

YAVUZ ERKAN

essay by Francis E Parker
Youngblood Editions 2011



youngblood
EDITIONS

Yavuz Erkan: Unorthodox Aphorisms

Intimately bound up with persistent expectations of masculine behaviour, the dominant mode of representation for the male body remains one of action rather than allowing the male subject to stop and to feel, to become a passive participant in sensation. Historically art did, however, offer these alternatives at the periphery of mainstream culture. Moreover, the evolution of the artist into a discrete profession with a burgeoning subjectivity from the seventeenth and into the nineteenth century made it a shelter for individuals who did not necessarily wish to conform to conventional expectations of masculinity. Art counterbalanced demand for such things as equestrian portraits with the sanctioned satisfaction of depicting Saint Sebastian, making room for alternatives within convention.

In the public domain, art has historically made grand gestures, taken heavy materials and heroic means but in the latter half of last century, feminism pushed all that aside and cultivated the scale, forms and textures that had always characterised creative expression in the domestic sphere. Among the many achievements of feminist artists is the opening up of intimate, interior concerns, methods and means as legitimate options for the contemporary artist. Yavuz Erkan has made images for his 2011 photographic series, *Unorthodox Aphorisms*, that are domestic, quiet and challenging of masculine conventions. Like many artists of his generation – he was born in 1982 – Erkan works in the wake of more senior practitioners whose ardent politics rent asunder the poles of gender representation. He has inherited a representational space that affords more nuances, more ambiguity; through which an avant garde has passed and over which he keeps watch.

Erkan has explicitly worked outside orthodoxy in this series, which echoes the strategies of the Dadaists and Surrealists by presenting unexpected combinations intended to disrupt convention. The Comte de Lautréamont, the 19th-century French poet who the Surrealists took as their prophet, wrote a line in the sixth canto of his *Chants de Maldoror* that seemingly predicted this characteristic of the art that was to come. Now famous, the ‘fortuitous encounter upon a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella’ is only a fragment, however, of the narrator Maldoror’s description of the English boy he resolves to lure into a trap:

He is as handsome as the retractibility of the claws of birds of prey; or again, as the uncertainty of the muscle movements of wounds in the soft parts of the posterior cervical region; or rather as the perpetual rat-trap, re-set each time by the trapped animal, that can catch rodents indefinitely and works even when hidden beneath straw; and especially as the fortuitous encounter upon a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella!¹

Like Lautréamont, Erkan uses familiar elements in unfamiliar ways, giving them new and evocative resonances. Just as one understands how Maldoror perceives the young man without being able to visualise him from such a description, Erkan’s images are strongly evocative of sensation but they elude literal interpretation. *Balloon* shows the artist’s hand resting on a table beside a knotted pink balloon; it seems a merely casual encounter but beguilingly emotive at the same time. In *Gloves* a rubber glove reaches towards Erkan’s ungloved hand; *Urn* includes a terracotta vessel whose angles rhyme with the contours of his glimpsed profile. None of these offer any narrative but they are visually succinct, they are indeed *aphorisms*.

Like Erkan himself, the aphorism started out in science, which is to say that before moving to Australia and enrolling at the Queensland College of Art in 2009, Erkan had studied Material Science Engineering at the Istanbul Technical University in his native Turkey and was completing a PhD in Physical Chemistry at Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden. While the aphorism was formerly a statement of scientific principle – and Erkan’s interest in the material properties of the substances he photographs is evident – he intends the title in its more general sense of a pithily expressed observation – observed entirely through his camera.

The unexpected but intuitively poetic partnerships that Lautréamont puts into his prose poem and that Erkan puts into his photographs are deliberately ambiguous, not just in their respective meanings but in the relationships they engender. Maldoror’s description of his victim is couched in terms that oscillate between the young man’s own capacity for violence and his vulnerability. There is fluidity between Erkan’s activity and passivity across the suite of *Unorthodox Aphorisms*; he plunges his hand into the glass in *Milk* but allows his prop to envelop him in *Towel*. It is a sense of vulnerability that predominates in Erkan’s work, however; he photographs himself with his gaze averted, leaving his flesh unguarded, his face out of frame or obscured – particularly so in *Bubble gum*, where he effectively veils himself behind a tender skin of confectionery.

