

# **Stony Brook University**



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**Each Body is a Strange Beach**

A Thesis Presented

by

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to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts**

in

**Studio Art**

Stony Brook University

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Abstract of the Thesis

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What drives not merely the individual but our society as a whole? How do we regard our own experiences, and, as an extension, how does that affect how we relate to the experiences of another? How do our individual motivations affect our societal motivations and vice versa? These core questions serve as the catalyst for my work. By developing artwork with this line of inquiry in mind, which includes research into contemporary as well as historic social criticisms, I come closer to finding answers to the questions that fuel my artistic practice. Throughout the process, I mine the many ways our human community operates to resolve how it functions and dysfunctions and how its members connect or disconnect.

For my written thesis, I will explore the above-mentioned ideas through the work I have produced during my studies at Stony Brook University, including but not limited to my solo shows at the Lawrence Alloway Gallery as well as my piece for the MFA thesis exhibition at the Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery.

I will refer to texts that have guided me personally and academically towards an understanding of the experience of the self and its relationality; a broad range of source materials from the critical writings of Nicolas Bourriaud and Herbert Marcuse to the more contemporary writings of Claudia Rankine and Scott McLeod.

Through discussion of specific works, I will delve into themes common throughout: issues of freedom, alienation and disenfranchisement of “the other”. I look at the figurative elements common to my work that represent contrasting relationships i.e., humanoid or animal-like creatures that engage with their environment and those that do not; shelters that protect and those that damage their inhabitants; and screens or windows that serve to reveal or conceal that which is within. As is the goal for most of my work, my thesis shall provide more insight into the simplicities and complexities of our human nature.

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“Each body is a strange beach”. It is a line from Claudia Rankine’s 2015 book, *Citizen: An American Lyric*. It is also the title I have chosen to use for my contribution to the 2016 MFA Thesis Exhibition. While Rankine writes the line in a midst of couplets concerning the micro-dynamics and aggressions that exist between races, I borrow the line to encapsulate what I believe to be the nature of my thesis project, my art work in general, and my life.



Fig. 1. *Each body is a strange beach*, 2016

*Each body is a strange beach* (fig. 1), my thesis work, is a multi-part installation loosely based on the Buddhist cosmological concept of “Mahakalpa”: the continual creation and re-creation of a world or universe that is constantly cycling through creation, duration, dissolution and nothingness. Throughout the work, I chose to limit myself to five basic elements or materials. Whereas in Indian tradition the five elements are represented through air, fire, water, earth and space, *Each body is a strange beach* is constructed out of latex, wire mesh, wax, plaster and papier-mâché. The creative and destructive process of constructing the work itself mimicked the processes involved in a “Mahakalpa”, that of Becoming, Abiding, Decaying and Emptiness. I sought to embody the ideas through varying densities of materials to investigate the nature of the formation and transformation of a body and, and within, its environment. Looking to the birth of our universe, I wanted to discover, in the most elemental way possible, how a singular something, such as the big bang, can arise out of nothing; how increased complexity can arise and expand out of a singular something; and how and at what point does it all return to nothingness once again.

This is a question I ask often throughout my work. What does the purpose or production of an object, such as sculpture (or even perhaps a human being) contribute to the understanding and value of its existence whether it is in and of itself or through the eyes of another? It is this question that is the impetus for most of my work’s development, and indeed, most of my life’s choices. The evolution of both are invariably linked, with each informing the other. In addition, the relationship that grows between my work and myself further develops into a relationship between the work and the viewer thereby linking myself with the viewer in an ongoing network of relationality. As Nicolas Bourriaud states in his text, *Relational Aesthetics*, “Producing a form is to invent possible encounters” (23). By bringing imagined potentiality and possibility into con-

crete form, the resulting materiality can become host to a plethora of other imagined potentialities and possibilities, some expected and some not. The future of the artwork itself along with its interpretation and its role in the creation of future artworks become enmeshed in an ever-evolving present.

In *Sketches of an Infinite Futility* (fig. 2), a site-specific installation I created in 2014, I began, in a sense, at the end: its inevitable death. Originally the work's sole purpose was to eventually be destroyed. Of course, the question then became why pursue the work at all if its end is already foreseeable; what could possibly be gained? The process alone, rather than the artwork itself, became the very nature by which it could be valued and understood. Again, I restricted myself to few materials (paper, tape and wire) to construct a three-dimensional sculpture that would rise from floor to (and through) the ceiling.

