

MONICA MAJOLI

Born 1963, Los Angeles, California; lives in Los Angeles, California

Monica Majoli's figurative paintings from the early 1990s to the present have depicted scenes of sexual fetishism—painstakingly actuated self-portraits with dildos or claustrophobically populated representations of S&M encounters between men. But she focuses less on the transcription of physical experience than on the suggestion of its most obdurate, if ineffable, psychological aspects and ramifications. Investigating themes and rituals of identity, intimacy, and mortality, Majoli's work is both a site for catharsis and an admission of its irresolution. A painting such as *Untitled* (1990), a small panel showing a slice of a woman's scarred pelvis, paradoxically implies intractable psychic distance that is unmitigated by corporeal proximity.

With the technical precision of a Northern Renaissance master, Majoli, in her earlier works, lavished attention on decidedly nonorthodox, sexually explicit scenes that are undeniably contemporary yet nonetheless betray a multitude of historical and religious references. These range from the invocation of Bernini's ecstatic Saint Teresa and David's beatific *Death of Marat* in her *Untitled* (1990) to more generalized tropes of masochistic Christian iconography, such as the martyrdom of the saints.

In her more recent series, Majoli has traded the factureless exactitude of oil paint for the runny swells of watercolor and gouache. She has also forsaken self-portraiture and depictions of friends in favor of more universal forms, while at the same time abandoning the diminutive scale of the earlier oils for a larger format. In her ongoing *Rubbermen* series, begun in 1999, Majoli loosely renders men donning multilayered rubber fetish suits. These garments function as a kind of second skin, a prosthesis that both envelops and redoubles the contours of the bodies they contain, implying at once protection and suffocation, restriction and pleasurable abandon. Because the rubbermen's faces and the details of their physiognomy are occluded through their encasement, their forms, often suspended and hanging from trees, become anonymous sites of identification and disavowal. Just what is our relation to them? Their isolated vulnerability and muffled presence imply and even mirror our own, while the rubber skin stresses and performs the impossibility of seeing, literally and metaphorically, inside even those who are closest to us.

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Hanging Rubberman #3, 2004. Watercolor and gouache on paper, 51 x 96 in. (129.5 x 243.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection