MATRIX 287
BERENICE OLMEDO
TO TI ÊN EINAI

Berenice Olmedo's Metamorphoses in Sculptural Form

Margot Norton

Commanding in stature and glistening in finish, Berenice Olmedo's sculptures dismiss the boundaries that separate inside and outside, self and other, body and machine. Throughout her career, Olmedo has maintained an inexhaustible curiosity, experimenting with innovative methods and materials, stretching, pushing, and reimagining sculptural possibilities to capture the evanescent yet resilient nature of life. Her rigorous practice transgresses sculptural conventions to reconsider relationships to otherness and standardized expectations of bodies. As the artist wrote, "There is no stigma of disability in the world I propose, but only variations of existence, variations of movement, variations of slowness and speed."[1]

Olmedo has become known for creating sculptures and kinetic installations incorporating prosthetic body parts and orthotic braces. In *Olga* (2008), the first of these sculptures, Olmedo animated a colorful children's orthotic device—a Hip-Knee-Ankle-Foot Orthosis (HKAFO)—that was originally designed to stabilize the lower limbs and hips of a specific child with polio. The custom-molded plastic shell of this device, with its contoured metal braces, is animated by barely visible wires attached to a motor. When engaged, the HKAFO is brought from reclining to kneeling, standing to walking, and back down again, in a perpetual cycle of endeavoring and collapsing. Olmedo imbues her sculpture with remarkable movement and pathos that transcends its mechanized form. Like many of Olmedo's sculptures, *Olga* has a name. This gesture personifies her, bringing her in direct relationship to those that she encounters. By reusing devices and other materials from the medical field, Olmedo explores the extent to which these devices are essential. Challenging ideas of the body as a fixed entity, her works often exist in a state of becoming—a crystalized effort to capture life's constant flux.

In recent years, rather than incorporate orthopedic devices as found objects, Olmedo has used them as source material to craft hybrid figures, joining prosthetic arm and leg sockets, scoliosis corsets and collars, which she casts in plaster and molds in resin. These sculptures transcend the specificities of their references, defining themselves through the conjunction of their parts. *Rutilio*, *Casilda*, and *Cipriano* (all 2024) stand at varying heights, their translucent and brightly hued resin-cast torsos and limbs contrasting with their weighty lead and metal supports. The light that shines through their violet, crimson, and honey-colored forms illuminates their bodies so that they appear to glow from within and also cast figurative shadows. While they are not kinetic, they evoke motion as they appear to lean, step, turn, shuffle, and twist.

In Olmedo's recent sculptures, such as *Sicarú* (2024) and *Zeltzsin* (2025), translucent bodily fragments

are isolated on metal structures attached to gallery walls, creating repetitive curvilinear arrangements from resin-cast ligaments that might evoke a new linguistic vocabulary. No longer fragments of a whole, but whole fragments, Olmedo's appendages work together to craft fluid, calligraphic forms. *Sicarú*'s and *Zeltzin*'s ethereal quality contrasts with the artist's most recent sculpture, *Zoraida* (2025), in which a lead-cast hand bears the weight of its own body, with its widespread fingers and robust musculature adapted to hold it upright in unique equilibrium. Seen together, Olmedo's sculptures carry viewers into relationships of varying scales, heaviness, gestures, and shadows—their bodies activating the space through these encounters.

Olmedo's embrace of experimental materials that represent the transient and resilient nature of the body calls upon sculpture to reflect these fundamental characteristics of our existence. In this capacity, her practice engages in dialogue with earlier artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Alina Szapocznikow, and Paul Thek, whose experimental approaches transformed the visual language of contemporary sculpture as they embraced unorthodox materials, fragmented forms, and "The Body in Pieces."[2] However, rather than casting bodies directly, Olmedo's sculptures cast the technology that might aid or heal them. In her hands, machines become tender and vital, challenging notions of human wholeness and using the potential of art to rethink relationships to otherness.

