himself permission to make his art, full stop. Why does (*Female figure*) say, for instance, in the artist's own voice, that "My parents are dead," or "I'm gay," when none of that is true? Because Wolfson gave himself the challenge of these enunciations. Say, "I don't believe in God." Say, "I'm getting fat." The statements Wolfson voices, literally, through his robot are as true as they are false: false because they don't always match the facts, true because he's truly tried them on.

(*Female figure*), in conclusion, is almost a lot of things, but isn't any of them. Not a passive odalisque or a classical marble; not a work of cinema, not a theme park ride; not a domestic violence victim, or an L.A. witch, or an auto mechanic sex doll. And no matter what the emails say, (*Female figure*) is not the greatest masterpiece of the 21st century so far. It's all the things Wolfson's sculpture *isn't*, though, that make it decisive—a piece that writhes through our categories until we feel like it's the *categories* that are lewd and need to go. It's the galleries' and museums' shameless barking, it's the press' moralistic vicissitudes, it's the artist's faux-naïf disavowals that are truly obscene. Wolfson doesn't attack taboos; he *pushes* taboos, from the inside out, in a way that makes those who don't question his work amoral fools, and those who do pious ones. In other words, if you're certain how (*Female figure*) makes you feel, then you've already lost. This ambivalence



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is the ruthless, seductive fulcrum of the work.

Good rules of thumb: Don't fall in love with a stripper, no matter what they whisper in your ear. Don't fall in love with fictional characters in general. And you probably shouldn't fall in love with a work of art, either—unless, warts and all, you're ready to try on the fact that the object of your desire is not one but several, contradictory versions of itself, a conglomerate of masks and costumes and scripts, and it will never love you back. That's right, (*Female figure*) is as full of shit as any of us, and the reason I queued up to see it is the same reason I pretend to hope a James Cameron film isn't schlock, but go enjoy it just the same. What's radical and enduring about (*Female figure*) isn't the robot or its capabilities; not the blood-on-the-thorns style poetry it recites; and not the fact that it "watches" you watching. The robot is about you watching—and you watching yourself watching—this wretched modern pageant. It took a second visit to realize that (*Female figure*) is about how it feels to give in and look a second time.

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