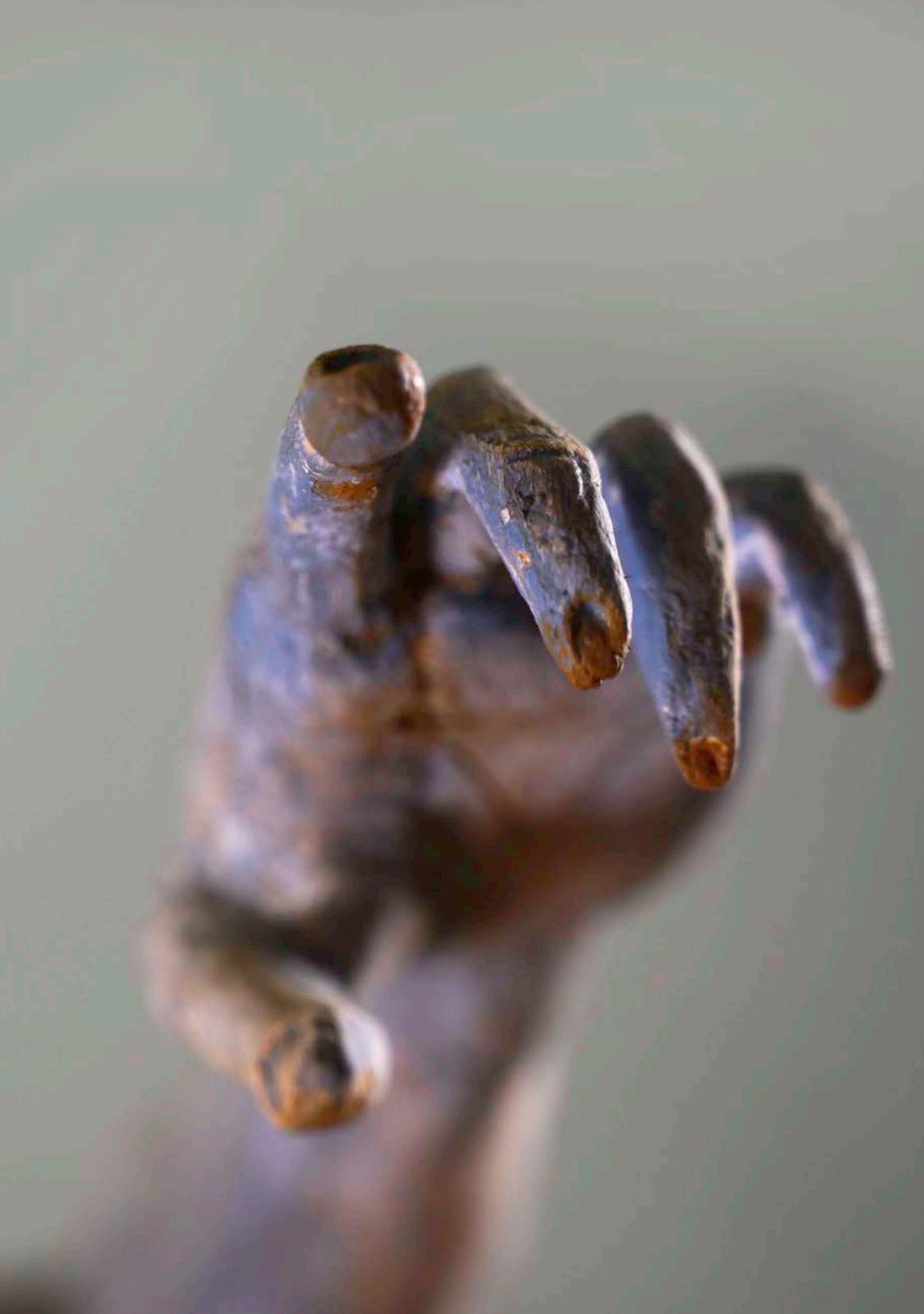


A  
Digital  
Construct  
of  
Physical  
Consequence

*Cassian Robbertze*



**A  
DIGITAL CONSTRUCT  
OF  
PHYSICAL CONSEQUENCE**

**Cassian Robbertze**

## Artist Statement for Cassian Robbertze

*A very summarised version of the writing to follow, skip the first paragraph of "Theoretical Underpinnings" as you read on.*

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 movies 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

