# Mitchell Squire

Inside the

WHITE CUBE

# Practice Wounds
Carmen Winant

Have you ever seen the Rumble in the Jungle? In the eighth round of boxing, Muhammad Ali beat George Foreman, who had already won an Olympic gold medal in the heavyweight division, and was, at the time of the 1974 bout in Zaire, eight years younger and six pounds heavier than his challenging opponent. Ali triumphed by tactically enduring and outlasting his stronger rival, taking repeated, thunderous blows to the forearms and kidneys (never to the head), until Foreman's energy began to sap and wane. Foreman's punches, which had become weak and desperate as his body expired, were further dampened by Ali's whispered taunts: 'They told me you could punch, George!' The crowd allied with the popular underdog, shouting, 'Ali, *bomaye*!' (Ali, kill him!), and once Foreman was down, they poured into the ring to champion their victor.

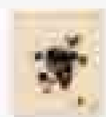
Amidst the chaos and the thrill of the greatest *rope-a-dope* of all time, step away from the wily, lionised victor. Envision instead Foreman's listless posture and unfocussed gaze in the face of his protracted defeat. Such is the moment from which I will begin this essay.

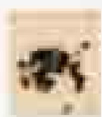
George Foreman isn't interesting or original because he was a tragic favourite who lost it all when everyone was watching, but rather for his desperate aspiration in the face of manifest fatigue; for his conspicuous self-*undoing* upon stumbling into Ali's sidelong trap ('Foreman's falling apart!' one announcer cried). As with this liminal moment in the Rumble – a moment at the threshold of destabilisation – Mitchell Squire's work demonstrates both the destructive and productive potential of the volatile form, while refusing the reductive dialectic of victory and defeat.

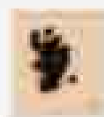
By appropriating, intervening with, and assembling scavenged material into deliberate sculptural form, Squire reassembles new bodies – *fallen apart bodies* – through cast-off limbs. In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart described the grotesque body as possessing a keen 'knowledge of itself, a knowledge of pieces and parts, of dissociated limbs and an absent center', an idea that serves Squire's practice well. [1] To encounter his work is to encounter the precariousness and potential of one's own body, and to be relocated into a plane of unrealised desire. It is to witness a Chimera.

Squire's relationship to Foreman, and to boxing, exceeds inference; his sculptural assemblage *The Intoxication of George Foreman* (2009) reconstructs the fatigued body of the boxer-turned-spokesman, though not only within the bounds of that historic fight. [2] As with all of Squire's work, *The Intoxication* is a loaded work of a few, strategically appropriated components: a thick rope is draped down the length of an upright Acme-Lite tripod, coiling upon reaching the floor. At the highest point of the tripod – where the camera head would be mounted – is a small, hand-blown glass bulb, swathed in the rope's undone and decorated ends. The work's only direct reference to the sport takes the form of white boxing gloves, which hang low around the tripod's base. The assemblage stands as tall as a five-year-old child (or perhaps, a boxer on his knees) and seems precarious enough to fall over if brushed by a passing hip.[3] Through the interaction of nearly functional objects, Squire evokes the tissue of a hulking, limp body, affected by years of expectant performance and concussive injury. As with all of his work, this piece probes the nearness of brute strength and fragility, of desire and submission, of balance and instability. Consider this: Foreman inadvertently collapsed each of these conditions on that sweltering Kinshasa night.

As for Foreman's 'intoxication', it holds me captive; who, in this exchange, is the self-destructive butt of the joke? Is it Foreman, who, tackily decorated, grips too tightly onto the light of his own dimming fame? Or, is it we ('Ali, *bomaye*!') who are made drunk and savage in the witnessing of his wild brutishness and eventual public razing? [4] Squire wants it both ways: neither audience member nor







performer is free from inflating the joys and terrors of violence and pleasure. *The Intoxication of George Foreman* makes its viewers complicit in its own incompatible fictions.

