UC San Diego

UC San Diego Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title
Mesh and Bone

Permalink

Author
Dunlap, Corey

Publication Date
2018

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

MESH AND BONE

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Corey Dunlap

Committee in charge:

Professor Ruben Ortiz-Torres, Chair

Professor Nicholas Christenfeld

Professor Anya Gallaccio

Professor Monique van Genderen

The Thesis of Corey Dunlap is approved, and it is acceptable

in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

_____

_____

_____

_____

<div align="right">Chair</div>

University of California San Diego

2018

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

MESH AND BONE

by

Corey Dunlap

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2018

Professor Ruben Ortiz-Torres, Chair

For my thesis exhibition *Mesh and Bone,* I have produced a series of digitally rendered inkjet prints and fabricated sculptures that serve to demonstrate my investigations on physicality, the collision of figuration and abstraction, and the repurposing of digital technologies for aesthetic production. Through this paper, I intend to deconstruct the many elements that have consumed my work over the years and elucidate the potential nuances of my influences and their outcomes.

MESH
AND
BONE

Corey Patrick Dunlap

University of California, San Diego

Masters of Fine Arts, Visual Arts

Thesis Dissertation, 2018

ABSTRACT:

       For my Thesis exhibition *Mesh and Bone,* I have produced a series of digitally rendered inkjet prints and fabricated sculptures that serve to demonstrate my investigations on physicality, the collision of figuration and abstraction, and the repurposing of digital technologies for aesthetic production. Through this paper, I intend to deconstruct the many elements that have consumed my work over the years and elucidate the potential nuances of my influences and their outcomes.

Your form seems to be that of an organic compound. Dimpled and irregular, a living organism or an inanimate natural surface. All over and sporadic, like the surface of a rock or the billowing of the ocean. Your body is woven. You flop, squeeze, and quiver, reacting to your surroundings. Through your physicality you articulate an invisible pressure. Your placement and interaction with various elements clearly indicates a moment of activity. A past moment of agency, of movement, either by you or some anonymous force. We only have a record of you as an image. No observable movement is possible in your current state. We must rely upon small indications of past moments. Carefully posed, it is unknown whether you are living, dead, or simply a body at rest.

1. Introduction and Past Work

The exhibition *Mesh and Bone,* serves as a distillation of past approaches to both virtual and physical modes of artistic production. Though my time spent working in virtual space has required a specialized level of skill and knowledge, I continue to explore new methods for generating physical and highly tactile objects that can exist alongside computer generated images. These two seemingly divergent ways of working have remained interrelated throughout my artistic development. Though there are at times clear divisions between the capabilities of one medium over the other, there exists continuity in my approach to representations of the body, methods of simulation and abstraction.

Incorporating sculptural and photographic techniques, I produce digital images using Blender, a modeling program primarily utilized in commercial settings for product, scene, and video game design. My first exposure to Blender occurred when I took a technology course during my undergraduate education. Though at the time the tools and operations of the program were quite advanced, the default rendering engine was subpar and did not produce a technically realistic image. Years later, just before starting the MFA program at UCSD, I made the conscious effort to reevaluated the possibilities of Blender as an artistic tool, which had since updated its rendering cycle and was capable of producing a more convincing three dimensional image.

In order to reacquaint myself with the complex operations of the program, I set myself the task of generating a series of digital models based on the work of Eric McMillan. McMillan is a retired Canadian architect and play designer who constructed play spaces, obstacle courses and interactive structures for theme parks throughout the 70's and 80's. He is perhaps most notable for originating the ball crawl, (also known as the ball pit) a now common feature at McDonald's PlayPlaces or Chuck E Cheese restaurants. I had been obsessed with the work and career of Mr. Mcmillan for some time and thought it would be an interesting and useful exercise to generate a series of digitally modeled images based on some of his early drawings. These

sketches depict the architectural structures and activities for potential projects, along with numerous squatty cartoon-like figures animated throughout the scene. My goal was to translate these fantastical 70's drawings into a new medium that allowed for a more detailed understanding of these architectural spaces. Given the simplistic geometry of many of McMillan's structures, it made sense to depict those same forms through the logic and limitations inherent to Blender.

