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This Boulder art exhibit is beautiful and ugly all at once

BMoCA's "Grossly Affectionate" exhibition challenges the way we see and talk about our bodies

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There are a lot of weird creatures lurking in the exhibition "Grossly Affectionate" now at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, and it is hard to tell exactly what they are.

Some are cushy, if not quite cuddly, like the plush animal-like objects Jennifer Pettus makes out of various recycled fabrics and a few unexpected odds and ends, like human hair, napkin rings and faux fur.

Some are downright difficult to stomach, like Cristobal Cea's "The Extended Thing," an installation that pairs three-dimensional sculptures of internal body organs with digital prints of what appear to be more body organs — intestines,



And some are just plain out of this world, like the installation by the artist who goes by the name Mr. Hanimal, which features three sculptural beings, each with the size and bearing of a small dog, that appear to have thumbs for heads and to use fingers as feet.

Nothing in this show is easy to describe in words or categorize in the usual way we talk about humans, animals and other souls that inhabit physical bodies, and that is the goal of "Grossly Affectionate." It wants to challenge us to rethink our perceptions of the living form, refusing to allow easy descriptors like race, gender, flora, fauna, earthling, alien, beautiful, ugly or anything else.



Jennifer Pettus' "Pussyfotted" at BMoCA has a humorous edge. It's made from tulle, satin, human hair and more. (Daniel Tseng, Special to The Denver Post)

The timing is just right, of course. We are living in an age of trans-human awareness, where races mix, genders blur and DNA can be altered. It's a fabulous moment in history where people and things that did not formerly fit in are finally being recognized and — slowly to some, too-rapidly to others — accepted.

As jarring and unattractive as the exhibit can be, "Grossly Affectionate" recognizes the beauty in all of this, but also the challenges it presents for how we understand and communicate with each other. These are confusing times for everybody, and anyone who struggles to avoid using incorrect pronouns or misgendering their neighbors or talking too-clumsily about ethnicity, disabilities, medical conditions, sexuality, age or other markers fully understands the situation.

Rather than being confrontational, though, this show offers a place to relax, even to laugh and acknowledge we are all morphing together.

And it succeeds because the work is fully committed. The images and creatures the seven artists present have an irresistible sincerity to them, a realness that begs you to consider their essence and to appreciate it, no matter how difficult they can be to figure out.

Pettus' three-dimensional objects are good examples. As you first encounter them they come off like the kind of squishy things you want to touch and hold — satiny, quilted cushions or playthings that belong in domestic settings.

But Pettus, who uses mostly recycled textiles that she finds at garage sales, gives them their own individual agency, and quirkiness, and moves them firmly out of the typical comfort zones. She uses pretty colors and patterns but mixes them in awkward ways. She gives them humanoid or doll-like forms, but holds back on symmetry so it can be difficult to put the picture together. They seem to have one arm or leg, and awkward lumps and head shapes, and clawed feet. The titles she gives them confuse their biographies even more. One is called "Flotsam," another is "Pussyfooted."

Artist Kate Casanova indulges in similar contrasts, though she seems to specialize in mixing different densities of materials. She combines hard and soft things, solids and fluids, stiff plastic and pliable mesh.

Her piece "No-show Blister Breath" evokes a monster from a low-budget sci-if movie with plastic, blister-pack bubbles all over its surface that make it look like it has multiple eyes. She sets it up on two concrete blocks that stand in as legs.

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The contrasts in her work serve as metaphors for the contrasts in all beings, especially humans. Made of skin, bone, blood and organs, are we hard or soft, wet or dry, delicate or durable? Or, as this show posits, grotesque or lovable?

"Grossly Affectionate continues through Sept. 5 at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, 1750 13th St., Boulder. Info: 303-443-2122 or [bmoca.org](https://www.bmoca.org).

Like Pettus' offerings, Casanova's works are not hideous, just unique and they ask us to recognize the uniqueness of all beings.

The other artists have their own ways of expressing this idea. Estevan Ruiz' "Cicatriz" is a collage of 18 close-up, black-and-white photographs of those round scars many people have from inoculations meant to prevent smallpox. They can be hideous, yet we know these crater-like marks save lives. Each has its own shape, but they document a common frailty and ability to persevere that cuts across social categories.

The same goes for Cea's disembodied organs, and another piece, by Sam Grabowska, which resembles oversized and exposed ribs. The works come off as raw, but there is something honest about them. We hide these things because they repulse us, but better to see them and to understand that this is the stuff we are made of, and to use them to highlight the fact that these internal elements supersede notions of gender, race and even species.

Pamela Meadows, who curated the show, was wise to balance that seriousness with some more whimsical work, including Daisy May Collingridge's series of photos featuring people wearing quirky, pillowy costumes that confuse the inside of our bodies with the outside. Her fleshy clothes look like anatomical drawings come to life, and it is impossible to discern if the people wearing them are male or female, old or young. They simply ask us to consider how bodies move and relate to each other.

And then there are those quadri-pedal thumbs — Mr. Hanimal's walking hands, which are rendered in yellow, blue and pink. They are the ultimate "Grossly Affectionate" objects, a little creepy, for sure, but in an odd way, relatable and very human. As humans, we learned to walk together on our evolutionary journey to the top of the food chain and those opposable digits are the things that set us apart from almost every other living thing on the planet

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