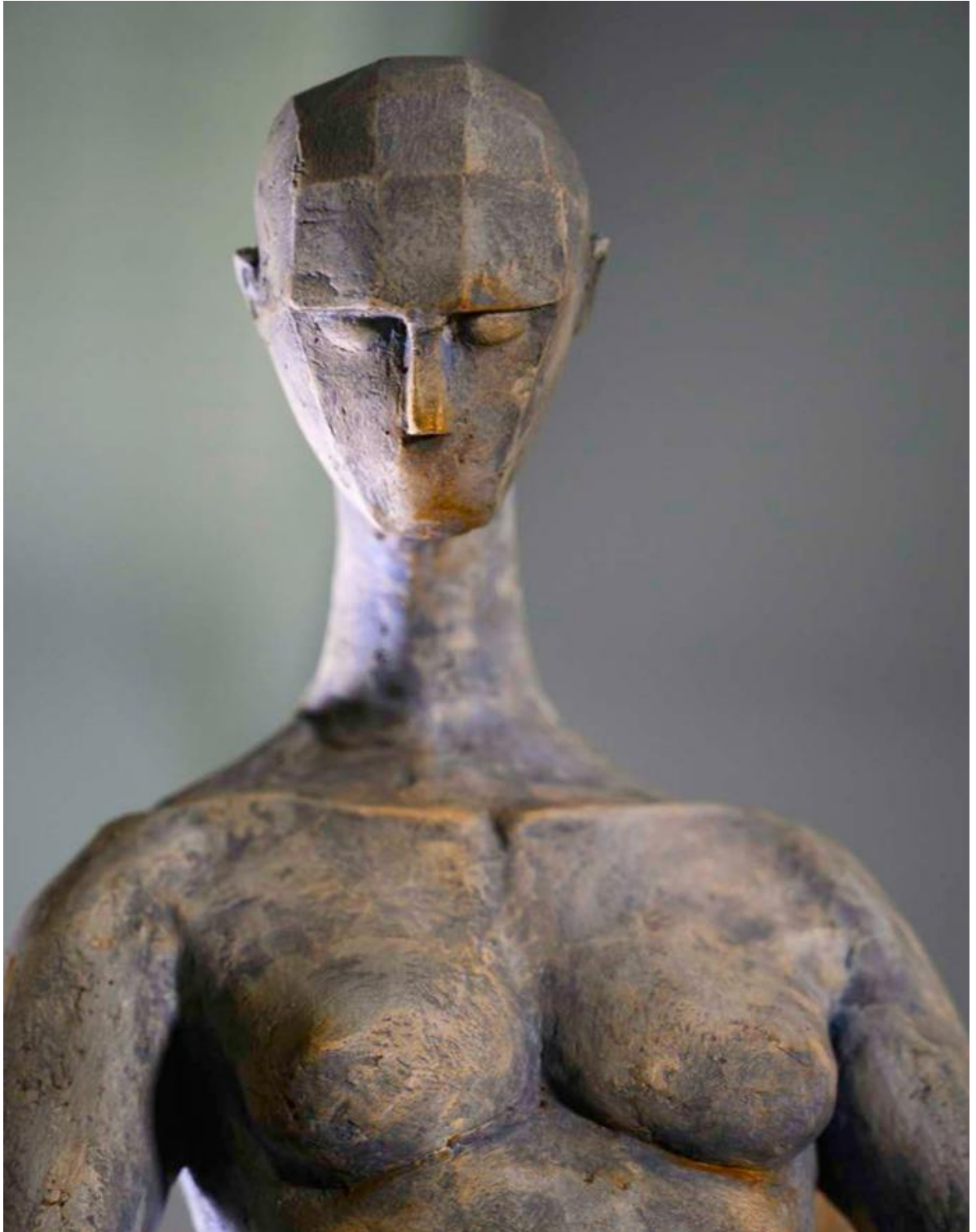


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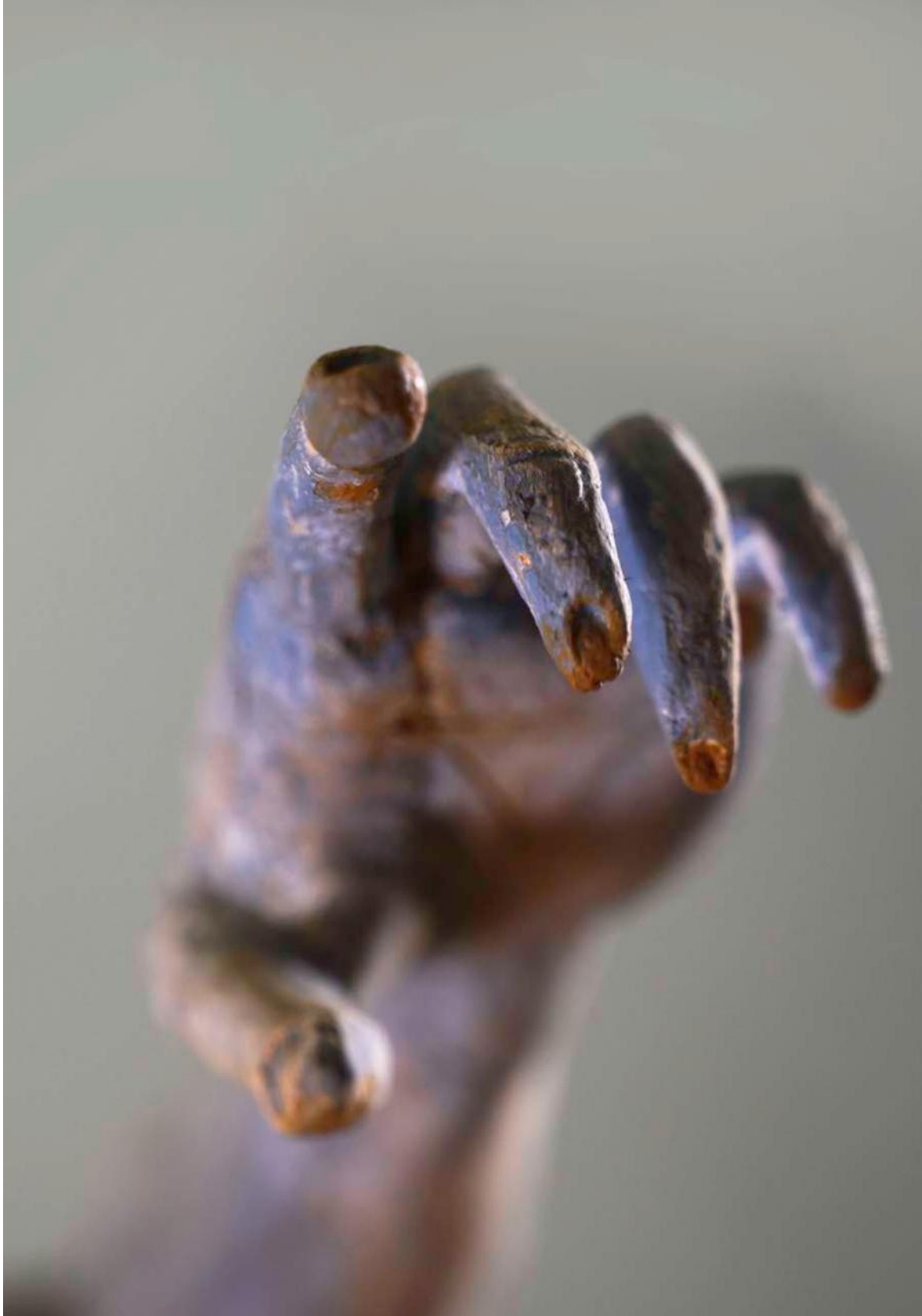
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Cassian Robbertze



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Artist Statement for Cassian Robbertze

I was about one year old when Google first came into existence. I have never known a time when the virtual world was not present. I am not unique in this experience although people born today would consider the year of my birth just as archaic as I would view the years of my parents' births.

