

**Sihui Zhang**

**MFA Thesis in Metal**

**Professors: Myra Mimplitsch-Gray, Lynn Batchelder, Kathy Goodell**

**05/19/2017**

**Peeling**

Curiosity is a natural instinct. We are easily attracted to things that are unfamiliar, yet we long for a tangible connection. Ultimately, we desire warmth, intimacy, and things that bear similarity to ourselves. I am compelled to cast strange objects in silicone, which shares the feeling of the body. I create forms that are fleshy and disturbing and at the same time, domestic and possibly comforting. Displayed on the table, these objects represent my own understanding of people and relationships. The process of making and the final result recall the series' title: Peeling.

Initially, I was interested in a wide variety of materials and found objects, with an open mind to try and explore the trait of each material. After trying couple different materials, different approaches. I end up with working through a single material with a range of objects.

I started my thesis during the process of testing and exploring this material. The process, quality, and appearance of this material are attractive. I do want to emphasize the unique texture in my work and use the short pot life as a benefit to creating my works. Work that delivers all the characters of the material itself, intimacy, warmth.

During the thesis researching process, I have been exploring the specific silicone rubber material called Ecoflex, which shares a similar appearance to the human skin. It is mostly used for life-casting, such as the artificial limb. I started with regular casting skills, pouring it into molds that I found or hand made with modeling clay. The texture turned out to be fleshy and disturbing. Because of the characteristics of this material, everything I am making needs to be done quickly

and efficiently. This gives me the chance to start manipulating it, as I am shaping the pieces frequently during the pouring process. Due to the short curing time, I am able to create the “skin” like the result. Instead of pouring the silicone into a mold, I began utilizing clay objects or using found objects, coating the exterior, and allowing the silicone to cure as a thin “skin” on the surface.

Body, jewelry, and absurdity are the topics that surround the objects that I am curious about. Everything in this world is more or less related, direct or indirect. A material such as silicone, to reflect an uncanny relationship between these things. The quality of the material referring human body; by creating vessels and other familiar daily objects with metal parts, I am trying to merging body, jewelry and absurdity to an absurd result.

According to a research “Observing Human-Object Interactions: Using Spatial and Functional Compatibility for Recognition” by Abhinav Gupta, Aniruddha Kembhavi, and Larry S. Davis, the way people interact with objects allow us to recognize the actions and objects when the appearances are not easily distinguished. And when there are two similar objects, the way people handle and use them would be the method of determining the function/purpose of the objects. (2009) I want the interaction between my works and the audiences to be the major factors that decide and accomplish my works.

By forming clay and casting the skin of the vessels, I am trying to give the material a new form. I am not avoiding the original function of this material for life-casting, though it was created to

mimic human skin and body. Rather, I am taking that as an advantage in order to create daily objects that share similar qualities as our bodies. The cast sink stopper with a found chain to refer the original chain that attaches to the stopper; cast piping with copper fittings; the flatted bottle with chains “spilling out”, etc. Each piece is engaging with metal parts, hand-crafted or found plumbing parts. From my perspective, plumbing systems are important in our everyday life, but at the same time, it is often ignored and unseen. Surreal part of the hand-made metal parts, and made plumbing mechanism together with cast silicone parts. The confusion between the different elements, with the recognizable and unknown parts, to reinforce the familiar/unfamiliar feeling through the fusion process. They have sleek and intimate looking on its own, and often reference genders, for instance, male and female adapters. Mona Hatoum talks about her own process of making works “I’m working with feelings of displacement, disorientation, estrangement ---- when the familiar turns into something foreign or even threatening. It’s about shattering the familiar to create uncertainty and make you question things that you normally take for granted.” (Robertson, Emma, 2016) By reforming a plumbing system and combining with ready-made fittings, fabricated metal parts, and silicone material, I am interested in the reality that people ignore the beauty right next to us, even inside of us. I want to emphasize the neglected but intimate connection between human and everyday life. It is important to have metal parts engage into the final results. The color of certain metals with warm, pink tones, is sensual. Those metals especially include copper and bronze. I think people are attached to warmth, intimacy, and similarity to themselves in color. The objects are seeking for a closer interaction with the audiences. That is the reason why I choose the way to display them.

Through my display, I created a group of domestic objects with the bodily material I chose. The vessels and pipes are sharing the bodily form and texture, directly referring to the human body. A long big display table in the center of the cave area, have the soft lighting and gray wall compliment on the pieces. All 10 pieces will be placed on top of the table.

The soft material has been using in artworks, mostly contemporary. Mona Hatoum made a child crib in 1996 in rubber material, it is laying on the ground floppy and deboned. She also had made a pair of crutches out of the same materials. In her work, it is a contrast between the soft child crib to the actual child crib, she used the crib as a format, to describe her own understanding of human body, and human skins as her interest in exploring the phenomenology of space and materials, she kept a very experimental attitude, and enjoy to surprise herself and audiences as well. I experienced a similar idea by making two visually similar, but different texture objects, I was meant to bring out the visual illusion to audiences.

