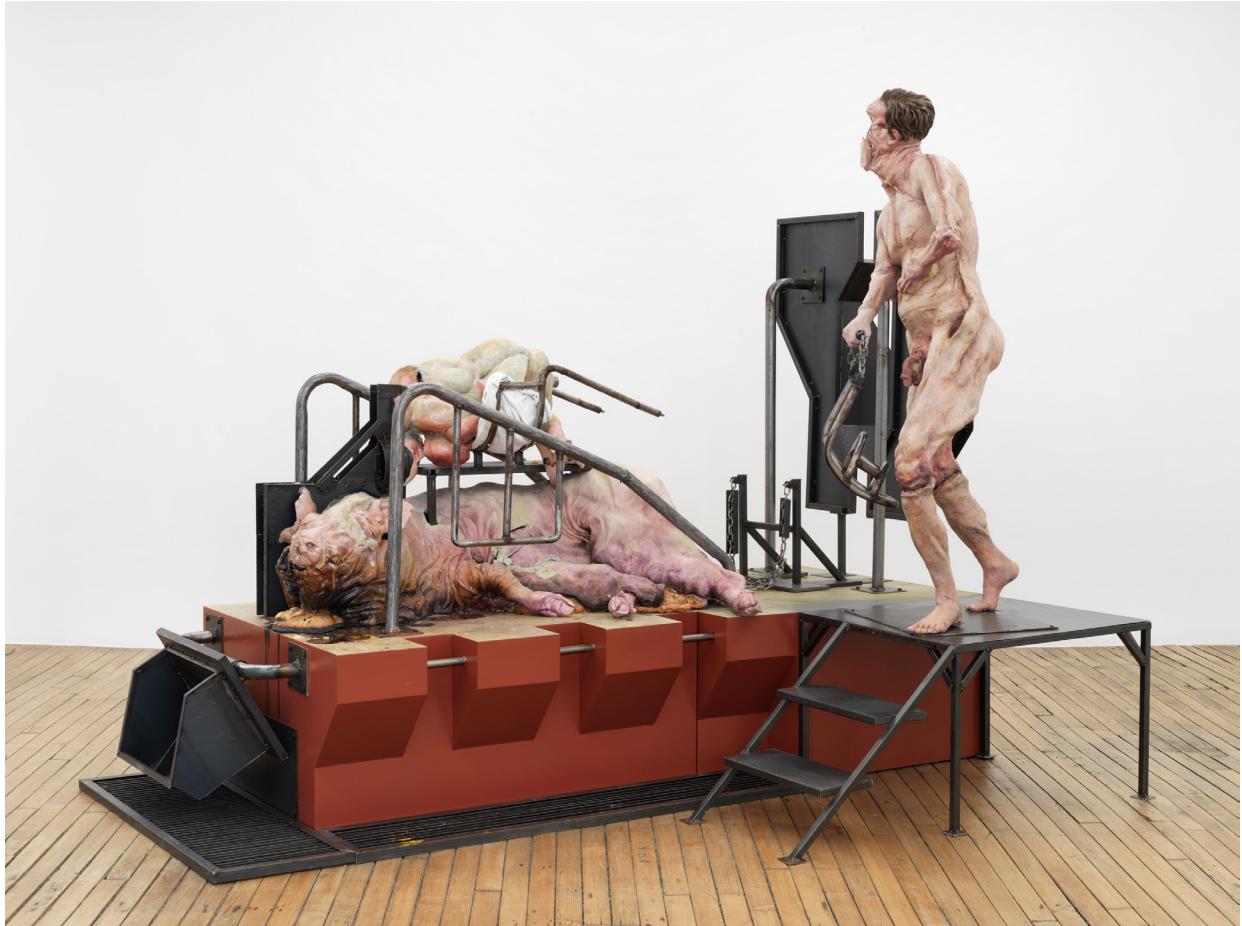


ARTFORUM

Lionel Maunz

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By Jenny Wu



Lionel Maunz, *The Pig*, 2025, epoxy resin, fiberglass, polymer-modified gypsum, urethane resin, epoxy clay, epoxy paste, plaster, burlap, steel, wood, acrylic paint, latex paint, 7' 11 3/4" × 11' 3" × 7' 2 3/4". Photo: Dario Lasagni.

