

Cultural Comments

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DOMESTIC DISCOMFORT



Tishan Hsu, Virtual Flow (1990)

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Consider the artist as domestic archeologist: Hannah Levy, Anna Uddenberg, Nicholas Riis, and Tishan Hsu uncover the hidden perversities of familiar things. Mingling the obscene and the seductive, they draw attention to the ways our surroundings return our gaze. Their work sparkles like chromed gadgets and glistens like open mouths, inviting us to consider the tenuous divisions between inhabited biology and mere matter.

Let's say you die and your body is thrown at the base of a tree, where it proceeds to decompose. Then this tree is cut down, milled and reconstituted as a generic Parsons table. Now, to be clear, that table is you, it's your next act. Shakespeare neatly delineates this:

Hamlet: A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a King, & / eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

Claudius: What dost thou mean by this?

Hamlet: Nothing but to show you how a King may go / a Progress through the guts of a Beggar.

Kings, worms, tables – our differences are not as great as our vanities. That idea seems to drive several artists who are especially effective at collapsing the perceived distance between beings, other beings, and non-beings. It's a timely notion, as we are becoming ever more aware that we eat the fish that eat our plastic and that one of the most common ways we recycle is by devouring our own waste. Hannah Levy, Anna Uddenberg, Nicholas Riis, and Tishan Hsu address the corroded edge between us and things. Although grouping these artists requires a selective focus, together they provide potent tools for excavating the double facing, interior and exterior qualities of any given surface.

Early swimmers in a common current might include Meret Oppenheim, with her furry teacups and tables (1930s) and Dorothea Tan-

ning's amoebic upholstery (1970s). Of course, Pop Art and Dada also borrowed bits, chunks, and entreties from commercial goods. The likes of Alberto Burri and Eva Hesse interpreted the human body through means of industrial products. Contemporary artists such as Kayla Anderson and Kelly Dobson also probe the boundaries of animate matter.

There are various ways of attending to "what's underfoot", to borrow a phrase from sculptor Robert Gober. Tishan Hsu provides a link between Surrealist domesticities and our technological age, replacing what seemed to be projections of the human subconscious with projections that might issue from the subconscious of a ventilation machine. *Autopsy* (1988) is composed of tobacco-coloured tiles cladding a stack of thick slabs. The structure terminates in what appears to be an upside-down flayed table. Swivel casters act as both foundation and battlement, so the piece can be read in reverse – perhaps the upside is down. The implication seems to be that if you sanded the wood of your Parsons table, you might eventually arrive at a body.

Much has already been written on the way Hsu's work anticipated and developed the theme of biology merging with technology – wetware, soft robotics, and the like. The pixelation of the screen and the selective focus of the lens, the alarming euphony of illusory depth set against immediate, three-dimensional space – all of these fac-

tor heavily in his wall-mounted works. Less discussed are the ways his installations respond to the manufactured environment. His boxy surfaces evoke urban architecture – a gridlocked landscape punctuated by "meat-eating genies of subway breath", to quote author Martin Amis. Behind any given city-wall is a gnashing knot of intestinal pipes, fetid growths, and mutant poison-resistant insects. Vents, grilles, tubs, taps, and sockets open portals to a hidden substructure of polychrome mucus pulsing through arterial networks hundreds of metres overhead and giant subterranean throughways below. A matrix of urine and gore: that's what the urban shell conceals and that's what Hsu's art is bent on uncovering, albeit with rigorously smooth intensity. He seeks out the places where the grid begins to throb and grow moist, where the pixels peer back from the screen. In his own words: "Freed from self, consciousness enters the object, merges with the world."

Autopsy is visceral, immediate and ambiguous. What is being autopsied? And who is conducting the enquiry if not us, the audience? The functions of the forms are illegible. The fact that it's on wheels seems significant – it can travel, transforming any given 'where' into a place of mystery. This impression is magnified by Hsu's selection of distinctly unremarkable materials – subway tiles and stainless-steel basins which seem to issue from the ACME factory itself. Of course, the effect is anything but generic – the piece is like a minotaur in a tweed

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Tishan Hsu, *Autopsy* (1988)Tishan Hsu, *Decubitus* (2018)



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Anna Uddenberg, Psychotropic Lounge (II), 2019. Courtesy of the artist; Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin. Photo: Gunter Lepkowski



Anna Uddenberg, Spoiled, 2019. Courtesy of the artist; Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin. Photo: Gunter Lepkowski

jacket. Hsu's compositions juxtapose lyrical randomness with industrial regularity, striking an aesthetic nerve somewhere between seductively designed washing machines and the gaping orifices in the works of Lee Bontecou. Hsu, who studied architecture at MIT, relishes the way tiling bends into a lip – as at the edge of a pool – and is expert at finding the moment when that lip becomes uncomfortably sensual. In *Autopsy*, three donut shapes protrude anomalously from the tiles, off-centre but perfectly regular.

