

**EXO**

By

Pani Bolbolabadi

Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

The University of Manitoba

in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ART

School of Art

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg

Copyright © 2022 Pani Bolbolabadi

## **Abstract**

This text explains my search for the grotesque beauty of disposable materials, especially electronic objects, addresses the relationship between electronic objects and humans, and propounds human impacts on issues such as biodiversity, climate, and biogeography. Through looking at historical movements such as surrealism and post-war artists such as Judy Pfaff, and Eva Hesse, I explore connections between subjective and objective concepts to give an impression of the real world. Audience interactivity is explored, in addition to formal aspects of my practice. The latter includes monochromatic applications of colour, pattern and symmetry as visual devices.

## **Table of contents**

Abstract .....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Introduction.....	5
Purpose and subject of the project .....	5
Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise.....	10
Infinity.....	12
Conclusion.....	14
Bibliography.....	14

## **Acknowledgment**

I express my sincere gratitude to all the individuals who have helped and supported me during my graduate program, the creation of my thesis exhibition, and my career.

I would like to thank my advisor, Mark Neufeld, for his patience, motivation, enthusiasm, immense knowledge, and his guidance throughout this project. I could not imagine having a better advisor for my master's degree.

Thank you to my other committee members, Leigh Bridges, Dominique Rey, and Eduardo Aquino, for their help and great advice, ideas, and feedback.

I am grateful to Christopher Pancoe, Dan Dell'Agnese, Trevor Baziuk, Francisco Fernandez, and Shelley McCafferty for their technical expertise during my program.

Thank you to my parents, Azim Bolbolabadi and Fariba Bazargani, for always supporting and encouraging me. Also, many thanks to my dear friends Mahsa Merci, Kiarash Koochaki, and Julianna Zwierciadlowska- Rhymer. You have all been my support system for these past two years and during some of the most intense times.

## **Introduction**

In the present digital age, cables and electric components are ubiquitous modern technological tools. Electrical components surround us. In fact, these elements pass through mountains, roads, and streets to reach homes, as well as penetrating walls to transmit electrical currents, assisting people to live more comfortably. Since electricity has a massive effect on modern life, people's day-to-day lives are indebted to it, even for domestic running water. However, these 'cable fences' have entangled individuals by forming a barrier between them and the environment, disconnecting their relationships and impacting their lives. In my work I seek to create works of art that address the role of technology in society, using the surplus waste materials of that society.

While living in Iran, I developed a body of work addressing the relationship between electronic objects and humans. My interest in electrical components was cultivated during my childhood. My first influence was my father, an electrical engineer who was always fascinating to me when he was repairing a broken part of an electrical appliance at home, or when he showed me high voltage overhead transmission lines and high voltage towers. Later, during my study at the University of Guilan pursuing a bachelor's degree, I became fascinated by insects and spiders because they were colorful with abstract natural textures on their bodies. Having the ability to hide in nature, as well as living in a colony, promotes some similarities between these different worlds, between nature and culture. My work seeks to explore the overlapping spaces of nature and culture, using patterning and morphologies in combination with recycled computer packaging and electronic components.

## **Purpose and subject of the project**

One of the significant environmental issues in recent centuries is how humans affect nature. The idea of the Anthropocene was considered in the early 1960s by Russian scientists. It is argued that the Anthropocene impacts on the homogenocene, biodiversity, stratigraphy geomorphology, climate, biogeography, and nocturnality. Another term, "Anthroponomy" was used briefly in the eighteenth century by Kant in his "Metaphysics of Morals" and is sometimes referred to as a rare anthropological term pointing to how human beings develop in their environment.<sup>1</sup> The environment is as crucial a component to human life as skin is to living flesh. In some countries like Canada, governments and people recycle disposable electric components to impede environmental impacts. Conversely, in countries like Iran, electrical parts are thrown away after serving their life span without any further consideration. Moving to Canada helped me understand the importance of recycling, especially electronic objects.

Using aspects of technology and modern life, I have observed some similar features of disposable electrical components with the natural world, specifically insects. Like electrical

---

<sup>1</sup> Involving Anthroponomy in the Anthropocene: On Decoloniality, by Jeremy Bendik-Keymer  
Published by Taylor & Francis Group, 2020-05-27

components, insects have the ability to be veiled and covered. Similarly, both electrical components and natural species are prolific and exist all over the world.

