

Community or Mushroom Tea: A Review of Serena JV Elston at Andrew Rafacz Gallery

BY GABRIEL CHALFIN-PINEY-GONZÁLEZ | AUGUST 5, 2025



Serena JV Elston, installation view of "Lingering Bodies," 2025, at Andrew Rafacz/Photo: Andrew Rafacz

On a Friday evening at Andrew Rafacz gallery, pungent smells emanated from the foyer. Throughout the night, the mushrooms and oils of the artist's birthing body saturated my clothes, mouth and skin. Upon entering, "Immortal Bath," a sculpture consisting of a muddy-bloody pool of reishi mushroom tea oxidized bronze casts of mushrooms, a brilliant turquoise glimmers within the muck. As I looked at the pool, I stood in between towering and reposed "Caryatid I" and "II," a duo of humanoid-shaped sculptures made entirely of living Reishi mushrooms; named after the sculpted women's bodies who quite literally hold up and provide a building with structural integrity.

The sculptures appeared to thrust and prance across the room as I moved through "Lingering Bodies," feeling watched at every turn, invitations to engage each person in a walking meditation, a ritual of their own making. I proceeded with my own path, crossing the gallery to take an offering of reishi tea, witnessing people coat their hands with oil and lean toward the whispering walls. I moved toward "Hauntology," a series of synthetic bone portraits of deceased philosophers Ursula K. Le Guin, David Graeber and Mark Fisher. As I brought my ear closer to the painting, the words of the dead emanated from behind their portraiture. The crowded gallery faded from focus as the spell of the art pulled me closer.



Serena JV Elston, "Hauntology III, Mark Fisher: 'Capital is an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombie maker; but the living flesh it converts into dead labor is ours, and the zombies it makes are us,'" 2025, synthetic bone, Spalted Maple, sensor, speaker, single channel audio, 26" x 20" x 4" /Photo: Andrew Rafacz gallery

As I moved through the exhibition, I asked people what brought them here tonight. I met the studio assistant who learned carpentry and programming for the exhibition. The farmer who harvested the mushroom stood next to the next person who fired "Forty Weeks," a bisqued ceramic sculpture cast from Elston's body a week before giving birth. I felt as if I was being further enveloped in the tendrils of Elston's inner world. Even as a master builder with a background in architecture and performance, Elston trusts their community to help her build. "I couldn't TIG weld in my third trimester or after having just given birth, so Jonathan (Lanier) TIG welded these for me." Elston referred to "Chthonic Entities," a group of sculptures frozen in form by bronze and marble, named after the mythic beings residing in the underworld. The Entities crept and hovered, seemingly idle yet patrolling across the gallery's wooden floor.

As the night petered on, I made my way around the gallery, having not yet taken in "Strigil Oil," a vessel of oil with the artist's pheromones collected from her body over a seventy-three-hour duration, from when she went into labor until delivery. A gallery attendant offered to drip the oil—and I swear time slowed as it pooled in my palms. I smelled my wrists, spread with the artist's body, an aroma so pungent and intoxicating that I forgot to breathe. As I left the gallery, the artist's days in labor were present. The smell of those days drove me home, followed me to bed and guided my dreams.

"Serena JV Elston: *Lingering Bodies*" is on view at Andrew Rafacz gallery, 1749 West Chicago, through August 30.