By formally paraphrasing these drawings, I developed a new understanding of how the world can be represented through virtual space, while noting the limitations and potential outcomes of mistranslation. Though I was able to render the play structures with relative ease, my interpretation of the figures required more deliberate consideration. In an attempt to comply with the geometric logic of this virtual world, I decided to signify the figures as a torus. Initially, I chose the torus to act as a stand-in for the figure because it functioned as a humorous parody of the body, was easily reproducible and could aesthetically assimilate with the surrounding structure. This introductory approach to Blender as a procedural tool and my discovery of the theoretical potentials of the torus would be the impetus for much of my work throughout the remainder of my graduate studies.
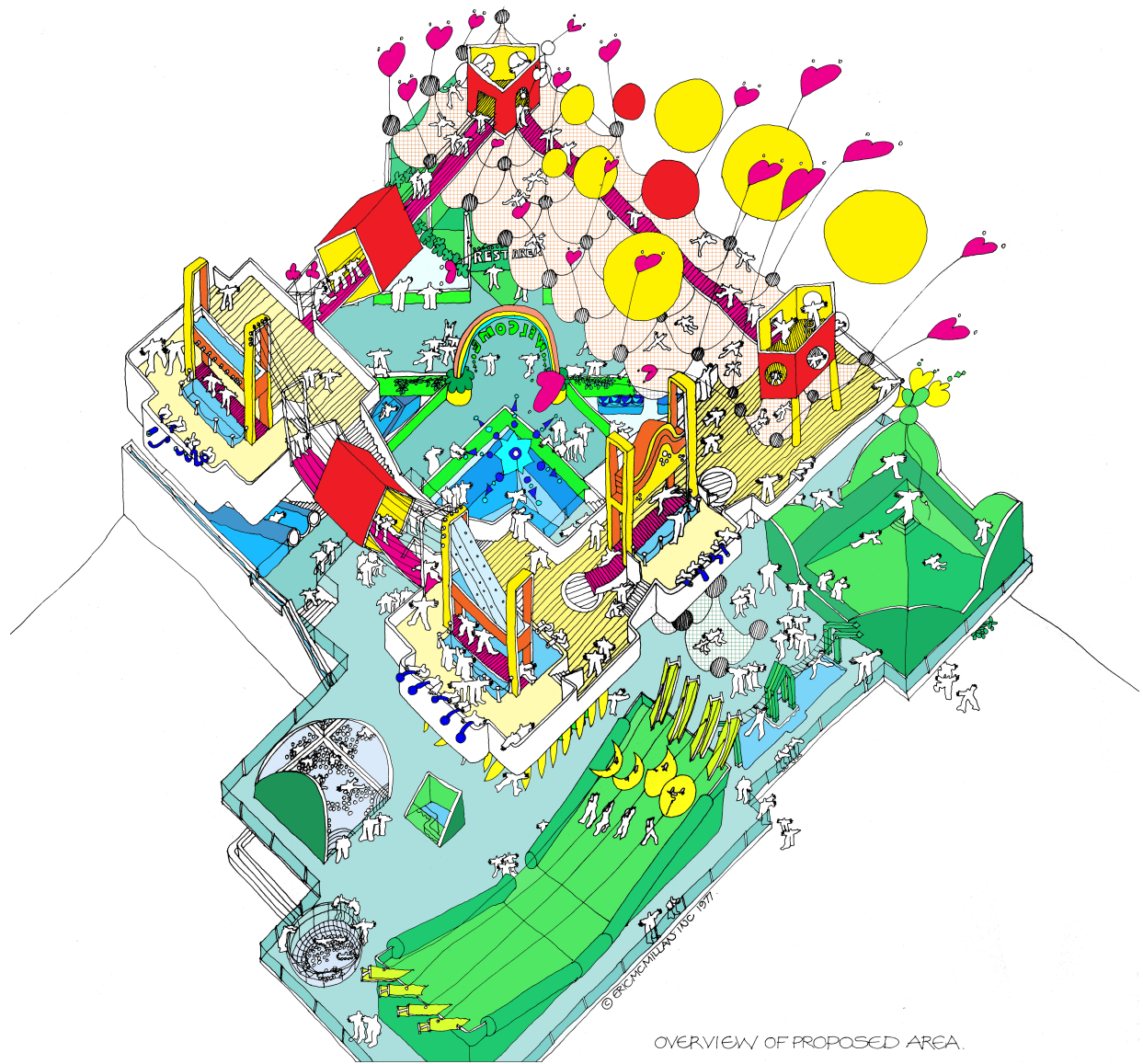
OVERVIEW OF PROPOSED AREA.