Erkan subtly undermines the expectations that his body creates, using his facial and body hair, which is inevitably – perhaps even essentially – masculine, in a play of textures with other objects and materials. As he explains, ‘I think of the state of being a male in general, why is it that the definition of it is so straightforward. I am really against a stereotype of any kind. Therefore I constantly think of multiple masculinities against the norm of a singular one...’² His body and the relationships that he makes for it open up many more possible interpretations than if it were pushed towards acting out or inverting the gender role assigned to it.

Erkan is present in each of his photographs save for two: *Beans* and *Tomato*. These read necessarily as still lifes and, as such, join a tradition in which the human body is invoked by the objects that an unseen hand has placed within the frame. Erkan is this animating force but these works in turn exert a peculiar influence over the whole suite that underscores how he appears in the others. Framed by this painted tomato and these beans sprouted within the confines of a bottle, across a uniform setting and palette, the artist appears as just one object in relation to a succession of others. Erkan reduces himself to being a texture in an encounter with another. Adopting this gender neutral status, he avoids the gender performativity that frequently attends photographs of the figure, confounding expectations of masculine behaviour by simply being rather than acting.

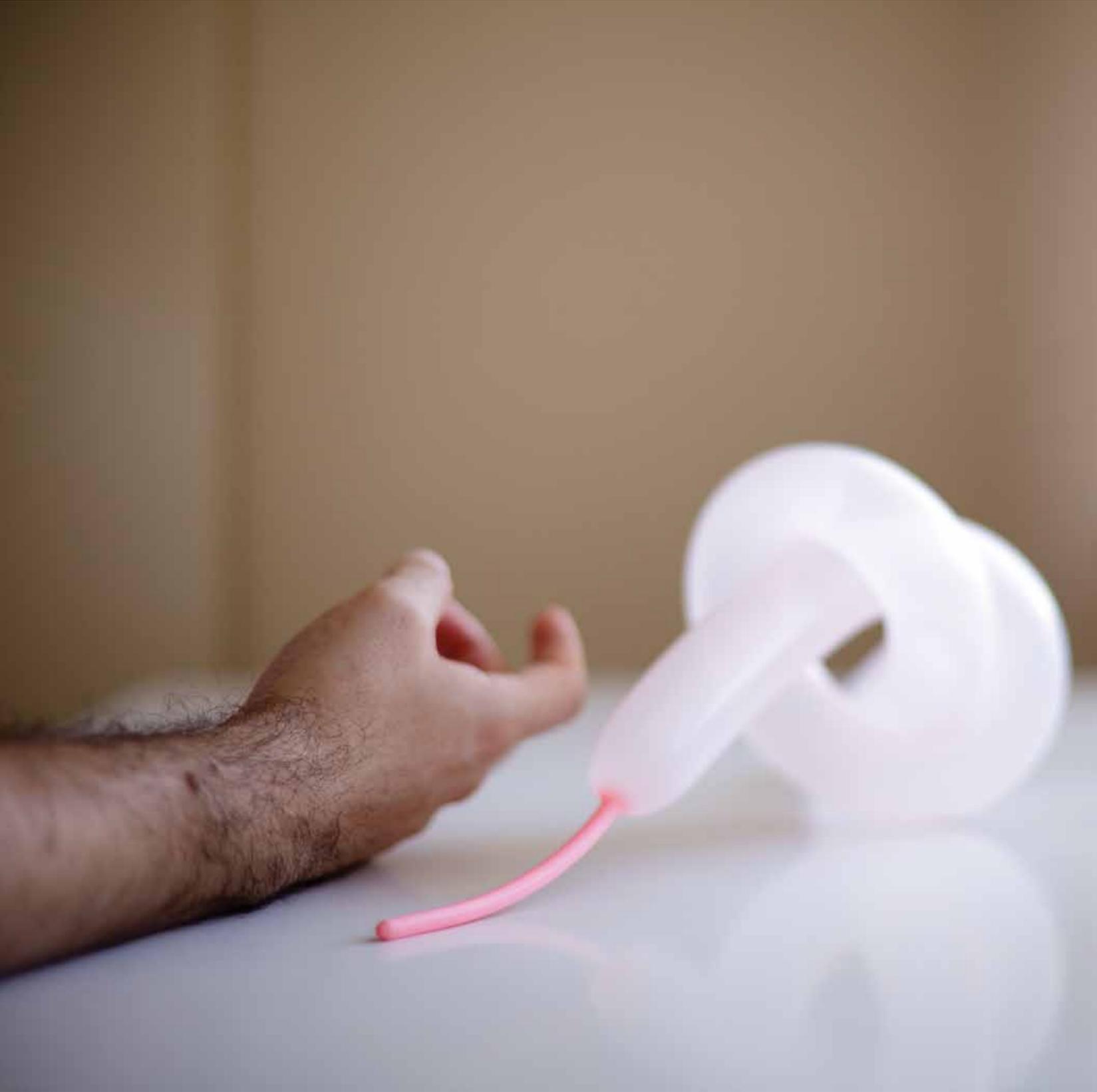
Still life has always been a quintessentially domestic genre – and many ranks below history painting – presenting passive rather than active subjects and offering contemplation rather than narrative. Like Lautréamont’s dissecting table, still life is concerned with the abstract relationships between things, inviting interpretation to ricochet between elements rather than along a route set out by narrative. When these things do not relate to each other in an anticipated way – for example, when Erkan photographs himself indoors with a coating of sugar on his back rather than on a beach with a coating of sand – the viewer’s expectation is thwarted. Rather than allowing his or her mind to slip quickly towards a predetermined resolution, it must take time to find its own way through. Art, as opposed to advertising or propaganda, welcomes ambiguity because ambiguity demands a lingering gaze. The eye rests on an object while the mind deciphers it; the more one thinks the more one sees.