Technology is ever-changing to satisfy our needs, real or imaginary, and we are changing with it, giving it new desires to satisfy or maybe, as technology becomes more and more complex, it is the one, creating these new desires. This is where my body of work situates itself. The new reality we find ourselves in is an amalgamation of virtual and real situations and experiences with a skewed hierarchy towards the digital world. True reality, devoid of the virtual world entirely, lives on only in nostalgia.

My body of work draws from the text titled "*Simulacra and Simulation*" by Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard rendered the world into different signs and symbols. Signs that represent real-world objects and concepts. Gradually those signs have gone on to reflect other signs rather than the reality they were originally based on. This is the simulacrum. The creation of signs with no original meaning that go on to create a new reality is the realm of the hyperreal. Baudrillard described this process as taking place in stages. First the faithful copy, the reflection of a profound reality. The second stage is a perversion of reality while the third is a masking of the fact there is no reality. The fourth and final stage is when the simulacrum has no relationship to reality at all and is no longer a representation but rather its own creation. In the online world with no tangibility and presence, everything is reduced to signs and symbols, consumer identity is informed by social media and pop culture. One's identity is moulded by situations and people who have never existed. People draw comparisons between themselves and movie characters or reality TV and real life. Thus, the simulacrum is created when the lines between reality and fantasy become blurred to the point where they are indistinguishable.

During the COVID-19 lockdown most people were forced to interact with an online platform in order to work and socialise. Post lockdown we are now in a world where a lack of access to social media means it is far more difficult to interact with people as more of these interactions take place within the digital realm. People can be whoever they want online; they can create their own personal simulacrum that presents themselves to the world with no basis in reality. People become valued for their contribution to the simulation through the online content they create.

Smartphones have become personalised portals into this digital world. The phone object itself has become as important as a limb; one feels disorientated without it. One could think of a phone as a brain prosthetic — it acts as an extra storage of memory, a logical processing unit, and a means through which to gain knowledge. Often, phones are the first thing people interact with when they wake up and the last thing before they go to sleep. In any other scenario, this level of devotion would be analogous to a form of religious fanaticism. Phones have become devices worthy of entering into a relationship with their user.

Theoretical Underpinnings

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Technology is ever-changing to satisfy our needs, real or imaginary, and we are changing with it, giving it new desires to satisfy or maybe, as technology becomes more and more complex, it is the one, creating these new desires. This is where my body of work situates itself. The new reality we find ourselves in is an amalgamation of virtual and real situations and experiences with a skewed hierarchy towards the digital world. True reality, devoid of the virtual world entirely, lives on only in nostalgia.

This essay will examine the theoretical underpinnings of my body of work as well as the real-world impact technology is having on the planet. It will then go on to talk about my methods of creation and conceptualisation and how those relate back to my concept. I will then go into detail about how each artwork displays an element of the meaning I am trying to convey.

How much of our current existence is dictated to us through the technology we see the world through? My body of work draws from the text titled "Simulacra and Simulation" by Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard rendered the world into different signs and symbols. Signs that represent real-world objects and concepts. Gradually those signs have gone on to reflect other signs rather than the reality they were originally based on. This is the simulacrum. The creation of signs with no original meaning that go on to create a new reality is the realm of the hyperreal.

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Real-World Impact of Our Digital Alter Egos

A large number of studies have been done on the impact harmful heavy metals, from e-waste dumped into landfills, have on the environment. Western countries are well known to export the majority of their e-waste and dump it on countries that do not have the necessary facilities in which to process it, including Africa. Maurice Mbikayi and Francois Knoetze both use art to talk about the effect e-waste has on their respective communities. Mbikayi talks about the effect e-waste has on his Congolese community and how people could transform their harmful environments through recycling. Knoetze is a local artist who works with discarded e-waste and objects to explore their material and social histories. His work deals with the idea of losing one's soul to the machine.

