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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The College of Art and Design

School of Art

In Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS in Fine Arts Studio

[Iteration 2491-J]

by

Jeff Leavitt

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Thesis Approval

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I. Abstract

When one considers the macro scale of human existence, it is ultimately a never-ending cycle of futility. We are born, some of us reproduce, and then we die. No matter what exists within that cycle, those facts remain true. However, a futile existence does not have to be a meaningless one. When one considers the micro scale of human existence, there is beauty and joy within the lives of individuals. Individuality is an essential component our existence, and it allows us to spend our time on this planet in a meaningful way. Futility, as a concept, is not inherently pessimistic. Futility can also be beautiful, not despite of its nature, but because of it. The concept can be both depressing and uplifting simultaneously. Futility, and this dissonant relationship are what I hope to examine in this thesis exploration.

The title of my thesis, [*Iteration 2491-J*] references the importance of the iterative process throughout my journey of researching and creating my artwork. Not only, did iteration play a large role in the development of the physical artwork for my thesis exhibition, it also was an essential part of the implied narratives. The number 2491 is an homage to the single most influential piece of inspiration in my research, *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus. The number is a reversal of 1942, the year the essay was original published.

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II. Introduction

The intended outcome of my original thesis proposal was to explore relatable experiences of growth and moving through life, with a focus on the cyclical and often futile nature of human existence. My research also led me to consider the value of tonal dissonance in my artwork, creating two contradictory feelings that are allowed to exist simultaneously. In this document, I will examine the philosophical influences of my thesis work, as well as other visual artists that I drew inspiration from. I consider the philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus, and its contribution to the theories of existentialism. Visual artists who have been crucial in my developing understanding of my own work include Tony Oursler, Takashi Murakami, and Tom Otterness. Paul Budnitz and his discussion of the designer toy community, as well as one piece by artists Sun Yuan, and Peng Yu also contributed to my thought process. Each of these artists has influenced my thesis work, whether it be aesthetically or conceptually. I explore the journey I underwent to arrive at my finished pieces, and how my thought process matured and developed along the way. The pieces in my thesis exhibition revolved around the character of a toy-like robot of my own design. This document explores this robot's presence during every step of my process and where it led my work. Finally, I discuss the concepts, intentions and results of the pieces featured in my thesis exhibition.

III. Research and Inspiration

Philosophy

The main source of philosophical research that influenced my thesis was *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus. Camus was a twentieth century existentialist philosopher from French Algeria (Aronson). He followed and expanded upon philosophical theories of existentialism, and contributed to the rise of the philosophy of absurdism (Aronson). To understand existentialism and absurdism, we must first look at their roots in nihilism and essentialism with the idea of ‘essence’. The idea of essence was discussed by ancient greek philosophers such as Aristotle (Robertson). The philosophical definition of ‘essence’ is “a property or group of properties of something without which it would not exist or be what it is” (Robertson). For example, take an axe. The handle of the axe could be long or short, green or purple, made of plastic or wood or steel, but it would still be an axe. If the axe does not have the axehead, the blade, it would not be considered an axe. Therefore the axehead is considered an *essential* component of the tool. Similarly, the philosophy of essentialism posited that human beings each also had their own essence— some innate part of their being that was essential to their existence as themselves (Robertson). This essence was not the same for all of humanity, but rather unique to individuals, meaning that every person had their own inherent purpose to their own lives (Robertson). In essentialism, your essence existed inside you even before you were born (Robertson). Much later, in the late eighteenth century, essentialism was responded to with the philosophy of nihilism by philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche (Reginster, 21). Nihilism posits that, counter to essentialism, there is no meaning or essence to life at all (Reginster, 21).

Existentialism lands somewhere in the middle between those two extremes. Like Albert Camus, another twentieth century philosopher that contributed to the creation of existentialism was Jean-Paul Sartre (Paeth, 145). Existentialism takes the core conceit of essentialism, that essence predates existence, and flips it backwards. Like with nihilism, Sartre agreed that each individual's life has no *inherent* meaning before they are born, but they are, in fact, free to assign that meaning themselves (Paeth, 148). This is the basis of existentialism, that existence comes before essence (Paeth, 148). Where it differs from nihilism is that in existentialism, one's purpose is to discover their own essence and to act on it (Paeth, 148). Absurdism is also closely tied to the ideas of existentialism. In philosophy, the 'absurd' refers more specifically to this idea of looking for a universal meaning without the possibility of arriving at an answer that actually satisfies us (Aronson). For Camus, the lack of meaning to existence is not meant to be bleak, but freeing (Aronson).

Finally, *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus explores this idea of the absurd in more depth. The essay looks at humanity's search for meaning through the lens of Sisyphus, the figure from greek mythology. Sisyphus was a human king in greek mythology who was punished by Zeus for evading death (Cartwright). Zeus' punishment for Sisyphus was to make him endlessly push a bolder up a steep hill, only to have it roll down again once he reached the top. He would repeat this futile and pointless process endlessly for eternity (Cartwright). Albert Camus took Sisyphus' situation as an allegory for human existence (Camus). The day to day menial tasks that we perform are akin to the pointlessness of Sisyphus endlessly pushing his boulder up the hill (Camus). Camus posits that, the only truly important philosophical question, is whether or not to continue living (Camus). He believed you must accept the absurd, that life has no prescribed

meaning, and either A. assign your own meaning and keep living, or B. kill yourself. In the story of Sisyphus, Camus is most interested in the period of time not when Sisyphus is pushing the boulder, but the moment after the boulder rolls back down and Sisyphus walks down the hill to begin the task again (Camus). Camus sees this period as Sisyphus' true strength, his conscious decision to go repeat a process that he already knows is futile and meaningless. He compares this action to our own lives (Camus). We too get up everyday and repeat the same tasks repetitiously, some of which cause struggle and pain. Then everyday, or every week, we do it all again. To rectify this analogy and keep it from being overwhelmingly bleak, Camus states that "one must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus). If we take ownership of the absurd and futile situation that we live in, we can accept that struggling is part of life. By accepting the absurd, we can find happiness, not in a goal to be eventually reached, but in the path to complete that goal (Camus). Sisyphus never achieves his goal; the boulder will never stay atop the hill. He finds happiness in the process by accepting the absurd and not being defeated by it.