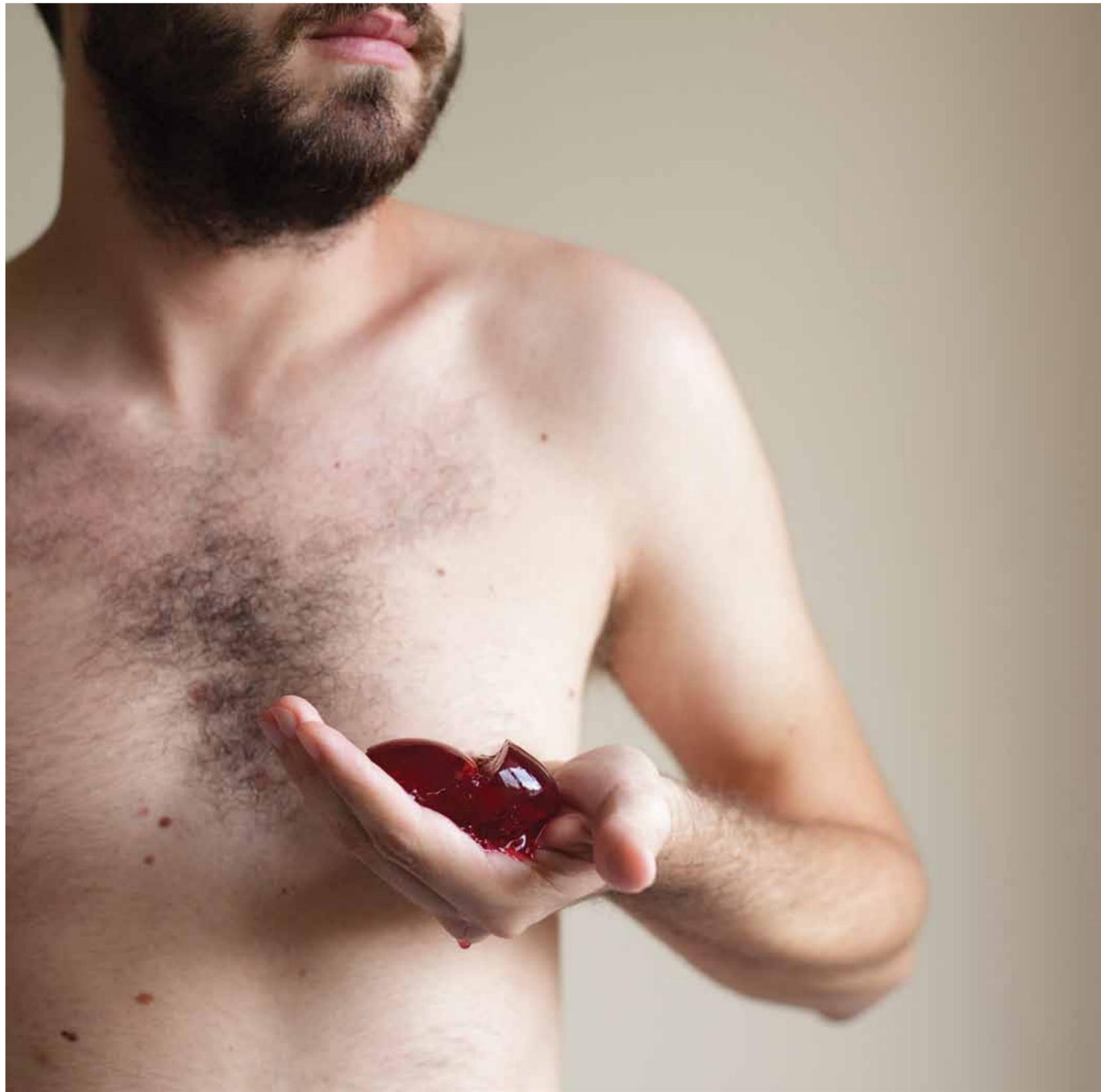
Yavuz Erkan’s *Unorthodox Aphorisms* sit meaningfully outside the established order of things. One grasps the substance of these images without being able to articulate precisely what they say. They evoke sensations that are at once familiar and peculiar, challenging received notions of how to behave. Through his photographs, Erkan counters the closing down of possibilities, which so much contemporary imagery implicitly does, by opening up the possibilities of what a man can be shown to do and to feel.

