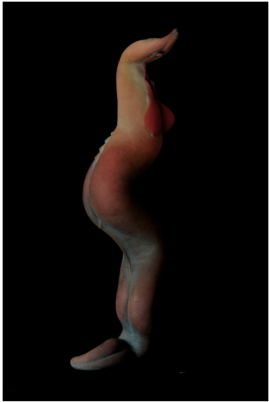


## Searching for Ourselves Amid the Monstrous

by Becca Rothfeld on February 18, 2015



"Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure, and we are so awed because it serenely disdains to annihilate us," begins Rainer Maria Rilke's breathtaking collection of elegies, *Duino Elegies*. For Rilke, beauty is beyond us, located at the point at which our usual categorizations begin to break down. Beautiful Beast, a group sculpture show that opened at the New York Academy of Art last week, is situated at precisely this point, at the intersection of the monstrous and sublime.

Many of the pieces in Beautiful Beast probe the boundaries of humanity: they present us with fragmented or deformed bodies in which the faintest traces of the human form are

barely but distinctly detectable, and we are left to determine their status as either man or monster. In Judy Fox's "Worms" sculptures, two of which are on view here, fat, sluggish contorted figures squirm like worms but suggest the female body as we make out the vaguest outlines of vaginal openings. The worms are desire personified, writhing and animal, hideous but fascinating. Although they aren't obviously humanoid, there's something human about them.



Lesley Dill, "Dress of Opening and Close of Being" (2008), steel, metal foil, organza, thread, wire

Lesley Dill's "Dress of Opening and Close of Being" and Monica Cook's "Snowsuit" invert this relation: they're human figures but with their humanity carved out. "Dress of Opening and Close of Being," perhaps the most striking piece in the exhibition, is an exquisite dress constructed of wire and metal foil skeletons in various shades of silver and black. The sculpture is armless, and there's an enormous funnel where a head would normally be. The work is fragile, delicate, and skeletal, gesturing at a human form and then thwarting our expectations. It suggests a filling but only offers up emptiness.



Monica Cook, "Snowsuit" (2015), wax, pigment, fur coats, aqua-resin, fiberglass (all images courtesy New York Academy of Art)

Monica Cook's unsettling "Snowsuit" is even more explicit in its simultaneous invocation and rejection of the human figure. The piece is a three-dimensional suit crouched on the floor, inhabited only by arms and legs. From behind, the piece looks like a headless body, but from the front it unzips to reveal a dark cavity where a chest would normally be. "Snowsuit" reminds us that the humanity of any object is in part a projection on our part: the viewer's willingness to complete an artwork she cannot fully perceive, to invest a visible form with an imaginary perspective.