Given that the essay begins with a statement that the only important question is whether or not to commit suicide, it surprisingly arrives at a much more uplifting conclusion. This tonal shift/incongruity was something I was greatly interested in incorporating into my thesis work. The themes discussed in Camus' essay operate both to point out the unavoidable futility of human existence, but also the joy that can arise from it. He presents a somber, and dark narrative of human existence, and gives it an uplifting aftertaste. I consider both of these presented tones to be important to my own work. My intention is to illustrate these darker ideas, with a similarly optimistic twist, hidden within. The idea of futility, in general carries this meaning for me. It carries negative connotations but it can also have a certain beauty to it as well.

Artists

Tony Oursler is a contemporary American projection artist who creates strange and alien forms that ‘poke fun’ at human behaviors and tendencies. His installations that I am most drawn to fall into the uncanny valley. The uncanny valley refers to a theory that claims that the more human characteristics an inanimate object takes on, the more relatable it is, but when the characteristics get too close to human, but not quite there, it becomes unsettling. This disturbing area in between personified objects and actual humanity is referred to as the uncanny valley (Mori, 90). Oursler uses this effect to create alien-like projection sculptures and installations by projecting human facial features onto abstract forms and scripting them various ominous dialogue. He uses video editing to stitch together facial features, commonly two eyes and a mouth but no nose. The features are all on one form, but they move independently of each other, translating normal human facial movements into grotesque and unsettling imagery. Though I am personally drawn to the uncanny valley aesthetic, it was not my intention to incorporate that aspect of Oursler’s work into the artwork for my thesis. The critique and exploration of human behavior is the area that I was most interested in drawing inspiration from. In his piece *Big Eyes*, he projects a woman’s eyes and mouth onto a bulbous abstract form. The script that he gives his actress is an unintelligible, extreme version of the kind of ‘baby talk’ that one would use to talk to small children or their pets. The result is the transformation of a recognizable and somewhat embarrassing human behavior into a deeply unnerving alien-like performance. This removes the viewer from an experience they have likely seen or even participated in in their own lives, and highlights the inherent oddness of the behavior by removing it from its original context. It is this removal of context to highlight ridiculousness that I have attempted to emulate in my own work.

One of my own pieces that was pivotal to enhancing my own understanding of my conceptual intentions, that followed Oursler's example was *Hurdle* (Figure 17). Additionally, *Hurdle* was my first experimentation with projection art, which was also inspired by Oursler's use of the medium. I projected a stop-motion animation of one of my robots onto a canvas with a painted set of stairs continuing off both opposite corners of the canvas. The robot slowly and methodically walks up the stairs, disappearing off the edge and reentering from the other side in an endless loop. Similar to Oursler's *Big Eyes*, I took an ordinary human behavior and completely removed it from its context to erase its meaning in order to ask the viewer to consider the action in its own right. By removing the destination from the repetitive stair climbing, my intention was to make the action feel absurd, in the colloquial sense as well as the philosophical. I will further describe the intended effect and impact of this piece in the critical analysis section of this thesis, but I included the glimpse here to illustrate the derivation from Oursler's work.

Takashki Murakami is a contemporary Japanese painter who blurs the lines between fine art and designer merchandise. Murakami makes enormous paintings that often feature a variety of colorful repeated characters. His original characters draw inspiration from science fiction, and Japanese mythology ("Takashi Murakami"). His pieces also relate to Japanese kawaii culture. Kawaii, in Japanese, translates to "cute," but the culture of kawaii has expanded past that to imply the total immersion into the cute culture and lifestyle (Burdelski, 65). Kawaii culture was largely popularized by Japanese characters such as Hello Kitty (Burdelski, 67). I will further discuss Hello Kitty in the critical analysis section in regards to my own work. Murakami's work, like kawaii, embraces the commercial and popular culture side of art, especially the art market. My paintings draw visual inspiration from Murakami, also using vibrant colors and incorporating

large, empty spaces on the canvas. Additionally, like Murakami, I am also interested in the effect of using the same characters as a motif in a variety of my pieces. Murakami's characters tend to be darker and more twisted than many kawaii characters, instead more closely following the aesthetics of the designer toy community. Designer toy artist Paul Budnitz describes the difference between designer toys and commercial toys for children in a 2014 interview ("Paul Budnitz Trains..."). He states that the key difference is the juxtaposition designer toys often have in their design between two conflicting ideas ("Paul Budnitz Trains..."). As well as being a designer himself, Budnitz is also the founder of the company Kidrobot, a popular dealer of designer toys and other limited edition artist products (Figures 21-23) ("Biography"). This dissonance that Budnitz describes is also a quality that exists in Takashi Murakami's work. Murakami's paintings include a variety of colorful cartoon characters that have a somewhat twisted, mutated demeanor to them. This allows Murakami's characters to appear both cute, and menacing at the same time, creating that juxtaposition that Budnitz sees as key to the designer toy movement ("Paul Budnitz Trains..."). In my thesis work, I also strived to include this dissonance. For example, in my painting *Quality Control*, I depict a scene of a robot in a vibrant and colorful landscape, dumping a bucket of black and white parts of the edge of a cliff (Figures 12-13). The robot, with his vacant expression, appears innocent and hopefully charming. Upon closer inspection, however, the objects that he's dumping over the ledge are the same shapes as the pieces that make up his own body. My intention for the work is to create an alluring first impression, a sense of cuteness and approachability. Once the bright colors and charming character lure viewers in, they are then more easily allowed to digest the darker undertones of the piece. The dark implications, which I will discuss in further detail in the critical analysis section,

and the cute and alluring aesthetic do not work against each other. Like the juxtaposition that Budnitz describes, the two ideas are allowed to exist simultaneously, without fighting for power. Budnitz argues that children will often only feel one thing at a time, whereas adults, as we mature and complex, often hold several conflicting emotions at once (“Paul Budnitz Trains...”).