During the last decade there has been a vast increase in the amount of e-waste generated worldwide. Heavy metals such as lead, cadmium and chromium can leach into the environment from landfills as well as harm the people who recycle e-waste without the proper safety precautions. These chemicals can also poison people who have no contact with e-waste as animals ingest them and poison people when eaten.

The production and recycling of plastic poses another major problem for the environment. Heather Davis spoke about the toxins emitted during the syntheses of plastic in her lecture entitled "The Queer Futurity of Plastic". In the lecture Davis addressed the harmful nature of microplastics and the fact a new species of microorganism has evolved in the depths of the oceans that can actually digest plastic. In our current climate we see the adverse effects waste chemicals from plastic creation is having and it is likely that as these tiny organisms are eaten, chemicals will affect the larger food chain at an increased rate.

Bisphenol A (BPA), amongst other organic synthetic compounds, has been found to have extremely adverse effects in humans and animals when they are exposed to a significant amount of it. BPA is used in everything from food packaging to personal hygiene products. It can cause infertility, cancer and has adverse effects on the metabolism as well as causing a host of reproductive pathologies. BPA and various other plasticisers are all associated with these harmful effects.

Waste plastic has become so widespread that geographers have started to find a new type of plastic rock forming on the beaches of Hawaii. These rocks are now part of the geographical makeup of the world. Archaeologists looking back will be able to pinpoint the creation of the plastic age from the near indestructible waste it has created. This new type of rock has been called Plastiglomerate Stones.

My Practice and Application of Theory

Since starting at Michaelis in 2018, my practice has changed quite drastically from what it was to what it is now. In truth, I owe the bulk of my current technological pathway to lockdown and COVID-19. Lockdown was a unique experience for me, as I am sure it was for most people, the feeling of isolation from the world and from my usual creative outlets meant that I had no other choice but to explore other avenues of creation. I had no access to a studio or materials and therefore my main means of creation was via my laptop. I explored the world of digital sculpture through Zbrush and the use of a drawing tablet. The learning process required a large amount of adaptation and many long hours on YouTube, but I was a confident digital sculptor by the end of lockdown. The idea that something created entirely in virtual space can be 3D printed to occupy space in the real world is a literal example of the digital world affecting the physical world in a permanent way.

After lockdown was eased and work resumed on campus, I looked for ways to implement my digital process of creation into my traditional sculpting method. In the end I made use of the virtual clay in Zbrush to mock up quickly and sculpt lots of different experiments and then from there developed the successful ones into fully formed sculptures that I 3D printed. These 3D prints I used as maquettes from which to sculpt the “traditional” sculptures out of Creststone using a method developed by Jane Alexander. When I sculpt the larger figures, they take on a life of their own, different from the 3D sculptures I made as reference.

This poses an interesting question, where lies the original art object in this process. Is the original sculpture the 3D file on my computer, or the 3D print of the file that I used to make the traditional sculpture? Or is the traditional sculpture itself the original — considering how much gets lost and changed when translating a digital sculpture into a physical one made of a different material. Are they all original in some way or are they copies/iterations of themselves? What is real in the age of the perfect digital copy? Originality as an individual object has no meaning in the digital world as files are able to be copied identically to the point where they are not just copies but the original themselves. In truth I think of my pieces’ originality as a simulacrum, they are all original pieces and at the same time, they are all copies of one another.

The process through which I create art has, in a large way, affected my thinking around the hyperreal and digital space.

The colour scheme of this body of work pays homage to its digital construction process. The digital clay I used has a blue tinge to it as does the resin used by the 3D printer. I grew used to creating and playing around in this colour. By painting the larger figure in an approximation of the 3D printed resin colour I am showing that I see these larger sculptures as “prints” of the digital sculpture, using myself as the “printer”. However, the colour is not exactly the same as the 3D print and neither is the sculpture. The 3D printed elements of the sculptures are painted in a slightly more saturated blue-grey and this clean solid colour contrasts the dirty blue-grey of the Creststone sculpture as they are the physical manifestation of digital constructs. The cleanness of the colour echoes the perfectly simulated digital world where everything you see is by design.

