Adventures in Thumbsucking

Thumbsucking is a toddler’s favorite activity, a sport offering relief from the burdens of social adjustment and literacy, conducive to relaxed reflections on life. Tim Hawkinson’s *Thumbsucker* (2015) presents this stance as a mission, one that will be consummated when his moon-walking astronaut composed of plaster casts of the artist’s thumb reaches the plaster orb whose craters are replicas of his waiting lips. Thumbsucking may be an escape from reality, what the artist calls "a closed loop," but, in closing off distractions, it offers a way to plug into the alternate reality of the self. In that nearby galaxy, the current art-world obsessions with social practice, gender issues, and zombee formalism don’t exist. There, what you are is what you are.

Hawkinson famously has examined both what he can see of himself and what he can't see. *Humongolous* (1995) is, as he describes it, "a map charting all the surfaces of my skin that I could see directly." *Balloon Self-Portrait* (1993) is an inside out latex body cast. *Blindspot* (1991) is a photographic self portrait of the parts of his body he can’t view with his own eyes. For him, the evidence lies within and directly around the crime scene. And that evidence may not be what one might expect. *The Fin Within* (1995), a plaster mold of the space between his legs, resembles the body of a pre-historic fish.

And it is not just his own body that contains hidden meanings. In *Sebastian* (2015), Hawkinson partially stripped two conjoined Christmas trees and straightened their
remaining spiky branches, rigging the limbs to simulate arrows piercing the trunks' woody flesh. He uses bits of palm frond, dried potato, avocado pits, and deconstructed pine cones to create the ominous points and feathers of these organic weapons of destruction. The Italian Renaissance painter, Sodoma, in his 1525 depiction of Saint Sebastian, placed the wounded martyr against a similarly double-pronged tree whose branches are pierced by arrows. Not just the saint, but the tree - and nature itself - endures a kind of martyrdom. Removing the human from his depiction, Hawkinson modernizes the hagiography, revealing the violation of the natural world that today is so omnipresent that it seems inherent in nature itself. We no longer need saints to kill. We can kill the planet.

The twists and turns of the contemporary soul are depicted in *Screw Self-Portrait* (2016), a collage depiction of a large-scale 1 1/4 inch drywall screw made from stacked strips of self-portrait photographs taken while Hawkinson revolved on a rotating base. This is a comprehensive self-portrait in contrapposto depicting all angles of Hawkinson's body, but as a portrait it is inscrutable. It is all screwed up.

Hawkinson’s practice regularly skews the everyday, challenging the norm. Made from small pieces of wood conjoined by rough dove-tail joints and shaped into a curve, *Rubber Band Sculpture* (2016) is a two-foot representation of a loopy rubber band that Hawkinson had photographed. He celebrates the found flexible shape by aggrandizing and solidifying it. A shape-changer, he transforms flat rectangular slats into a continuous curve.
Transformation is what art is about and seeds are a natural embodiment of that process. In several recent ball-shaped sculptures, Hawkinson emulates the structure of ripening pine cones, including human feet and hands in the work’s blossoming scales. Sprinnging forth from these gradually opening pods, human creatures will be disseminated by the wind. Hawkinson holds to a faith in growth and maturation. Lumbering sculptures like Überorgan (2000), Bear (2005), and Bosun’s Bass (2015) have shown his penchant for the gargantuan sublime.

But, too practical to be a Platonist, he takes a tough-minded view of ideals. His Averaged Vitruvian Man (2015), a sculptural remake of Leonardo’s drawing illustrating the human proportions on which geometry and Renaissance architecture are based, is composed of plastic soda bottles wrapped in panoramic photographs of body parts whose dimensions have been averaged to fit the size of the bottles. Hawkinson’s man’s head, torso, fingers, toes, and penis are all the same size. The Vitruvian Man has been traditionally used as a symbol of the human body’s fundamental symmetry, its relationship to the size and proportions of nature, and of the inherent order of the cosmos.

Something is wrong with the modernized version. While the relative proportions and symmetry of Hawkinson’s man conform to those of Leonardo’s, the contemporary body’s subject matter has been radically altered, reconfigured using the tactics of a market surveyor or consumer analyst. His body has been stuffed, sausage-like, into a uniform Coke-bottle casing. The habits and clicks of Pepsi drinkers are statistical realities and they - not the span of arms and legs - determine the size and shapes of today’s
vending machines and box stores. The omnipresence of internet cookies have vilified the idea of the "average," sacrificing individualism for homogenous taste. The soda pop man's averaged-out proportions are not be used to design a temple or villa, but to determine a new soft drink flavor or logo design.

While some of Hawkinson's work comments on the ills of contemporary culture, it isn't mired in critique, speaking with an allusive, metaphor-minded voice. For twenty-five years, his art has made a case for contemplation of the rarely questioned structures of time, space, and the body that rule everyday experience. Beyond celebrity reflections and internet tweets, the foggy mysteries of existence hover ready for Hawkinson's creations to bring them to light. We viewers need but look, sit back, and contemplate. His penchant for questioning everything couldn't be more important in the frivolous, contemptible climate of contemporary America. As an advocate for contemplation, Hawkinson's astronaut Tom Thumb may be making a small step for man, but in large ineffable ways he's making a giant leap for mankind.