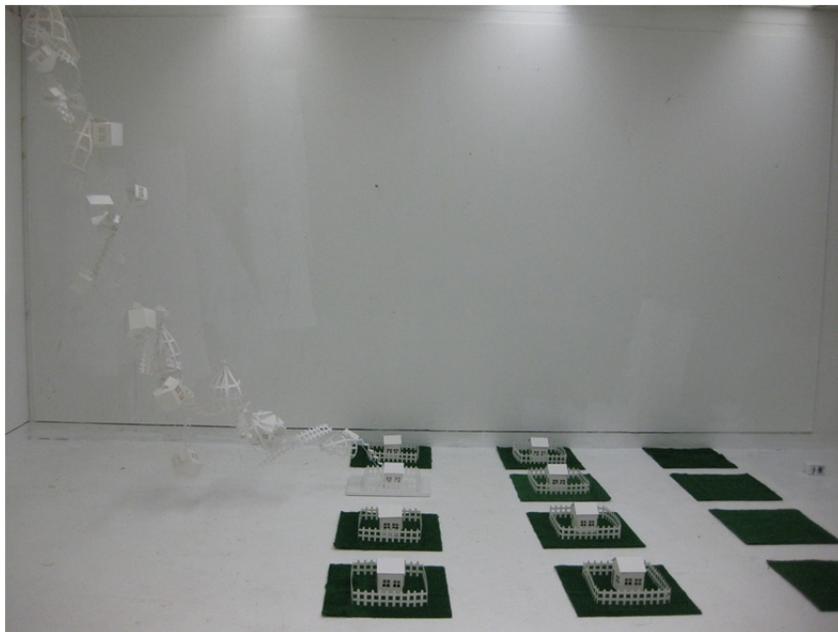


Fig. 2. *Sketches of an Infinite Futility*, 2014

Much like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, I attempted to find “Home” through a tornado-like structure constructed of deconstructed houses; windows arose out of doorways; staircases wrapped around fences; birdcages housed smaller and smaller birdcages; that which once served as a place of shelter and comfort could also become confining and convoluted. The very idea of “home” became transmutable. Different questions developed in reaction to my attempts to control gravity, as one object would fall to the ground, another would not be able to support itself and collapse upon and distort yet another. The very act of trying to maintain structure with a material incapable to do so became a Sisyphean task, one that led me to question the very nature and existence of what or where “home” is and if the pursuit itself is futile.

What typically defines stability, the “home”, a place with four walls, a few windows and a white picket fence, where one could rest one’s feet at the end of each day, was literally upended. The inevitable destruction of the entire work became almost a welcome event to the constant maintenance of trying to sustain the unsustainable, unpredictable actions of the individual pieces, like trying to nurture a rose garden in a field of overgrowing weeds.

Only in retrospect do I see the similarity between the construction and deconstruction of *Sketches of an Infinite Futility* with that of *Each body is a strange beach*; at the time, I hadn’t come across the concept of *Mahakalpa* where all of nature itself is traveling through states of creation and destruction and periods of nothingness. The rhizomatic nature of the work and the process led me to continually ask what is in actuality being created. Oftentimes the work, or, more specifically, the idea for the work, appears to pop up out of nowhere, yet, like a rhizome, it most definitely arises from somewhere, its roots reaching far below the surface to a vast network of pre-existing knowledge and exposition of thought, Perhaps, to borrow Deleuze and Guattari’s words, “It is a question of a model that is perpetually in construction or collapsing, and of a pro-

cess that is perpetually prolonging itself, breaking off and starting up again” (*Rhizome*, 2). This could be said of the artistic process itself.

My earlier work (fig. 3), before I began my studies at Stony Brook, grew out of a need to non-verbally articulate a reaction to a certain stimulus, whether it be a thought, an emotion, or an external event.

The means to process that reaction was to build an object outside of myself and my own ideas in order to see the cause of that reaction and thus the object in and of itself. Similar to the way an oyster forms a pearl around an irritant within its valves in order to soothe and protect itself, I created, and continue to create, work in order to better understand and accept myself and the world as they are and as they continually evolve.

