



Matthew Chase-Daniel: *Untitled*, 2011, flatplate scans, 8.5 x 11 inches each

Body by Matthew Chase-Daniel,
Axle Contemporary Press, 89 pages

Gather up some friends and colleagues, ask them to get naked — or partially so — take photographs of their isolated body parts, and then present the images in a book. That's the gist of Matthew Chase-Daniel's recent body of work titled (appropriately enough) *Body*, a photo essay of more than 85 black-and-white pictures bled to the edges of the page, featuring close-ups of everything anatomical from head to toe. On various pages, arranged according to no particular pattern, are fields of hair taken from the scalp, body, and pubic areas as well as shots of eyes, noses, lips, tattoos, the nape of the neck, nipples, knees, and every imaginable part.

Chase-Daniel has done a good job of deconstructing the human form and forcing us to look point-blank at minute facial features, appendages, wrinkles, and pores. The shots are so in-your-face that you'd swear you can smell residual shampoo and body odor. Though most of the untitled photos are immediately recognizable as an ear, an eyebrow, a foot, a crotch, or what have you, many are abstract in nature, importing formal elements of shape and line. Collectively, the pictures remind us that our own bodies are relatively alike and yet exist as unique constructs of both geometric and biomorphic configurations. However, the more abstracted images are the most interesting, both photographically and conceptually; by themselves, these would have made for a slightly different but better book.

The handful of pictures that transcend the body work to great effect. A breast and nipple appear like some unknown planet seen through a telescope, two elbows look like dead fish, an unidentified orifice suggests the mouth of a cave, and creases remind one of windswept, dry riverbeds. On the other hand, a shot of toes in need of a pedicure, stray tattoos — one of a sunflower, the other of stars — and a pair of lips punctuated with spittle should have been discarded in the first edit.

Exploring fragments of the human body is nothing new, of course. Think of the myriad studies by Leonardo in the 15th century — often rendered from actual cadavers taken surreptitiously — that filled hundreds of sketchbooks. There are César Baldacchini's truncated iron torsos and Jasper Johns' cast body parts — incorporated into his *Target* paintings — of the 1950s. Add to that the wide assortment of votive folk charms known as *milagros*, and that's just a handful of ways in which artists have isolated parts of the human form.

In photography, body imagery has a long history, particularly for medical purposes, as well as being a core assignment in numerous photo classes. In fine-art photography, one can recall work by Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston, Imogen Cunningham, Bill Brandt, Ernestine Ruben, Robert Mapplethorpe, Herb Ritts, and Robert Davies, to name only a few. But perhaps most closely related to Chase-Daniel's book is John Coplans' *A Body of Work* (1987), which is a compilation of photographic self-portraits exposing an aging, sagging, and far-from-sexy male body.

But where Coplans' critique of the self was brutally honest, even confrontational in its directness, Chase-Daniel's portfolio of fleshy shards remains impersonal. His participants are anonymous, though gender comes into play, depending on what body part is presented.

A second read through *Body* made me question whether Chase-Daniel was the director or choreographer, rather than the photographer, of this work. Once you digest the images and consider the technical aspects of the pictures — the low-grade reproductions, the inconsistent sharpness, and the depiction of some body parts pressed up against a glass support — you begin to wonder how these pictures were produced. Haven't we all at one time or another placed our face, hand, or ass atop the glass of a photocopier to see what it prints out? Methinks this is the key apparatus in Chase-Daniel's photographic endeavor. It's fun to do, but as a means to an end it's shamefully outdated — been there, done that, seen it before. So while some of Chase-Daniel's pictures — from lovely to ugly — are thought-provoking, there's something gimmicky in the mix that seems to compromise the photographer's efforts.

In the end, think of Chase-Daniel's book as a catalog for a show that never took place. Or better yet, think of it as a visual record of what went on behind closed doors at an office party. After perusing *Body*, I guarantee that you'll check yourself out (or parts of yourself) to compare and contrast — either for fun or out of vanity.

— Douglas Fairfield