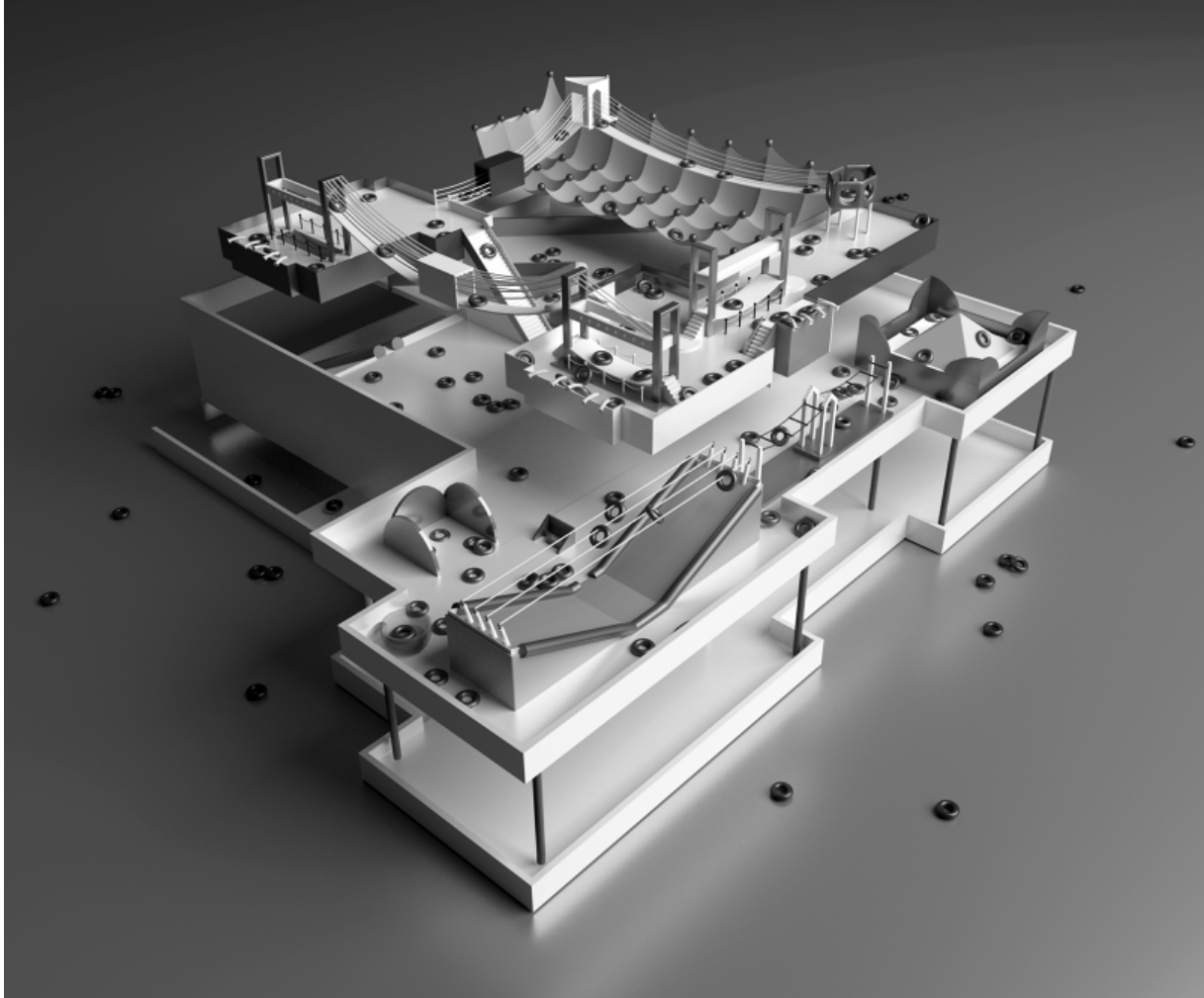**Figure 1**: Eric McMillan, Proposal Sketch, 1977

Figure 2: *After Eric McMillan*, digitally rendered ink jet print, 2015

2. Blender

Blender is designed to obey the desires of its users, but the constructions I produce are based on a negotiation between my artistic ambitions and the abilities of the technology. The images I generate are developed through a series of tested strategies, with the program often providing new ways of seeing and depicting form. This process is counter to traditional methods of artistic production in which the medium is wholly subservient to the motivations of the creator. Rather than solely forcing the program to assimilate to my ideas, I allow the digital interface to act as a kind of material body from which to invent itself. In this way there is a collapse in hierarchy between myself and the tool that I use.

