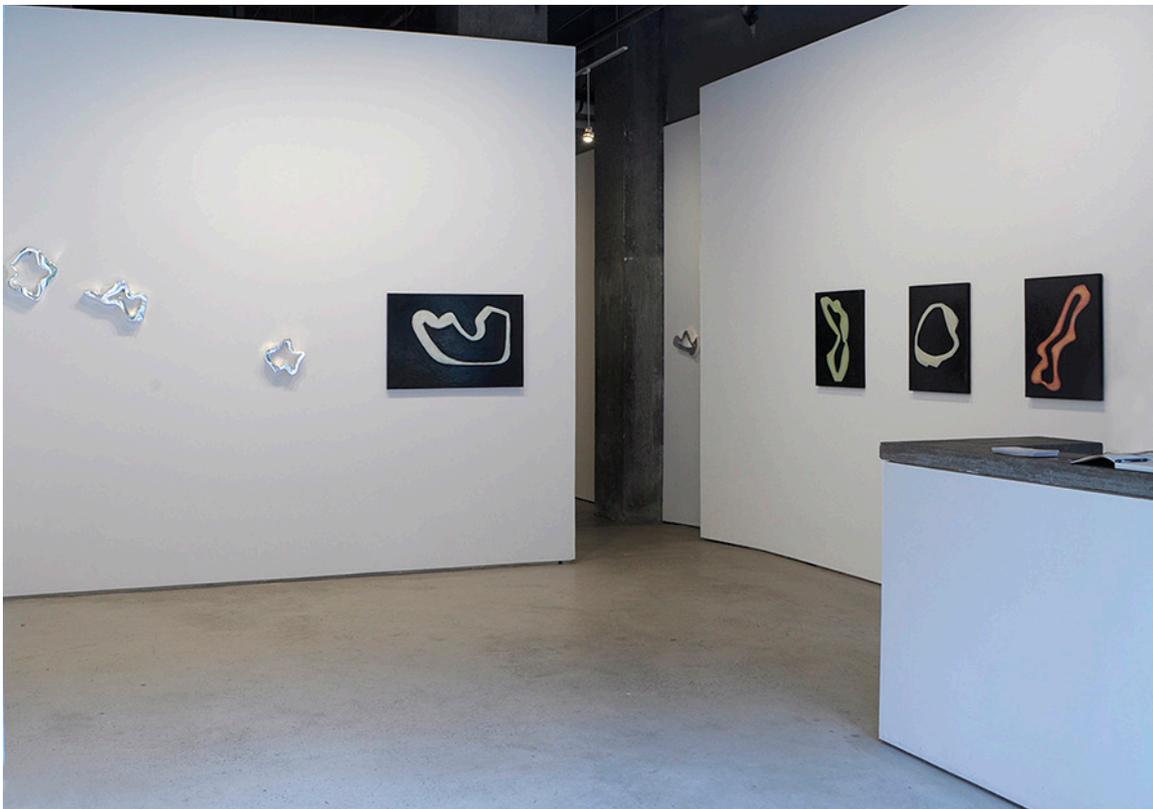


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## Brice Brown: A Thing Attains a Life

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*Brice Brown, A Thing Attains a Life at Margaret Thatcher Projects, Installation view.*

The art and evolution of puppetry has a long historical record dating back to 4,000 years. B. C. In India, it is written about in the *Mahabharata*. In fact, “the Sanskrit terms *sutradhara* (he who holds the strings) and *sutraprota* (puppet), denote the earliest written accounts of puppetry in world literature.” In early ritualistic ceremonies,

puppets or inanimate figures were used as stand-ins or surrogates for humans and/or deities.

Authorities have traced “the roots of European puppetry back to the Greek plays where puppets played to the “common people” in the 5th century BC. While in ancient Greece and ancient Rome clay dolls, and a few of ivory, dated from around 500 BC, were found in children's tombs.” Whether in a religious context or a public, theatrical setting, “it seems certain that from a very early period in man’s development puppet theatre and human theatre grew side by side, each perhaps influencing the other.”