I have also been inspired by the sculptures of American artist Tom Otterness. Otterness is another artist who uses the veneer of charming characters to explore more serious concepts. One example of this is his installation *Creation Myth* outside the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester, New York (Figures 24-26). The series of large, carved limestone and cast bronze sculptures depict several male and female gendered figures creating and building each other in a variety of ways. Upon first glance, my initial interpretation of the installation was that it was essentially a love letter to traditional sculpture techniques. The three largest figures in the installation each illustrate the three primary sculpture making strategies: addition, subtraction, and substitution. One of the figures is being assembled together from pieces— addition (Figure 24). One is midway through being carved away from a stone by another— subtraction (Figure 25). And finally one was sculpted to appear as though it was being removed from a mold— substitution (Figure 26). However, when considering the pieces further, there are several underlying implications of gender and sexuality politics and representation. In addition to the larger structures in the sculpture garden, there are also several smaller bronze cast pieces that depict similar scenarios to the larger ones. Some of the figures, while creating each other, are embracing or kissing and the couples that are represented include every variety of gender pairings. Additionally, and most notably, one of the smaller bronze sculptures depicts two of the figures writing a document titled “The Revolution.” The Document reads, “men, their rights and nothing

more; women, their rights and nothing less”. At the bottom of the document, the names of Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton are signed, significant figures in the women’s suffrage movement. Here, Otterness uses childlike, and charming figures to illustrate more serious and positive messages. The figures that he uses in *Creation Myth* are also recurring motifs in many of his pieces. In this way, his work relates to my own in many of the same ways that my work relates to the designer toy community and Takashi Murakami’s work. Additionally, in this installation, Otterness makes meta-contextual references to the processes he used to create the pieces, paying homage to his own identity as an artist. Similarly, in my thesis work, it is also my intention to include references back to myself as an artist and how that influences my thought processes while creating the work. For example, in both *Sell Your Darlings*, and *Rinse, Repeat*, integral parts of the bodies of the sculptures were designed to evoke the identity of white cube gallery pedestals (Figures 9-11, Figures 1-4). It was important to me that these pieces carry my identity of someone studying in the fine arts world. The concepts explored in each of these pieces are not exclusive to this narrative, but referencing back to my personal journey to exploring these ideas felt crucial to include.

Lastly, one of the pieces that was paramount to helping me understand the potential beauty in futility was *Can’t Help Myself* by Chinese artists Sun Yuan and Peng Yu (Figure 27). Commissioned for the Guggenheim Museum in 2016, and included in the 2019 Venice Biennale: *May You Live in Interesting Times*, the piece is comprised of a large mechanical arm in an enclosed space (“Can’t Help Myself”). At the end of the arm is a large squeegee and surrounding it is a thin layer of red liquid in a large circle. Using sensors, the arm procedurally rotates around and uses the squeegee to pull the red circle of liquid closer to itself when the liquid seeps far

enough away. This action causes the liquid to slowly expand outward into other areas of the circle, which triggers the sculpture's sensors to move to that spot and repeat the process.

Between its sweeps, the arm moves around in choreographed dances. Each component combines to be a mesmerizing and somewhat hypnotic display. As the arm completes its programmed objective, it automatically gives itself more to achieve. There is a certain humor in an unconscious machine, repeatedly attempting to complete a task that it will never achieve, especially when we view it through the lens of the tale of Sisyphus. Sisyphus serves as the bridge that enables us to view ourselves from the perspective of the machine, further highlighting the futility and humor of our own repetitious lives. However, it is important to remember that though the machine's futility is humorous and somewhat tonally melancholic, there is still beauty in the action. The futility does not erase the beauty of the movements; the two ideas, though dissonant, are allowed to coexist. In fact, neither idea would be as poignant without the other. Like the work of Murakami, and Budnitz, and Otterness, the tonal dissonance is what gives the piece its strength.

IV. Critical Analysis

The Journey

In this section, I recount the evolution of my thought process and discuss pivotal moments that led me to arrive at my finished body of work and conceptual understanding of the philosophy behind it. To go fully in-depth in discussing my thesis work as it exists now, I believe it is important to look at the first seed that it evolved from. The robot that exists within almost every piece in my thesis exhibition was originally conceived in some forgotten point in my childhood. When I was young, I had recently discovered the material of polymer clay. Among many static creations of odd and amusing creatures, I decided to experiment with making a sculpture with moving parts that could pose like a simple action figure. Before continuing, to understand my motivation to do this, it is also important to know that I have been an avid collector of toys since around this age. For much of my early artistic career, I saw my fascination with art and my fascination with toys to be completely unrelated. They were two distinct areas in my life that did not have any sort of cross-pollination. I believed this to be true until only a couple of years ago. Now, having matured as an artist and as a person, I am able to see that my perspective as a collector does inform many of my decisions as an artist. Once I began my artistic career at RIT, I still struggled with this idea. I attempted to embrace the connection between my interest in toys and fine art but trying to make art about this part of my life never felt completely sincere. Through much experimentation and trial and error, I was able to accept that, just because my life as a collector *informed* my artwork, it did not mean that my art had to be *about* that. I want my art to have meaning, but I do not want that search for meaning to bleed into

my hobby. It is important that I have that occasional respite from my more conceptual thought as a fine artist and let myself be fascinated with something conceptually simple. While I am now open to letting my knowledge and fascination with toys inform my art, it must remain a one way street. For this reason, the artwork in my thesis is not about toys or collecting, nor do I wish it to be. This journey of thought also allowed me to conclude that there are two distinct ways in which I make art— as a fine artist, and as an art hobbyist. This is, undoubtedly, not a distinction that is specific to me, but it feels as though there are two different parts of my being that are drawn to create for entirely different reasons. The art hobbyist in me wants to make art to challenge myself, to play without the tether of a meaningful concept attached to my work. The fine artist in me wants to say something, to create in order to communicate something to the outside world. Often my work as an art hobbyist will evolve into fine art, but I have to let it get there on its own, and allow it to not get there if it does not want to. Now that that context is explained, I will continue to recount the conception of my first robot. This experiment was the art hobbyist in me, wanting to make something simple and fun to see if I could. I created a simple robot, made up of six parts, a body, a head, two arms, and two legs (Figure 19). I baked each part separately so they could attach together after they had cooled. It didn't really work. Polymer clay, as a material, was not really suitable for what I was attempting. The joints were loose, fell apart constantly, and caused stress fractures in the clay when I moved them. The robot went in my box of failed ideas that I was too sentimental to get rid of, and stayed there for years.

