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Toby Ziegler

By Elli Walsh

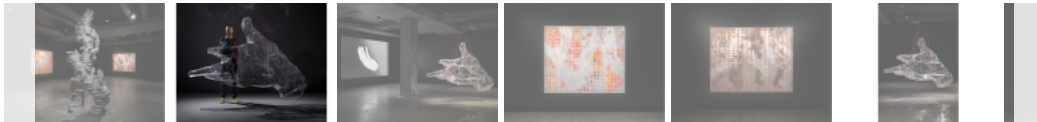
British artist Toby Ziegler probes the various fissures that exist between formal and conceptual thresholds. His paintings, sculptures and films hatch lofty constellations mapping the intersections of the technological and the human, figuration and abstraction, the schematic and the organic, analogue and digital. Physically and symbolically embodying transformation, translation and trauma, the works dip in and out of history to paint a portrait of the strange hybrid world we live in today. Artist Profile caught up with Toby in Hobart ahead of his exhibition 'Your Shadow Rising' at the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona).

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Toby Ziegler with The human engine, 2018, photograph Peter Mallet, courtesy Toby Ziegler Studio

Your current exhibition, 'Your Shadow Rising', feels somewhat cyborgian in the sense that it hybridises the technological with the human body. Olivier Varenne (curator) commented that for him the show is very human, yet for me it seems quite post-human. Where did your interest in the vicissitudes of technology stem from?

I grew up playing computer games, but there's always been a kind of tug of war between a very schematic approach to making and a much more intuitive approach. I started using computers in my work quite early at a time when I was having a complete crisis in how to approach making a gesture. After I left art school I couldn't see a way to make a painting. With the weight of art history, it felt hard to make a painterly gesture that wasn't a macho cliché. So I stopped creating work for a while, and then when I did start making again (about fifteen years ago), I began constructing 3D models on the computer. I wanted to do something that was totally rudimentary and just model a form; to strip away the hand. The first thing I made was an apple – I was thinking of the genesis myth, and then I made a model of my dad's breakfast.

Your dad's breakfast?!

My dad has had breakfast the same way for his entire life at precisely the same time each day. It's very elaborate – he has a boiled egg, half a grapefruit, a piece of toast and a cup of coffee, all laid out the night before he goes to bed. It was ephemeral in a way but also a monument; this thing that was so significant.

So I created 3D models of it, and then I started making drawings using Japanese ink and calligraphy pens and paper. There's a Western tradition of the brush mark somehow being invested with emotion or personality, however a calligraphic mark is different. I was interested in this kind of rehearsed mark making, so I used a computer as a way of mediating that.

A similar synthesis of the gestural and the digital filters into your sculpture *The human engine* (2018), which renders the human hand in a very schematic way. This work was based off an etching by Dutch artist Hendrick Goltzius?

Yes, I did a show last year at The Freud Museum, in London, which is where all of Sigmund Freud's stuff ended up, preserved as he left it. There were three sculptures of hands in Freud's study and another one on this table on the landing where he used to work, and then there was a piece in his daughter's bedroom, and a video of different depictions of hands. Amongst them was an etching by Hendrick Goltzius, who had lost a few fingers from a fire and claimed that this had made him a better artist.

I was really interested in the hand in relation to digital technology – the fact that we've always got these devices glued to our hands, prosthetics, that we use our fingers to access a non-tactile space; this kind of luminous world that's out of reach.

So *The human engine* was a model I created on the computer, from looking at this Renaissance etching, then I made a few small paper maquettes, and finally I constructed a large plexi version of it. I wanted the sculpture to be slightly dematerialised – it's transparent, floating, and it's light and hollow. I think it's quite successful because of the way the light behaves with it.

There is something spectral about the work – watching it sway gently in the air with its lattice of shadows cast on the floor is a powerful moment.

I do like to have something moving; in a lot of the installations I've made there's been an element of movement. I was very pleased with the shadows because they become diagrammatic. They also look a bit like the wire frame drawing that I use to make the object. There's always been this back and forth between 2D and 3D with those sculptures.

Behind this work is the diptych film *It'll soon be over (exquisite corpse)* (2018). The incongruous image results engendered by search engine source imagery are fascinating; some are comic, others tragic. As I was watching the film, it felt as though the images symbolically chart the history of the world – from dinosaurs and ancient ruins to contemporary medicine, design and everything in between. What informed your choice of source imagery?

The six source images visualise a composite body. You start with Lee Miller's neck from a Man Ray photograph, then there's the arm of a Buddhist martyr who's self-immolating; a Guido Remi painting of Saint Sebastian's body; then a foot and a toe which were both illustrations for Georges Bataille's essay *The big toe*, and the last one is cells under a microscope. I was thinking about that game 'heads, bodies and tails', creating fragments that approximate a body – again contemplating the relationship between the body and digital technology. When I fed these images into a search engine – similar to an image search – it produced completely eclectic results. I've been making these sorts of works for five or six years, and it's been interesting to chart the change in the technology. The one I used for this work looks at composition quite a lot – it's tonal, it's colour and you see a very strong silhouette that might recur.