Though this advanced program is able to render a myriad of *real* materials such as hair, water, skin, and cloth with stunning accuracy, I have predominantly used it as a platform from which to generate abstract imagery. The designers of Blender invested immense amounts of energy to have the program produce complex irregular textures, subtleties in light and color, and overall convincing depictions of form. I employ these capabilities in order to build believability in this universe. The final images are as convincing as photographs. For the viewer, the image is telling them that what they are looking at is a real thing, something that must have existed, been posed, lit, and photographed. However, their security in this belief is immediately foiled when they are unable to assign a definitive identity to what they are seeing. Abstraction exists alongside realism. Through a child-like defiance, I have repurposed this tool in a way that is counter to its intended function. I seduce viewers through the program's randomized textures, exaggerated geometry and simulations of gravity.
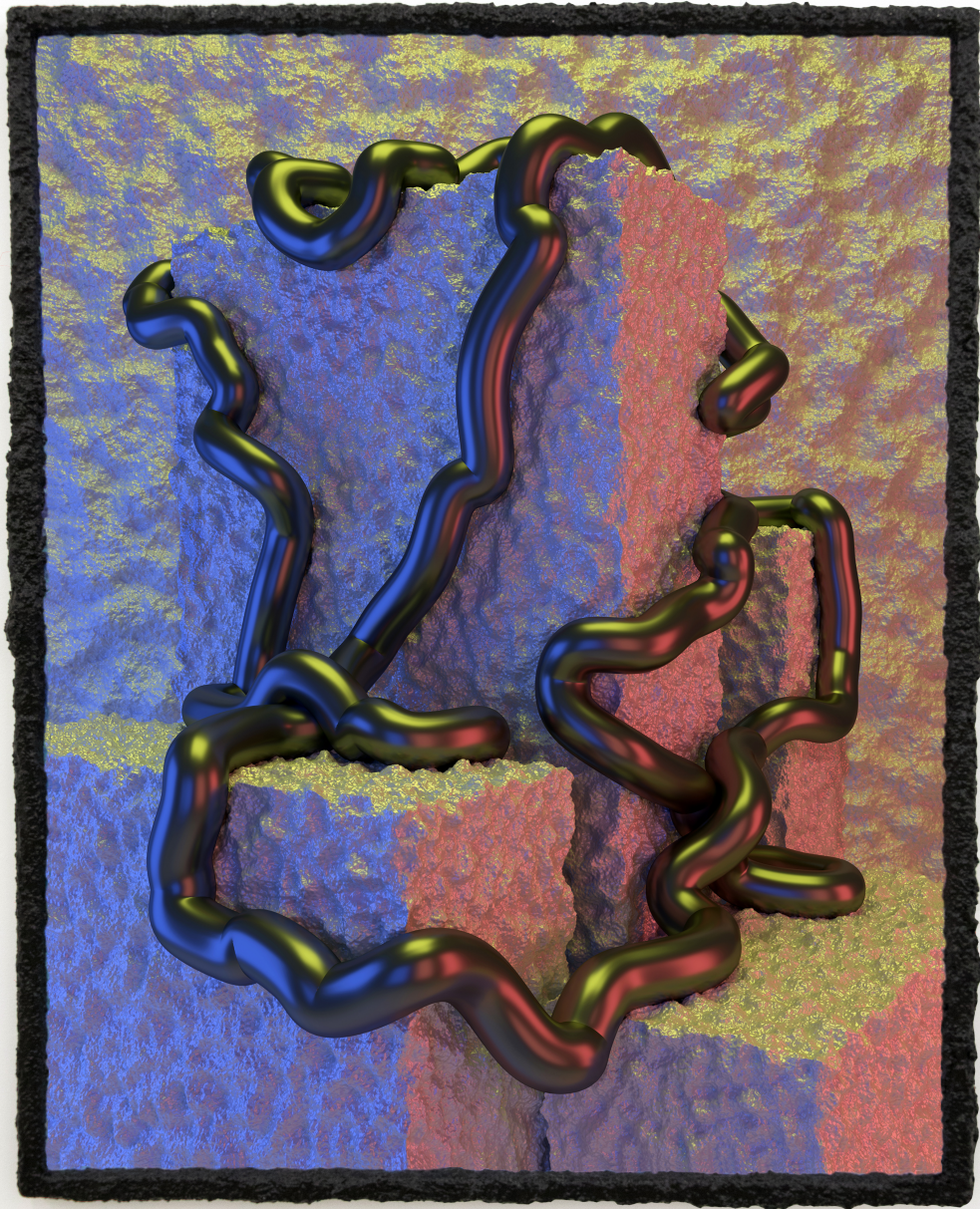
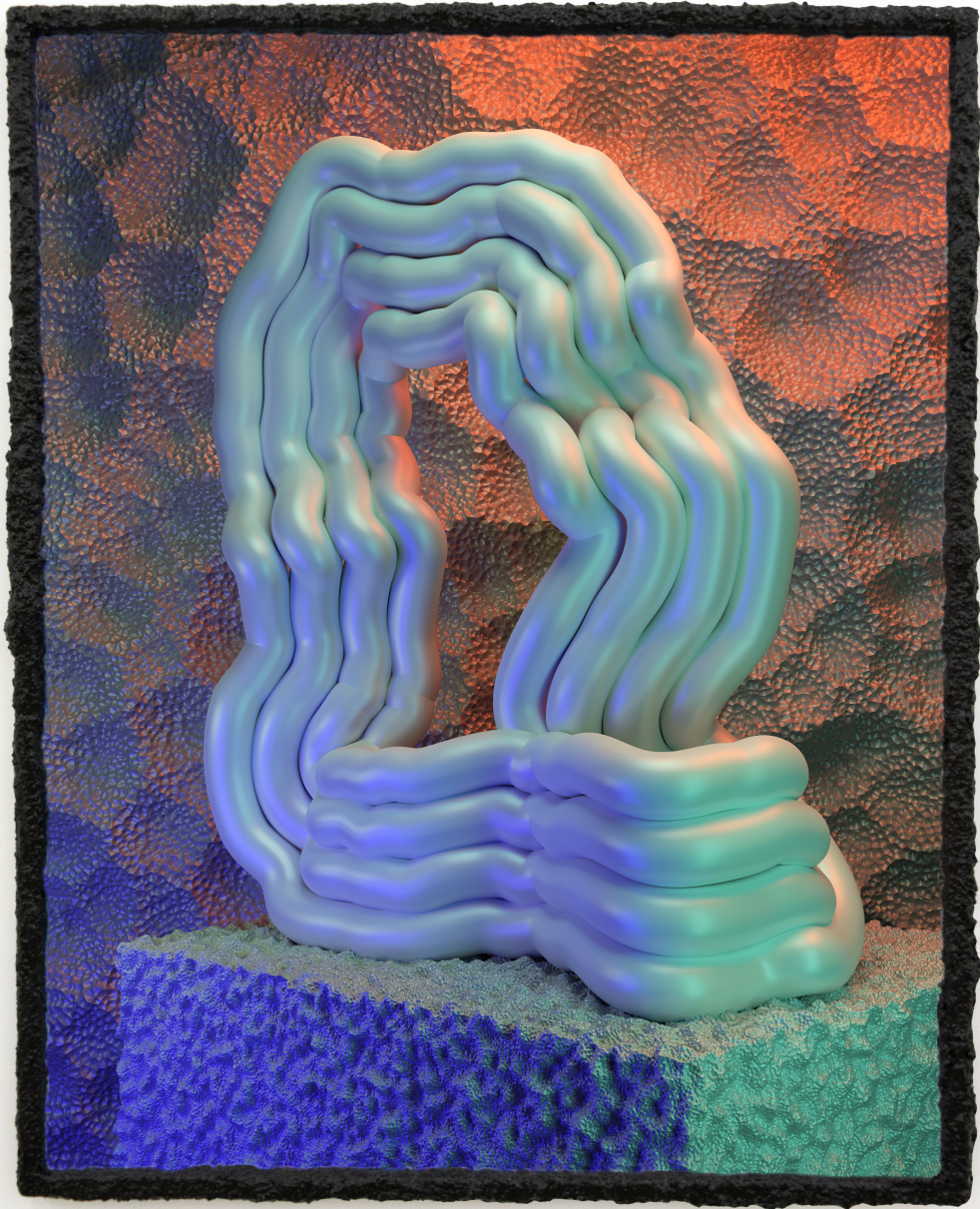**Figure 3**: *The Flow*, digitally rendered ink jet print, 2015

