

Body-Building

Every majestic building in the western tradition is an archetype of authority. They occupy the land with an air of assurance and command: not only do they contain the instruments of institutional power but the powerful facades project their authority by means of a strong ornamental language of weight and support. Those gorgeous fluted columns with their articulated capitals and bases, the mighty cornices and volutes, the pediments and entablatures, all conspire to enhance the force of one another's presence. Each element in a classical design corroborates the logic and gravity of every other. They collectively argue their place in the world; it's a place worked out with definition and order.

One was brought up to think that beautiful objects appeal simply because they're aesthetically balanced. Classical architecture is esteemed because it embodies harmonies which, for centuries of western judgement, were imagined to be eternal and universal. One spoke of a canon, the rule, by which forms were correctly proportioned and against which any deviance would result in caprice. Wrapped up in this aesthetic rigour, the big handsome buildings wore their politics lightly. The pillars of western authority are fluted with the beautiful myth of natural order.

In the photographic frieze *Body/Building* Polixeni Papapetrou has constructed an ambitious argument about the roots of two classically beautiful cultural archetypes: Greek architecture and the ideal body. For the ideal body, Papapetrou has resorted to a contemporary translation of Hellenic beauty. Her shiny bodybuilders have been photographed in an underground bunker beneath the auditorium in which a competition is staged. In itself, the contest for physical prowess (agon) is very Greek; and some of her greased-up figures could almost have walked off an Attic vase showing a gymnasium, where bodies were also smeared with oil.

The comparison of classical design and contemporary bodybuilding suggests a strong connection between the two, apart from their obviously shared Hellenic heritage; for although classical architecture is associated with refinement and bodybuilding is associated with vulgarity and excess, both are an emphatic archetype of phallic discipline, authority and institutional control.

Papapetrou's reaction isn't entirely unsympathetic. The format of *Body/Building* confidently assumes the rhythms of ancient Greek architectural friezes. Images of full-length figures in heroic near-nudity are interspersed with images representing architectural details taken from Melbourne buildings of classical revivalism such as Parliament House and the Shrine. The balance of human figure and masonry recalls the sequence of carved metopes and triglyphs in Doric architecture.

The Hellenic ideal of beauty identified perfection with a virile and muscular body, well suited to athletics and war. With strongly institutional links, it was a body

which belonged to the city. The combination of today's bodies and an ancient canon of architecture implies that classical aesthetics prevail in the continuing contemporary cult of physical prowess. Witness the appeal of powerfully muscled torsos in magazines, films, television (Gladiators) and, of course, the bodybuilding contests themselves.

Through exaggeration of muscular details, the symmetries of the body become emphatic; moreover, while untrained bodies tend to flow from one part to another, the muscle-bound body is highly articulated. The bodybuilder speaks of 'definition' meaning the extent to which the muscles stand out as separate units and are not subsumed under a unifying skin. Effectively, this is the aesthetic logic by which ancient Greek ornament worked in the architecture of the temples. This belongs to our hidden canon of beauty, though long lost in the architecture of modernism, but surviving in various corporal inscriptions. It is relentlessly male, inorganic, unerotic, authoritarian and, arguably, very Greek.

Though not consciously seeking a sublime aesthetic, Papapetrou makes awe and admiration jostle with revulsion and redress. A desirable aspect of Greek aesthetics is coupled with a questionable one: the great sense of stature, magnificence and authority of ancient architecture is unhappily married to the glorification of the pumped-up flesh which, even when belonging to females, is gendered as masculine. The frieze proposes that the relationship between the primed body and the majestic ornaments of the institutional is not coincidental. It points to the hard soul of patriarchy.

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