Yes, the foot and the sofa was an interesting pairing! Another work in the show, the eponymous *Your Shadow Rising* (2018), is the largest sculpture of your career, made using a giant 3D printer. Can you walk me through its process of creation?

It began as a geometric, faceted 3D model. The sculptures I'd made in the past used 3D modelling software as a way of reducing a form to something totally schematic; just points in space. I started thinking about how the logic of 3D printing is very similar, it's just a different way of organising those points in horizontal bands.

I used the 3D model to make a set of templates, and from that I made a clay coil pot. I was trying to turn myself into a human 3D printer, but very rudimentary, old technology. I made a figurative form, and then I wanted it to have moments of disruption – something that takes a week to make can be disrupted in a second – to embody different speeds of mark making. The velocity of different ways of looking and making seeps through the whole show.

I then scanned that clay piece using a laser scanner and got ready to print it. You actually have to do loads of work before you can 3D print, it's so far removed from what people think! Everyone assumes 3D printers are these magic boxes where you press a button and something pops out, but it's like learning to play the harp – they're so temperamental! We've got this huge 3D printer in the studio now and I'm very interested in when it misbehaves.

So the clay model had this kind of systematic coiling and then big baroque disruptions in it. Then the print, which we made full size (nearly 4m), has a similar logic in microcosm. The coils were laid down over six weeks (running twenty-four hours a day) and I encouraged the places where it failed; where gravity took its toll on the hot plastic. This resulted in big festoons of slightly abject-looking resin, like spaghetti.

And finally, I was interested in it being liquid again, so I remade a mould from that printed object and recast it in aluminium.

Interestingly it doesn't look like aluminium...

No it's not shiny; it's sandblasted so it looks like stone. I suppose there is the idea of all these different processes and time scales being condensed into a single object, which is quite geological, and I think the final object does look a bit like a stalagmite – you can't entirely work out how it's been made, or what you're looking at.

Does this allusive geology tie into the pile volcanic rocks installed near the sculpture?

Your Shadow Rising was based on this little Phoenician bronze that I saw in a museum in Beirut, which was in a cabinet of damaged artworks that had melted during a fire in the museum in the '80s during the war. It was incredibly beautiful, this little transfigured figure. The volcanic rocks have a relationship to that sculpture because they were once liquid and became

solid, but also this particular basalt forms hexagonal columns – a faceted, geometric quality that relates to *The Human Engine* as well. There happened to be quite a lot here in Tasmania, so it seemed like a nice reference point.

Many of your works have formative links with ancient artefacts. What's the source material for your paintings?

The paintings in this show come from a search engine. There are two pairs of paintings, which started off very figurative. Initially I paint on panels of aluminium, working from found images. I manipulate the images – often inverting or desaturating them to remove them from the original, so the search engine has to treat each image as an abstract configuration.

I started off with details of hands and flames from Georges de La Tour paintings, and then the black and white paintings were from this essay I stumbled across about foot deformity in Renaissance painting. Really gnarly feet appealed to me as an interesting place to start [laughs].

The paintings are often very pixelated – low resolution, quite corrupted images – so often I'm trying to find a painterly equivalent for that. You can see that a lot of the brush marks are trying to faithfully represent something, but at the same time there is this kind of horizontal and vertical brushwork that's searching for an equivalent to a pixel.

You work across multiple mediums – do you have a preference?

I think they all inform each other. It's great to move between things – when you get stuck with painting, the sculpture might offer you a solution. But I suppose a lot of it does come from painting, although I think painting is incredibly hard, especially now.

Especially now?

I suppose it's a hard time to make a painting. Painting could be quite important for the world at the moment but at the same time it's extraordinarily difficult to make a painting that doesn't feel parochial.

I think painting is still quite useful because of the sort of speed of making and the speed of looking. The video operates at an incredibly different speed. It's difficult to put a film and a painting in the same room, so that's why is made a video that plays for two minutes and pauses for three minutes. It's loud and fast but then it just stops and is silent and still.

You mentioned earlier that after graduating from St Martin's School of Art, you lost faith in the idea of making art. Where do you stand now?

I suppose I've found a more comfortable place with it. I definitely like having an audience, and it's nice to be part of a conversation with the times that you're living in. I'm interested in the idea of culture in the way that culture is used to describe life in a petri dish or bacteria; we're part of this little ecosystem. There are people who think that culture dies as soon as you put it in a museum because then it's isolated in this kind of sterile place, but I think museums have changed quite a lot.

Mona is certainly testament to this! How has your experience with Mona been?

It's pretty wild! They're incredibly supportive and obviously they have the funds to smooth things along which helps. I like the fact that David [Walsh] has this two-tiered system, which is free entry for Tasmanians and \$28 for everyone else!

EXHIBITION

Toby Ziegler | Your Shadow Rising
Until 25 March, 2019
[Museum of Old and New Art \(Mona\), Hobart](#)

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