

# ArtReview

Julia Phillips *New Album*

Matthew Marks Gallery, New York 10 September – 17 October

Deploying her characteristic fragmentary visual language, Julia Phillips's most recent sculptural installations investigate the mechanics of human relationships. *Mediator* (all works 2020) consists of two ceramic moulds of the area of the chest around the collarbone, glazed in layered, flesh-coloured tones and mounted at either end of the crossbar on a T-shaped stainless-steel fixture. Atop the vertical support sits a microphone inside a metallic ring, its position between the two ceramic moulds implying a discourse. The title invokes the legal process of mediation as a negotiation between two parties in conflict. Yet in viewing *Mediator*, the viewer is left to guess who mediates between whom and what is in dispute. Maybe it's divorce proceedings, or political debates, or arguments with family members that spin around the microphone like a centrifuge. This equivocal connection between the sculpture and the viewer, where the viewer extrapolates the sculpture's

indeterminate meaning, is critical to Phillips's work, allowing it to function as a machinic representation of a psychological relationship.

At the same time, Phillips's use of fragments of the human form signals the embodied experience of relationships, like the chest pieces in *Mediator* or the clenched knuckles in *Negotiator #1*. These corporeal traces are reminiscent of Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* series (1973–80), in which the outlines or indentation of the body implies its presence. The largest work, *Oppressor with Soul, In Treatment & Suppressor with Spirit, In Treatment*, places such bodily fragments in a symmetrical arrangement; opposing groups of elements feature a mould of shoulders and the base of a skull mounted on a vertical pole, near a hollow mould of shoulders revealing a chest-cavity-like shape that rests on a nearby metal table. Here, Phillips pairs the oppressor and suppressor, where both are in positions of power but are depicted 'in treatment'. One chest cavity, whether the 'Soul'

or 'Spirit', is largely intact, but in its opposite, the ceramic flesh curls with sculpted flames.

This tableau suggests treatments that are perhaps more torturous than therapeutic, recasting the stainless fixtures and white walls of the gallery as a more sinister or surgical environment. In her installations, Phillips dissects power dynamics, leaving only corporeal fragments or cross-sections of oppression, negotiation, mediation or observation. Yet these fleshy icons prevent any reading of the social identities of their implied bodies (racialised, gendered or classed). By avoiding such constructs, Phillips invites the viewer to imagine whose bodies might be enacting these psychological relationships – a symbolic elasticity that permits the works to act as mirrors for the viewer. In contemplating *New Album*, I questioned the ways in which I allow myself to be vulnerable, to conciliate or to exert power in my own interactions. *Rachel Remick*



*Mediator*, 2020, ceramic, stainless steel, granite, nylon hardware, 175 × 285 × 285 cm.  
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