

Studio Visit: Tim Hawkinson, The Indices of the Unknown

21 May 2018 | By Gary Brewer

“What is an idea? It is an image that paints itself in my brain.”

Art is a philosophical quest – it is a method of discovery – in the right hands, one can use it to become a vehicle to question and search for how we think and feel. Our perceptual limitations are hidden from us and, through the lens of art, we can explore the secret aspects of our bodies, minds and the universe; the indices of the unknown.

Tim Hawkinson is a protean artist. His work is driven by ideas. In the realization of the means to express these ideas, his work becomes an obsessive act of exploration and discovery. His work explores the space between self-perception and the hidden reaches of the body. “We carry a map of what we look like and how we appear to others but much of our bodies are hidden from our view, we cannot really know what we look like. We have these little brains that cannot quite understand the body. We cannot see much of it, but we feel confident that we know what we look like. I still feel like I am in the body of a child, but recently my daughter took a picture of my wife and I dressed up for an upscale event. When I saw the photo I looked like my grandfather; it was a shock.” The primal schism between what we think we know and the hard facts of reality is one of the avenues that Tim Hawkinson traverses in his varied, multi-tiered and imaginative approach to creation.



Photo courtesy of Gary Brewer.

“I focus on one part of the body, the rest of reality is a casualty of creation. I scavenge for odd logic, for the unexpected.” Years ago I saw a sculpture titled *Head*; it was a mold, for lack of a better term, that he had made by painting countless layers of latex on the inside of a bathroom. Sink, tub, toilet everything was captured. He pulled it free and hung it in the middle of the gallery and inflated it. It was a remarkable object that engaged but defied recognition. It took several moments to start to identify its component parts, “There is a toilet, that is a sink.” Slowly, one came to realize what it was. The strangeness of the revelation of identifying it, and the raw power of its sculptural form was intoxicating. Like an object from another culture or world, it held one in its grasp, without knowing what it was or what it meant. Next to it, hanging and inflated, was a latex ‘skin’ of Tim’s naked body, seemingly floating in space. When I asked about these two pieces, Tim replied, “It was a part of my inflatable series, I had already done my body and the bathroom was a logical correlation; it is a room where the bodily needs are taken care of. I had no idea of what it would look like, I was just following the odd logic of the idea.”

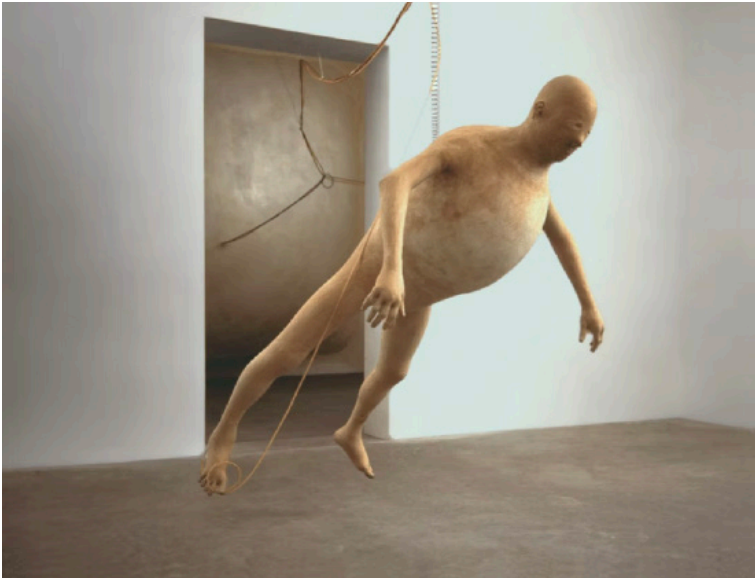


Photo courtesy of Tim Hawkinson.

Our senses are limited, imagination fills in the blind spots. We have a collective faith in the conceptual maps that culture, belief and our limited understanding of the universe gives us. It informs and shapes the way we interpret our experiences. Tim Hawkinson has created works that explore the dark matter of our world. He searches and finds representations of the immaterial stuff that informs and shapes our consciousness. An idea becomes a methodology for mapping the contours of that which is just out of reach, around the corner from cognition. Many years ago, he created a piece *Blind Spot*, in which he photographed all of the parts of his body that he could not see and then pieced them together to create a strange map of the unknown.