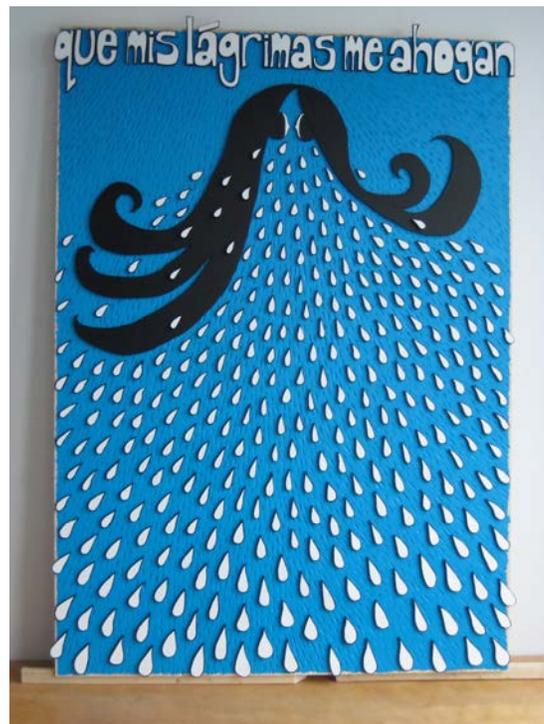


Fig. 3. *Las Lagrimas*, 2008

In *The Intertwining-The Chiasm*, Merleau-Ponty speaks of his relationship to that which he is seeing and how, through the process of seeing, he himself is shaped into being.

Between the exploration and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kinship, according to which they are not only, like the pseudopods of the amoeba, vague and ephemeral deformations of the corporeal space, but the initiation to and the opening upon a tactile world. This can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also part. Through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it; the two systems are applied upon one another, as the two halves of an orange. (133)

Similarly, I, like one half of an orange, engage with an object's creation, from its inception through its execution (sometimes also through its destruction), to create myself. Through the object's development, I too am developed. From there a different reality can begin to express itself, even if it is only to be seen for a moment, then erased from memory.

In my 2014 work, *Genesis and Catastrophe* (fig. 4), I examined the idea of whether people are born purely evil or purely good; if not, where is the exact point in a person's history where he or she becomes what is to be later thought of or referenced to as a saint or villain?



Fig. 4. *Genesis and Catastrophe*, 2014

Six small plexiglass boxes were laid out upon a table. Encased in each box was a small fetus-like sculpture held in a pinkish gel. In front of each box lay a baby hospital bracelet with the names, birth dates, and parents of Mao Tse Tung, Martin Luther King Jr., Benazir Bhutto, Mother Teresa, Saddam Hussein, and Adolf Hitler, people who historically are considered “good” or “evil” or “good” by some and “evil” by others. On the wall beside the table hung a clipboard with the “Child Growth Tracking Records” of the figures identified, the “tracking records” being their histories from birth to death rather than the typical chart measuring a child’s age, weight, height, etc. I was interested in discovering when one becomes destined to be who they are, whether it be predetermined or by chance or will; is there a specific moment in a person’s history that will forever shape how they will be remembered; and, is there a place in time, if any, where they can simply exist as a blank slate, just a child, fighting to survive in the world.

*Genesis and Catastrophe* was inspired by the story of the same name by Roald Dahl. It recounts the supposed true story of an Austrian couple, who, after losing their first three children, have just given birth to a new, frail baby boy. The reader empathetically feels the mother’s pain as she desperately prays for her baby’s survival; until it is revealed that the baby is, in fact, Adolf

Hitler. It is an interesting moment for the reader, one I sought to question more deeply, not only for myself, but for my viewer as well.

How is it possible to have compassion for people who have done so much harm to others? And is it even necessary? For me, the concern isn't the hate another has for me, but the love I have for another. How may I cultivate love for my fellow human beings, no matter what their actions have made them become? How may we, as a society, do so? It is no small challenge I ask of myself or others. In trying to find a compassion and understanding for figures like Adolf Hitler, (or Donald Trump), I have to reach far within myself and find a place where I can hold these people, like a mother holding her new, frail baby in her arms and ask my fellow human beings, can you accept this person, into your arms, too? From there, the artwork is born. My work, however, is not always born out of such love and generosity. Most often, it is a cynical (sometimes humorous) critique on our American society's continual injustices. Maurizio Cattelan is an artist I greatly admire in his ability to create small to large scale sculptures, complexly built in nature, but straightforward in his commentary.



