

What the Body Keeps

On Victoria Zeder's Living Systems

In a small upper room of the Seattle Aquarium hangs a black-and-white photograph of an orca breaching off the coast of San Juan Island. The whale is identified, in the caption, as J2. Researchers gave her another name, Granny, because for the better part of a century she led the southern resident pod and kept its memory of where the salmon were. She had no calf in her final fifty years. She did not need one. The pod kept her alive because what she knew was needed.

The painter Victoria Zeder, working out of a studio in Miami, has spent the past two years building a body of work named after this animal and the proposition she represents. Living Systems is twelve paintings, a sculpture, and a sequence of dimensional textile pieces that share a single substrate: a clinical immobilization mesh, the kind that fixes a patient's head still through the delivery of radiation. The mesh in these works is the artist's own. Zeder wore it through the treatment of a pituitary macroadenoma in her early thirties.

It would be easy and incorrect to read the work as illustration of illness. The work is something more specific, and more useful. It is a proposition about what a body keeps when it cannot keep everything.

I. Distributed intelligence

Contemporary cognitive science has spent two decades dismantling the long-held idea that the mind is concentrated, central, and locatable. Andy Clark's extended-mind thesis argued that a notebook in your pocket performs cognition as legitimately as a synapse in your cortex. Lisa Feldman Barrett's work on constructed emotion proposed that feeling is not a thing the body has but a thing the body assembles, every time, out of interoceptive signals and learned categories. Microbiologists now estimate that the average human carries roughly as many bacterial cells as human ones, and that the gut's regulation of mood, immunity, and decision-making is closer to a parliament than a service entrance.

Living Systems is organized around two named sub-series. The Genesis sub-series begins with Genesis, a nine-by-twelve-inch field of hand-carved spheres bound by gold filament and sealed under resin, edged in twenty-four-karat gold leaf. Genesis is the first Living Systems work and is held in studio as the body's origin object. It is small enough to hold in two hands. It establishes the argument before it is enlarged: a body composed of separable units, a binding tissue, a perimeter held in value despite its cost. Every later work in the body is a development of what Genesis proposes.

The Inheritance sub-series opens at Hamptons 2026 with Origin / Inheritance I, sixteen by twenty inches, encaustic spheres, twenty-four-karat gold leaf, gold thread, and acrylic ink on cradled birch. A silver hero sphere is held by satellites in a cobalt field, with a gold thread tracing

the line of descent to a signed cobalt-and-gold sphere in the corner. The thesis of Inheritance, as a sub-series, is rupture, not refusal · the new generation observes, accepts, and breaks the patterns it is given, though it is often misunderstood for doing so. Where Genesis is the seed object, held in studio, Origin / Inheritance I is the first work in the body that the public can acquire from the Inheritance arc.

Living Systems takes this dismantling as its formal challenge. The keystone sculpture, Eye Sea All I, is a twenty-four-inch cube of mesh and pigment from which gold-leafed forms emerge in scattered constellations. There is no center. The viewer's gaze, looking for the eye the title promises, is asked instead to assemble the work from its dispersed inlays. The eye is the seeing. The sculpture distributes itself in the way the body distributes itself · not as a unity but as a federation, and not as a hierarchy but as a circuit.

This is a formal claim and a political one. The bounded individual self has done specific work in the history of Western painting, from the Renaissance portrait through the Romantic sublime. It is the unit the market is built to price and the unit the museum is built to display. Living Systems refuses it not by fragmenting the self into pieces but by relocating it: the work is not in any one place because the body is not in any one place.

II. Matriarchy after reproduction

Three species are known to have a meaningful post-reproductive female lifespan: short-finned pilot whales, orcas, and humans. Evolutionary biology calls this the grandmother hypothesis. Natural selection ordinarily discards a body once its reproductive function ends; in these three species, the body is kept alive because the social organism needs what is in it. The grandmother is not residual. She is structural.