Squire treads similar thematic and structural ground in *The Annunciation of Johnny (Jack) Trice* (2011), in which he both debunks and mythologizes heroism through reconstructed artefact. Jack Trice is a lesser-known figure than Foreman, and no doubt a more tragic one. The son of a former slave and Buffalo Soldier, Trice was the first African American athlete to compete for Iowa State University in Ames, where Squire himself currently lives and teaches. Trice died at twenty-one, after a particularly violent football game during which he was repeatedly trounced by opposing white players. When his body was being groomed for burial, a pre-game note that Trice wrote to himself was discovered in his breast pocket. It read, in part, 'The honor of my race, family & self is at stake. Everyone is expecting me to do big things [...] fight low, with your eyes open.'

Again, Squire resists the tendency to flatten Trice's aspiration, and subsequent victimhood, into facile allegory. Rather, *The Annunciation* accomplishes something far more disconcerting and less axiomatic in its strategies. The work consists of knee-length appropriated football pants sitting upright in a corner of the gallery floor, with 'FIGHT LO' embroidered in chenille block letters along their inner waist. A glowing neon ring rests tethered to the groin area. The live electrical cable, running through a pant leg, is coated in white, athletic tape that grows tumorous and abnormal as it reaches for the far-off socket. Unlike *The Intoxication of George Foreman*, the material of Trice's body itself exists here in absentia, as if belonging to an immortal, rather than terrestrial, realm. The word 'annunciation' is used in the New Testament to signify reincarnation as well as proclamation, a double meaning that allows a specific reading of this work: beyond the qualities of transcendence, its material remnants allude to divine transubstantiation.

For some, the work may function as a shrine to Trice's fearlessness, or exaggerated virility. For me, *The Annunciation of Johnny (Jack) Trice* is a symbol of mortal

exhaustion in the face of confrontational violence and profound vulnerability. Collapsed and earthbound, the work challenges the medieval convention that the body should be depicted upright, and viewed from head to foot. Rather, as Susan Stewart writes, such work 'presents a jumbling of this order, a dismantling and re-presentation of the body according to criteria of production rather than verticality'.[5] Imagine Trice's lack of balance upon being hit repeatedly, his eventual succumbing to gravity and the distinct horizontality of Squire's subsequent work. [6] As with the slumped *Intoxication*, this work reminds us that there is a distinct erectness of triumph (and survival) that involves, above all, the expectation of *staying on one's feet.*

The visual centre of the brain is in back of the head. In Squire's *Untitled 1-4 (bulk law enforcement targets shot through)* (2004)*,* the artist queries the inherently violent nature of *opening up* and entering other bodies.[7] As in *The Intoxication*, Squire does so by confusing the surface of the endoskeleton and exoskeleton; as in *The Annunciation*, he does so through the marked absence of the body itself. To this end, Squire has been profoundly affected by the work of Elaine Scarry – a telling influence that I'll consider shortly – a scholar who wrote in depth about the sentient body and its complex relationship to production. In her seminal 1985 book, *The Body in Pain*, Scarry investigated the relationship between the artist and their pregnant object, writing: 'The human being has an outside surface and an inside surface, and creating may be expressed as a reversing of these two bodily linings'.[8]

Around 1997, Squire discovered four discarded targets at an undisclosed Iowa State Patrol Post. In a gesture that proclaims both refusal and vulnerability, some seven years after the acquisition, he shifted the implication – in fact, the very tactile vocabulary – of the layered, off-white targets by turning them around, by facing their backs toward us. Though the printed 'target figure' is no longer visible, the density, force, and sting of the ammunition form head and torso shapes in the negative space create a series of imaginary bodies that have at once been materialised and annihilated through the active removal of their fibrous tissue. As with all of Squire's work – another example would be *The Rape of Tawana Brawley* (2011),

which alludes to the bodily residue of a *potential* crime – the viewer assumes the role of the perpetrator and of the casualty (oddly enough, the bullet holes run in both directions). In *Untitled (*[*...*] *targets shot through)*, it's a status made all the more complicated by the fact that these paper wounds are evidence inflicted on a 'practice' body, of an action made in training, of a projected violence still yet to occur. It is at once the proof and the prediction.

