Warped Gates

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Warped Gates

by

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Introduction

We are not static. As we move about, interfacing with people, objects, and architecture, we are gathering information through sensory perception. We are absorbing the radical nuances of our environments - the slight temperature change from one side of the room to the other, the timing necessary for entering a revolving doorway directly after and before somebody else, or a subtle squeeze to test the ripeness of fruit. We are ultra-sensitive people making hundreds of micro-decisions that steer our movement. But with movement comes misstep and distractions are aggressively present. We are ingesting content from all sides: the phone, the TV, the internet. It is a weird experience to inhabit a virtual and physical space concurrently. It can be exhausting, especially lately. The collective fever pitch has reached a height where nuance can be difficult to accommodate. How do we digest this white noise? Where does the content go? I am interested in the ambient conditions that are filtered through our bodies and our relationships with the built structures positioning us. This project of understanding through physicality bipasses language and allows for an empathy towards vulnerability and curiosity towards mystery. My work is in dialogue with these somatic experiences.

I am combining experimental material approaches with a sensitivity to the spaces around an artwork to create sculptural situations that are dissonant and precarious. For the past year I have been invested in the mimetic potential of platinum silicone as an likeness for both our actual skin and many of the products we use daily. Silicone is a synthetic material not to be confused with silicon, which is a naturally occurring chemical element. Silicone is a rubbery plastic that has
many industrial uses because of its low toxicity, high-heat resistance and insulating properties. Silicone’s presence in our lives is ubiquitous. In the medical field it is used for prosthetics, catheters, contact lenses, bandages. You can find silicone in a number of personal care items, including shampoos, shaving cream, personal lubricants and sex toys.\(^1\) It is also used in a variety of kitchen utensils, among other uses. In sculpture it is typically used when creating molds for complex objects. Inversely used as a positive material during casting, however, reveals silicone’s unique ability to perfectly duplicate the mold it is poured into. Furthermore, I have discovered when dry materials like charcoal, soft pastel, and graphite are drawn into the mold, the silicone will absorb the pigment as it cures, creating a perfectly mirrored copy of the marks, with no loss of information. This part of the process operates like a monoprint, allowing for full control of variation in color and line, both existing just below the surface of the material. Silicone’s shapeshifting qualities speak to the contemporary experience in its unique ability to replicate and imitate nature while being completely synthetic.

As the silicone works have developed, they have become as much about the haptic, and especially the \textit{desire} to touch, as they are about observation. Somatosensory understanding is a physical, pre-linguistic way of learning. Sight and touch specifically work in concert to help us make sense of our experiences. My aim is to emphasize the tactile qualities of my chosen material through the repeated use of a ribbed texture, color that loosely references the body and a contrast between the softness of the silicone with the steel it is cast around. Sensation, as an idea relative to the body, has a limited lexicon for description. Feelings like pain and ecstasy, for example, can be especially abstract. Virginia Woolf said “English, which can express the
thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear has no words for the shiver or the headache.”

Creating objects that appeal more to our physical intelligence than our verbal, analytical minds is the challenge that these works engage. By actively employing ambiguity in these forms, I hope to welcome tangential associations that speak to the viewers own experiences and the environments where they exist.

My position as the maker therefore becomes non-determinant, choosing instead to lean heavy on texture, color, shape, and unorthodox materials that have a potentially broad scope of reference, but refuse facsimile. As this work has developed, it has become reduced. All imagery that produces quick associations have been eliminated in favor of a slower experience. Broadly speaking: physical performance, disruptions in architecture, and ideas surrounding poetry have been my primary areas of interest, and have critically informed the development of these objects. While these practices are traditionally separate, there are many examples of overlap - historically in the work of others and also in the work I am presenting for my thesis exhibition. I will briefly touch on each of these influences.

**The Physical**

I have developed two strategies for “animating” the silicone, or taking it from being a flimsy sheet of material *pinned to* a structure to becoming a membrane that is *cast around* the support.

The first involves casting silicone around a grid of thin metal which is welded together and the second is an interior layer of perforated metal, embedded within the rubber. Both of these directions allow me to bend, warp, and present the objects in postures that mimic the body in
various states. In order to understand these contortions, I have looked to performance art; works like *Plank Piece I-II*, by Charles Ray (fig. 1), or more recently the sustained activities of Li Binyuan and the structured improvisational physical scenarios that Aki Sasamoto creates.