After receiving my Bachelor of Arts degree from University of Rochester in 2017, I had improved my artistic skills, and my knowledge of materials. I was going through boxes of old things from my childhood and I came across the robot. With my life in a state of transition, I

decided to revisit my childhood idea. I now possessed the skills to make a rubber mold and cast in resin, so the material limitations that caused me to abandon the idea years prior no longer existed. Feeling nostalgic, I decided to faithfully recreate and update my old design to make it something new, but still pay homage to its roots. This is one area where my identity as a collector informed my artistic practice. New toys that are released will often be updated versions of toys of the same characters that were released decades prior. I made my new parts out of polymer clay, and cast them in resin to create my new robot (Figure 20). I made this robot as a hobbyist. It did not have a deeper conceptual context; I just knew that I had to make it. However, once it was made, I started to feel that it could be something more important, and more meaningful.

When I began my studies at RIT in 2018, my only interest was diving into the rabbit hole I knew I had found for myself. I had absolutely no idea what this robot was about, but I knew it was about *something*. My initial strategy was to make a third iteration of the robot. My thought process was that if I worked in stages, the joints would become more sophisticated, the articulation would improve, and the design would become more complex. I began reproducing new copies of all of my parts, as well as designing new ones. The second iteration had loose joints held together by wire pins. It could not stand on its own, and like the original design, the head was attached with a peg, so it could rotate but could also easily detach from the body. I wanted to incorporate ratcheting joints for the elbows and knees and ball and socket joints for the shoulders, neck and waist. The new design was going to be twice as tall, with more than triple the number of components. I was going to update the aesthetic design as well, with a rounded, segmented body, a head with a hinging jaw, and hands with all five fingers. I spend about two months going down this path.

While I continued working on the new design, almost as a side project, I decided to rework a few of the joints from the first new iteration, without significantly changing the aesthetic design. I cut one of the cast bodies in half, and built in sockets for ball joints for the neck, shoulders, and hips. Previously, the body was all one piece, including the joints where the shoulders and hips attached. The legs could not rotate, and the arms could not move forward and backward at the shoulder, only out to the side, due to the way they were attached. I made new shoulder, hip and head pieces with balljoints. I also redesigned the hands, changing the way they attached to the arms, and adding a new joint so the thumb could rotate in and out. Once I cast all the new parts and assembled the new iteration of the design, I immediately knew that I had to stop working on the new, more complicated design and begin reproducing more of this simpler iteration of the robot.

I realized that the simplicity of the design was somehow integral to the success of the character. By trying to make the robot more complex, I was diminishing the effect it could have. The vacant expression on the robot's face allowed it to become a blank slate for others to project onto. The kawaii character, Hello Kitty was also designed with this intention (*The Toys That Made Us* 9:00-9:45). Part of the popularity of the Japanese character was her innocence, and her lack of expression. The character has just two dot eyes in the middle of her face, a nose, and no mouth. The lack of a mouth was integral to the simplicity of the character that allowed children to project themselves onto her (*The Toys That Made Us* 40:30-40:45). If the child was sad, Kitty was sad; if the child was happy, Kitty was happy. I had studied Japanese kawaii culture a few years earlier, but had not made the connection until then between the pop culture icon, and my own character. My robot had the same vacant expression with two simple eyes, and no mouth. I

wish I could say that I designed it specifically with this intent, but the truth is that it happened by accident.

Now that I had this final design, and an understanding of what drew me to the character in the first place, I started experimenting with different ways it could be used. The pieces that most successfully used the robots, for me, were my paintings. Even with the earlier design, I had begun using the robot as a subject in my paintings. After some trial and error, I eventually discovered success in creating paintings that were almost entirely empty space, with one robot somewhere in the composition by himself. Compared to previous paintings with more sophisticated scenes, again, I found that the simpler approach felt more powerful. The first of these paintings, *Open*, depicted one robot standing in a void (Figure 18). The light on the robot's face was at such an angle, that the cast shadows from the eyes created the appearance of tears rolling down his face. This piece was where I began to realize the value in the dichotomous relationship between conflicting tones, as discussed earlier in relation to Paul Budnitz and the designer toy movement. The figure of the robot itself was cute, innocent, and toy-like, but it appeared to be in a state of great sorrow and loneliness.

This was the first piece that I had found real success in. In attempting to replicate its results, I created more paintings with similarly empty spaces. The one quality of the robots that I felt was still not being properly represented was their movement. The initial conception of the idea to make the robot hinged upon its use of articulated joints. From here, I simultaneously started working on incorporating movement into my new pieces in two entirely distinct ways. I began attempting to make kinetic sculptures using the physical robots, and also started to experiment with projection. I had already been drawn to the artwork of Tony Oursler for several

years, so incorporating projection into my practice felt like a logical next step. I wanted to maintain the success I felt I had created in my paintings, so I decided that the surface I should project onto would be a painted canvas. I used one of my plastic robots to create a stop-motion animation of the figure walking up a flight of stairs. I edited out the background of the video so the robot was the only thing being projected and painted the stairs onto the canvas itself. This piece, *Hurdle*, was easily the most pivotal artwork in affecting the trajectory of the rest of my thesis exploration (Figure 17). Throughout the process of making this piece, I began to think about the tale of Sisyphus which led to my research of Albert Camus and existentialism. The futility of the action felt hugely important to me. This piece came at a time in my life where I felt everything I was doing was futile. The iterative process of my art practice was not evolving as quickly as I wanted it to. My kinetic sculptures proved to be more difficult and less rewarding than I had hoped. I had abandoned about a dozen ideas, leaving me feeling as though I had invested a great amount of work with little to show for it. This all contributed to feelings of despair and futility, creating a personal connection to the piece that I did not fully realize existed until it was finished. I had already been endlessly walking up this flight of stairs with no view of the top, often making it feel like I was on the bottom step again. I realized this connection while installing the piece for the second time. My studio was in the basement of the building, and the equipment cage where I checked out the projector was on the third floor, so every time I wanted to install the piece, I physically had to walk up three flights of stairs, which felt poetic in a way. When *Hurdle* successfully came together, I finally felt that my work had a tangible direction to go in. My next conclusion was that the piece was not just successful as an illustration of futility, but also in its relatability to human experiences like the one I was having.