Formal logic is deeply bound up in Squire's training as an architect, a fact that I have withheld from the reader until now with the hopes that it would not come as a surprise. Whether through re-animation of disparate parts, an anti-classical horizontalizing of form, or a mediation of bodies through their deliberate absence, Squire's sculptural forms both draw from, and actively defy, the standards of engineering and structural integrity. Squire might be seen to deride the rules of architecture, were it not for the fact that he has so much respect for them. In this sense, his art practice is one of the post-architect, dedicated to creating form while refusing its capacity for 'legitimate' functionality.

One of the classes that Squire regularly teaches architectural students at the Iowa State University revolves around the work of Elaine Scarry, whose aforementioned influence can be traced within his own practice. Scarry contends that the artefact – or the materialised object, as she often refers to it – is an ontological conflation that ultimately 'lacks sentient awareness', or, the essential properties of *aliveness*.[9] As in *The Intoxication*, *Annunciation*, and *Untitled (*[*...*] *targets shot through)*, Squire's own work fundamentally struggles with and against this contention. While his sculptural assemblages cannot escape their status in relationship to the human body, brimming as they are with the desire of their own making, they may exist only as *renditions* of phenomenological experience. Squire's work is in fact born from this inherent problematizing – this struggle between inert objecthood and compassionate subjecthood – and therein lays the fruit of its toil. Squire, an artist deeply sensitive to the possibilities and limitations of production and breakdown, would have it no other way.

## Endnotes

1 — Stewart, Susan, *On Longing: Narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1984), p.105. I understand Squire's forms here as grotesque in the sense that they are misshapen and fantastical forms which induce a conditional empathy.

2 — Squire has made several videos of himself in the role of a boxer, which contribute to the overall reading of his work as an investigation of the black, male body. Above all other concerns, however, they appear to me as studies in libidinous endurance and exhaustion.

3 — It's worth noting that many of Squire's pieces are *just* undersized, occupying a space between child and adult proportions; both *My Daddy Left Me Plenty but I Ain't Got Nothin' New* (2009) and *I Do Love America* (2012), for instance, use miniature ironing boards and children's shoes as elements in their production. The result is both fetishistic and nostalgic. Stewart writes: 'The miniature [...] presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulatable, version of experience [...]'; Stewart, *op. cit.*, p.69. Indeed, relative to the human body, such works feel arrested in time, and the affect is disquieting.

4 — In her influential text *On Boxing*, Joyce Carol Oates considered this exact phenomenon, concluding that 'the instinct to watch others fight and kill is evidently inborn. When the boxing fan shouts, "Kill him! Kill him!" he is betraying no peculiar individual pathology or quirk but asserting his common humanity [...]'; in *On Boxing* (Doubleday, New York 1987), p.42. Michel Foucault argued more generally from the opposite pole, warning against the social dangers of the 'cruel pleasure taken in punishing'; in *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison* (Gallimard, Paris 1975), p.73.

5 — Stewart, *op. cit.*, p.10

6 — Norman Mailer wrote of the liminal moment in which Foreman began to teeter in his 1975 book *The Fight*: 'Vertigo took George Foreman and revolved him [...] his mind was held with magnets high as his championship body was seeking the ground'; in *The Fight* (Vintage International, New York 1997), p.208.

7 — It is impossible to avoid the coital implications of entering other bodies through their orifices, organic or not. Jacques Lacan often described openings in the body as tears, gaps or cuts; for him, any aperture in the body's surface – lips, anus, tip of the penis – was a potentially erotogenic zone. See Lacan, Jacques, *Ecrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (W.W. Norton & Co., New York 1977).

8 — Scarry, Elaine, *The Body in Pain: The making and unmaking of the world* (Oxford University Press, New York 1985), p.284

9 — *Ibid.*, p.294

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Carmen Winant is an artist and arts writer living in Brooklyn, New York. She is a regular contributor to *Frieze*, *X-TRA* journal, *Aperture Magazine*, *Dossier Journal* and Artforum.com. She is also an editor of *The Highlights* journal.

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White Cube
144–152 Bermondsey Street
London SE1 3TQ

+44 (0)20 7930 5373
whitecube.com