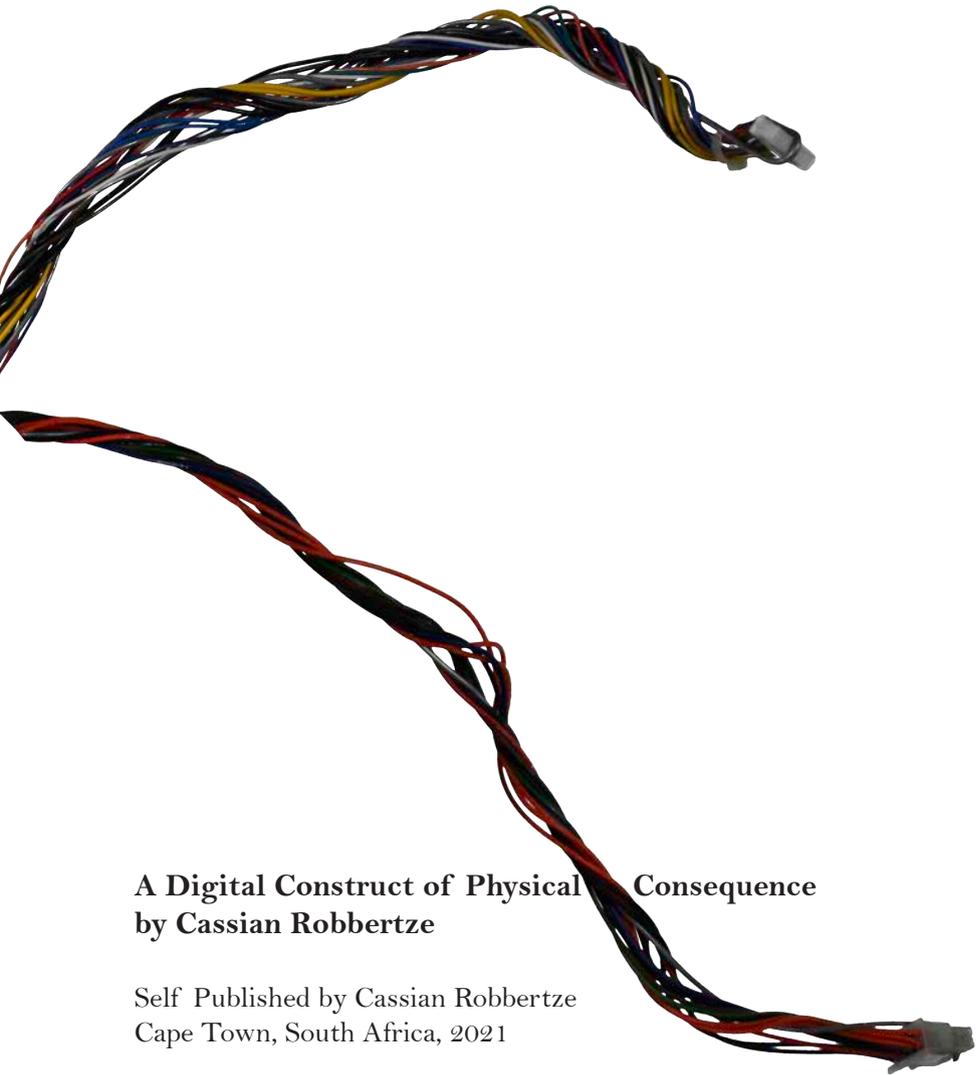
is far more difficult to interact with people as more of these interactions take place within the digital realm. People can be whoever they want online, they can create their own personal simulacrum that presents themselves to the world with no bases on the real. People become valued for their contribution 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, logical processing unit and a means through which to gain knowledge. Often, phones are the first thing people look at or interact with when they wake up and the last thing they interact with before they go to sleep. In any other scenario, this kind of devotion would be analogous to a kind of religious fanaticism. Phones have become a device worthy of entering into a relationship with their user.

Link to video of AR Demonstration:  
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-VQ2PF6ndplZDL2JJ7yoI-Jo4804z5Yu1/view?usp=sharing>





**A Digital Construct of Physical Consequence  
by Cassian Robbertze**

Self Published by Cassian Robbertze  
Cape Town, South Africa, 2021

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Artwork: Cassian Robbertze  
Photography: Tania Robbertze  
Graphic Concept and Design: Cassian Robbertze  
Printing: Zip Print

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*"At Your Finger Tips"*

## Theoretical Underpinnings:

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.

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 (Baudrillard, 1994:6). 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, 1994:6).

Baudrillard described this process as taking place in stages (Baudrillard, 1994:6). 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 (Baudrillard, 1994:6).