Figure 4: *Folie a Deux*, digitally rendered ink jet print, 2015

3. The Torus

In the same way we have a hole running through our bodies which articulates our mouth, anus, nose, phallus and other offshoots, the torus exists as a form whose sole identity is that of a cavity. Its arrangement is only actualized by its ability to designate a *through* space.

For the past three years I have incorporated the torus as a conceptual motif through a variety of iterations, both physical and digital. The torus is a geometrical concept in which a circle revolves around a path in three-dimensional space that is coplanar with the circle. The resulting objects typically resemble a ring, inner tube, lifebuoy, or donut. The way in which a user generates all objects and forms in the virtual world of Blender is by manipulating and applying constraints to a series of pre-given geometric objects. These base objects include a plane, cone, cube, sphere, cylinder and torus. At the immediate onset, the torus struck me as an object that could easily act as a physical replacement for the body while also conveying a generative relationship to embodiment.

My use and understanding of the torus as an expansive concept has been greatly informed by the ideas of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. In his essay *Rabelais and His World,* Bakhtin examines previously overlooked aspects of the work of French Renaissance writer François Rabelais. Bakhtin attempts to redress and clarify the intentions of Rabelais, with particular attention paid to representations of embodiment by defining and deconstructing his concept of *grotesque realism*. Bakhtin underscores the body's ability to interact and accept the outside world through what he describes as "apertures and convexities". (26) I have used Bakhtin's understanding of the body to structure my relationship to the torus, emphasizing a conflation between the inner and outer body. By using the ideas of Bakhtin to structure my relationship to the torus, I am hoping to produce a more visceral experience for the viewer; pulling through bodily aspects from an otherwise sterile geometric form.

