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ART

## A Tinkerer's Damnedest

*Tim Hawkinson's labor-intensive creations have won rave reviews and a summer exhibition at the Armory Center.*

June 23, 1996 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

As we wrap up the 20th century, in contemporary art the subject of "the body" begins to seem like the genre painting of earlier centuries--nearly every artist explores it, but only a few contribute insight or originality. Tim Hawkinson is among the latter group.

In Hawkinson's wildly unpredictable art, the body is both metaphor and machine, mirror and mystery. His varied self-portraits include an inflated latex head-to-toe balloon of himself and a series of belts that once were wrapped around his torso and now hang at one-inch intervals in a column that is a memory of his presence.

"I think of my use of the body as 'self-portrait as crash test dummy,' " he says.

Hawkinson's exhibitions over the past decade at ACE Gallery in Los Angeles have received largely glowing reviews, while his debut at ACE's New York venue last fall met with unusually high praise and an award from the International Assn. of Art Critics for best show by an emerging artist. Lilly Wei wrote in *Art in America*, "This was as impressive a [New York] debut as I can remember." Kim Levin of the *Village Voice* opined, "By means of sheer prolific nerve, it defies the precariousness of life and attempts to collapse time."

Much of the work from his New York show will be on view at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena today through Sept. 1. The show was organized by Armory Gallery Director Jay Belloli.

Hawkinson, 35, has titled the Pasadena exhibition by rearranging the letters of his first and last name in alphabetical order: "AHI IKMNOSTW." Rearrangement is the simple but effective essence of his work. At the Armory, Hawkinson is literally turning the space inside out by making an inflated latex balloon out of the building's former ammunition vault. He will also fill galleries with wonky home-made machines that make sound. Various moving and floating sculptures will be linked by tubes filled with oxygen or by electrical cords acting as figurative respiratory and nervous systems. There will be faux holograms and castings of space marking his absence. Often, Hawkinson's absence becomes his figurative presence.

"I don't think there are many people who would sit through these invasive and irritating processes," Hawkinson says, explaining why he acts as his own model. Sitting naked in a tub of rising black paint, he was photographed to document the slow disappearance of his white body under the dark liquid. He used these pictures to produce a lacy contour drawing that looks as though it was generated on a computer. He purposely employs such low-tech methods to demystify high-tech production.

Hawkinson seems bemused, if pleased, by the recent critical attention his work has received. An artist who rarely socializes, glad-hands or participates in the extracurricular activities of the art world, the introspective Hawkinson is known for the labor-intensive nature of his production. For example, he once covered every inch of his bathroom in latex to make an inflated, inside-out model of the room titled, wryly, "Head."

Hawkinson's loft, stranded on an industrial street between the garment district and the wholesale produce markets of downtown Los Angeles, is reminiscent of a small-town hardware store, a thrift shop and a trip through the Ripley's Believe It or Not museum. Shelves of tools crowd walls hung with naive paintings by unknown artists. His favorite? An awkward picture of a cat being attacked by little lobsters.

Such an image seems perfectly sensible in Hawkinson's world. Against one wall of his studio leans a flesh-colored painting imprinted with the pattern of his nostrils. "Looking down my nose at art," Hawkinson jokes in his characteristically dry humor. He shows a visitor a snapshot of the companion piece, a great big nose with shoes upended behind the nostrils, laces dangling down: "Nose hairs," he calls it.

Perched like a stork on a chair, his skinny frame twisted at angles, Hawkinson is manifestly uncomfortable discussing his work. His hair is buzz-cut short, and wire-rim spectacles veil large blue eyes that blink with anxiety as he tries to explain certain aspects of his art. This may be the secret of his success. His work is not rhetorical. Evading easy, verbal answers is one source of its appeal. Hawkinson simply says, "I think with my hands."

A suit of armor made of tinfoil and filled with inflatable foam stands lopsided in the corner. A contraption linked by oxygen tubes to an air pump made of old Evian bottles and strapped to a rusted dolly wheezes "yooo-waa-wee." The primitive plastic bellows, the carved reed that makes the sounds, all of this was made from scratch by Hawkinson.

"There is this artist-stranded-on-a-desert-island quality to the machine pieces, where I am just using whatever materials are available," Hawkinson says. "I'm always looking for something that sustains my attention."

Hawkinson considers it dishonest and boring to resort to convenient solutions. He obsessively takes on new challenges in the appearance and technique behind his work and evades the very characteristic sought by most artists: an identifiable style. To address this issue, Hawkinson built a machine that signs his name, a personal joke on the fact that he refuses to develop a signature style.

One example of his recent fascination with machines that make sounds is an 8-foot-tall bagpipe made from glued tarpaulins. "It's a traditional bagpipe with a chanter which plays the melody and drones, made of cardboard carpet roll tubes, which give it that wavering sound. I guess it's an extension of my interest in speech and the body, in the way it sucks and exhales air." The bagpipe plays 10 songs, including "A Bicycle Built for Two" and the Olympic theme. There is no computer chip or tape loop involved.

"It's playing it right before your eyes," Hawkinson explains. "It's an aspect of sculpted sound that interests me; that is, the sound actually being made."

The notion of building sound recalls Hawkinson's high school years in Los Altos in the Bay Area's Silicon Valley, when he repaired and built musical instruments. After completing a banjo and a mandolin, he contemplated becoming a luter but was dissuaded by his art teacher who already saw his promise.

With little affinity for the business of his optician father, Hawkinson enrolled at San Jose State, where he earned a bachelor's degree in fine art in 1985. There he met painter Patty Wickman, whom he later married. She was offered a job teaching painting at UCLA that brought the couple here the same year. "The

saddest thing is we moved directly into this space and haven't moved since," Hawkinson says.

Hawkinson's earliest work was indebted to the Dadaist and Surrealist artists in their intimate scale and manipulation of common objects. Hawkinson now feels, "Those early pieces were so small and precious. I started loosening up and using larger scale. The next step was life-size form and the body seemed the obvious connection."

Artists Bruce Nauman and Lucas Samaras are influences that Hawkinson readily admits to today, but there is a salient difference between them. They all share an interest in psychological and physical self-exploration, but Hawkinson is also an old-fashioned inventor. His work stems in part from a need to spend hours tinkering.

"A lot of times, with the machine pieces, I stick myself in a situation where I have no idea where I'm going or how to go about finding the solution," he says. "Putting myself in a lost position is important."

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"AHI IKMNOSTW," Armory Center for the Arts, 145 N. Raymond Ave., Pasadena. Dates: Opens today. Wednesdays to Sundays, noon to 5 p.m.; Thursdays and Fridays, 6:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. Closed Mondays, Tuesdays and holidays. Ends Sept. 1. Prices: free. Phone: (818) 792-5101.