Fig. 5. Maurizio Cattelan, *La Nona Ora*, 1999

In one of his most famous works, *La Nona Ora* (*The Ninth Hour*) (fig. 5), he depicts a realistic life-size wax figure of Pope John Paul II being crushed by a meteor that had crashed through the church's skylight. Whatever Cattelan's inspiration might have been, and however vast the range of interpretations may be, the work does serve as a drive towards critical thought and contemplation. In an interview he gives for the Christie's auction catalog, he tells the interviewer, Alicia Bona, "Ideas never really come. They go: it's all about distribution. I gather fragments, bits and pieces, crumbs of reality. Art works need to function very quickly, no matter how complex and varied they are: *La Nona Ora* is first of all a quick image - a mechanism for incor-

porating difference in a visual synthesis. When people are different, they tend to interact only through art or war. I prefer to use art as a field study for confrontation” (Bona).

For me and my work, this confrontation Cattelan speaks of is a means to bring quiet differences up to the surface, sometimes very bluntly, in obvious cliché and iconic representation. It is a way to engage the viewer in a silent dialogue, to ask, “what do you think about this?”, in a place of “social *interstice*” (16), to echo Bourriaud.

Following the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, I was immediately overwhelmed with the responses around gun violence and the cascading debates that grew between gun control and gun rights activists. I mourned greatly for the loss of so many children to a semi-automatic weapon and, at the same time, I was profoundly angered at my, as well as my country’s, inadequacy in being able to prevent these now commonplace events; a dichotomy engendering two very different works.



Fig. 6. *Overkill*, 2014

In my 2013 work, *Overkill* (fig. 6), six small white birds in the throes of death are individually sculpted out of papier-mâché and mounted, in a sense, to a prison-gray wall, impaled by black wax casts of toy M-16's. The guns are positioned at eye level almost to encourage the viewer to step forward and grab hold. *Overkill* is as much a condemnation of our helplessness in the situation of gun aggression as it is in our culpability. We, collectively, are to blame for allowing these continuing instances to occur in our society. We are both the innocent birds being shot and the invisible hands holding the guns, doing the shooting. For *Flaccid* (fig. 7), I chose to monumentalize the ineffectuality of gun legislation. Like Cattelan, I wanted to take an iconically recognized symbol and somehow poke fun at its deeply-seeded grandiose stature and rectitude. In Catholicism and throughout Europe, it is the pope. In America, it is the gun.



Fig. 7. *Flaccid*, 2014

*Flaccid* is a 10 foot long M-16 made out of latex rubber that stands fully erect except for its limp barrel. Like perpetrators of gun violence, I wanted to empower myself by disempowering the other; emasculating that which holds itself to be the pinnacle of American prowess, virility and dominance.

While both works deal with the same issue in very different ways, the process throughout both, and indeed throughout most if not all of my works, is the same. It is the way I am able to create more space around the issue or concern, whether it be personal, political or social. The

process allows me a moment of solidity and empowerment, however fleeting, in the face of an ever-changing, seemingly always harsh, world. In that moment, I am capable of acknowledging, possibly even accepting, the world as it is, and maybe perhaps laughing at or finding joy within it.

In addition to the steady trajectory of my artistic process, thematically attempting to stabilize the unstable, ever-changing world around me, stylistically, the elements and materials stay their course. My methodology is to uncover the most basic parts of the question itself and then re-ask it in its most understandable, approachable, universal form. It is a method I can equate with my comprehension of the process of cartooning.

In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McLeod discusses the inherent universality that arises from reducing an object or form to its most elemental parts. “The more cartoony a face is, for example, the more people it could be said to describe” (31). Because we, as humans, have a tendency to anthropomorphize almost anything we encounter, we can see ourselves in almost any object, even something as basic as a happy face, essentially a circle with two dots and a line within it. “By de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts” (41).

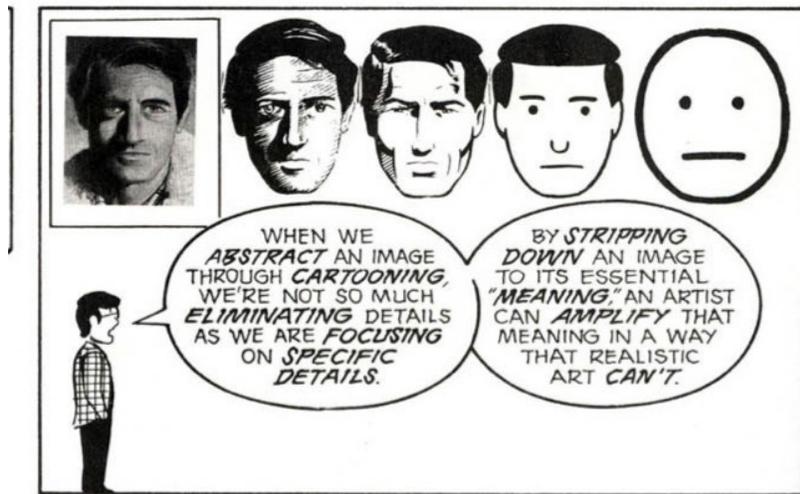


Fig. 8. Scott McLeod, *Understanding Comics* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994) 30.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (fig. 9), I chose to reduce the subject matter of the almost co-dependent relationship between humans and technology to the simplest representations of that relationship: that which represents our current state of humanity, the figure, and that which represents the current state of technology, the screen. I wanted to examine what our increased dependence on technology has done to the concept of our “selves” and ourselves in relationship to others.