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 movies characters or reality TV and real life. These are fantasies that you compare your reality against and for the most part, you do not even realise you're doing it. Thus, the simulacrum is created when the lines between reality and fantasy become blurred to the point where they are indistinguishable (Baudrillard, 1994:6). A Yeezy t-shirt that is similar to any other t-shirt, is more valuable because it represents a sign that tells people it is more important. Its importance has been separated from its function to the degree where its function is no longer important only the sign (brand) is. Its value is no longer informed upon by the real.

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. Whether that is on a macro (countrywide) or micro (individual) level. A lack of technology means a lack of the ability to interact with the digital world. As the digital world becomes more important than the physical world technology and access to technology becomes even more important. On the micro-

level, 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, logical processing unit and a means through which to gain knowledge. It can even think for you or provide you with a set of opinions you may choose to believe as fact (Nashef, 2016:46). Often, phones are the first thing people look at or interact with when they wake up and the last thing they interact with before they go to sleep. In any other scenario, this kind of devotion would be analogous to a kind of religious fanaticism. Phones have become a device worthy of entering into a relationship with their user (Nashef, 2016:45).

Phones have ways of demanding attention from their users through ring tones, vibrations and the sheer amount of content they provide at one's fingertips (Nashef, 2016:45). Phones also have a way of expressing the identity of the person using them, through wallpapers, phone covers and customised content, they create a sense of belonging for the user. In this way, the digital world has a physical means of demanding attention in the real world and creating a sense of urgency that makes the digital world feel more real than reality. When people break

off conversations to answer a phone call, they are showing a preference for a digital experience over a physical one (Nashef, 2016:42). This break in conversation is normally accompanied by body language that distances the phone call receiver from the people they were talking to face-to-face. Body language such as breaking eye contact or turning one's body to face away from the other person leads to less meaningful connections between the two people speaking face-to-face (Przybylski and Weinstein, 2012).

In Nashef's text titled "*Virtuality and Difference in the Age of the Hyperreal*" (2016) she suggests that one of the reasons people choose the digital world over the physical could stem from the creation of online identities. People can be whoever they want online, they can create their own personal simulacrum that presents themselves to the world with no bases on the real. An example of this would be an online dating profile or a social media profile.

These online identities gain traction over time as people follow them. People become valued for their contribution to the simulation through the online content they create (Nashef, 2016:46), look at how influencers and celebrities' online personas have global impact on society. As these identities become more important, the lines between

one's online identity and one's identity in the real begin to blur (Nashef, 2016:41). You have value in the real because of your value in the simulation. Reality is informed upon by the virtual world. In the end, your virtual identities become more real than the real itself. This could lead to a crisis of identity as you lose sight of your identity in the real and how it separates from your external identities in the virtual (Nashef, 2016:47). Your online identity might once have started out based on your identity in real life but as it grows and changes in the digital world it becomes its own identity with little to no bases on reality. It has become a sign that reflects another sign, with no meaning grounded in reality. As long as that sign is interpreted through the digital world it has meaning and importance and therefore there is an incentive to stay online where your identity has meaning. Here the real has lost all meaning, the threshold has been crossed and existence in the hyperreal becomes the preferred state of being (Nashef, 2016:50).

This shows how important the simulation has become, how necessary constant contact with information has become. Through this abundance of information, truth has been lost as media has become a reflection of a viewpoint. There is enough information out there to back up any viewpoint anyone could possibly have. People no longer



have to find common ground with people in the real because they have people who support their views in the simulation. This leads to a fundamental loss in meaning as fact blends with fiction and the hyperreal takes over.

*"Constructing a Following"*

## Real-world impact of our digital alter egos:

A large number of studies<sup>1</sup> 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 (Ouabo et al., 2019). 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 (Mbikayi, 2021). 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 (Zeitz Mocca, 2021).

During the last decade there has been a vast increase in the amount of e-waste generated worldwide (Interesting Engineering, 2020). 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*" (2017). 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 (Davis, 2017).

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 (Matuszczak et al.,

2019). BPA and various other plasticisers are all associated with these harmful effects. Davis also talks about how these chemicals are feminising male fetuses and causing early onset puberty (Davis, 2015:237).

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 (Davis, 2017). Archaeologist 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 by the researchers who discovered them (Davis, 2017).

<sup>1</sup>(Heacock et al., 2016), (Kirby and Lora-Wainwright, 2014), (Ouabo, Ogundiran, Sangodoyin and Babalola, 2019) to name but a few.