My body of work consists of five sculptures situated atop large rock-like constructions: “At Your Finger Tips”, “Abdication of Identity”, “Constructing a Following”, “Threshold” and “Digital Rapture”. There are a number of issues that run through the entire body of work and elements that are specific to each sculpture. The rock-like constructions each sculpture is situated upon are my interpretation of the mountains of e-waste scattered around the world and how they are physically changing the make-up of our bodies through the chemicals released. I have constructed my own form of the Plastiglomerate Stones Davis spoke about, an amalgamation of e-waste I collected and the Crestone I used to sculpt the figures themselves. In this way the last two sculptures’ “flesh” has merged completely with the e-waste they have created. The figures are telling a story of the transition these hyperreal rocks have already undergone.

The rock-like plinths the sculptures stand upon were also created in reference to the digital landscapes I grew up playing computer games in. Whenever I think of computer games, I think of the hours of virtual experiences created with friends, while totally occupying the virtual world. For me this is the true birth of the digital simulation. Computer games allowed me to be anyone I wanted and to achieve feats that were simply impossible. For me nothing is as alluring as the world of a computer game. The rocks sit on the floor of the exhibition space, they appear to come out of nowhere. This evokes the feeling one might get when they use an Augmented Reality app on their phone and overlay a digital scene or character into real space. In this way the whole exhibition can be seen as an AR virtual world given physical presence in the real world.

Each sculpture deals with the fact that the hyperreal has become more real than the physical world. They do this in different ways.

In “At Your Finger Tips” the digital world is represented by the 3D printed phone and “digital demon” that clings to the figure’s shoulder. I wanted to focus on the conclusions I had drawn about the demanding nature of phones and through them the digital realm — the fact that when your phone rings you’re likely to answer. The figure has a tiny “digital demon” clinging to his shoulders forcing his attention towards the phone screen even as he tries to look away. This creature is the personification of the sense of urgency that surrounds the digital world — the feeling that what transpires within it is innately more important than its real-world counterparts.

The digital world is established through the 3D printed screen that has replaced the head of the figure in “Abdication of Identity”. The figure has sacrificed his identity to technology. He holds his head in his hands watching the TV screen that has replaced it. He has outsourced his imagination and the machine now thinks for him. The way he cradles his head shows that he underwent this process willingly. He has now become one with the simulacrum and only exists within it, online. The TV monitor also refers to a culture of mass consumption controlled by corporations, which in turn dictates popular culture within the digital world.

In “Constructing a Following” the “robot” creations that walk around the ankles of the main figure personify the digital world. Collecting these robots gives the main figure meaning and purpose. As he collects more and more figures, he becomes more deeply embedded within the digital world and his real-world existence starts to lose meaning and value. This is an analogy for social media and its creation of perceived worth.

The digital aspects of “Threshold” no longer take physical form. This piece exists both within the physical world and the digital realm. The figure reaches out towards his many online personalities, which are only visible when viewed through a device capable of Augmented Reality. In this way, the viewer must enter the digital world to fully understand the work. The digital realm becomes the key to interpreting the physical object.

In “Digital Rapture” the physical reality of the figure has evolved to suit the digital portal through which she accesses the digital world. The figure is fused to a throne of plastic waste, her neck elongated as her body adapts. Her phone has become fully integrated into her body — an extension of herself. This reflects the growing physical and psychological integration between humans and technology.

Social media and digital identities.