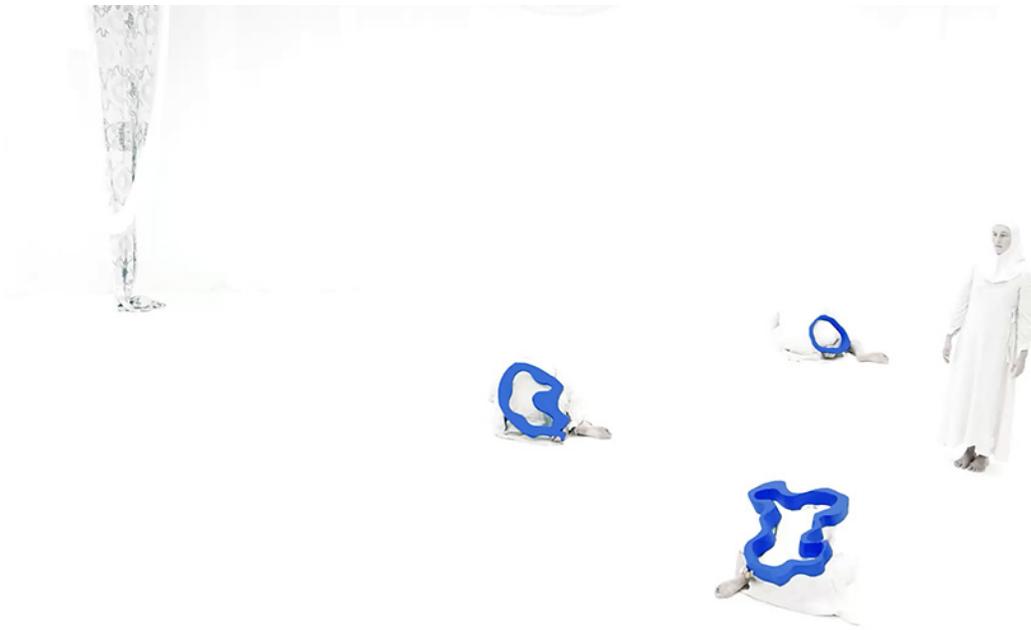
The stories, myths and popular tales with which puppets have entertained people for thousands of years, have incorporated important cultural information into their story-telling narratives, serving to instruct audiences in religious-and-societal laws. As society evolved, the entertainment value and universal appeal of this art form became evident throughout many different historical periods, countries and cultures.

Some of the varieties and styles of puppets include Christmas holidays puppet shows, conveying the spectacle of Christ’s birth; English *Punch and Judy* shows; Asian Shadow puppet theater; sock puppets and many more. Howdy Doody, “the first nationally televised American children's TV program originally titled *The Puppet Playhouse*” which was a very popular kid’s television show from 1947 to 1960. The Muppets, created by Jim Henson in 1955, and highly popularized in 1976, as *The Muppet Show*, has changed the American public’s perception of puppetry.

Artists have also created and used puppets. The Swiss Surrealist artist Kurt Seligmann, made puppets in 1946, for *A Sentimental Playlet*, a surrealist play written by the poet Charles Henry Ford. The *Bread and Puppet Theater*, founded in 1963, by Peter Schumann on New York City’s Lower East Side, is a theater and puppet group originally concerned with political issues in local neighborhoods, and now produces performances on a national and international stage.

The artist Dennis Oppenheim created and used puppets in his exhibitions and films. His puppets were handmade and served as surrogates of himself. By presenting images of himself, Oppenheim was in part, revealing the artist’s process and allowing the audience to experience that process as well.

In his recent exhibition at The Margaret Thatcher gallery, the artist Brice Brown incorporates puppets into his work, which combines painting, sculpture and a video. The first part of the exhibition consists of seven paintings and six sculptures with each work displaying an abstract form the artist identifies as a specific moment or step in a process; the alchemical transformation of matter changing from one shape to another. When I first entered the gallery, the paintings and sculptures reminded me of photographs from Karl Blossfeldt's great photography book, *Art Forms in Nature*, first published in 1928. But, Blossfeldt's photographs present us with nature manifested through organic shapes while Brown's work presents us with mythic shapes.



