

# ARTFORUM

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## Katsura Funakoshi

VAN DOREN WAXTER

Sculptor Katsura Funakoshi's exhibition at Van Doren Waxter, "A Tower in the Night Forest," collected five humanoid forms fashioned from camphorwood, arranged like mannequins in a showroom. Each sculpture evinced an almost sentient presence that was just as much about absence. At approximately forty-two inches tall and mounted on pedestals that were roughly three feet high, these avatars were/are postlife, vaguely afterlife, and utterly deathless.

Somewhat resemblant of carved religious icons, they conjure the accidental melancholy of wooden millinery heads and seemingly wait for something to happen to them. This passivity is underscored by their partial nudity: The prominent breasts and buttocks of each are almost inconsequential until one sees how lovingly and precisely the erect nipples have been rendered. Imagine Daphne, after eluding Apollo's unwanted affections by turning into a tree, chiseled into a dutiful disrobed wife: flesh as eternally yielding, feminine. As Dr. Frankenstein's fiend demanded of his progenitor, "You must create a female for



Katsura Funakoshi, *The Book of Azure* (detail), 2017, painted camphorwood, marble, tin, stainless steel, glass, 71 1/4 x 18 3/4 x 15 3/4".

shared similar proportions and facial features and, despite their props and variations, were nearly identical: replicants almost in replica.

*Sound of Tree Water*, 2019, is boldly covered in variegated royal-blue brushstrokes on the arms, torso, and neck. The artist's decision to "dress" this figure in pigment was a strange one; the mannequin almost passed for a dazed festivalgoer wearing body paint. Her wooden ponytail, however, was a marvel—its fixed articulation read as an appendage or a prosthesis and deviated from the others' smooth heads, upon which appeared shorter hairstyles that were either carved, stained, or painted on (some heads even seemed to be wearing a wig liner). In a room of its own was *Hands Can Reach the Sea*, 2016, a bust that is partially swaddled in smooth white with cerulean outlines. On the head is a kind of surgical turban and two sets of ears—one animal, one human—as if the figure were mid-metamorphosis. Rather than sitting on a black pedestal like all the other sculptures, this one is perched atop four bowed wooden legs that lend it a spidery effect.

On the gallery walls were rough sketches that resembled the sculptures—some even shared the pout and unknowable stare of the final product. Funakoshi's twilight zone is peopled by beings with marble eyes that gaze into and from the void; their deceptively sensuous lips never part in speech. This illusion of sight and of sound is just that—these are silent phantoms who refuse to look back at us.

—Charity Coleman

me with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being."

The works in this show, it bears mentioning, did not have hands; the omission brought to mind gross anatomy classes in which the hands of a cadaver are discreetly covered up, so as to dehumanize the body for medical students. Similarly, emotional disengagement comes and goes in Funakoshi's figures; without certain defining attributes a body becomes a decoy, like a scarecrow. Take the sci-fi form titled *The Book of Azure*, 2017, who wears a crown made of stainless steel and a heraldic cobalt-glass panel curved over the forehead. *Sphinx, with Whose Eyes?*, 2011, has jellylike glass blobs over its mouth and right eye, and two marking the spots where the frontal lobes would be. It also possesses plush floppy-leather ears—the effect is both folkloric and comical. The figures