This kind of materials has been used more by jewelers, Yevgeniya Kaganovich, Stephanie Voegele, Jill Baker Gower. Yevgeniya's works used a lot of rubber, latex and other alternative materials. Her works are mostly about the human interior, and the material is an appropriate choice to approach her research. Especially the mouthpiece series, she created these mouthpieces look like oxygen masks, they are supposed to be worn, but instead of attaching to an oxygen tank, they attach together to connect two people.

Stephanie Voegele created a series of “jewelry” body pieces out of rubber, because of the fleshy tone, when they are attached to the human body, they look like part of the body, and there is jewelry shape cast on the surface. Same with Jill Gower, she cast gemstones out with the similar material, but instead of large body pieces, she has the cast rubber pieces perfectly set as real gemstones, and her works have a cleaner, less fleshy visually.

I have also looked up Robert Gober’s works. His earlier works including the handmade plaster sinks and urinals are described as “fabricating a host of handcrafted everyday objects that in their banality and potent eroticism, as well as their interrogation of the very language of traditional sculpture.”

Allan Wexler’s interchange 2008 is also inspiring me to bring out the absurdity quality of my works. The chairs are connected by carving out of the solid wood chunk. The labor he put into the process of carving is incredible. I would be questioning the meaning of the labor behind the work, but that is the major issue he is addressing through the work.

With the experiences, I have learned and tried from the process of making and exploring, I am expecting to push the boundary to the next level by enlarge the scale of my works. Approaching to a more sculptural resolution in the future practice.

## Reference

Robertson, Emma. "Mona Hatoum" *The Talks*. The Talks, 19 Oct. 2016. Web. 19 May 2017.

"Robert Gober" *Guggenheim*. N.p.,n.d Web. 19 May 2017.











Resume

**Sihui Zhang**

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## **Education**

- 2008-2014    **Bachelor of Fine Arts**  
Metalsmithing and Jewelry  
University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon
- 2015-2017    **Master of Fine Arts**  
Metal  
State University of New York-New Paltz

## **Exhibitions**

- 2012    ***Production Exhibition***  
Modern, Eugene, Oregon
- 2013    ***SPRING STORM***: Department of Art Annual Senior Show  
University of Oregon,  
Eugene, Oregon
- 2013    **Cheap Jewelry**  
Jewelry & Metalsmithing program  
University of Oregon  
Eugene, Oregon
- 2013    **Solo Exhibition**  
Washburn Gallery, University of Oregon  
Eugene, Oregon

- 2014 **Accumula**  
LaVerne Krause Gallery, University of Oregon  
Eugene, Oregon
- 2014 **Vermes** (solo exhibition)  
Washburn Gallery, University of Oregon  
Eugene, Oregon
- 2014 **Experimental BFA show**  
Jewelry & Metalsmithing program, University of Oregon  
Eugene, Oregon
- 2014 **Rack and Ruin** (BFA Thesis exhibition)  
Laverne Krause Gallery, University of Oregon  
Eugene, Oregon
- 2015 **Form Forge Fabrication** (3<sup>rd</sup> place)  
South Illinois University  
Carbondale, Illinois
- 2016 **Dis/play**  
Artbar Gallery  
Kingston, New York
- 2016 **Practice/Play**  
Fine Art Building  
New Paltz, New York
- 2017 **Material: Hard + Soft**  
Greater Denton Arts Council  
Denton, Texas

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## Work Experience

2014 Studio assistant, with Anya Kivarkis, Eugene, Oregon

### **Related Work Experience**

2010 Art Design, *Huafeng* Magazine, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon

2013 Internship, Goldworks Jewelry Art Studio, Eugene, Oregon

2014 Internship, studio assistant, with Anya Kivarkis, University of Oregon, Eugene,  
Oregon

2014 Teaching Assistant, Intro Jewelry and Metalsmithing, Eugene, Oregon

2014 Internship, studio Assistant with Studio ERG, Portland, Oregon

2015 Teaching Assistant, Foundation with Suzanne Stokes, New Paltz, New York

2016 Teaching Assistant, Basic Metal with Michael Gayk, New Paltz, New York

2017 Teaching Assistant, Process II with Lynn Batchelder, New Paltz, New York

### **Artist Skills**

#### **Metal**

Strong skills in soldering, piercing, coloring, electric-forming, mold making  
(alternative materials), casting

#### **Photography**

Strong skills in photographing artworks

#### **Ceramics**

Basic knowledge in slip casting and mold making

#### **Sculpture**

Strong skills in woodworking, power tools, welding, plaster casting

#### **Computer**

Basic knowledge in photoshop, rhino, 3D printing