The kinetic piece I had been working on was a segmented conveyor belt. One section had individual robot parts and the other had fully assembled robots. I included several supplementary robots walking between the belts to imply that once the robots were created, they immediately became assembly line workers to create the next batch. This piece, *Reproduction Line*, identified another quality that I felt was important to the body of my thesis work—the generational cycle. When thinking about futility, I had begun to consider not only feelings of futility in individual's lives, but the broader futility of human existence. When one zooms out and looks at the macro picture of the human life cycle, we are born, some of us have children, and we die. Our children and our children's children follow along and repeat the same, never ending process. And when that pattern is broken down and simplified to just those facts, it becomes a pointless, never ending cycle. However, if one zooms in on the micro picture, individuals create meaning in their own lives, and that meaning has a beauty to it. This creates that same juxtaposing relationship that Budnitz posited, where the somber tones of the macro futility contrast with the hopeful tones of the micro beauty. The two ideas are somewhat contradictory, but yet they simultaneously exist in tandem. It was here that I came to the realization that the robots could not just represent a single individual, but also the broader human condition. Again, narratively, these two ideas contradict each other. Is the robot humanity, or is the robot a human? It had to be both. They had to represent futility within each of our lives to create that personal connection, and they had to represent the larger human condition to successfully speak to existentialist theory.

Now that I was focusing on this macro vs. micro futility and cyclical nature of humanity, I was able to answer many questions I had about what drew me to the robot in the first place. I'd latched onto some deeper ideas, so did the subject of my pieces have to be the robot? The robot

helped me find the meaning in my pieces, but was it relevant any longer or was it a distraction? I did some introspection and created new pieces, both with, and without the robot. I began to realize that the identity of this robot toy was deeply engrained in the concepts for me. It had just enough human qualities to be relatable like Hello Kitty, but was just foreign enough to allow for that level of separation. In Tony Oursler's projections, that degree of removal from humanity is important because it allows viewers to digest the behaviors of his creatures from an outside perspective. My robots were not as alien or grotesque, but they also were not human. No matter how many human similarities they possess, they are a separate entity. One painting I created substituted myself for the robot. I painted myself climbing an endless flight of stairs. Without the robot, it felt insincere. With myself in the image, it felt too specific to me, whereas the robots always felt like they could represent me, and the whole of humanity simultaneously. As representations of futility, they perfectly embodied the narrative that I was attempting to imply. They were little, hapless drones, going about their duties without a second thought. They were alive, but barely conscious. This comparison to humanity felt apt to me. Their lack of deeper thought leads them to perform the same repetitive, pointless tasks on loop. However, within those cycles, there are glimpses of joy and hope. I arrived at the conclusion that the robots had to stay. They were integral components to what was exciting me about the work; they were the essence that made the artwork what it was.

The Work

In this section I will discuss the five pieces that I selected to be shown in the thesis exhibition. It should be noted that, due to the COVID-19 outbreak and resulting quarantine order in the state of New York, the exhibition did not take place in a physical space. The change from physical to online gallery also affected my selections of which pieces would be included.

Piece 1: *Rinse, Repeat* (Figures 1-4)

Rinse, Repeat is a static sculpture that depicts the scene of seventeen small robots walking up a spiraling brick staircase that leads to the top of a tower. At the top of the tower, the robots wait in line to get on a slide. The slide spirals down to the very beginning where the robots get up, walk up the stairs once more, and repeat the process endlessly.

Despite being physically the darkest piece in the thesis, this piece probably has the brightest outlook. Here, the endless cycle of the robots is put into a positive light by giving them an obvious sense of enjoyment. *Rinse, Repeat* was heavily inspired by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's *Can't Help Myself*. *Can't Help Myself* creates a purely beautiful display of futility. The only somber tones in the piece are the presence of futility itself. The mechanical arm in the piece performing a repetitive task and creating problems for itself by solving others. The inclusion of the dance choreography indicates to me that robotic arm is not despairing its situation. So too is the case in *Rinse, Repeat*. The robots are performing an activity that, for us, while fun at first, would get repetitive and painful. For the robots, however, they are showing no signs of fatigue. In this piece in particular, they appear mostly emotionless. The robots on the slide itself, however, have their arms thrust into the air, which indicates that they do derive some enjoyment

from the process. The robots are ultimately enjoying their experience, even if it is ultimately futile. I felt it was necessary to include this more overtly positive narrative into the exhibition. Like Camus, my goal was to posit a seemingly grim narrative, but land at a hopeful conclusion.

As mentioned previously, the piece is constructed around a white gallery pedestal. The root of my consideration of futility was ultimately my own experiences feeling futile as a visual artist. For this reason, I felt it was important for the piece to retain some tether to the world of fine art, other than just existing in an art gallery. I admit that this symbolic connection is not completely resolved, either in the work, or in my own thought process, but instinctively I still felt that it was essential to include.

Piece 2: *Important Question* (Figures 5-8)

Important Question is the sole projection piece that I selected to include in the exhibition. It consists of three stretched canvas, painted with latex paint-pour environments. Projected onto the canvases is a single robot. The robot begins on the rectangular pink canvas (Figure 6), and slowly walks from the right side until she disappears off the left edge. After a few seconds, the robot reappears on the yellow, trapezoidal canvas (Figure 7). Now much closer to the perspective of the viewer, the robot is larger in comparison to his background. She methodically climbs the stairs, with a similar motion and speed to *Hurdle*, then disappears off the top right corner of the canvas. Lastly, after a few seconds, she reappears on the right edge of the purple hexagonal canvas (Figure 8). Now a medium size compared to her appearance on the prior two canvases, she walks to the edge of the cliffside, pauses for a moment, and then jumps off. Seconds later she falls face-first onto the right side of the pink canvas, gets up, and begins her loop again.

The primary inspiration for this piece was the opening question in Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus posits that the only truly important philosophical question is suicide (Camus). The robot in this piece is the closest out of any of the robots in my thesis to being self-aware and capable of philosophical thought. The robot goes through her long and futile journey throughout the three canvases. When she arrives at the end, she has a moment of conscious thought and clarity. This moment in the narrative of the piece is equivalent to the moment of consciousness for Sisyphus that Camus discusses. Camus is most interested in the moment that Sisyphus sees his boulder roll back down the hill, and makes the decision to begin the process again (Camus). However, in *Important Question*, my intention was to leave the decision of the robot at the end of the narrative up to the interpretation of the viewer. Is the robot deciding to break the loop and kill herself? Or is she able to see where she began from the top of the cliff, and jump off to land on the pink canvas and restart her own process like Sisyphus? Does she survive the fall and endlessly repeat the same loop or is the next robot a new reincarnation after the suicide of the last? I believe either interpretation to be equally valid.