Most contemporary cultural production about menopause remains framed by what is lost. Loss of fertility. Loss of estrogen. Loss of recognition. The work of Living Systems sits in a different frame entirely, in part because the artist's own clinical situation cut the chronology short. The pituitary tumor disrupted her reproductive years before they ended on a normal schedule. The result is that the questions matriarchs answer at sixty arrived in her thirties. What is a woman's social function when reproduction is not the frame? What does she keep, and how does she transmit it?

Faceless Self Portrait, the work that hangs adjacent to Eye Sea All I in the planned Hamptons installation, refuses every conventional self-portrait demand. There is no face. The cerulean field is interrupted by a gold inflection at the place a face would be, and the inflection does not resolve. The painting argues that the matriarch is not a particular face. She is a position in a system, a relay in a longer transmission, and her individual features are not what she is for.

The Origin series · Inheritance I, Mass I, Drift I, Release I · names four motions by which traits travel through a matriline. Inheritance is the direct vertical transmission, mother to daughter. Mass is the accumulation of traits in a population over time. Drift is the random walk of frequencies across generations. Release is the loss of traits no longer selected for. Living Systems insists that the four are equally constitutive. A matriline is not a single line. It is a wide channel through which most of what is passed is unnoticed and most of what is kept is unspoken.

III. Medical humanities

The medical humanities have become one of the most fertile interdisciplinary fields of the past decade. The premise is straightforward: clinical experience is too important to be left to the clinic alone, and the language of medicine is too narrow to hold what illness asks of a person. Artists from Christina Sharpe to Carolyn Lazard to Felix Gonzalez-Torres before them have made work that does not illustrate illness but instead converts clinical material · records, language, devices · into objects that can hold the complexity the clinic must, by design, strip away.

The decision to embed the actual immobilization mesh in *Living Systems* is the work's central methodological claim. The mesh is not represented. It is not photographed and reprinted; it is not cast in bronze; it is not symbolized. The actual device, the one fitted to the artist's actual head, is laminated into the paintings and the sculpture. Its presence is literal. The radiation it was made to allow is finished. The function it was designed for is complete. The work asks what the object becomes when its clinical life is over and its second life begins.

The answer the work proposes is that the object becomes a substrate. The mesh held the artist's head still so that energy could be delivered to a precise location. In the finished works, the mesh holds gold leaf in much the same way. The substrate is unchanged. What it holds is changed. The argument is that the clinical encounter is not finished when the patient leaves the room. The materials persist, and they can be asked different questions.

IV. The matriline as commons

Donna Haraway's cyborg, Rosi Braidotti's nomadic subject, Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality · a generation of post-human and new-materialist thinking has insisted that the bounded individual is a cultural artifact and not a biological fact. We are constituted by exchanges: with the microbiota that outnumber our own cells, with the kin networks that share traits across generations, with the species and ecosystems whose survival is entangled with our own.

Living Systems takes the matriline as a specific instance of this proposition. The matriline is a commons. It is a body of inherited material held collectively across generations, transmitted vertically through mothers and grandmothers, and operating regardless of any individual's reproductive status. *Pareidolia in Blue*, the largest painting in the series, names the cognitive habit by which the brain organizes ambiguous fields into recognizable figures · faces in clouds, animals in shadows. The painting proposes that the matriline operates by the same mechanism at the scale of generations: a tendency to recognize, against the noise of inheritance, the traits that have already worked.

V. What the body keeps

Living Systems is not autobiography. It is not the story of an illness. It is a proposition about how survival operates when the body is read as a system rather than a unit, about how intelligence operates when it is distributed rather than centralized, and about how inheritance operates when it is held in common rather than passed singly.

The artist's own line in the work is plain: I carry the legacy of the traits that work. So does she. The she is plural and unspecified, on purpose. She is the orca matriarch in the upper room of the aquarium. She is the artist's mother and grandmother. She is the patient sitting in the next bay of

the radiation suite. She is the viewer standing in the booth. She is whoever stands at the moment where the line passes through.

What Living Systems argues is that the body, when it is asked the right question, keeps what is needed. Not what is wanted. Not what is desired. What is needed. The work is what is needed made visible.

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