Beyond the torus' ability to act as a conceptual representation of the body, it also demonstrates notions of universality. For Bakhtin, the ability for the *grotesque body* to engage with the outside world is manifested in the activities of birth, death, copulation, eating, defecation and other bodily exchanges. The figure is forever simultaneously unfinished, creating a new, always growing and dying. The collective figures that are pictured throughout *Mesh and Bone* similarly demonstrate this quality of ambiguity and perpetual becoming. Though unmoving, the figures exhibit a sense of animation through the layering of form and reactionary gestures. The torus is stretched and folded in ways that promote a sense of development, presupposing that the body is still in an embryonic state.

Figure 5: Installation view, *Mesh and Bone*, 2018, Main Gallery, UCSD

Figure 6: Installation view, *Mesh and Bone*, 2018, Main Gallery, UCSD

4. Objects

For the exhibition *Mesh and Bone,* I have constructed three sculptures, each of which feature a body sized torus form. Measuring roughly twelve feet in circumference, these soft figures are displayed slumped over a rigid armature or platform. In complete opposition to the smooth and flowing surfaces of the digital images they sit alongside, the sculptures are coated in a highly textured black liquid, producing a glossy, thick and gooey surface. The overall effect of this material treatment is somewhat ambiguous, and intentionally so, leaving the viewer to assume that the object was dipped in a giant vat of some liquid and left out to dry.

Figure 7: *Hung to Dry*, wood, plaster, latex paint, resin, 2018

Black liquids are typically a sinister motif in popular culture and literature, with evil or alien creatures often depicted in opaque pools or dripping in black goo. One example of this correlation can be seen in the film *District 9* in which humans are infected with a mysterious black liquid that slowly transforms them into crustacean-like aliens. Another example is in the film *Under the Skin*, in which Scarlett Johansson plays a mute alien that seduces and consumes humans, drawing them into a black pool like an alien Venus flytrap.

Setting aside all its obvious associations with death and morbidity, black is perhaps the most unnatural color to associate with the body. There is an attempt within the sculptures to produce an intentional contradiction between the form and its material surface: one beguiling and the other repulsing. The flopping torus reacts and bends like a limp body, while the thick black coating suffocates. The sculptures are meant to oppose the colorful seduction of the digital prints they sit along side, depicting the torus as frozen in a tortured state.

Figure 8: Installation view, Mesh and Bone, 2018, Main Gallery, UCSD

In the same way *Blender* operates as a simulation of the world, with an emphasis on its ability to realistically render the qualities of light, my sculptural works highlight the laws of physics, dramatically oozing, falling, and glistening. By isolating moments of contact, movement, viscosity, and gravity, the physicality of the sculptures take precedence over any secondarily veiled content. The tensions that exist between the digital images and the physical sculptures are amplified. The viewer is left to reconcile the relationship between the immaculate digital world of the prints and the festering physical world of the sculptures.

While my work in Blender is focused on generating a pictorial representation of the body, the sculptures I create address the physicality of the body through a heightened sense of material. Like the virtual world of the prints, these sculptural works prominently display the torus as a substitute for the body. However, when presented in sculptural form, the torus is literalized, taking on the scale of the body, often displayed in somewhat violent positions. In a humorous way, these sculptures demonstrate the perils of an actualized torus body; limp and dumb, without bones or muscles, they require the support of an external structure, demonstrating the absurdity of my continued obsession.

5. The Body

Figure 9: Whale, James, director. Frankenstein. Universal Pictures, 1931

My process for generating form and figure often feels similar to the operations of Dr. Frankenstein, attempting to piece together inanimate body parts in the hopes of creating a convincing representation of life. As Dr. Frankenstein, I use mesh geometry as my material body, and accurate simulations of light, color and texture as my electricity.

But how do you determine if something is alive? In discussions on the uncanny valley, there is a differentiation between a figure that is still and a figure in motion. A body that has movement (or seems to exhibit movement) produces a more extreme reaction in observers than if it was simply motionless. Think of the difference between a corpse and a zombie. While both bodies maybe upsetting, the addition of movement

in the case of the zombie induces terror by complicating our understanding of how a body can and should function. Though movement is thought of as a sign of life, in the case of a mobile corpse, its jerky gestures serve as a conflicting perceptual cue.

The prints on display throughout *Mesh and Bone* depict an entirely abstract and non-referential world, with smooth tube-like forms that bend, fold, and huddle next to one another, contorting into a collective figure. The images present forms that are created through a series of articulated paths, reacting to and flowing over other objects. By assigning a circle to run the length of the path, an extruded form is created. Though there exist moments when the forms could be misrecognized as a knee or elbow, the complete figures are entirely anonymous.