Additionally, to further blur these lines, I added slight variations to certain iterations of the loop. The majority of the iterations are this same default loop, but in some instances, the robot will trip as she walks along the pink canvas. Shortly after, she gets up and continues walking. The second variance happens right at the end of the narrative. As the robot reaches the end of her path on the cliff, instead of just pausing for a moment before she jumps, in this variation, she looks directly outward towards the viewer, puts a symbolic 'finger-gun' to her head, and recoils as if a bullet had been shot. After this, she then jumps off the cliff, as before. In

the default loop, neither of these two actions takes place. In some loops one or the other happens, and in other loops, both occur.

My intention with the addition of these variations was to raise more questions for the viewer about the potential suicide of the robot at the end of the loop. Does the ‘finger-gun’ confirm the existence of a suicide, or is it just a jovial action intended to display fatigue? If it is a suicide, is every loop, or are just the loops with this action? Additionally, by breaking the fourth wall, does this robot have an additional awareness that she is in a work of art that the others do not? Again, it is my intention to leave the answers to these questions up to the viewer.

Piece 3: *Sell Your Darlings* (Figures 9-11)

Sell Your Darlings is an interactive sculpture. A working gum ball machine sits atop a white pedestal with clear glass walls. Inside the machine are capsules that hold colorful, tiny versions of the robot. Inside the glass walls of the pedestal is another robot, sitting in a reclining lounge chair, reading a news paper. Viewers are invited to put a quarter into the gum ball machine, and turn the crank. When they do, they will receive one of the small capsuled robots to keep, and their quarter falls from the bottom of the machine to down where the larger robot reads, collecting behind his chair.

The impetus for creating this piece was my own personal feelings of angst towards selling my own artwork. As a visual artist and someone wanting to spread my work, I felt a pressure to sell pieces that I had invested myself into. As a collector, I have a desire to keep these meaningful objects for myself and not let them go. I view my artwork somewhat like children, and so it feels wrong to part with them. With this piece, I was able to illustrate how the prospect

of selling my artwork feels to me, while simultaneously allowing it to compromise by giving away small parts of myself in the form of the capsuled robots. Though this was my initial reasoning for creating this piece, it evolved into a representation of corporate greed, which has strong roots in the futile lives of many individuals. When discussing futility in our society, a common narrative is the life of an office worker. In this societal narrative, an office worker spends their hours at a job that does not reward them meaning in their life, only profiting the powerful corporations they work for. This sentiment is echoed in *Sell Your Darlings*, as the robot at the bottom of the pedestal is passively profiting off the sales of his children. The connections to futility in this piece are admittedly weaker than most of the other pieces in my thesis.

However, where this piece excels is its stronger inclusion of my own perspective as an artist into its narrative. I feel that the robots in general serve as a representation of myself in the artwork, but this piece makes those connections more literal, which I feel makes it an important inclusion in my body of thesis work.

Piece 4: *Quality Control* (Figures 12-13)

Quality Control is the only static painting that I included in my thesis. I should note that, before the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, I had not intended to include this piece in my exhibition due to its location at my parents' home in Schenectady and its relative difficulty to transport. The piece is on a seven foot by three foot canvas. The composition features mostly empty space, with a cliff-side made of latex paint-pouring on the right third of the canvas. At the edge of the cliff is a robot holding a bucket, dumping several grayscale parts off the ledge. The parts being dumped are the same shape of the parts that make up the robot's limbs.

For me, this piece was the epitome of my intention to include darker undertones beneath a more approachable veneer in my work. The colors in this painting are vibrant and demanding of attention. It was my intention to make this piece feel inviting and charming at first glance. The inviting nature of the colors is meant to allow viewers to digest the implication of a darker underlying narrative. The title, "*Quality Control*," is another example of my identity as a toy collector influencing my artwork. When a product has quality control, or Q.C. issues, it means it has some sort of unique assembly error. It is an example of a human error somewhere along the assembly process that affects the functionality of the product. By titling the piece this, I am intending to imply that the robot is discarding the failed parts from the assembly line process. As a representation of humanity, one of these robots discarding the faulty parts of another robot creates a more sinister implication. Is the robot merely throwing out the 'duds' from the assembly line process, or is he dumbing a body? The robot absent-mindedly performs this task with a vacant expression on his face. His complacency is meant to suggest that this is likely not an isolated incident. To the robot, he is not doing anything notable, just going about his routine, no matter how dark that routine may appear to us.

This piece, as well as *Important Question*, feature a paint drip technique to create the landscapes that the robots inhabit. This technique also explores a similar dichotomous relationship to the one discussed earlier in regards to Paul Budnitz and designer toys. However, the conflicting ideas in the drip landscapes are two and three-dimensionality. The shapes I created with the drips imply a form and mass to the environment, but the method I used to make them also makes them feel more two-dimensional. With only limited shading, it is difficult to image the forms convincingly rotating in space. However, the same technique that makes the

forms appear less three-dimensional, is also literally making them more three-dimensional. The thick application of the paint creates a texture and depth that would not have been present otherwise. This conflicting relationship echoes the dissonant tones of the pieces and leaves them up for interpretation.

Piece 5: *An Impossible Game* (Figures 14-16)

An Impossible Game is an interactive found object sculpture, and is the only included piece in the exhibition to not feature any version of the robot. The piece is comprised of the wheel sections of desk chairs, without their seats. Four of these chairs are fixed to the wall in a line, interlocking like gears. A makeshift crank is attached to one side with a belt. On the other side, hangs a small bell. The viewer is invited to participate with the piece by rotating the crank, in hopes of causing a chain reaction down the line to ring the bell. Due to the varying sizes of the chairs, and thrown together quality of the mechanisms, the task of ringing the bell is quite difficult to achieve. Participants are forced to rotate the crank back and forth to build up momentum, which dissipates down the line of chairs. If one is actually capable of successfully hitting the last chair into the bell, the force is so little that the bell makes little to no sound.

My intention with this piece was to create an exceedingly frustrating and disappointing experience for the viewer. As was the case with *Sell Your Darlings*, *An Impossible Game* also has ties to the narrative of futile office life. It was important that the piece be made out of office chairs for this reason. The game serves as a representation of the futile activity of attempting to climb a corporate ladder. Once one gets to the top, the results are meaningless and anticlimactic. Since this is the only piece in the exhibition that does not include the robot, my hope was that it

would lead viewers to looking for its existence in the piece and concluding that they themselves serve as the robot in this narrative. This conclusion will cause them to reconsider their own place in the narratives of the other pieces, which will allow them to see the work through a new lens.

