

Text by Amrita Dhallu

PALOMA PROUDFOOT

# LAY FIGURE



Paloma Proudfoot's practice brings together sculpture, performance and sound within unsettling installations that explore the porosity of bodies in space. The artist subtly plays with the perceived fragility of the ceramic medium, augmenting this within other textural dimensions of her work, in order to create an experience that disorients and unnerves. Each frieze luxuriates in antagonistic ambiguity, pitching contrasting energies against one another. From the comically overblown to the microscopic detail, the tender to the sinister, the individual to the collective. This exploration of dualities reiterates the power dynamics and vulnerabilities that can shift between bodies.

Proudfoot's bank of references is ever-evolving. In the last few years, she has been reflecting on the institutional violences carried out on women's physical and mental health. This has seen the artist investigate the medical theories of 19th century neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. Charcot, the mentor of celebrated psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud and Gilles de la Tourette, was known for leading acoustic medical trials on women who were inflicted with 'hysteria'<sup>1</sup>.

The tuning fork is a key sculptural and sonic motif within Proudfoot's work. The presence of this instrument was initially associated with the acoustic stimuli that Charcot employed to provoke catalepsy in his patients. Such experiments would see women's bodies become pliable and malleable like lifeless mannequins, or "symbols of compliance"<sup>2</sup> that accepted or submitted to any position that they were placed into. As researcher Carmel Raz asserts, "Charcot's acoustic experiments on hysterical patients appear to represent a further iteration of the trope of nervous sounds, now projected onto the tuning fork"<sup>3</sup>.

In *Human Tuning*, the owner of the hand is ambiguous; disembodied hands holding tuning instruments in Proudfoot's installations may represent "the trope of nervous sounds". This is particularly heightened here, due to the disproportionate scale between the hand and the ear. Who is in control of the tuning? What are they tuning to? This skewing of scale reiterates the asymmetry of power that is the connective tissue within all of Proudfoot's installations.

The exhibition is accompanied by a performance, made in collaboration with Aniela Piasecka and composer Ailie Ormston. Ormston's oscillating sound piece *Lay Figure* begins with a resounding clang of the tuning fork. Gradually distorted echoes and percussive drilling enter in, as the soundscape begins to swell. We tune in. We tune out. Throughout the performance, we are introduced to the physical and recorded sounds of the moving ceramic mannequin, its creaking joints are held together with bungee cords, amplifying the sense of intense strain. The pace of the piece is drawn out, each texture, each tone lengthened to its limit. To experience this work fully, we must become active listeners. This level of attentiveness invokes composer Pauline Oliveros's thesis on *Deep Listening*, where listening becomes a conscious, multi-faceted act that heightens our spatialised awareness to the material world of which we are a part. Oliveros also repositions the deliberate act of listening as a way to deepen connection to one another:

**Listening involves a reciprocity of energy flow;  
exchange of energy; sympathetic vibration: tuning into the web  
of mutually supportive interconnected thoughts, feelings, dreams,  
vital forces comprising our lives; empathy;  
the basis for compassion and love.<sup>4</sup>**

As a recurring tactic, the artist borrows certain compositions or structures seen in archival imagery which depict medical technicians handling and producing body casts for female patients. While these references remain connected to Proudfoot's work, especially the act of deconstructing and rebuilding the body's exterior, she has initiated a new set of 'correspondences'<sup>5</sup>, instigating new narratives. In this body of work, we see ceramic friezes *Skin Poem (II)* and *A Casting From Life* reposition gentle compassion and kinship as forces that rebuild the body.

I am reminded of Audre Lorde's writings on the erotic – this replenishing force becomes critical to each central figure's return to their whole selves, a "transformative potential", in the artist's words. Lorde defines this as "a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings [...] an internal sense of satisfaction"<sup>6</sup>. Each collective scene, which is populated by figures who appear to be in friendship with one another, perhaps speaks to Lorde's assertion that the erotic can be an empowering shared experience, "[...] providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person"<sup>7</sup>.

While it is difficult to discern the emotional experience shared between the figures, as their countenances appear ambiguous, what the composition does underpin is a sense of communing, particularly through the sense of touch. According to Lorde, the erotic "forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference"<sup>8</sup>. Proudfoot's communal pieces encourage us to become more attune with one another. She asserts that her work conveys "how our relationships with our bodies are intensely personal, functioning as carriers of individual experience, [...] our bodies rely on connection to one another"<sup>9</sup>.

When we arrive at the solitary portrait *Listening Forward*, there is no ambiguity around who possesses control. We no longer see a fragmented body. Instead, a fully formed figure looks directly at the audience member with defiance, her own hand firmly wrapped round the tuning fork. We are presented with a character who is in tune with her wholeness. She has a composure and self-possession that embraces Lorde's edict:

**[i]n touch with the erotic, I become less willing  
to accept powerlessness, or those other supply states  
of being which are not native to me,  
such as resignation,  
despair,  
self-effacement,  
depression,  
self-denial<sup>10</sup>.**



---

**Amrita Dhallu is a curator and researcher based in London. She provides support structures for emerging British artists through commissioning, editorial projects, creating artistic networks, and intergenerational learning spaces. She is always thinking about diasporic feminist practice and the ways in which it reveals the systems of compliance and complicity within the British cultural institutional space. To counter this and encourage more balance in her life, she is becoming an amateur birdwatcher and fungi enthusiast.**

1. Carmel Raz, *Of Sound Minds and Tuning Forks: Neuroscience's Vibratory Histories*, 2023 <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/of-sound-minds-and-tuning-forks-neurosciences-vibratory-histories/>. Accessed 18 November 2024.
2. Paloma Proudfoot presents: The Mannequins Reply, 2024 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I\\_17CbqOQco](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_17CbqOQco). Accessed 18 November 2024.
3. Raz, 2023
4. Pauline Oliveros, 'Quantum Listening: From Practice to Theory (to Practice Practice)', in *Quantum Listening*, Ignota Books, London 2022, p. 57.
5. Artist in conversation with writer in October 2024
6. Audre Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic', in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, Silver Press, London 2017, p.23.
7. Lorde, p.26.
8. Lorde, p.26.
9. Bold Tendencies 2022, Q & A with Paloma Proudfoot, <https://boldtendencies.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2022-Paloma-Proudfoot-QA.pdf>, 2022. (Accessed: 18 November 2024).
10. Lorde, p.28.