The result is an astonishing work. It is in the realm of the grotesque but has the innocence of a child endlessly asking questions about the world. The piece reflects an existential curiosity combined with a remarkable ability to discover uncanny formal means to resolve the quest. It could be a map, or the hide of an unknown animal. From the anus, up the lower back following the spine and spreading wider from bottom to top; it is a continent of the unknown, the parts of the body that remain hidden to our eyes and to our closest ally; self.

When I visited Tim in his studio he was working on a piece that was quite different. He was using his body to create an eccentric image of a twisting figure. The image was made by Tim standing on a base, which was slowly rotating while his wife, Patty, was taking photographs, shooting approximately 1 frame every couple of seconds, resulting in about one hundred images per rotation. He then cut $\frac{1}{4}$ inch wide horizontal strips and collaged them together in descending order. Depending on where he started in the sequence, a different perspective of the figure was given, creating the appearance of a twisting figure. After he completed them, he saw that the piece had a connection to *St. Peter's Baldachin*, the spiral pillars by Bernini, over the high altar of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The piece looks like a digital, 3-D scan of some kind. The four images of Tim's body as spiraling columns of flesh with the strange distortions make it slightly grotesque. The body twisting maelstrom-like, suggests an image from Dante's *Inferno*, or of some mythic narrative of a genie emerging from a bottle. It also alludes to Hockney's *Pear Blossom Highway* and Hockney's efforts to articulate a challenge to the dominance of single point perspective. In Tim's piece, he is traveling through a wormhole of form and history, the contours of his body shape shifting into this classical masterpiece of religious art and architecture.



Photo courtesy of Gary Brewer.

We spoke at length about how he “scavenges for odd logic,” searching for materials that suggest ideas to explore. “One piece may lead to another or something may come to my mind fully formed.” His studio is filled with an assortment of objects that he has collected. He is scavenging his studio for synthetic amber, the leftover artifacts of materials that have dried in their can or bottle, left unused for too many years. Resins, enamels, mold making materials that have solidified, have been pried from their containers and now adorn the shelves and ledges of his studio, awaiting the moment when an idea will give them formal and narrative purpose. He has many musical instruments in his home and studio, violins and instruments he has made. Indeed, sound has been a component in many of his works.

A piece in the studio, *Tiara*, is a large tiara made from recycled silver plastic objects. It is on a structure that has a motor attached that slowly turns it round and round. In the middle are small metal tanks that once held oxygen or other gases. He has created a musical instrument of sorts with these recycled tanks. As the piece turns, balls tumble about inside the tanks, creating soft metallic sounds, not unlike a steel drum. “The patterns never repeat, it rotates on two axes, so that there is no discernible patterns. The piece is a reflection of my daughter who is fourteen. Somehow it is about growing up and the innocence of youth.”

I was asking many questions trying to find a frame or structure through which to contain the tentacle-like imagination of this protean artist who seemingly discovers his formal inventions in the blind as it were; finding an idea first and then in episodic epiphanies, each step forward reveals the formal means to give shape to his ideas. In this subjective methodology Tim arrives at remarkable sculptural objects.

As we spoke he said, “I have approached making my sculptures and images from many different ideas, using my body is just one of them. Recently I have wanted to use my body to tell stories. The piece over there is a representation of Moby Dick using my body parts to reenact the image of the whale, the ship and the men lost at sea. I am not sure of the title yet, whether I will include Moby Dick in the title or not.”

The piece sat in the corner, a slightly comic hand-made bathtub that could have been designed by Robert Crumb contains casts of the knees, feet, and fingers of Tim’s body. Blue denim material from Levi’s pants, have been cut with holes in them, to allow these elements to protrude; the Levi’s are the water of the sea, a knee bent with the calf and thigh articulate the form of the great white whale, his two feet are the fluke, his fingers and hands become the ship and the men lost at sea. It is both comic and tragic, containing the pathos of the scene but with an element of comedy; humor and pathos have always been present in Tim’s work.

To be an artist is to reflect a spiritual truth about the creative impetus, the mysterious force that forms our world. Many faiths ascribe different stories to creation, but the state of grace that has brought our world into being and our ability to think, feel, love, remember, and imagine is a mystery that art touches upon. We are part of a river of creation that from the beginning of time, has flowed through the universe. To create, to care, and to bring forth the fruits of our creativity is to be an agent of this mystery.

Tim Hawkinson’s work touches upon some of the deepest quandaries of self and consciousness. He does so with a scale of imagination that bends the mind to consider the unknown, with a blend of humor and pathos. His materials are common objects from the world we know – that through alchemy – are transformed into conduits of his imagination. In this act of creative transubstantiation, the world we know is renewed, and our sense of the skin we live in is transformed.