Fig. 9. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 2015

For the installation, five life-size humanoid figures are paired against their respective televisions, each displaying the same never-ending static transmission. Their hunched postures suggest hardly a concern, not even an acknowledgment for their somewhat “human” or “humanoid” counterparts. Their only attention rests upon their individual screens exuding brain-numbing static and white noise (however to call it attention might be ascribing too much to the action to which they are participating. To be attentive is to be somewhat engaged. For the figures, their engagement appears to be of only a physical nature). It is almost as if they have been stripped of their ability to make any choices. They are resigned to what’s being fed to them. They have been dominated and can barely hold themselves up. But still, they persist. They cannot let go. The screen, in return, in order to fulfill its purpose maintains itself with its captive audience.

This modern-day romance, in a sense, almost echoes Marcuse’s relationship of man and his objects in *One-Dimensional Man* where “people recognize themselves in their commodities;

they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment,” (18) and today, in their smartphones.

This symbiosis with our technologies has resulted in a situation where we have become almost a function of the interaction itself. Moments can no longer be experienced as subjects in themselves but something that seems to only be realized through the process of a virtual sharing where we can develop, define and identify ourselves in the context of and relation to the other. As Bourriaud states in his essay on *Relational Aesthetics*, “This is a society where human relations are no longer ‘directly experienced’, but start to become blurred in their ‘spectacular representation’” (9). Even the humanoid figures in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are by-products of their own interactions. Devoid of any personal identity, they exist, for the most part, as outpourings of the screen, forever fixed (enraptured? obsessed? numbed?) in the constant barrage of meaningless information and sound in the form of static. Much like Narcissus who lost himself in his own reflection, so too do we lose ourselves in our screens to find ourselves in another time and space.

Perhaps, however, not all is lost. Perhaps, the screen is just another media, like art, serving as a function to create an interface, not just between the figure and the screen, but between humanity and technology, between the self and the other. What we create and choose to engage in the world is an extension of ourselves, using whichever tools we so choose, be it language, the internet, art, etc.. We all have our own ways of trying to comprehend the world around us.



Fig. 10. *Self-Evident Truths*, 2015

For me, it is the observation of our collective human drives and motivations that have and continue to be the source of my individual drive and motivation to understand the world. It is more often the failings and frustrations born out of those motivations that fuel my artistic practice and lead me to develop work that asks, and perhaps confronts, the viewer into agreeing or disagreeing with my conclusions.

My 2015 installation entitled *Self-Evident Truths* (fig. 10) arose out of the frustration born from the continued perpetuation of inequality between races, following the 2014 Grand Jury decision not to indict a white police officer in the death of an unarmed black man; the frustration being born not just out of our inability as a society to recognize, acknowledge and deal with the

racial injustices constantly being propagated, but my own inability as a white woman to make any substantial changes in our social system.

In *Self-Evident Truths*, this frustration is apparent in the large faceless white clocks that line the gallery walls. They are eleven in number, one short of the number needed for a Grand Jury indictment in New York State. They face the center of the room where twelve black bird cages hang at different heights from the ceiling. Within each cage lies a dead black bird, some too big or too small for their cage; the cause of death revealed by the bullet holes through the cage's bottom. A take-away flier serves as a map, delineating the birds as representations for the twelve unarmed people of color who were killed at the hands of police officers in the year 2014.

The work was both a memorial and a condemnation of the people and events that had transpired over the previous year, and that most definitely would continue to occur over subsequent years; the ongoing, ceaseless nature of these wrongdoings marked by the almost imperceptible movement of the clocks' hands in the piece. Whether it is an overt aggression incited by a predominantly white police and justice system or a subtle comment steeped in a long-established American tradition of racism, it is a problem that remains difficult to solve much less to address.