*"Digital Rapture"*

## 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 COVID19. 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 piece's originality as a simulacrum, they are all original pieces and at the same time, they are all copies of one another. In this way,



*“Constructing a Following”*

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 Cretestone 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”* (Figure 1), *“Abdication of Identity”* (Figure 2), *“Constructing a Following”* (Figure 3), *“Threshold”* (Figure 4) and *“Digital Rapture”* (Figure 5). 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 (Davis, 2017), an amalgamation of e-waste I collected and the Cretestone 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, however. 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 the viewer 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 a number of different corporations, that exists today. This consumption in turn dictates the popular culture seen in 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 of course an analogy for social media and its creation of worth but I will get into that later in this essay.

The digital aspects of *“Threshold”* no longer take physical form. This piece exists within the physical world and the digital realm. The Crestone figure reaches out towards his many online personalities. These personalities are only visible when viewed through a device capable of Augmented Reality. In this way, the viewer themselves has to migrate into the digital world to fully understand the piece. The digital world holds the key to understanding this physical sculpture just as the digital world



*“Abdication of Identity”*



holds information and knowledge that we access in order to understand the physical world better. For this figure, his physical existence is of no importance to him. His body has begun to disappear into the plastic rock created through his sustained use of technology and the E-waste that goes with it.

In *“Digital Rapture”* the physical reality of the figure has evolved to best suit the digital portal through which to access the digital world. The figure is fused to a throne of plastic waste, her neck has grown elongated as her body has evolved around her new limb. Recent studies have shown that phone use is actually changing the way the cartilage and bones move in our hands, as well as mapping new neuropathways in our brains (Drury, 2015). The evolution of the lady in the throne echoes the evolution that may be taking place within the viewer themselves. Her phone has integrated seamlessly with her body as any limb would. This hints at the devotion to technology I spoke about earlier. Her personalised portal into the digital world has become a piece of her and the only important part of her physical existence.

Next, my body of work focuses on social media and digital identities. Figure 1 takes a rather direct approach in depicting the digital bodies we see online every day by doing just that, depicting the body. 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 out there that you can use to change your 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 figures attention towards it. Social media can be addictive and the little demon makes sure that the figure stays up to date.

The branded shoes the Creststone 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 your identity and hide others is a powerful tool when crafting an online persona. The figure has curated his image to look as good as possible online. For him, his online identity is all-important.

Online your interaction with people is mediated through technology, this results in a slightly different way of communicating depending on what software you are using. This difference in communication makes it easier to have different identities online - you can be whoever you want to be. Having different online identities can lead to a degradation of your identity in the real world as you try to figure out which you, is the real you. The fancy suit and shoes worn by figure 2 mark him out as an individual who places value in the outward appearance that is so valued by social media.

Within the realm of social media, importance is created when people "like" or "follow" you. This can happen in a number of different ways. Either organically or through the use of "bots" (fake accounts) that inflate your likes and lend you authenticity as you become more important and influential. Despondency can set in when the real world does not live up to the social media hype. People who enjoy influence online often live real lives that differ greatly from the lives they post about. Their online following sustains them and gives them meaning. Figure 3 is collecting the robots and plugging them into himself. Through them, he gains meaning and is able to sustain his online reality. His lack of clothes shows the vulnerability present in

the digital world, this figure draws meaning and purpose from these online interactions, which means that the digital world has power over him. He is vulnerable in the face of all that online power. He merely creates content; he requires other people to "like" it in order to feel validated.

In Figure 4 the main figure rooted in reality is attempting to transcend it in order to get in touch with the many different digital versions of himself that he feels are more real than his current state of existence. Figure 4 and figure 5 do not wear clothes as they have completely disregarded their physical existence in preference for a digital one.

The posture of the figures shows a progression from the physical world to the digital one. In figure one, the posture is balanced and firmly rooted. Even though the focus of the figure is towards the digital world through the phone in his hand he is very much rooted in the physical world. In Figure 2 the fantasy is becoming real. The posture has become more unstable as the hyperreal starts to take over. In Figure 3 the posture is that of someone bending over, this bending implies subservience. As the posture progresses from standing strong to the crawling of the 4th Figure it echoes the subservience and dependence that humans now have on technology. The 4th Figure is naked and vulnerable, crawling towards the digital world of his

dreams.

The 5th figure no longer crawls towards the digital world she is subservient to. Her transformation is complete, she sits on her throne of waste plastic, completely absorbed in the Hyperreal with no regard or awareness of the physical world. The 5th figure is also a female figure, this refers to a possible future where the toxins in plastic have made males extremely scarce (Davis, 2017).