After a period of withdrawal from the public eye, Hsu's work has come to be widely celebrated, with solo shows in 2020 at both the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and the SculptureCenter in New York. This has coincided with the rise of several younger artists who touch-on related concerns, albeit with voices entirely their own. This zeitgeist has been accompanied by a jostling array of academic publications around living/nonliving binaries, issued under various headings: new materialism, eco criticality, vital materialism, posthumanism, actor network theory, and object-oriented ontology, to name a few. Someday everyone will have their own genre. What can be deduced is that we are in continual material exchange with our surroundings – acting on and enacting gravity, drawing in gulps of sky and giving back the leftovers. Subatomic particles leap in and out of us and our proximal environment. Borders, always contested wherever claimed, flow. Scientists like Carlo Rovelli who study quantum gravity, report that time itself is amorphous and interdependent. Which is likely what we should expect during this moment of collective fluctuation.

The continuums are finally catching up with Hsu. But while he directly engages the screen, the urban landscape and medical apparatus, what about the suburban garage, the gro-

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cery store and the mall?... To explore these other territories of the industrialized world, meet Nicholas Riis, Anna Uddenberg, and Hannah Levy.

Like Hsu, Riis frequently combines rectilinear forms with uncanny fleshiness. He draws source material from a catalogue of the quotidian grotesque: doggie chew toys, knee braces and hospital beds. Materially cohering his assemblages requires much massaging of joints and junctions – and at this, Riis is masterful. He lavishes attention on the edges and interstices, adding fabric piping and caulk-like transitions with an industrial designer's eye for aesthetic resolution, honing particulars until they affect the sheen of luxury merchandise. But what exactly is he selling?

Take *Doll Born Daytime (M) Hatchback* (2000). It imparts the eye-pleasing colours and forms of display-window advertising with a paedophilic aura that makes you ashamed to look. The more one tries to verbalise just what dark energies he is channeling, the more alarming and disturbing the work becomes. *Dita Adult* (2018) tunes into a similarly sweaty-palmed ambience – I'd compare it to a groomed, fluffed and ribboned show pony given by a mafia don to his tween daughter for her birthday. Riis delights in bad taste – in hideous taste, really – but his work is filled with nuance and a sculptural force that goes far beyond the ham-fisted kitsch of, say, Takashi Murakami. His inclusion of readymade elements is so specific that it's often difficult to know if he has fabricated what seems to be the perfect component or if he has sourced it. See, for instance, the sports padding in *Decubitus* (2018).

Riis's fondness for sports gear and synthetic fur is paralleled by Anna Uddenberg's. She gets as much out of cheap carpet as Robert Morris got out of industrial felt. Uddenberg's work looks like it might have been

generated by an AI-system trained on Georgia O'Keeffe paintings and La-Z-Boy chair advertisements. Like Hsu and Riis, Uddenberg makes beige a conductor of searing optical impact. She prefers carpet-coloured carpet, the spray-tan of pleather, and the chemical white of polyester. Uddenberg pushes you into a void that is inhumanly clean and frighteningly odourless, as if vacuum-packed.

She often incorporates explicitly figurative female forms. Her women have all the humanity of hotel rooms; their skin is a graft of cyber-punk apparel, their limbs distended into ludicrously hypersexual poses. Often frozen in the act of taking selfies, they seem like Arcimboldo's consumable objects. One thinks of Luc Goddard's film *Alphaville*, in which women are sold together with apartments, as decor. And indeed, libidinally charged furnishings fill one branch of Uddenberg's oeuvre. *Psychotropic Lounge* is equal parts hovercraft and tacky brothel sex-furniture. *Hairy Foot* (2017) makes my eyes drool. It hangs like a suspension bridge between gasp-inducing beauty and the revoltingly grotesque. What Uddenberg does that many artists working with similar themes do not do, is exploit the power of ambiguity. Her women are as likely to have packaged themselves as to have been packaged. She thwarts lazy meaning-finding, in part through sheer optical dazzle – it takes so much effort to visually process her sculptures that intellectual interpretation is delayed. When emphasising the inertia of non-living material, Immanuel Kant calls it "crude matter". Uddenberg puts the emphasis on 'crude' but her constructions are anything but inert. They emit big bursts of anti-gravity and gravity – sending you reeling back in disgust and drawing you in again.