Details regarding textures of insect bodies are of great importance; dot patterns, lines, and different forms influence how I assemble the wires and electrical components in my work. While my materials and processes suggest an engagement with sculpture, I see myself as a painter rather than a sculptor. In this project, I have attempted to paint simple dots along with lines, while drawing on the shapes to show the importance of details. Using circular foam pieces, I then covered the shape with colored papier mâché pulp. After that, I used polyurethane spray and coloured it with a brush and acrylic color. The last stage is making small holes and adding wires to them.

Blue-black and red are my colour palette. I believe a monochromatic approach to colour focuses on the viewer's imagination and creates optical illusions. Yves Klein expressed that in his monochrome painting he felt that "[t]hrough colour I feel the sentiment of complete identification with space; I am truly liberated [...w]hen colour is no longer pure, the drama can take on frightening proportions."<sup>2</sup> To me, this quote expresses how the purity of colour can affect the audience. The red by itself, or dark Prussian blue, gives an intense psychological and emotional pleasure. As architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe said, "less is more" to describe his aesthetic of minimal view. Geometric forms and patterns with wires; painting dots on these sculptures can uniquely convey an idea of pure colour, and simultaneously highlight aspects of a larger and more complex piece.

A balanced distribution of duplicate body parts or forms inside an organism's body is referred to as biological symmetry. In contrast to mathematics, biology's symmetry is always approximate.<sup>3</sup> Plant leaves, for example, while symmetrical, seldom match up perfectly when folded in half. *Symmetry* is a natural pattern in which the pattern element is almost repeated via reflection or rotation. From a distance my works are like symmetrical patterns, however upon closer inspection, the viewer can find more symmetry in the patterns. Since such dots are one of the basic elements of painting and drawing, they will form a cohesive design when the audience gets farther away from the work. In fact, all the dots come together to form a single pattern.

The work produced in the latter half of my MFA program uses several layers of three-dimensional modular objects. Additionally, I added more material to my work, such as: electrical components, electrical board, mirrors, wires, nails and metal, because I wanted to develop the idea of the nature-culture divide as it relates to abstraction.

The nature-culture divide refers to a theoretical foundation of contemporary anthropology. The reason for employing minuscule pieces of mirror in some of my sculptures was so that as the audience would move closer to inspect the details of my work, they could also see their reflection.

---

<sup>2</sup> Brougher, Kerry, and Vergne Philippe. Yves Klein: With the Void, Full Powers. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and Walker Art Center, Washington, DC. 2011. Pp.96.

<sup>3</sup> URL, Symmetry in biology, Wikipedia

in other works of mine, I have included tiny mirrors to provide an opportunity for the audience to observe the minor details which are hidden on the backside of my work. ‘Early anthropologists sought theoretical insight from the perceived tensions between nature and culture. Later, the argument became framed by the question of whether the two entities function separately from one another, or if they were in a continuous biotic relationship with each other.’<sup>4</sup>



Untitled, 25 x 24 x 17 Cm, Mixed media, 2021

The idea of three-dimensional objects installed on the wall is rooted in the history of relief sculptures and its background in Egyptian and Greek cultures. The reliefs of Donatello, Ghiberti, and other early renaissance artists make full use of perspective, which is a pictorial method of representing three-dimensional spatial relationships realistically on a two-dimensional surface. ‘Egyptian and most pre-Columbian American low reliefs are also extremely pictorial but in a different way. Using a system of graphic conventions, they translate the three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional one.’<sup>5</sup> Therefore, this idea of having a realistic spatial essence provides a distinctly illusionistic viewing experience while making a close connection to sculpture. On the other hand, wall-reliefs are not free-standing and have a connection to the wall. "The panels are all literal things, but the overall effect is pictorial, hence something more than two dimensions but

---

<sup>4</sup> URL, Nature–culture divide, Wikipedia

<sup>5</sup> URL, Relief sculpture, Britannica

less than freestanding sculpture – in the last analysis very close to renaissance precursors, differing only in that there is no clear progression from picture space to sculpture.”<sup>6</sup>



The Reign of Jupiter

The Reign of Jupiter, marble bas-relief depicting Jupiter (center) and Mercury (left), dating to the northern French Renaissance, c. 1550–70, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

Image: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, The Annenberg Foundation Gift, 1997, 1997.23, [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)

---

<sup>6</sup> Linsley, Robert. *Beyond Resemblance Abstract Art in The Age of Global conceptualism*. Reaktion Books Ltd, London, UK. 2017. Pp.142.