*Brice Brown, A Quincunx for Bakst, 2020, video still.*

All the paintings in the exhibition are meticulously worked, ranging in size from 12 x 18 inches to 36 x 24 inches. The background surfaces vary in color from green to black to blue, heavily reworked with tints of other colors mixed in. Some of the forms are lightly tinted with a rust-orange, or lime-green or off-white veneer. These tints enhance the contrast between the background and the image, reminding me of Arshile Gorky's abstractions, where the eye is pulled between a painting's foreground and its matrix.

Both the paintings and the sculptures vary in their shapes but have similar contours which play off one another, hanging on the walls. However, I felt the size of the paintings dominated the wall space forcing the smaller sculptures to compete with

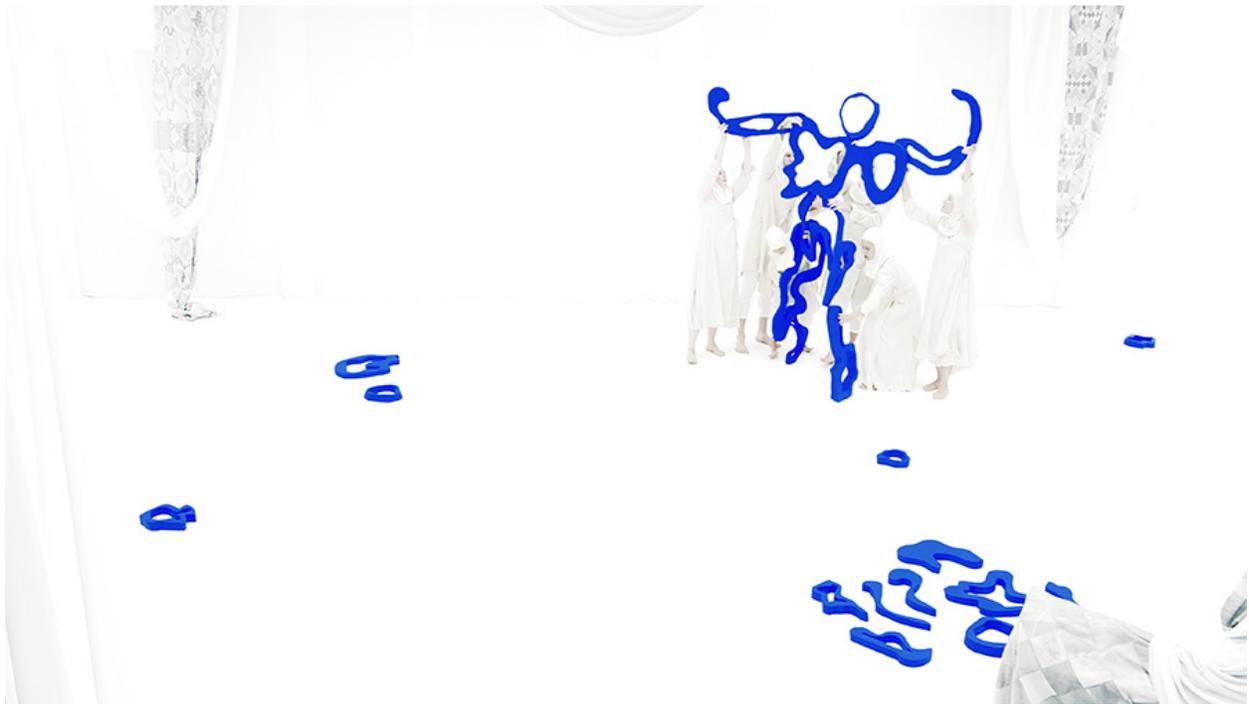
them. Perhaps, if all the sculptures had been hung salon-style, rather than individually or in a group of three, they would have created a stronger, overall effect. All thirteen works are labelled after body parts: head, arm, leg, torso, and even though they do not resemble body parts, grouped together, they present Brown's central theme; the alchemy of our biological-and-spiritual existence, fixed but in flux. Movement in this exhibition is a subtext and it is made apparent in the third section, a video, which broadens the thematic and metaphoric range of the thirteen works on the walls. As Brown explains it, "the paintings in the exhibition are alternate representations of "puppet" forms used in the video, while the sculptures are the actual "puppet" forms seen in the video as blue foam forms, surrogates of DNA material. The sculptures were created from these foam forms by casting them in sterling silver, transforming them from an inexpensive object into a precious one.

