

Text by Chloe Stead

To Yield or not to Yield.

Onomatopoeic, to say the word ‘squish’ out loud is to replicate the soft, squelching noise it is used to describe. What these five letters can’t capture, however, is the pure pleasure that can come from placing a squishable object between thumb and forefinger *and* 1, 2, 3...SQUISH.

It should come as a surprise to no one that this form of gratification finds its apex on the internet. There are entire channels on YouTube dedicated to cutting open squishy toys and playing with their insides. In one particularly satisfying video, user “Doctor Squish” heats up a scalpel with a Bunsen burner and then slices a smiley face bouncy ball clean in half—four million views and counting. Slime, too, is a big industry online. Made from a mixture of glue, water, sugar, dye and some form of activating agent, teen influencers can make thousands of dollars by pressing their perfectly manicured fingers into the stuff. Elsewhere, in the deeper recesses of the web, high-heeled shoes squish insects, small animals and men’s testicles.

What’s the trajectory of such an obsession? Do you start by running your fingers over the skin of an overripe avocado and before you know it there’s another human’s head between your thighs? Does it make me perverted, for instance, to want to dip my hand, fingers first, into the creases of one of Jens Kothe’s latex and silicon creations? To run my cheek across its surface; touch it with the tip of my tongue to see if it tastes like salt? According to feminist scholar Alexandra M. Kokoli’s reading of Freud, the uncanny is that which “situates the unknown and partially unknowable in the dark heart of the familiar.” An ordinary bench, but wait a minute—*What’s that?*—an abscess, a skin graft, a partially buried body? We desire what scares us.

It takes a certain set of qualities to be squishy. Many things that are squishy are also viscous, with a thick, sticky consistency that’s somewhere between solid and liquid. Gel, wet mud, partially melted ice, heated resin, silicon, latex... understanding the allure of these materials is to have an idea of the sensuous experience of touching them, of watching—or hearing—them be touched. Inspired by a French tapestry, each section of which is dedicated to a different sense, Christiane Blattmann’s wall hangings and basket works celebrate that pleasure. Natural fibers like jute are pressed into wet pigmented silicone, which, when dry, retains the flexibility and texture of skin. Scratched with wood carving tools, veiny like the leaves of the hands and the fig leaves they depict, these static motives remain, conversely, full of life.

In order for something to be squished it must *yield*—concede, surrender, bend—under pressure. But just how much pressure varies: imagine putting a tomato in the palm of your hand and trying to make a fist. How far can you go before its form is irreversibly altered? The abject, says Julia Kristeva, is “on the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me.” Markedly different from its dictionary descriptions, which characterize the abject as “completely without pride and dignity,” and “(of something bad) experienced or present to the maximum degree,” Kristeva’s definition allows for some pleasure alongside the pain.

The works in Carlotta Bailly-Borg’s series ‘CHITCHAT’ suggest just this possibility of becoming undone. Her humanoid figures bend and stretch their forms to accommodate the bodies of their partners, seemingly without concern for their own

sense of self. Abjection, according to Kristeva, is caused by that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” Signalling the transgressive potential of sex (the cigarette one character smokes gleefully pushes this suggestion far beyond subtext), these paintings give weight to Bataille’s assertion that: “The need to go astray, to be destroyed, is an extremely private, distant, passionate, turbulent truth.”

But imagine, just for a second, that not everything is about sex. As well as helping us find others who share our kinks, the internet is a place to discover names for the multitude of different ways there are for being in the world. Urban Dictionary, whose motto “define your world” speaks for a

Gen Z generation despite being established in 1999, has an entry that describes a “squish” as “a platonic crush, one where you like someone and want to be close to them, but not in a romantic way.” Young people are having less sex, they say, but caring more. A knee can be squeezed, yes, but so can a hand to say: “you’ve got this.” Come on now; let’s hug it out.

An incomplete list of squishy things: plushy toys, marshmallows, flaccid penises, pillows, raw chicken breasts, jelly babies, cherry tomatoes, ear plugs, rubber duckies, Play-Doh, and the leaves of aloe vera plants. Baby’s cheeks are squishy but so too—terrifyingly—are their heads. Birth canals expand and contract as needed, as do intestines, airways, and capillaries, all of which come to mind when looking at the sculptures of Teresa Solar. The colour of (white) skin when rendered by the crayon of a child, the status is of the metal sculptures that make up the installation *Everything is OK* (2018) are “ambiguous,” to use a quality that Kristeva attributes to the abject. They mimic the appearance of pliant organic matter, yet upon close inspection are anything but: seducing and then thwarting the gaze.

According to Freud, an uncanny feeling can occur when something in our lives “seems to support” the animistic beliefs—“omnipotence of thoughts, sorcery and animism”—of our “primitive” forefathers. “Since practically all of us still think as savages do on this topic,” he writes, “it is no matter for surprise that the primitive fear of the dead is still so strong within us and always ready to come to the surface at any opportunity.” The sensation or suspicion that the inanimate might, in fact come alive (or the reverse: that what might be thought of as skin and bones is, in fact, metal and electrical circuits) is chief amongst these beliefs. In Lindsay Lawson’s *Interior Sphinx* (2018) and the photographic series *Still Lives* (2016) movement is suspended, but the uncanny feeling that if you turn, even for a moment, these objects might come alive wins out over our more “rational” selves. But as we’ve learnt, there can be a pleasure in giving over, or giving up, to the “turbulent truth[s]” of our subconscious.