For the title of her exhibition, Olmedo turned to the phrase "To ti ên einai," written by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Literally translated from Greek as "the what it was to be," the philosophical concept indicates that a being contains the entire history of how it came to be, even as it changes over time. According to one of Olmedo's professors at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico, philosopher Dr. María Antonia González Valerio:

> Within Aristotelian ontology, the causality that brings a thing into existence remains active within the thing; it does not fade away as just a historical trace. . . . Essence, therefore, is not a universal template, but the historically specific arrangement of the Aristotelian categories through which a singular being appears and transforms. "To ti ên einai" describes that dynamic: the passage, the metamorphosis, and the irreplaceable fabric of unique circumstances without which no sensible entity could exist.[3]

In our contemporary world, as the boundaries between the technological and the corporeal increasingly dissolve, this concept takes on further significance. Our burgeoning symbiosis with technology, artificial organs, or prosthetics has opened the question of the human condition as a multiplicity of technological transformations over time. As Olmedo recently wrote, "It seems that the preservation of humanity depends on its technological artificiality. . . . If the body oscillates between repair and damage, why not think of recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction of the body as a social metaphor that advocates for technologies as systems of assistance for a humanity to which care must be provided."[4] As in Aristotle's expression, Olmedo acknowledges the many transformations that are essential to existence, conjuring a tension between the unstable conditions of the body and its role as host to a ferociously powerful life force. Her luminous and commanding sculptures offer profound meditations on the simultaneous fragility and resiliency of life, as well as the interdependence of bodies and the machines that might sustain them.

MATRIX 287 / Berenice Olmedo: To ti ên einai is curated by Margot Norton, Chief Curator.

The exhibition is part of BAMPFA's ongoing MATRIX series of contemporary art exhibitions. Founded in 1978, MATRIX provides artists with an experimental platform to make and show new work.

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1. Shanti Escalante-de Mattei, "For New Exhibition in Basel, Berenice Olmedo Pushes the Boundary of What We Consider to Be a Body," *ARTnews*, June 16, 2022, artnews.com/art-news/artists/berenice-olmedo-kunsthalle-basel-exhibition-1234631623/.

2. Linda Nochlin traced developments of the partial image, fragmentation, and loss of totality in artistic representation from Neoclassicism to modern art in her influential book *The Body in Pieces*: *The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994).

3. Dr. María Antonia González Valerio, in conversation with Berenice Olmedo, July 15, 2025.

4. Email to the author, July 3, 2025.

Cover: *Casilda*, 2024 (detail). Courtesy the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles.

Works in the Exhibition
Berenice Olmedo
Oaxaca, Mexico, b. 1987

Casilda
2024
ThermoLyn orthoprosthetic, cortical screws, surgical steel traumatology instruments, osteosynthesis plates for fractures, Knee-Ankle-Foot Orthosis (KAFO), socket adapters for prosthesis, resin, and lead; 70 x 15 ¾ x 19 ¾ in. Courtesy the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles

Cipriano
2024
ThermoLyn orthoprosthetic, cortical screws, surgical steel traumatology instruments, osteosynthesis plates for fractures, Knee-Ankle-Foot Orthosis (KAFO), socket adapters for prosthesis, resin, and lead; 69 x 13 x 20 in. Collection of Beth Rudin de Woody

Rutilio
2024
ThermoLyn orthoprosthetic, intramedullary femur nails, cortical screws, surgical steel traumatology instruments, aluminum tube and socket adapters for prosthesis, resin, and lead; 97 ¼ x 23 ¾ x 18 ½ in. Courtesy the artist and Lodos, Mexico City

Sicarú
2024
Surgical steel traumatology instruments, aluminum tubes, socket adapters for prosthesis, and resin; 23 ¾ x 35 ½ x 35 ½ in. Courtesy Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; purchased with funds provided by Jaren Hillenburg and Nancy Lainer

Zeltzin
2025
Surgical steel traumatology instruments, aluminum tubes, socket adapters for prosthesis, and resin; 23 ½ x 35 ½ x 35 ½ in. Courtesy the artist and Lodos, Mexico City

Zoraida
2025
Orfit orthoprosthetic, osteosynthesis plates for fractures, surgical steel traumatology instruments, resin, and lead; 47 ¼ x 23 ¾ x 23 ¾ in. Courtesy the artist and Lodos, Mexico City