In *The Performance* (all works 2025), one of three large-scale sculptures in Lionel Maunz's "Obedience," his seventh solo exhibition here, a stagelike platform displayed a humanoid male made from polymer-modified gypsum, fiberglass, urethane resin and epoxy clay. He sits on the edge of a thin, stained mattress topped with medical restraints that appear to have been cast off in a state of frenzied contempt. Next to him is another metallic-skinned figure, disemboweled, who lies in a shallow, rectangular pit built into the stand. This piece could have been the Brooklyn-based artist's bizarre take on the Lamentation of Christ, set in a twentieth-century psych ward. But in a statement accompanying the show—which was billed as an indictment of the institutions of art, psychiatry, and religion—Maunz wrote that the piece "started with [the idea of] two men wrestling." He also had in mind Austrian artist and sex criminal Otto

Muehl's early *Aktions*, in which performers were often covered in food, paint, piss, and shit as though they were being prepared for a ritual sacrifice. Like Maunz's other brazenly visceral sculptures, *The Performance* showed no overt signs of moral handwringing or redemptive proselytizing on the part of its creator.

Upon closer inspection, however, one noticed details that complicated the work's violent tenor—for instance, the body of the seated wrestler, ostensibly the winner of the scuffle, was not only slumped over but severed at the waist. Moreover, he'd swaddled himself and buried his face in his own soiled bedsheets, as if to avoid the sight of his defeated opponent, experiencing a Pyrrhic victory, steeped in regret. In the opposite corner of the gallery, *A Model for a Furnace and a Model for an Adult* further underscored the sense of unfettered brutality permeating the exhibition. This sculpture, which resembled an incinerator, housed its own corpse. A grille placed at eye level granted one a view of ashen feet, knobby legs, and a distended abdomen that called to mind the unsettlingly rendered subject of Andrea Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, ca. 1483. In between these works stood *The Pig*, the centerpiece of the show. Elevated on a rust-colored rostrum, it featured a naked, faceless executioner standing over a cadaver whose hands and feet were pierced by metal pipes (another reference to Christ, by way, perhaps, of Robert Gober) held aloft by steel bars over the body of an enormous battered sow. Behind the platform lay a pile of dead piglets, which seemed to have fallen from a rectangular aperture carved into their mother's belly.

Seen from the front, *The Pig* struck me as a picture of irredeemable sadism. From behind, though, it hearkened back to a piece from the Fiftieth Venice Biennale: Australian artist Patricia Piccinini's *The Young Family*, 2002, a fiberglass-and-silicone sculpture featuring a wrinkly, five-foot-long human/sow hybrid with two of her three anthropomorphic offspring suckling away on her teats. Read against Piccinini's work, *The Pig* seemed poised as a rejoinder to the scientific optimism of the early aughts—in an essay on *The Young Family*, Piccinini wrote, "I'm not pessimistic about developments in biotechnology. . . . I imagine this creature to be bred for organ transplants." A way to collapse the distance between humans and other life-forms is to try and make them one that, among other things, undermines our position atop the food chain, potentially forcing us to become less narcissistic and more sensitive to the needs of other sentient beings occupying a planet that we've been actively destroying for centuries. Maunz might have ventured to crystalize in sculpture what the Viennese Actionists tried to express in performance—the destructive undercurrents that had been suppressed by the etiquette of postwar bourgeois society—but what he accomplished was far more sci-fi than psychoanalytic. If Piccinini's uncanny family represented a kind of ambivalent utopia, then Maunz's human stand-ins, with their open wounds and base instincts for survival, portrayed the promise of a dystopian future born out of pure self-interest.

Beneath its provocations, "Obedience" exuded an eerie calm. Maunz's sculptures didn't so much depict power—which, per Michel Foucault's observations, can only exist in the face of resistance—as capture the aftermath of another's total subjugation (and, perhaps, a victor's guilt). Oddly enough, amid Maunz's demystified destruction, one was able to come to the realization that there is nothing profound or transcendent about the impulse to violence. By spilling its guts, the show encouraged viewers to seek rapture elsewhere.