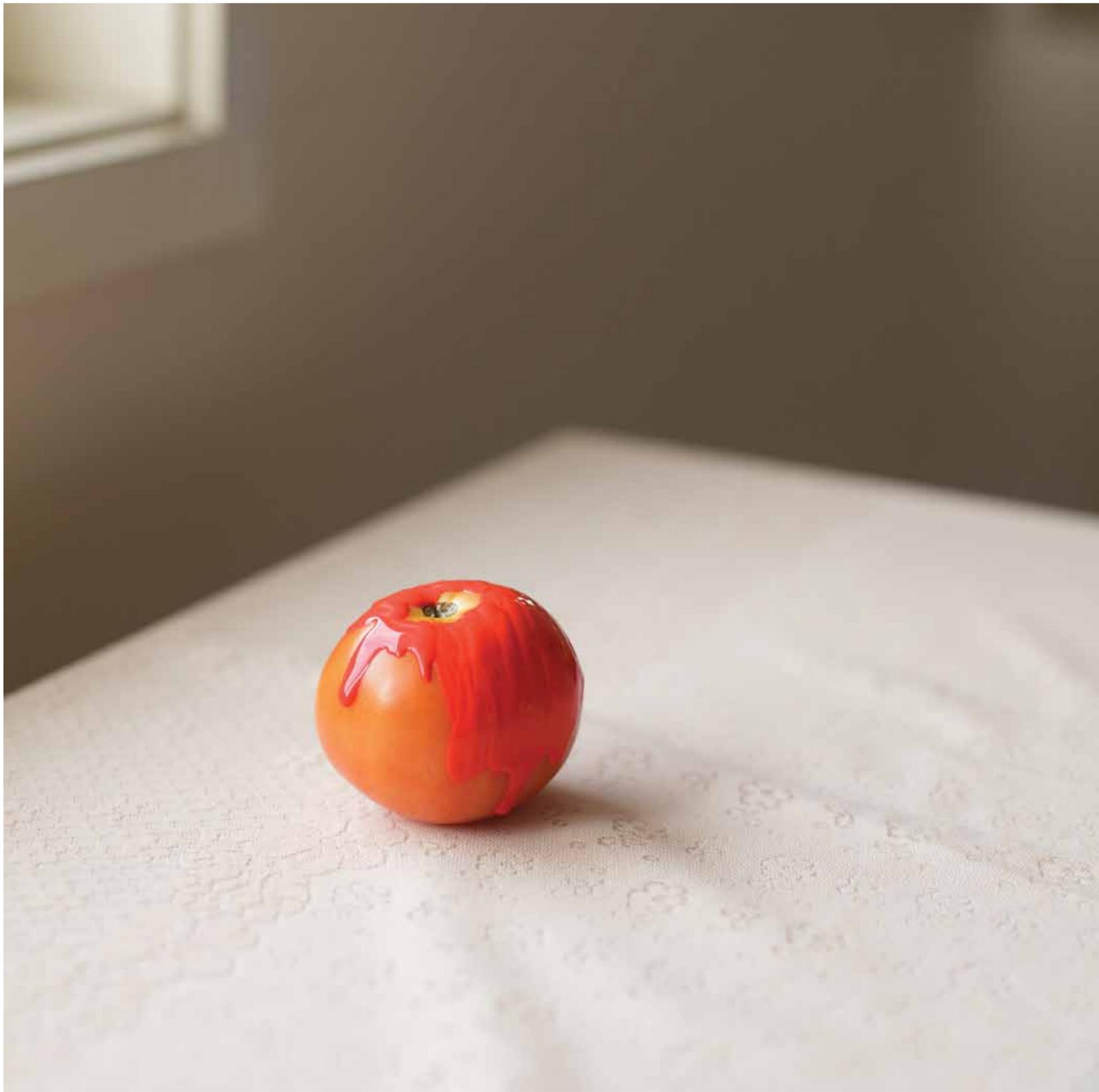
Francis E Parker

¹. Lautréamont, *Les chants de Maldoror*, Guy Wernham (trans.), New Directions Publishing Corporation, New York, 1943, p.263.

². Yavuz Erkan, email to the author, 23 February 2012.