The video, titled *A Quincunx for Bakst, 2020*, is an homage to Léon Bakst, a painter, scenery and costume designer, and a member of the Sergei Diaghilev circle and the Ballets Russes. A quincunx is a geometric arrangement of five objects, four at each corner with the fifth one in the center. Brown's video is essentially a visual, interpretive narrative presenting the sculptural forms as animated, biological building blocks, essential to all life forms. They could also be interpreted as steps in our spiritual development moving from the simplest forms to the most complex.

The video is divided into screens; one center screen and four small screens, one in each corner. The opening introduces the six dancers as they slowly walk around the sculptural forms, picking them up, interacting with them and bending them as a kind of preparation for the metamorphosis they are about to undergo. Each form is painted a deep, cobalt blue, creating a stark contrast against the white costumes of the dancers and the white backdrop. The dance consists of four biological phrases, each one personified by a puppet representing a particular organism; Protozoan, Amoeba, Animal, Human. The puppet organism are manipulated and animated by the dancers who form and reform these parts into an evolutionary succession; fish, bird horse, and ultimately a human being. The dancers imbue each figure with a feeling of wonder as we watch the process occurring in front of us.

The forms portrayed by these paintings, sculptures and video are mythic fragments, and essentially timeless, existing as unrealized human parts waiting to be joined

together. As Brown points out, “the action in these four stages of life” is what the video reveals; how the step-by-step creation of a human life is drawn into existence by these biological units. The alchemical changes from one state of matter to another is a mythic dance, beautiful to watch but mysterious and beyond our comprehension. Referring back to the Sanskrit terms *sutradhara* (he who holds the strings), the dancers are defined as an unknowable spiritual force, animating all human-and-animal forms throughout the natural world. Brown does not give a label to this force, he only represents it to us in his art.



*Brice Brown, A Quincunx for Bakst, 2020, video still.*

At 4:44 seconds, the screen goes dark and two of the screens reveal three dancers in silhouette while the center screen shows five dancers in slow, ritualistic movements, entwine the blue foam around their bodies, reconfiguring their shapes. Mysteriously, a small number of forms are left on the ground. The video’s point-of-view suddenly changes from a horizontal perspective to an aerial view, forcing us to look down upon the three dancers as through we were looking through a microscope’s lens as they wander among the blue foam fragments. The longest section of the video continues for almost ten minutes and presents dancers manipulating the puppet forms; pulling them apart and reforming them into small flying birds. The dance culminates as five dancers

work in unison, combining the parts to form a human being, which comes to life in their hands. When the dance is over, the screen goes dark and then the video begins again. In total, the performance is twenty-eight minutes long.

I liked the visual reference to Baskt's style typified by the way the dancers manipulate and contort the blue pieces of foam with their own movements. These thirteen works and video may be considered a small exhibition but their themes embody and present some engaging ideas, open to different interpretations. Brown has created a line of descent from the ancient traditions of puppetry to the present, reminding us of the relevance of myth(s) in our lives in the internet age. **WM**

### Notes

1. Diverse Theories. *Origins of the Puppets*. Written by Henryk Jurkowski (2009). Translation: Alain Cloarec (2009). World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Art. A project of Unima Internationale. 2009-2020.
2. Puppetry – Wikipedia [en.wikipedia.org › wiki › Puppetry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puppetry)
3. Character of Puppet Theatre. Written by George Speaight. Former Editorial Director, George Rainbird Ltd. Author of *The History of the English Puppet Theatre; Punch and Judy: A History*; and others. PUPPERTY. Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. On-line data base. August 2, 2002.