This has manifested in a tension between the recognizable qualities of the body and ambiguous object or non-living forms. The viewer sees an illusion of a body reacting to simulated gravity by flopping, folding, or through layering. The finalized forms function as stand-ins or representations for the body, both as a signifier and in their literal correlation to the digestive and circulatory systems.
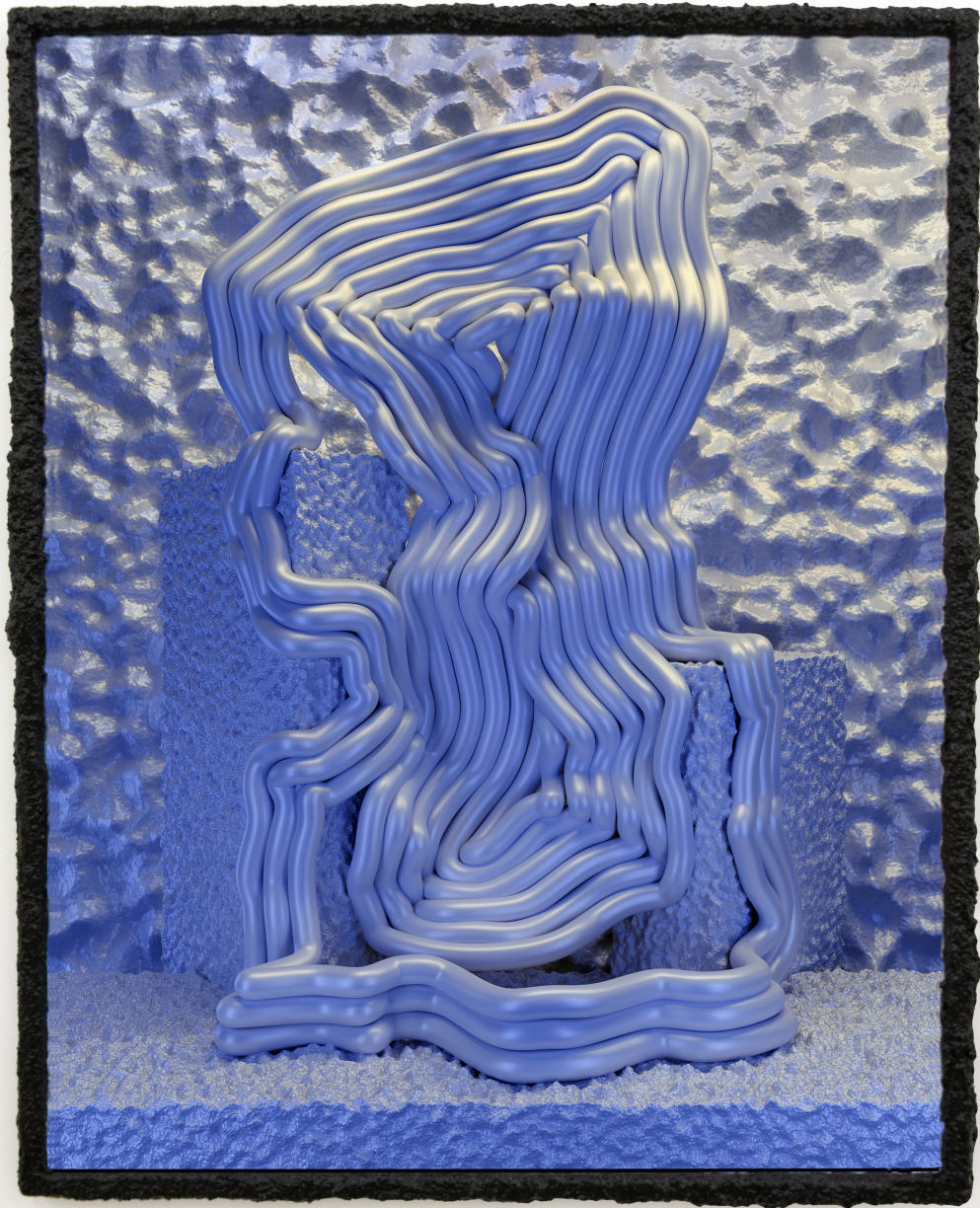
Figure 10: *Relief*, digitally rendered ink jet print, 2017

6. Desire and the Viewer

Figure 4: Titian, Venus of Urbino, 1534, oil on canvas, 119 cm x 165 cm

It is important for my work to demonstrate a rational tendency, a universal framework that is in balance against a disordered visual pleasure. This is not simply visual harmony for the sake of readability, but a clear pairing of opposite forces that the viewer must contend with.