In rendering this fantastical muscular figure in the real world through sculpture, the viewer notices how improbable it is that a real person could actually look like that. This is something that does not often happen on social media platforms, as the implicit assumption when viewing a photograph of someone is that photographs do not lie, or at the very least depict most of the truth. This is of course a fallacy, and even when one knows that, it is still difficult to shake. There are a vast number of apps that can be used to alter physical appearance in minutes. Never before has this process been as easy as it is today. The digital demon points towards the source of these unrealistic digital bodies that we consume on a daily basis and forces the figure’s attention towards it. Social media can be addictive, and the demon ensures that the figure remains engaged.

The branded shoes the figure wears hint at a consumer society that expresses itself through the purchasing of commodities. Online, one’s image is synonymous with one’s identity, and therefore the ability to purchase goods that showcase certain aspects of identity while hiding others is a powerful tool in constructing an online persona. The figure has curated his image to appear as desirable as possible online. For him, his online identity is paramount.

Online, interaction with others is mediated through technology. This mediation creates a layer of separation between individuals and their lived realities. Communication becomes filtered, edited, and curated, often resulting in a version of the self that is idealised rather than authentic. As individuals engage more deeply with these curated identities, the distinction between their real selves and their digital personas becomes increasingly blurred.

The constant need for validation within digital spaces reinforces this behaviour. Likes, shares, and followers become measures of worth, influencing how individuals present themselves and how they perceive others. This creates a feedback loop in which individuals continually modify their identities to align with what is rewarded within the digital environment.

As this process intensifies, the digital identity begins to supersede the physical one. Individuals may prioritise their online presence over their real-world experiences, leading to a detachment from physical reality. Relationships, achievements, and self-worth become tied to digital representation rather than tangible experience.

This shift reflects a broader transformation in how identity is constructed and understood. The self is no longer fixed or grounded in physical experience but is instead fluid, performative, and shaped by external validation within digital systems. In this way, identity becomes a construct — something that is continuously produced and reproduced within the digital realm.

Ultimately, my body of work examines this transition and its consequences. It reflects on the ways in which technology reshapes our understanding of reality, identity, and value. By translating digital processes into physical forms, the work seeks to make visible the often invisible influence of the digital world on our lived experiences.

BIOGRAPHY

Cassian Robbertze (b. 1997) is a sculptor who grew up in Cape Town, South Africa. He completed his Bachelor of Arts in Fine Art at the University of Cape Town in 2021, studying under renowned artist Jane Alexander. Before pursuing formal studies, he gained hands-on experience working as an assistant to different sculptors and worked as an art tutor at Rathkeale College in New Zealand.

Robbertze has exhibited in a number of different art fairs including CTAF2023 and various group shows, including Untitled 9.9 at 99 Loop Street Gallery. In 2021, he was selected for the ArtLabs mentorship program with Latitudes, where he was mentored by Dr. Willie Bester. His work has been acquired by the Art Bank of South Africa and is now part of the permanent collection at the Oliewenhuis Museum in Bloemfontein. In 2023, he was again recognized by the Art Bank and selected for a mentorship with Niëll Jonker.

Bouncing between Cape Town and Johannesburg, Robbertze continues to develop his practice, exploring sculpture as a medium to engage with themes of history, technology, and the evolving human experience.

CASSIAN ROBBERTZE

ARTIST / CREATIVE DIRECTOR

- **BACHELOR OF ARTS IN FINE ART, 2018–2021**

University of Cape Town

Graduated with Distinction and Distinction in Studiowork under the supervision of Jane Alexander

- **JANE ALEXANDER**

- Professor at Michaelis School of Fine Art

- jane.alexander@uct.ac.za

- **PART-TIME LECTURER - UCT | 2022–PRESENT**

Practical based lecturing in Mould Making and Computer-Aided Design for the Sculpture department at Michaelis School of Fine Art

- **CREATIVE DIRECTOR - AMNOVA | 2023–PRESENT**

Oversees the creative branch of Amnova Tech, specializing in additive manufacturing and general fabrication for the Arts

- **ASSISTANT SCULPTOR TO MARY SIBANDE | 2021–2023**

Assisted Sibande in bringing her vision to life through the sculpted form

- **PESP3 - ART BANK OF SOUTH AFRICA | 2023**

Selected from a country-wide application to create art under the mentorship of Niel Jonker

