

Shifting Bodies

Julian Miholics

Guest Curated by Reilly Knowles

What images can express the experiences of a community which is told to disappear? What visual language can describe a group of people often forced into hiding in order to survive? What art can speak to transgender experience? *Shifting Bodies* by Julian Miholics represents one answer to this tangle of questions. Transgender experience is interpreted here in an ancient vernacular of monstrous gods and tragic heroes, of forming from and returning to the clay. In this body of work, transgender subjects are not held to the sidelines of traditions of life, death, and myth-making, but richly intertwined with them.

Miholics' sculptures have the magical quality of sketchbook pages given form. Reminiscent of watercolours, washy passages of glaze enrobe the artworks, allowing the red of the stoneware to join the vibrant palette. Dark linework expresses the fur and feathers of his characters with a deceptive sense of spontaneity and imbues them with the directness of drawing. Fleeting gesture turns to stone, in a process Miholics has called "sealing illustrations into vitrified forms." This idea of solidifying something transient into a permanent state extends to the artist's interest in depicting Queer life. He intends his artworks as reflections on personal experience, but also as affirming documents of Queer existence when so few have survived the editing process of history. In particular, his sculptures capture states of Queer transformation and liminality – shifts between phases of life, of emotion, and of body.

The Queer figures of *Shifting Bodies* come in many guises. Part-plant, part-human, and part-animal characters serve as metaphors for transgender embodiment, appearing as category-disrupting "monsters." These include the monsters of the eponymously titled *Sphinx (Your Truth)* and *Minotaur (Your Happiness)*, as well as the werewolves, unicorns, and canid creatures which also populate the show. Queer people have long been dehumanised as "monsters," with their bodies, their loves, and their desires deemed "unnatural." Yet these sculptures do not reflect the monsters of the bigot's imagination; rather, they are soft-bodied and tender, their rounded forms brimming with charm and humour. Monster-hood has been incorporated into these images of queerness not in self-deprecation, but in an act of reclamation which forges an aesthetic chain between the Queer body and the mythic. Specifically, the figure of the werewolf has been taken up in some parts of the transmasculine community as a metaphor for gender transition, as well as the social stigma which comes with having a body deemed strange and unsafe. In *Your Embrace*, werewolves lovingly hold one another, completely devoid of the violence to which they are usually ascribed. They are accepted and supported by those who understand them best: their Queer packmates, their fellow monsters.

Equal to the artist's love for his Queer community, love for nature resonates throughout *Shifting Bodies*. Flowers grow out of and echo the interior of the monsters, as in *Sphinx (Your Truth)*, where a white flower mimics the skeleton of the creature it adorns. Death and decomposing are especially prominent expressions of this love of nature. In both *Life Cycle* and *Seedling*, corpses are seen returning peacefully to the earth, their flesh studded with growing plants. The fact of Queerness being part of nature is a returning subject for Miholics, whose previous works have pointed to the varied sexes and sexualities of non-human beings, destabilizing queerphobic perceptions of what it means to be natural. Images of the decaying Queer body can similarly be read in an

affirming light – death comes to all creatures equally. Stripped of social meaning, all bodies are ingredients for future soil, unified in their transformation back into dirt. Their dying is evidence of their place within the cycle of life.

Being monsters, however, these sculptures at times surpass the natural realm to speak to the supernatural and draw upon religious iconography of past and present faiths. *Minotaur (Your Happiness)*, recalls the bull-human hybrid of ancient Greek legend, but also the solar bull deities of ancient Egypt. Far from a murderous beast, this minotaur lies in a playful centrefold pose, colourful and radiant. An even more striking example is *I Remain*, which references the Christian martyr Saint Sebastian. The persecuted saint, who doubles as a werewolf, is seen bleeding after being bound to a tree and shot with arrows. The blood from his wounds mingles with that from his mastectomy incision, aligning Saint Sebastian's strength in the face of religious persecution with transgender strength in the face of bigotry and surgical recovery. The wolf's mouth is open perhaps in a snarl, or perhaps in a howl of ecstatic suffering. Like the "beautiful torment" of Saint Sebastian icons which have resonated with gay artists since the nineteenth century, *I Remain* finds aesthetic pleasure and mystical meaning in an otherwise crushing circumstance. By adopting images of divinity, these sculptures declare that the transgender body is not profane – it is an object of reverence.

Together, these works represent a love letter to transgender people and to the broader Queer community. *Shifting Bodies* enfolds playful, multi-layered images around the often difficult and often joyful experience of accepting who you truly are and working to embody that truth. Queer identity is complicated, and informed by both historical and contemporary persecution, but it is the artist's thoughtful dialogue with this messiness that has made these sculptures both beautiful and profound. As a fellow transmasculine artist, I feel privileged to be curating this exhibition by an exceptional emerging talent such as Julian Miholics, and for his message of resilience and care.

Reilly Knowles

Ann Roberts Curatorial Fellow 2023

Julian Miholics, *Minotaur (Your Happiness)*, 2023. Cone 6 stoneware, underglaze, glaze, nichrome wire. 44 x 17 x 22cm. Courtesy of Jonathon Bancroft-Snell Gallery. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Julian Miholics, *Sphinx (Your Truth)*, 2023. Cone 5.5 stoneware, underglaze, glaze. 19 x 17 x 12cm. Collection of the artist. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Julian Miholics, *Guiding Light of Truth to Self*, 2023. Cone 5.5 stoneware, underglaze, glaze, chain, textile. 30 x 14 x 13cm. Collection of the artist. Photo Courtesy of the artist.

Julian Miholics is an emerging ceramicist and illustrator born and residing in Treaty Six Township (London, Ontario). Following his graduation from H.B. Beal Secondary School in 2016, Miholics' work has featured in galleries including the Ely Centre of Contemporary Art, Dust Evans Gallery, and Museum London. His practice takes up beasts of legend and prehistory to explore and reclaim the identity of "monster" imposed on transgender and queer people, as well as create a queer continuity through deep time.

Miholics is represented by Jonathon Bancroft-Snell Gallery.

Reilly Knowles is an emerging artist and curator based in Treaty Six Township (London, Ontario). A 2020 graduate of Western University's Bachelor of Fine Arts Program, Knowles served as the Curatorial and Collections Intern at the Woodstock Art Gallery in 2021-2022. His criticism has been published with *Femme Art Review*, and he is a member of Good Sport Gallery & Studio as well as the Coves Collective. Knowles' art and curatorship are interested in more-than-human relations, histories of regional folk magic, and trans experience.



Reilly Knowles is the Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery's inaugural Ann Roberts Curatorial Fellow. Launched in October 2022, the Ann Roberts Curatorial Fund marks Ann's longstanding commitment to the art and craft of ceramics, glass, and enamel in Canada's cultural scene. This fund will be used to invite an emerging guest curator to organize an exhibition at the Gallery every other year. For more information, visit www.theclayandglass.ca/arcf



Julian Miholics, *I am Seen*, 2023. Cone 5.5 stoneware, underglaze, glaze, nichrome wire. 33 x 23 x 31cm. Collection of the artist. Photo Courtesy of the artist.

Cover:

Julian Miholics, *I Remain*, 2023. Cone 5.5 stoneware, underglaze, glaze, nichrome wire. 33 x 14 x 20cm. Collection of the artist. Photo Courtesy of the artist.

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