For the digitally rendered prints on display throughout *Mesh and Bone*, I have staged supposed figures within the framework of traditional portraiture and still life painting. Forms are set against a surreal wall or pedestal, a scenario that is familiar to the viewer and in line with classical depictions of the body. This gesture casts the genre of portrait painting (and all its pomp and circumstance) against a world that is void of specific identities or histories. In this way, the portraits utilize a strategy of degradation in which the recognizable conventions of art history are made to depict surreal computer-generated forms. Thus, the images are preoccupied more with

embodiment, recognition and material process, rather than the personal identities of the pictured.
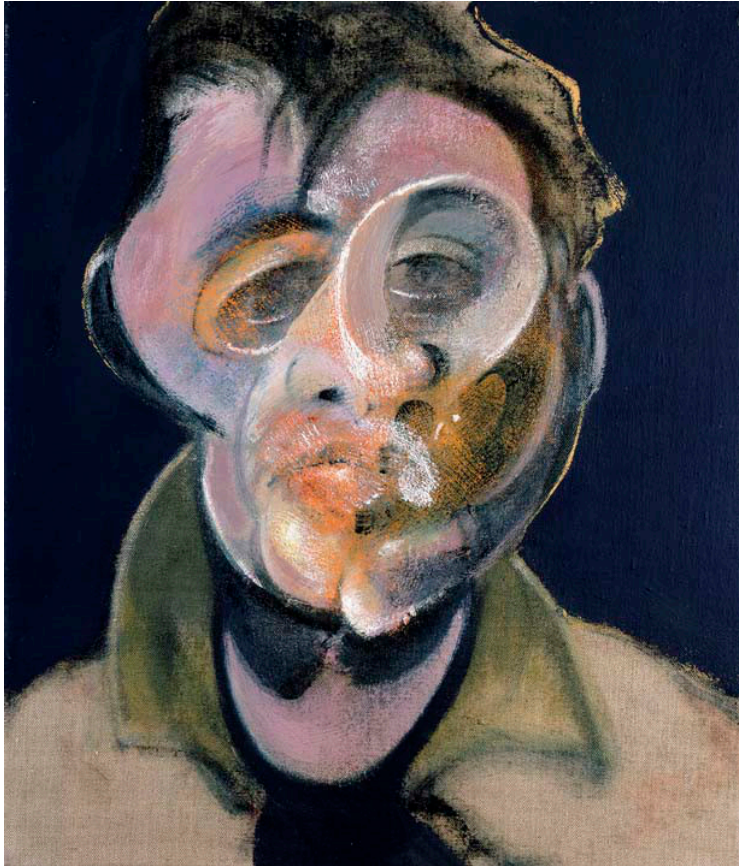

Figure 5: Francis Bacon, Self Portrait, 1969, oil on canvas

I believe my work exists within a lineage of figurative artists that sought to generate new methods of production by giving material form to the abstract. Artists such as Francis Bacon, have not merely depicted the body in new ways, but have subverted our inherited concepts of what faces and figures should look like, thus highlighting a more primitive reality beyond the image. Bacon's images also incorporate a violent approach to figuration in which the viewer's recognition of form is distorted through a series of ambiguous gestures. Through disfiguration and misrecognition, my work similarly conflates the cognitive hierarchy between objects and bodies.

Figure 13: Sarah Lucas, Romans, 2011, mixed media

The sculptor Sara Lucas is another artist whose work exists at the intersection of figuration and abstraction. Though Lucas relies heavily on metaphor and cultural association, often tilting towards the humorous or sexual, she simultaneously distorts those signifiers through the use of abstraction, creating a gap between meanings. I find aesthetic kinship with Lucas in her merging of violence and desire, as well as the intention to expand a visual motif in as many ways as possible. In the same way Lucas re-presents the body, focusing on the same form (breast, phallus, mouth, anus) and the same materials (tights, concrete, coat hangers, light bulbs) over many decades, I have attempted to iterate the torus and its visual strategies in as many ways as possible.

The impulse towards abstraction for many artists and myself is to create a fracture within a presumably stable concept. When our understanding of the body is broken, both terror and wonder can exist simultaneously as we confront the fact that our materials bodies are finite. The work I produce intentionally utilizes this schism as a means to seduce the viewer and to serve as a record of my activities.

Bibliography:

1. Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Rabelais and His World.* (H. Iswolsky, Trans.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

2. Ferrey, A. E.; Burleigh, T. J.; Fenske, M. J. (2015). "Stimulus-category competition, inhibition, and affective devaluation: a novel account of the uncanny valley". *Frontiers in Psychology.* ^: 249. Doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00249

3. Mori, Masahiro. "The Uncanny Valley: The Original Essay by Masahiro Mori." *IEEE Spectrum: Technology, Engineering, and Science News*, IEEE Spectrum, 12 June 2012, spectrum.ieee.org/automaton/robitics/humanorids/the-uncanny-valley.

4. Zeki, Semir, and Tomohiro Ishizu. "The 'Visual Shock' of Francis Bacon: An Essay in Neuroesthetics." *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 7 (2013): 850. *PMC*. Web. 9 Apr. 2018.