Claudia Rankine, in her book, *Citizen: An American Lyric* speaks of this quieter form of racism, which, to me, is another expression of our human inability to see and accept the other:

A woman you do not know wants to join you for lunch. You are visiting her campus. In the café you both order the Caesar salad. This overlap is not the beginning of anything because she immediately points out that she, her father, her grandfather, and you, all attended the same college. She wanted her son to go there as well, but because of affirmative action or minority something-she is not sure what they are calling it these days and weren't they supposed to get rid of it?-her son wasn't accepted. You are not sure if you are meant to apologize for this failure of your alma mater's legacy program; instead you ask where he ended up. The prestigious school she mentions doesn't seem to assuage her irritation. This exchange, in effect, ends your lunch. The salads arrive. (13)

How do we, as a society, as an individual, ameliorate the situation, not only between races, but between sexes, ethnic groups, religions...essentially between any human being and another? Somehow, in our evolution, we have become trapped into thinking that we are different from each other; that we exist solely within and for ourselves and those most like us. In our search for connection, we isolate ourselves even further.



Fig.11. *Each body is a strange beach (Detail)*, 2016

We tend to live in the narrow vastness of our own minds and prefer to remain there. “Each body is a strange beach”. When I came upon the line in Rankine’s book, I couldn’t escape its elusive imagery and its relationship to my current work. For my installation, *Each body is a*

*strange beach*, I wanted to explore the concept of our (what I believe to be inherent) human connectivity and our emergent perceived experience of isolation. Herbert Marcuse talks of this alienative state of our human condition in his work, *One-Dimensional Man*:

The concept of alienation seems to become questionable when the individuals identify themselves with the existence which is imposed upon them and have in it their own development and satisfaction. This identification is not illusion but reality. However, the reality constitutes a more progressive stage of alienation. The latter has become entirely objective; the subject which is alienated is swallowed up by its alienated existence. There is only one dimension, and it is everywhere and in all forms. The achievements of progress defy ideological indictment as well as justification; before their tribunal, the “false consciousness” of their rationality becomes the true conscious. (19)

Perhaps, for me, it is this knowledge of our constructed alienation that drives me to connect to others through my work, albeit in a very non-intimate, distanced way. How do our social constructs serve us as individuals and how do they degrade us? Through our extensions of ourselves, do we in fact become more alienated?

Throughout the development of my work, I tried to investigate the various ways our consciousness (our individual and collective consciousness) affects and shapes our reality. In Buddhism, an individual’s existence and experience of reality is made up of five elements, what is called, skandas or aggregates: physical form or matter, sensation or feeling, perception or cognition, mental formations including thoughts, ideas and opinions, and consciousness or discernment. To understand the changing nature of these aggregates, I sought them through materials that I often use: plaster, wax, papier-mâché, wire mesh and latex. I was hoping to correlate each material to a corresponding skanda, plaster to matter, wax to sensation, etc. As I worked, however, I found that there couldn’t be a direct correlation; that the very nature of these aggregates is fleeting-that a sensation can eventually transform into a thought, a perception can evolve into an idea. As the aggregates do not exist in a solid state neither then could the materials that I chose

to represent them. By restricting myself to the use of only those materials listed yet also responding to the concept behind them, I was able to have a better understanding of how we evolve from a disembodied consciousness (what some call a soul), through a more substantial, sometimes rigid physical form. The environment that surrounds and inhabits us also becomes a form of mental construct, whether that be an atmosphere for our benefit or for our detriment, or, at times, simultaneously both.

In *Each body is a strange beach*, the humanoid figures, and as an extension, the terrain around them, be it an orb of light, an orb of sound, metal cages or a net, are all separate and distinct from one another, one barely contacting or connecting with the other, unaware (or perhaps dismissive) of their similarity, in materiality or form. Each object exists only in its own isolation. The blankness and mundanity of the figures in their world recall Antony Gormley's sculptures (fig. 12) whose life-size human forms often confront the infinite space around them.



Fig.12. Antony Gormley, *Another Place*, 1997

I, myself, can greatly identify with these inanimate beings of plaster and wax. Oftentimes, I feel as if I have been dropped off or planted in a strange distant world, lost and alone, searching for the meaning of it all. I look to the others around me but they too appear lost and alone, searching for the meaning of it all. We are all strange bodies existing on a strange beach. We all try to stand on the uneven surface of the earth, staring off into the horizon, hoping for some chance glimpse of knowingness. For me, the making of art, gives me that momentary, fleeting glimpse at a deeper understanding, and through it, I hope to share and connect to those other bodies, near and far, yet all together, on this strange beach.

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