Hesitate, 24 x 17 cm, Mixed media, 2021

I have created three-dimensional abstract relief sculptures, inspired by Frank Stella's work and Judy Pfaff's installation art and sculptures, and Eva Hesse, in order to give an impression of the real world. Through abstract sculptural techniques, I make connections between subjective and objective concepts. The relationship of the objects to the walls with various forms is also inspiring and compelling due to being aligned with my own interests in many ways. The works that I have made are informed by a close study of the aforementioned artists, and others who used a similar technique to them. In fact:

“In traditional relief, the plane is at the back, and so there is a coherent movement from illusionist space forwards to sculpture, fully modeled but still attached abstract relief the thing that comes forward is often a plane, which maybe bent or curved or cut, and there may not be a single identifiable background plane except for the wall. Each plane is of course itself fully three-dimensional, but in Stella's case the whole complex is set back visually and conceptually into the place where we usually find painting, on the wall at ninety degrees to our vision, so what we have is a kind of extra vividly material pictorial game.”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

Frank Stella gave new meanings to the back parts of his works while completing them like the front parts which are shown to the audience. In fact, as a way of finishing his relief paintings, Frank Stella began putting color on the backs of them. He does not seem to have a method for treating the backs; instead, he seems to be experimenting with various options in the Moby-Dick works' spontaneous spirit. The back parts were decorated differently than fronts, and he employs a variety of languages, methods, and application types.<sup>8</sup> In my current project, the backsides of my work to present the hidden parts for several reasons. Firstly, insects and bugs are living hidden in the soil, trees, or under the rocks, and some of them live in a colony to protect themselves. When I was a child, I spent time following insects in my family home; often, they could be found under tables and furniture, hiding next to the electrical cables and plugs. Secondly, I wish to create space for curiosity and discovery. Mostly in painting and relief sculptures hanging on the walls, the audience cannot see the backside of the work. But I want the audience to be more curious to come closer and look at the reflection in the mirror from the backside of my sculptures. Lastly, because there is a connection between the hidden part of art and the hidden parts of electrical components. Electrical objects are usually covered and hidden by their visual production design, and they are most of the time not recognizable at first look. For example, in computer monitors or simple lamps, we cannot see the electrical board or wires.

In my thesis, I had thematic and material explorations, considering abstraction and insects within the format of wall reliefs. With modern technology, we are communicating and creating new forms, impacting one another but also impacting the natural world. Technology seems to offer an escape from nature, but this is impossible and, in the process, technology changes nature. I want my artwork to comment on or add to these understandings of the modern world.

### **Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise**

---

Isaiah 26:19

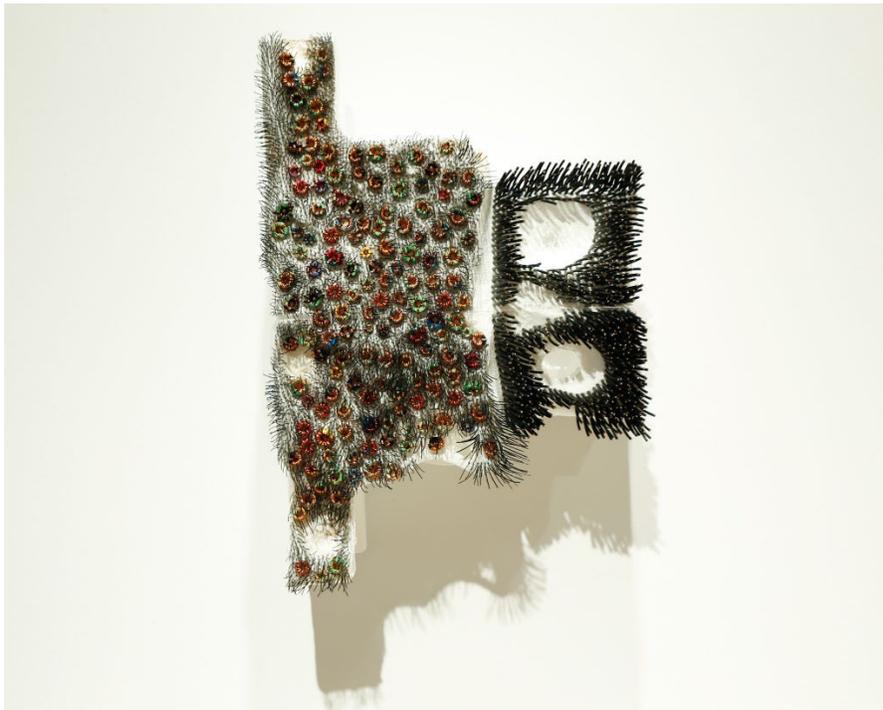
I believe that human beings already have littered our world to excess, I have decided to try not to add more to it. My personal preference is to recycle the enormous amounts of waste material we encounter in our daily lives, giving new life to items that others have discarded or abandoned. For this series of works, which is the continuation of my research on foams in earlier works, I have used the raw foam polystyrene packaging used for protecting iMacs as the project material and added disposable electrical components and wires to it. I have used iMac packaging foams as the structure of my sculptures because several digital companies have mass production, packaging their products using raw foam polystyrene escalating more waste materials. In the digital industry, each product becomes accessible for consumers in packaging after production. Boxes and foam that protect devices are rendered useless once they have been removed from the package. Luckily, foams are thermoplastic, which means that recycling companies can reclaim them repeatedly. Also, many companies have developed innovative ways to keep plastic waste in the loop. A circular economy is a holistic strategy for economic growth that benefits businesses, society, and the environment simultaneously. A circular economy, in contrast to the linear "take-make-waste" model, is regenerative by design and seeks to decouple growth from consumption of finite