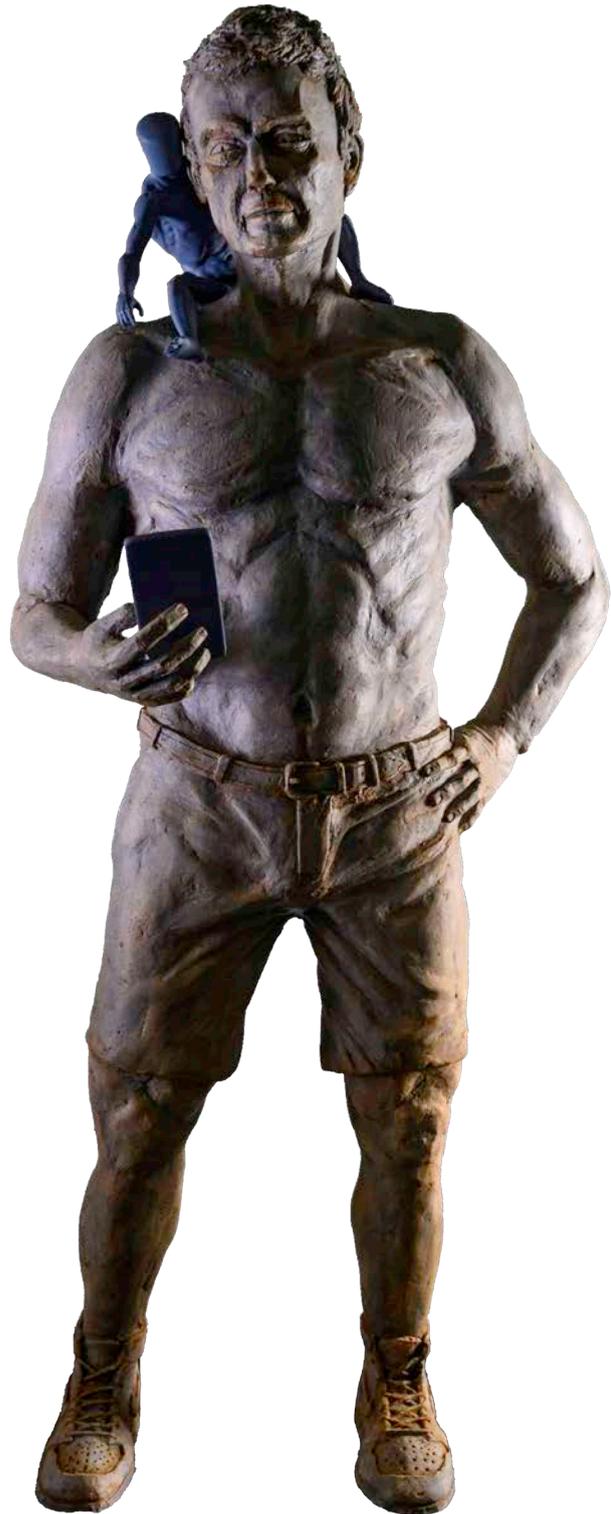
The heads of the figures tell a story of progression into the Hyperreal. Figure 1 and 2 have individual identities signified by the naturalistic rendering of their facial features. Figures 3, 4 and 5 have

their individual faces replaced by the low polygon base mesh you might see when constructing an avatar for a computer game. In this way, the final three figures have given up their physical identity in favour of the digital persona that exists in the Hyperreal.

In conclusion, my body of work focuses on the inevitable transition into the Hyperreal that has already begun in the world today. Portals to the digital world have become an indispensable part of life as the virtual world grows in importance. The simulacrum will soon be complete and the virtual world will become all-encompassing.



"Threshold"