In *Plank Piece*, Ray transforms his body into a sculptural element held against the wall by a single piece of lumber. This work being created with just a plank and the artist’s body is extremely moving in its economy, formal intelligence, and metaphor. The work of these artists have been critical in steering the how I think about the body existing in a space relative to objects, weight, and gravity. But I have gained equal insight from the work of physical comedians like Buster Keaton and Molly Shannon. Their relationship to architecture, the confined space, is one of equal parts disruption and harmony. There is a pervasive intensity, an explosiveness to their performances, counterbalanced by a melancholic humanism. I try to echo this duality in my work. The violent distribution of weight, from flinging their bodies through walls or desperately clinging to the facade of a building, to stunts that land with the elegant precision of a dancer, is one thing I think about when choosing my materials. The amount of silicone that is cast around ⅛” thick steel bars creates a scenario where the bones seem too thin for the body. The fatigue of the supporting structure, the slight slump is palpable.
Comedy is mostly built on a two-part formula: #1: expectation (setup) #2: reality (punchline), being the basic template. According to the philosopher Simon Critchley, “Humor functions by exploiting the gap between being a body and having a body, between - let us say - the physical and metaphysical aspects of being human. What makes us laugh, I would wager, is the return of the physical into the metaphysical, where the pretended tragical sublimity of the human collapses into a comic ridiculousness which is perhaps even more tragic.”² It is the misalignment between the two that keeps us laughing out loud. This formula is mirrored in the art experience. To create a sculpture is to propose a situation in which an object’s utility is brought into question. A tension arises between its intended function and what we expect from it. My aim with this body of work is to keep this tension perpetually suspended.

Fig. 2 / Studio view with Gate #1, 2018

Fig. 3 / Stills from Day Dreams starring and directed by Buster Keaton, 1922
A house is built and immediately begins changing. Over the years layers of paint accumulate. Things get added on like security gates and satellite dishes. There are patches, repairs, and patina. In urban environments, however, erasure is imminent. Structures are cancelled out or totally gutted to start from scratch, the location being more valuable than the building. While on a drastically smaller scale, this oscillation between the constructive and destructive occurs when I create the molds in which the silicone will eventually be cast. The basic footprint is cut out of MDF, a series of grooves are carved into the wood allowing for fluctuation caused by a shaky hand, marks are added, erased, and entire areas are spackled over. The dusty charcoal settles into the cuts. Stray fingerprints emerge from the pigment. (fig. 4) There is an absorption that will take place once the mold is cast. I see the ribbed silicone as recalling a sort of HVAC filter that has collected color from the room itself.
In our built environments, doors and windows are the primary thresholds, separating the interior spaces as well as the outside from the inside. The steel structures in my work are reminiscent of the security gates you often see on first floor windows around New York City, though not exact replicas. I became interested in these objects because they act as a visual disruption to the architecture. They are after-thoughts; allowing sunlight and breezes to enter a home, but not people. Inherently graphic, the lines create a counterpoint to the painted brick and glass houses that line our neighborhood streets. In Ridgewood Queens where I live, the iron bars are painted a variety of colors, laundry is hung from the gates, as well as holiday decorations and flags. The thresholds in these cases become what Gérard Genette termed the “zones of indecision”. I have chosen to further complicate the function of these types of structures by bringing them indoors and utilizing them as an skeletal support for the silicone panels as opposed to a barrier.

Fig. 5 / Iron gates and railings seen around Ridgewood, Queens, 2018
The Poetic

Language has become an important part of my practice and is woven into all of the objects I make, sometimes literally embedded into the material, only to be seen if the work is destroyed. Poetry has the ability to build a thin scaffold around a situation. This scaffold often provides more questions than answers. Even a simply constructed couplet which forms an unexpected combination of words, can provide a new way of seeing. Poetry in this way also subverts expectation. Still, the poetic can be difficult to define. Gaston Bachelard in his book “The Poetics of Space”, provides insight into the function of poetry and its relationship to our homes. He maintains that the poetic instant is a “harmonic relation between opposites … a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche”. This perspective has directly influenced how I think about image, material, and spatial relationships.

For an artwork to be transporting, there must be an alchemy of materials. The charcoal and pastels do not pigment the silicone itself, but are absorbed, fixed, suspended on the surface of a substance that could never have supported the mark-making. The rubber is not attached to the steel with hardware, but exists inside of and around the metal. The front of the silicone is an ultra matte finish, absorbing light while also being translucent enough to allow the light to flow through it onto the wall behind the piece. Each line of the ribbed surface was carved by hand into the mold. There is an inconsistency to many of the grooves, a quiver in the movement. The back of the silicone, in contrast to the front, is an ultra high gloss, almost mirrored surface, reflecting
light and making it difficult for our eyes to focus. All of these details add up to a collection of nuances that strive to capture Bachelard’s idea of a poetic oppositional harmony.

**Conclusion**

Fig. 6 / Missing NYC subway tiles, 2018

This project, as with all of my work created at Hunter, finds its genesis in observation. The content is a response to content fatigue. The advent of concurrent, virtual spaces has resulted in a situation where time and space are measured and navigated differently. Information is updated at an aggressive speed. Algorithms are capturing our residual data online and imagistic perspective collapses. It’s a lot to deal with. In order to digest this new reality embedded in our lives, I have made it a practice to document the nuanced oddities in our built environments, which often make their way into the objects I create. While the materials I am currently working with are inherently strange, my hope is that by magnifying that tactility of the silicone, presenting them at a 1:1 scale with the viewer, reducing the imagistic, and casting them around structures that feel
vaguely familiar to the viewer, I will be able to evoke a sensorial response that is at once human and alien, present and lingering.

Though actively employing ambiguity, my ultimate desire is for these works to be accessible. The physical, the architectural, and the poetic provide entry points into the work. Variants of this sculptural scenario are repeated throughout the space in order to achieve a sort of rhythm. It is this repetition that a person may see as they walk through a neighborhood, looking around, noticing things.
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