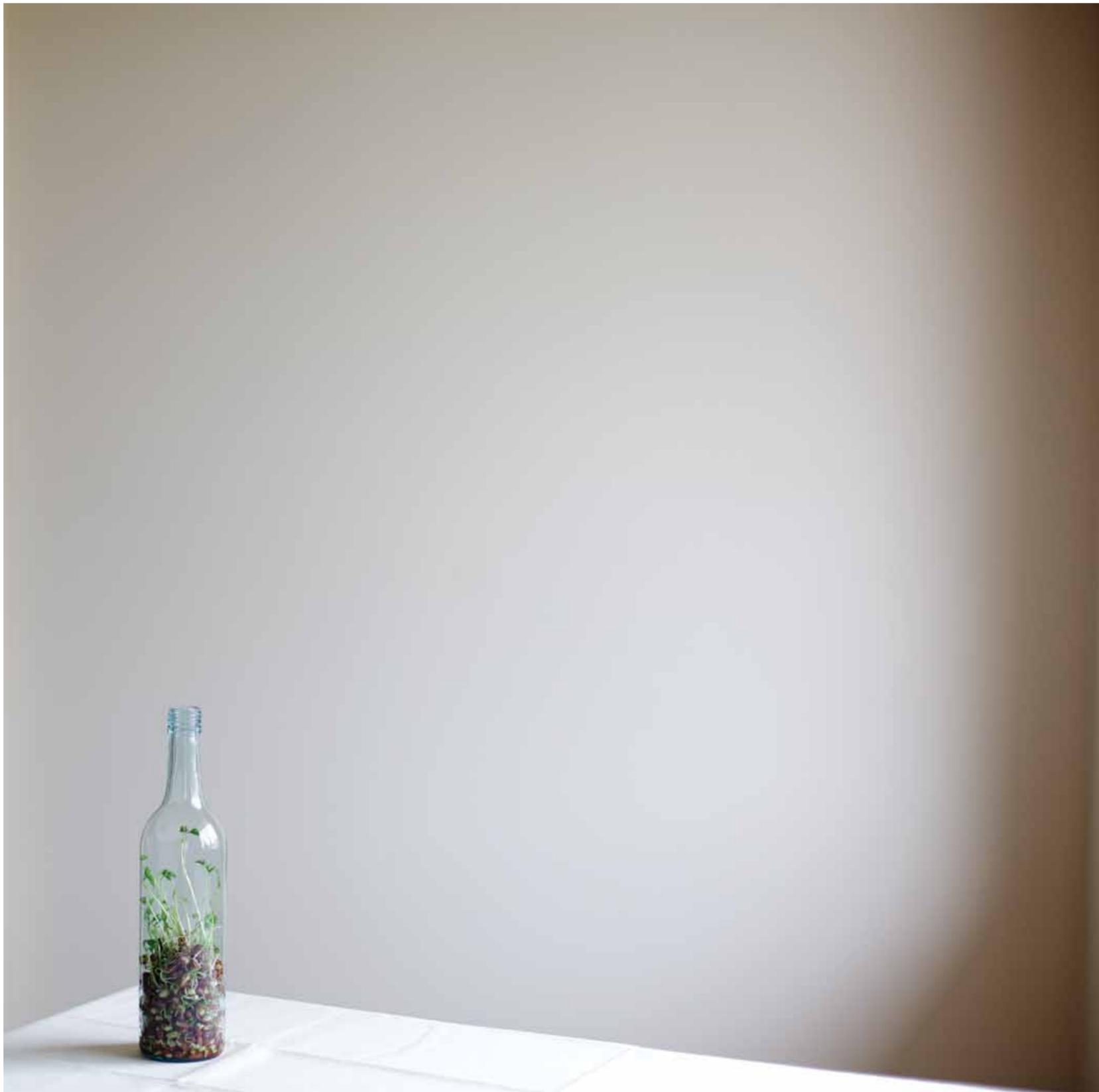


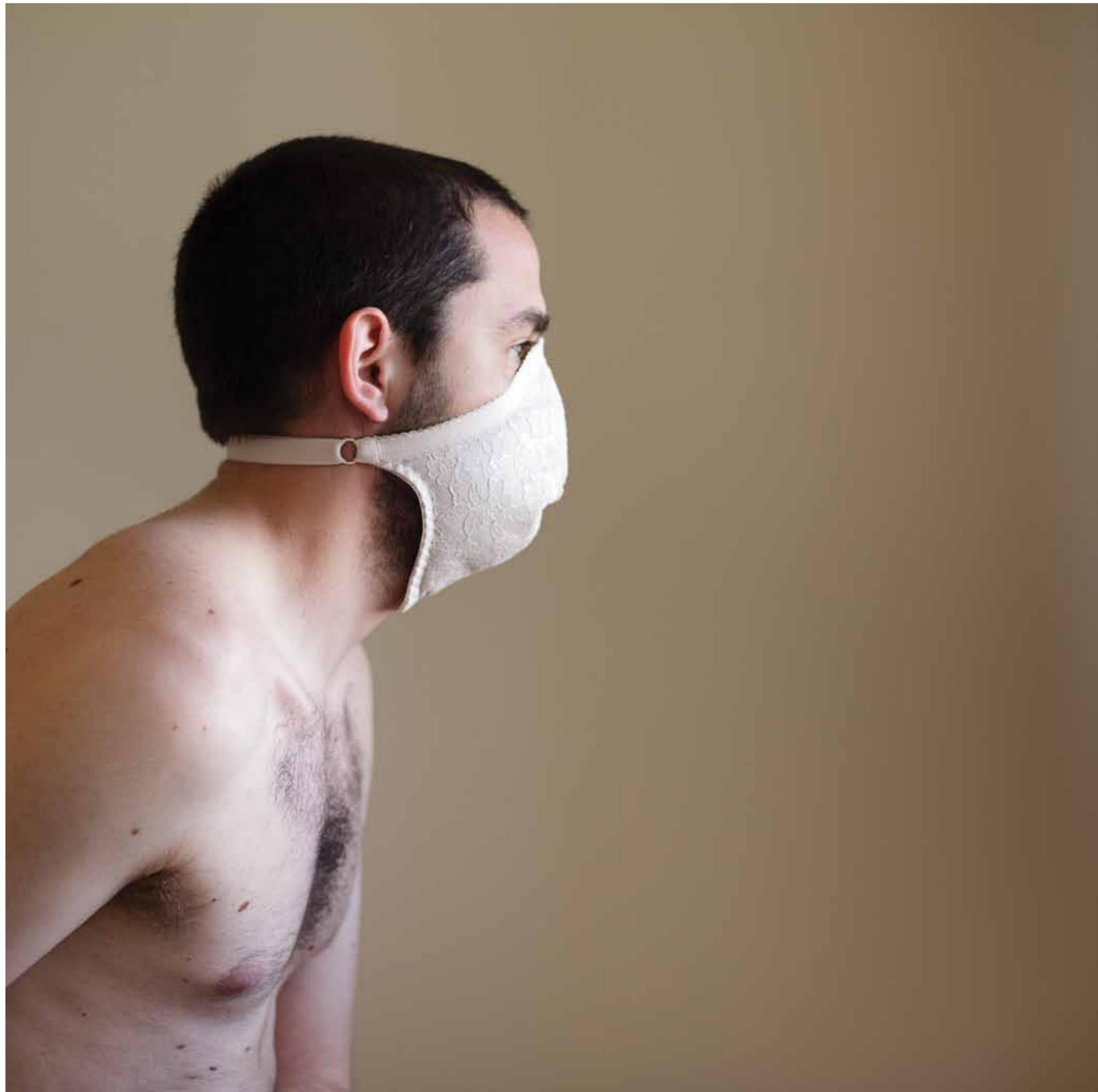




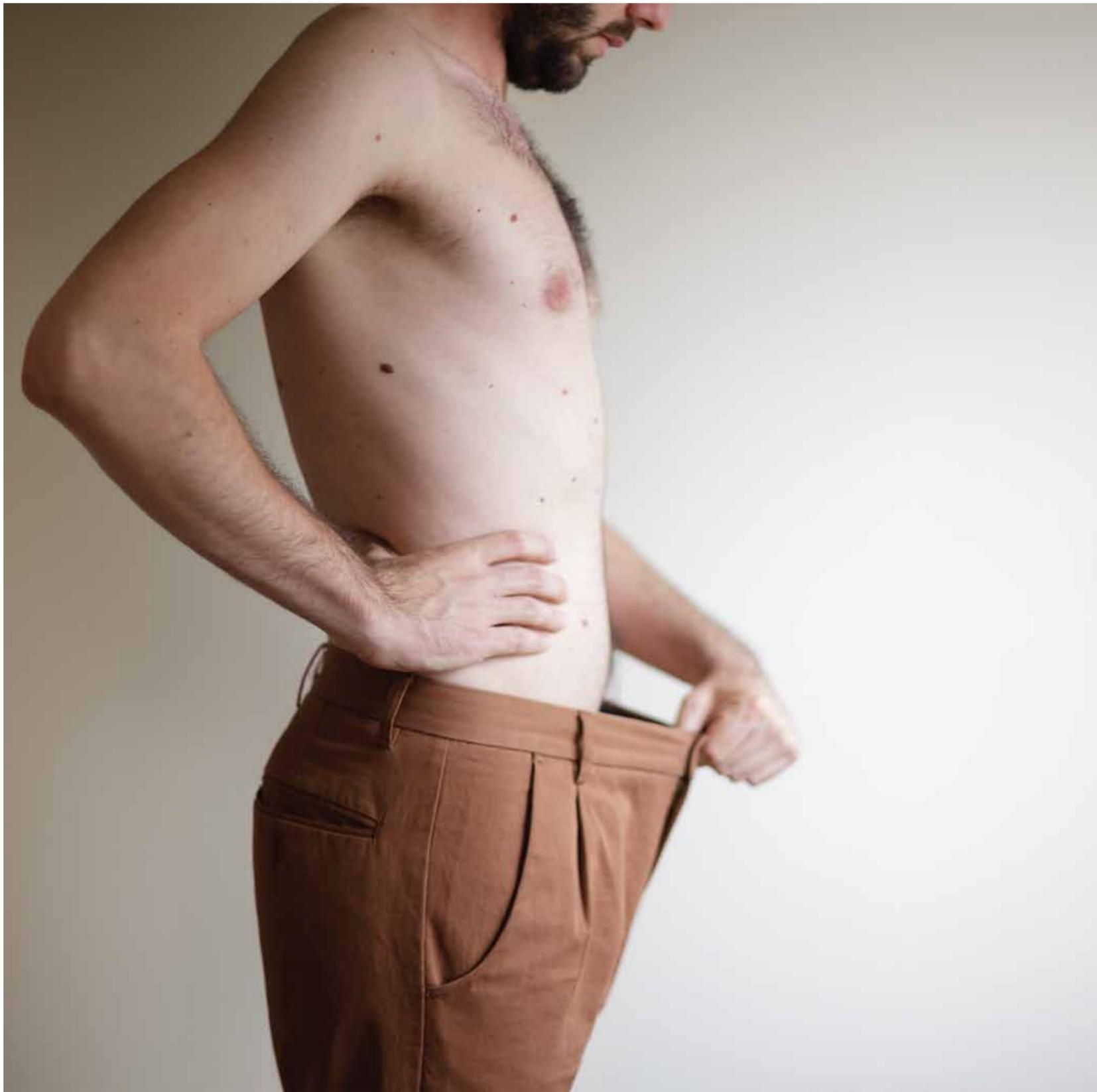












Unorthodox Aphorisms, 2011



Balloon



Jelly



Tomato



Sugar



Milk



Urn



Beans



Towel



Bra



Gloves



Bubble gum



Pants

Imprint

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EDITIONS

Youngblood Editions is an initiative by Queensland Centre for Photography to encourage and support emerging Queensland photomedia artists in the development of their careers.

Yavuz Erkan is an emerging photographic artist with a Bachelor of Photography degree and a Curatorship specialisation from the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. He had his first solo show in Perth Centre for Photography in 2011 and he has exhibited in several group shows in Australia, Chile, UK and USA. His works are held in the Daryl Hewson Photographic Collection, Queensland Centre for Photography Collection and Monash University Museum of Art Collection.

Francis E Parker studied at Monash University, Clayton, completing his Honours in Visual Culture in 2005. In 2006 he took up the position of Curatorial Assistant, Australian Art to 1970, at the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane. As Curator, Contemporary Australian Art, from 2008, he played a role in diverse exhibition projects including: *Contemporary Australia: Optimism*, 2008, the first in a triennial series surveying contemporary Australian art; *Easton Pearson 2009*, a survey of the Brisbane-based fashion house; the *6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, 2009; and *Scott Redford: Introducing Reinhardt Dammn*, 2010. Parker joined the Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA) staff in 2011 as Curator – Exhibitions.

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