V. Conclusion

To begin, I must, once again mention the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in regards to my thesis work. Due to the shut down of the state, the physical showing of my and my peers' thesis exhibitions in a gallery setting was made impossible. For this reason, it is difficult to consider my body of work in its entirety, since I was never able to see the work in the same space simultaneously. After all of our hard work and time spent to bring these theses to fruition, the inability to experience our final shows is obviously deeply upsetting. However, I am profoundly thankful that the pandemic has affected my life in a comparatively minor way. It would be an immense disservice to those whose lives have been permanently altered or cut short by this virus to not acknowledge them here.

In its entirety, I am pleased with the outcome of my research and the body of work that resulted from it. I believe that each piece has some unique quality that it brings to the exhibition as a whole. *Rinse, Repeat* serves as the prevailing source of positivity in the overall narrative of the exhibition. *Important Question* brings forth the suicidal ideation that Albert Camus presented in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, as well as allowed one of the robots to have some form of consciousness that the others did not. *Sell Your Darlings* presents a more specific inclusion of my personal experience with futility and reconciles that with the viewers. *Quality Control* explores the relationship between several contradictory ideas in more depth than any of the other pieces. And lastly, *An Important Game* presents an example of futility without the presence of the robot and allows viewers to actively participate in the experience. My largest area of critique of the exploration is that I could have gone even further in my research of philosophy. I am satisfied

with my understanding of the different philosophical theories, but If I had identified and embraced the connection to my work sooner, then I could have explored additional relating ideas in a more nuanced way. I believe with would have only strengthened the work overall.

Additionally, there were some aspects of individual pieces that I felt were still not completely resolved. For example, the concept of the paint dripping included in two of the pieces felt unresolved and its place within the greater body of work did not necessarily have strong enough ties to the other conceptual motifs.

I am excited to continue with this exploration in the future. This experience has taught me to trust the iterative process of my studio practice. I began with an idea of a simple robot, with no concept attached, and it evolved into something profoundly important to me. In the immediate future, I am going to give myself a respite from conceptual thought in my artwork. I will allow myself to create with no intention of purpose, so that it too, can evolve on its own terms, into something meaningful and new.

VI. Illustrations

Thesis work:

Figure 1: *Rinse, Repeat*, 58"x20"x14",
cast plastic, SLA 3-D printed plastic, MDF, acrylic paint, 2020



Figure 2: *Rinse, Repeat* Detail, 58"x20"x14",
cast plastic, SLA 3-D printed plastic, MDF, acrylic paint, 2020



Figure 3: *Rinse, Repeat* Detail, 58"x20"x14",
cast plastic, SLA 3-D printed plastic, MDF, acrylic paint, 2020