MATRIC CERTIFICATE, 2016

Wynberg Boys High School

The Top Art Student

EXPERIENCE

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2023

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the sculpted form

• **PESP3 - ART BANK OF SOUTH AFRICA | 2023**

Selected from a country-wide application to create

art under the mentorship of Niel Jonker

• **LATITUDES MENTORSHIP WITH ARTLAB | 2021**

Invited to create art for an exhibition with

Latitudes under the mentorship of Dr Willie

Bester, Ronald Muchatuta, and Bonolo Kavula.

• **ART BANK OF SOUTH AFRICA - NATIONAL**

MUSEUM | 2019-2021

Sports, Arts and Culture Department of South

Africa aquired work that is now housed at the Na

tional Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa

-
- ASSISTANT SCULPTOR TO JEAN DOYLE | 2018-2019

- Binguwa Mutharika - Malawian Monument
- James Mancham - Seychelles Monument.

- ART TUTOR - RATHKEALE BOARDING SCHOOL, NEW ZEALAND | 2017

Worked as an art tutor, teaching painting, drawing, and graphic design.

EDUCATION

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REFERENCES

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- Professor at Michaelis School of Fine Art
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- JEAN DOYLE - Sculptor
- info@doylebronzes.co.za

-
- TEXT, 2023
45 Yew Street, Salt River
 - OPEN STUDIOS, 2023
9 Hopkins Road, Salt River
 - UNTITLED 9.99, 2022
99 Loop Street Gallery, Cape Town

-
- IN STRANGER TIMES, 2022
Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein
 - WANDERLUST ART EXHIBITION, 2022
30 Keerom Street, Cape Town
 - MICHAELIS GRAD SHOW, 2021
Michaelis School of Fine Art, Cape Town
 - IN AND OF CULMINATION, 2021
Latitudes Online Exhibition
 - HONEYBADGER, 2021
91 Loop, Cape Town
 - GROUP SHOWS IN CAPE TOWN, NEW ZEALAND, AND BLOEMFONTEIN, 2016–2021

-
- LATITUDES ART FAIR - SPIER CREATIVE BLOCK PROJECT, 2025
Shepston Gardens, Johannesburg
 - SculptX SCULPTURE FAIR, 2022–2024
Melrose Gallery, Johannesburg
 - INVESTEC CAPE TOWN ART FAIR - CHURCH PROJECTS, 2024
Cape Town Convention Centre
 - TURBINE ART FAIR - THE GRADUATE BOOTH, 2022
Johannesburg

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- MISFITS, 2025
33 Yew Street, Cape Town
- HOMAGE TO THE YEAR, 2024
Melrose Gallery
- FIRST THURSDAYS - THE EMERGING ARTISTS PROGRAM OF CAPE TOWN, 2023–2024
SA Sendiggestig Museum
- UNFILTERED - SPIER ARTS TRUST, 2024
Sisonke Gallery, Cape Heritage Hotel
- BLUE ROOM OPEN STUDIOS, 2024
149 Upper Canterbury Street, Cape Town
- GREAT EXPECTATIONS, 2024
Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein

- VITAL SIGNS, 2024
Michaelis School of Fine Art, Cape Town
 - PANDEMIC, PRAXIS, PEDAGOGY, 2024
Michaelis School of Fine Art, Cape Town
 - FAME WEEK, 2023
Cape Town Convention Centre
-

ART FAIRS

- LATITUDES ART FAIR - SPIER CREATIVE BLOCK PROJECT, 2025 Shepston Gardens, Johannesburg
- SculptX SCULPTURE FAIR, 2022-2024, Melrose Gallery, Johannesburg
 - INVESTEC CAPE TOWN ART FAIR - CHURCH PROJECTS, 2024 Cape Town Convention Centre
 - TURBINE ART FAIR - THE GRADUATE BOOTH, 2022 Johannesburg