In her 2014 series *Transit Mode*, limbless female torsos often merge with or emerge from suitcases, like

Anna Uddenberg, FOCUS (Keep Calm), 2018, courtesy of the artist; Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin. Photo: Gunter Lepkowski



Anna Uddenberg, Mont Blanc, 2020, courtesy of the artist; Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin. Photo: Gunter Lepkowski

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Hannah Levy, Untitled (2018)



Hannah Levy, Untitled (2020)

pornographic figureheads on the bows of ships. At other times, they are haphazardly stuffed into luggage. The luggage, like the women, is seductively and curvaceously detailed. Like the women, the luggage is seductively and curvaceously detailed. Similarly, a woman's body can be treated as a scaffold for fantasy. Uddenberg has identified the disconcerting bandwidth where the commoditization of female bodies and the sexualization of product design fall into mutuality. Trunks of women and travel trunks, travelling together.

While Riis and Uddenberg focus on the packaged, Hannah Levy is more preoccupied with the unpeeled. She describes her work as existing within a "design purgatory". Her work is all skin and bones, steel and latex; a restricted pallet of deflated cool and sterilised sadism. Never have claw feet conveyed such a chilling bloodlessness. When she casts thick phallic forms in silicone, there is no sense that they have an interior life – it is just skin-deep all the way. At other times, she stretches latex to the point of near-tearing. Her work toggles between the taut but hollow, the tumescent but limp. In *Untitled* (2020) and *Untitled* (2018), gargantuan spears of asparagus are draped across polished steel armatures. They evoke the tension of worms suspended helplessly on, but not penetrated by, gleaming hooks. Imagine surveying a fridge full of fresh produce composed of human organs – a squash-shaped liver, a salad-shaped pancreas, wrinkled cabbages of damp intestine encased in pull-and-rip cellophane – food which seems to have preemptively reconstituted itself as the material it is destined to become. Or the inverse. As per Hamlet's parable – kings becoming beggars becoming kings.

Political theorist Jane Bennett writes that "the association of matter with passivity still haunts us today, ... weakening our discernment of the

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force of things". Hsu, Riis, Uddenberg, and Levy all bring 'the force of things' to the fore. Their work flashes with the thought that we are "part of some massive untethered subjectivity projected onto matter as a screen", in the words of artist Kayla Anderson. Our tables, food, chairs, and our own bodies are exchanging matter all the time.

In this context, the question of authorship might be revised from the deconstructionist 'who is it that speaks' to the vital materialist 'what is it that speaks'. The matter from which we are formed passes in and out of what we call 'life' – it decomposes and recomposes, it affiliates and returns. Awareness of this allows us to simultaneously appreciate that there is something as miraculous in a rock as there is in a brain, and to make the unsettling connection between what we eat and the fertiliser we become.

Rocks don't choose to become rocks. But neither do people choose to become people. It's rather dubious, given our circumscribed origins, whether anything can be said to be willed at all. We are, according to the new materialists, brief constipations in the circulation of matter. When Brutus asks for the crowd to lend him their ears, he is speaking no less literally than figuratively. As art-historian Joanna Fiduccia puts it, "The ear is a channel through which we, as much as any sound, pass." Listen, and what you hear becomes part of you. Speak, and you become a part of what listens. Entangling, entwining, entraining, enfolding, enmeshing – these are the verbs these four artists call to mind.

A human leg bone is made of calcium, iron, zinc, silicon, etc. The same minerals exist outside the human body as well. Once we take them in – through food – they are absorbed into the constituency we identify as ours. At what point, exactly, is the 'it' subsumed by the

'I'? When a mineral is partially digested but still in the stomach? Or when it is in the mouth but can be easily spat out? But what if part of the 'I' is cut away? Enlargements of the first-person singular can tug outward in all directions – contrast "I am the State" and "We the People". They can be physical – as when U.S. marines recite the Rifleman's Creed: "My rifle is human" – or metaphysical, as when Americans pledge allegiance to the flag. Over the past several decades, an academic argument has been developing around the problematics of living and non-living matter. What the artists here do is lyricise and volatilise the felt response to uncertainty about the aliveness of things – looking at their work, we are disconcerted by the hybridised, partial measures of being, at once reduced and augmented. We see ourselves, our things, and our spaces drawn together in perplexing assemblages.

Food, as Shakespeare notes (and Bernard-Henri Levy's work intuitively is a concentrated mingling of our material pasts, futures and presents. Our thoughts themselves are recomposed from the dead meat of animals. The hindquarters of a cow helped conjure Zarathustra. As did some leafy greens that grew in such-and-such a place. As did the worms that tilled the soil where the greens were grown. Worms which perhaps carried the germs of kings within them. Such is authorship, according to some authors. In one sense, this addresses a foundational assumption of art – that inanimate objects can transmit the pulse of something alive, that objects, in fact, far from being inanimate, are vital actors. <

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