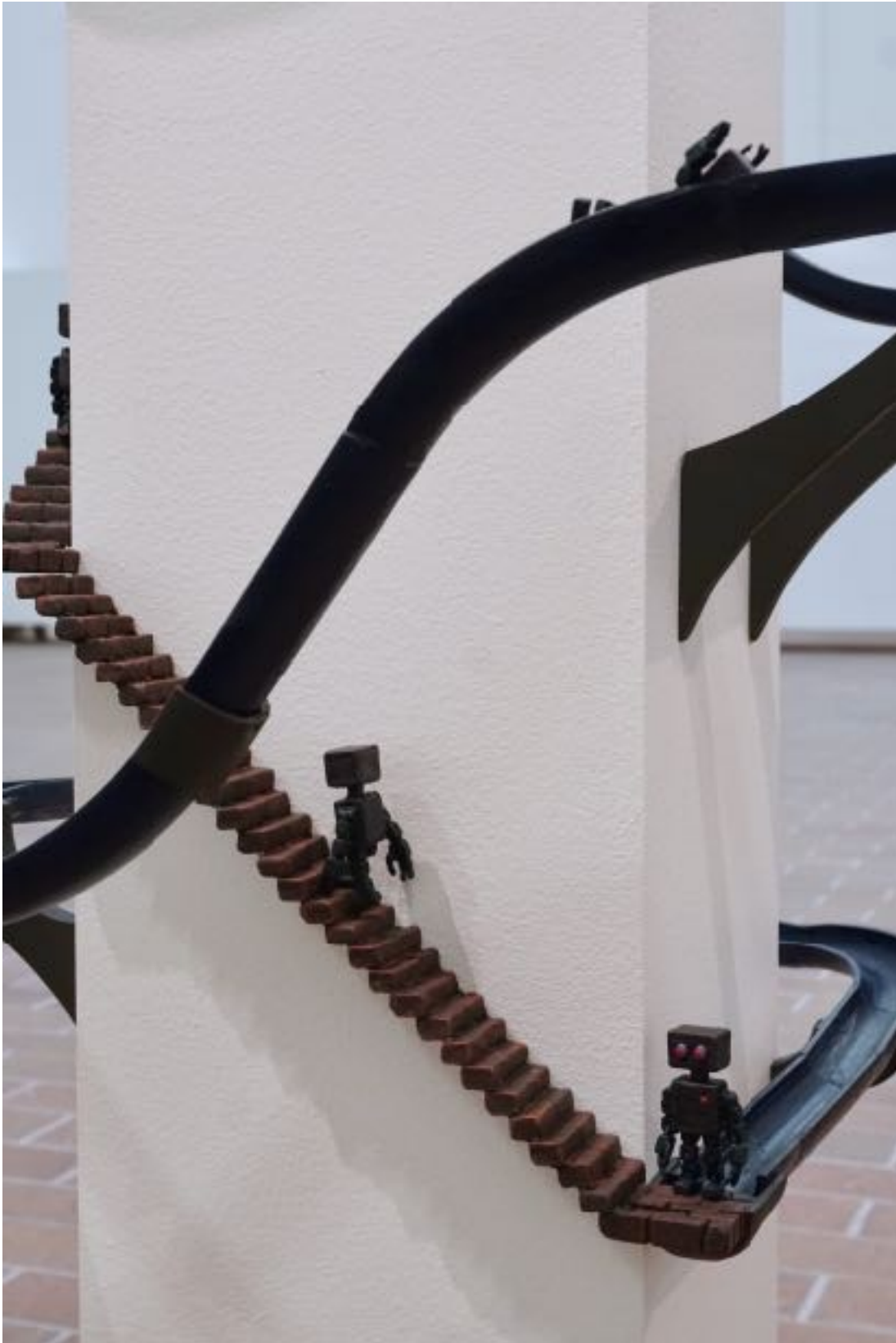
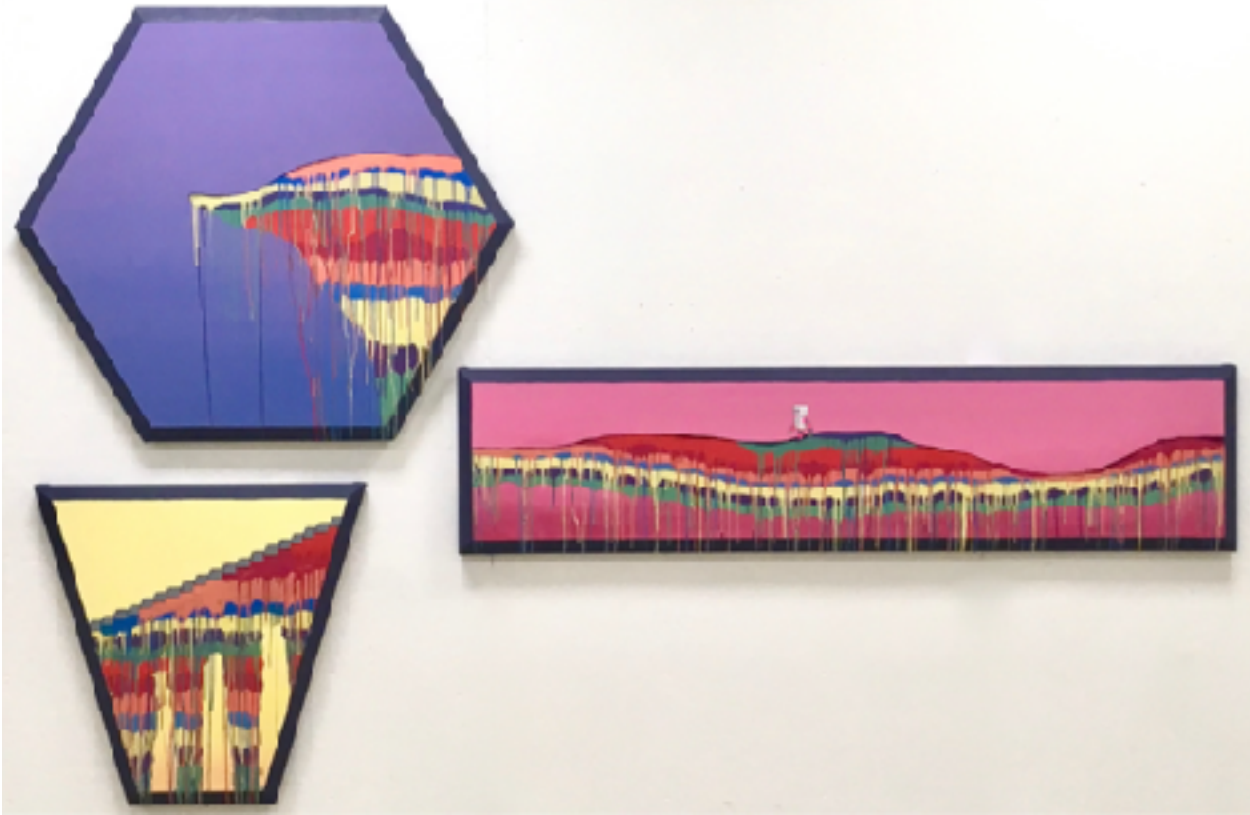


Figure 4: *Rinse, Repeat* Detail, 58"x20"x14",
cast plastic, SLA 3-D printed plastic, MDF, acrylic paint, 2020



Figure 5: *Important Question*, projection, acrylic and latex on canvas, 2020



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HV8IPSG4g_0

Figure 6: *Important Question* Detail, projection, acrylic and latex on canvas, 2020



Figure 7: *Important Question* Detail, projection, acrylic and latex on canvas, 2020



Figure 8: *Important Question* Detail, projection, acrylic and latex on canvas, 2020



Figure 9: *Sell Your Darlings*, 60"x24"x24",
cast plastic, found objects, sheet glass, MDF, 2020



Figure 10: *Sell Your Darlings* Detail, 60"x24"x24",
cast plastic, found objects, sheet glass, MDF, 2020



Figure 11: *Sell Your Darlings* Detail, 60"x24"x24",
cast plastic, found objects, sheet glass, MDF, 2020



Figure 12: *Quality Control*, 36"x84", acrylic and latex on canvas, 2019



Figure 13: *Quality Control Detail*, 36"x84", acrylic and latex on canvas, 2019



Figure 14: *An Impossible Game*, found objects, plywood, 2019



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Oy6lpWRfn4>

Figure 15: *An Impossible Game Detail*, found objects, plywood, 2019



Figure 16: *An Impossible Game Detail*, found objects, plywood, 2019



Unused/Progress Work

Figure 17: Hurdle, 27"x58.5", projection, acrylic and latex on canvas, 2019



https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=10&v=OOuxuwcatYs

Figure 18: Open, 32"x55.5", acrylic and latex on canvas, 2018



Figure 19



Figure 20



Other Artists' Work

Figure 21: Artwork by Paul Budnitz (Permission for use given by the artist)



Figure 22: Artwork by Paul Budnitz (Permission for use given by the artist)



Figure 23: Artwork by Paul Budnitz (Permission for use given by the artist)



Figure 24: *Creation Myth* by Tom Otterness, 2012 (Permission for use given by the artist)



Figure 25: *Creation Myth* by Tom Otterness, 2012 (Permission for use given by the artist)



Figure 26: *Creation Myth* by Tom Otterness, 2012 (Permission for use given by the artist)



Figure 27: *Can't Help Myself* by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, 2016
(Permission for use given by the licensing department of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum)



Can't Help Myself, 2016

Modified Kuka mechanical arm machine, fitted with plastic and rubber shovel,
and liquid

dimensions variable

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Collection, 2016

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