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 143

resources gradually.<sup>9</sup> It also identifies and addresses the hazards associated with economic activities that affect human health and the environment. However, often times, styrofoam is not recycled by individuals; therefore, this project aims to encourage such individuals to use their household items in an artistic way and discover the value of reusable items in the packaging foam series.

Besides, the city where I lived before made me concentrate on this material. I was raised in the north of Iran, next to the scenic Caspian Sea and a place called Saravan's Jungle. Unfortunately, Saravan's jungle has become a garbage depot due to the incompetence of environmental management; indeed, the Iranian government made a huge mountain of garbage in this jungle, causing many negative impacts—such as pollution, natural habitat destruction, and disease for the residents of that area. An Untitled documentary by Leila Fouladvand about the Saravan Jungle led me to consider many issues, such as the quantity of trash we produce, its aggregate impact, and its effects on the symbiotic system in the surrounding natural habitat and ecology.



Untitled, 53 x 35 Cm, Wires & post used electrical components on the iMac protection foam, 2022

In the twentieth century, the term "ready-made" was used to describe the substitution of manufactured objects for ones made by hand invented by Marcel Duchamp and continued by other artists. Later, in the twentieth century, many artists (among them pioneering women such as Eva Hesse and later Cady Noland and Mona Hatoum) started to use ready-mades and industrial fabrication techniques in their works. As a reminder of how gender-specific labor was at the moment, Hesse made the Fabrication of Accession ii at Arko metals where it was still legally

---

<sup>9</sup> URL, THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY IN DETAIL. ELLEN MACARTHUR FOUNDATION

permissible to bar a woman from jobs based on gender, a practice common in manufacturing.<sup>10</sup> At the end of the 1950s, the appropriation and collecting of discarded materials for art began in Europe and New York, coinciding with the growth in Western capitalist consumption. Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns created stunning juxtapositions of urban trash between 1958 and 1959.<sup>11</sup> The curator William Seitz coined the term "assemblage" to describe this new art form, which he described as a "language for impatient, hyper-critical, and anarchic young artists"<sup>12</sup> "As element set element, the numerous traits and auras of solitary fragments are compounded, merged, or refuted, resulting in substance becoming poetry," he wrote<sup>13</sup> In fact, using such art form would provide more room for artists in the way that they could in a critical indirect way address the political, social, and economic issues in the communities.

Many contemporary artists are using manufactured items in their work to avoid adding more waste materials while sending an artistic message to their audience. For instance, Elis Morin collected 65,000 CDs for her installation, "Wasteland Space," and carpets on the floor of the Centquatre art space, housed in a former funeral home in Paris. "Wasteland Space" is planned for exhibition in multiple locations before eventually being completely recycled into polycarbonate.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Brian Jungen utilizes the raw materials of economic production as a way to examine consumerism and globalization in his work. The "Shapeshifter" is one of the three whale sculptures created by Jungen with white polypropylene plastic chairs. Jungen's artistic practice is characterized by his experimentation with commercial materials to create unexpected constructions. The title of this work, Shapeshifter, refers to the spiritual transformation that occurs in many cultures between humans, animals, and supernatural beings. Similarly, the artist transforms a cheap, white plastic chair - an everyday consumer product - into an object of mysterious power and majesty.

## **Infinity**

*Infinity* employs a readymade steel cage, mirrors, spray foam, electrical boards, and wires. At a size of 91 x 91 x 229 cm, *Infinity* is the largest and most significant work in the exhibition. The readymade outer structure houses a second form: a monochrome red sculpture with the abstract shape of the cocoon. Large mirrors are placed on the top and bottom of the cage, creating an illusion of infinite depth.

*Infinity* develops concepts of re-purposing in multiple ways. A wire frame filled with studio detritus comprises the cocoon-like form. The wire structure is wrapped with found newspaper flyers. Re-purposed electrical boards were added between the gaps. Finally, this form is covered with spray foam painted red, and red electrical wires hang from it.

---

<sup>10</sup> Swenson, Kirsten. *Irrational Judgments: Eva Hesse, Sol Lewitt, and 1960s New York*. Yale University Press. 2015. Pp. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Collins, Judith. *Sculpture Today*. Phaidon Press Limited, New York, NY. 2007. Pp. 414.

Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Crolla, Kristof, and Metta, Annalisa. *Landscape Installation Art*, Edited by Infengspace, Basheer Graphic Books. 2013. Pp. 121.

*Infinity* is a collaboration between the abstract sculpture and the delimited space around it. The surrounding cage is a fenced area where time or space has no end. The cage with an open door invites viewers to participate in the captivity of the sculpture and make it an endless picture in the fenced space. When the audience looks at the bottom of the cage or the ceiling, they can see themselves as part of this endless picture in a bottomless hole, giving the viewer the feeling of falling. Due to the optical mechanics of mirrors, the viewer's perception activates a double sense of entrapment: that of the hanging sculpture, as well as the viewer. The door is open, but the sculpture is not free, and the audience will not help. The audience is there to watch and search for the visual aspect of it.

On the side of the cage are thirteen circular mirrors of varied sizes, the backs of which face outwards towards the viewer. Painted red, these "mirror backs" appear as red dots from a distance, visually pulling the viewer in, whereupon the details of the cocoon sculpture appear. The number thirteen symbolizes bad luck surrounding the sculpture. The sculpture has a fatalistic attitude toward its situation and cannot avoid it, and the mirrors demonstrate its resignation.



*Infinity*, 91 x 91 x 229 Cm, Steel, Mirrors, Spray foam & Wires, 2022



Details of Infinity, 2022

## Conclusion

By using industrial mediums, I aim to show one of the main objects of modern industrialization and its effects on the self and the techno-mediated environment. The wires and E-waste can be toxic; they are not biodegradable and accumulate in the environment, in the soil, air, and water.<sup>15</sup> They impact biodiversity and add to climate change. By using mirrors in my work, I want viewers to create connections between themselves and technology, waste, the human body and formlessness. These issues which emerged throughout the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are intensifying through pressures from technological competition at all levels. My work seeks to raise questions about the state of the self in the face of these transformations.

## Bibliography

Bendik Keymer, Jeremy, *Involving Anthroponomy in the Anthropocene: On Decoloniality*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020-05-27.

Brougher, Kerry, and Vergne Philippe. *Yves Klein: With the Void, Full Powers*. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and Walker Art Center, Washington, DC. 2011.

Symmetry in biology, Wikipedia, Holló, Gábor. 2015.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symmetry\\_in\\_biology#cite\\_note-A\\_new\\_paradigm\\_for\\_animal\\_symmetry-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symmetry_in_biology#cite_note-A_new_paradigm_for_animal_symmetry-1)

---

<sup>15</sup> URL, The Growing Environmental Risks of E-Waste, Geneva Environment Network.

Nature–culture divide, Wikipedia, Greenwood, David J and William A. Stini (1977) *Nature, Culture, and Human History*, New York: Harper and Row, 393–408.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nature%E2%80%93culture\\_divide#cite\\_note-GS-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nature%E2%80%93culture_divide#cite_note-GS-1)

Rogers, Leonard R. Relief sculpture, Britannica.  
<https://www.britannica.com/art/sculpture/Animals>

Linsley, Robert. *Beyond Resemblance Abstract Art in The Age of Global conceptualism*. Reaktion Books Ltd, London, UK. 2017.

*The Circular Economy In Detail*. Ellen Mac Arthur Foundation. 2019.  
<https://archive.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/>

Swenson, Kirsten. *Irrational Judgments: Eva Hesse, Sol Lewitt, and 1960s New York*. Yale University Press. 2015.

Collins, Judith. *Sculpture Today*. Phaidon Press Limited, New York, NY. 2007.

Crolla, Kristof, and Metta, Annalisa. *Landscape Installation Art*, Edited by Infengspace, Basheer Graphic Books. 2013.

*The Growing Environmental Risks of E-Waste*, Geneva Environment Network.  
<https://www.genevaenvironmentnetwork.org/resources/updates/the-growing-environmental-risks-of-e-waste/>