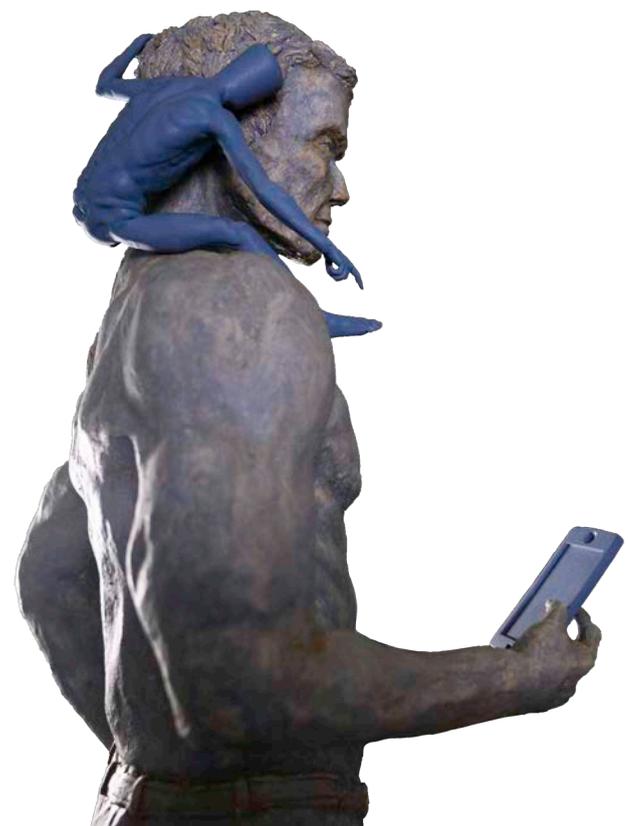


## At Your Finger Tips

Cretestone and Resin, 2021

30cm by 30cm by 67cm





## Abdication of Identity

Cretestone and Resin, 2021  
30cm by 30cm by 76cm







Constructing  
a  
Following

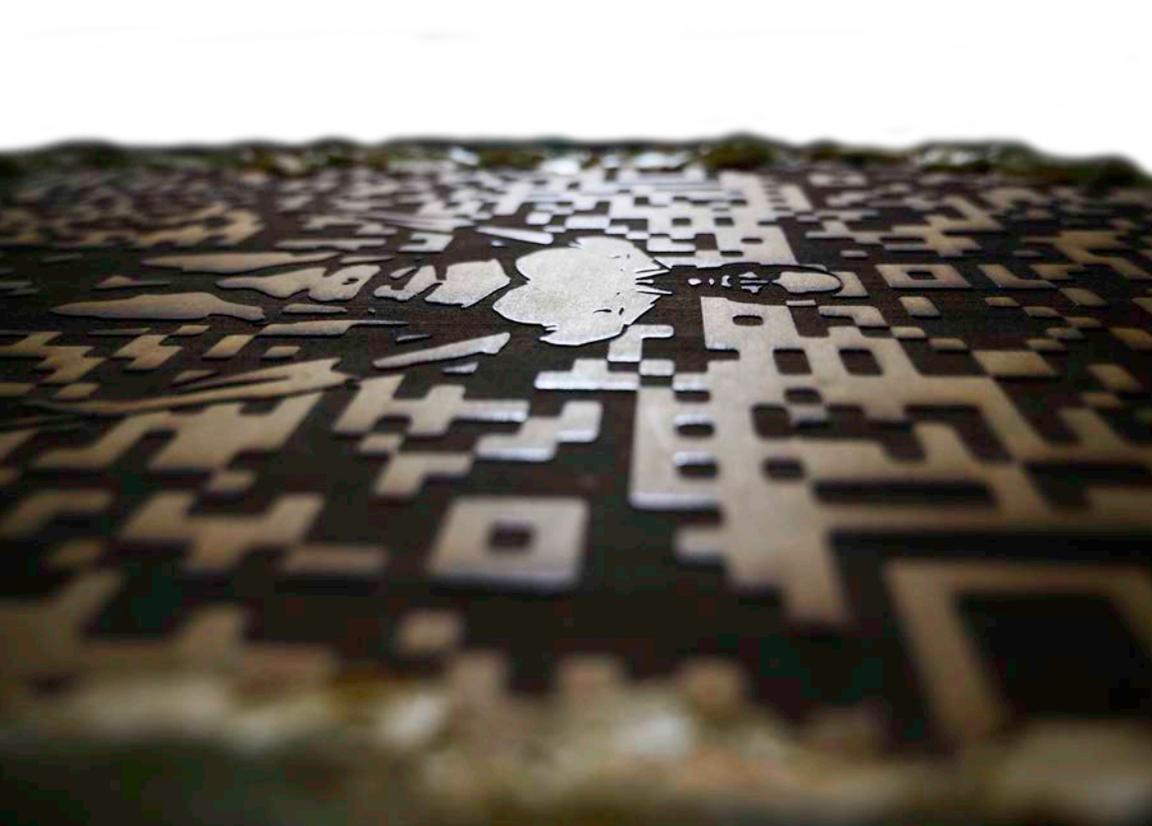
Creststone, Resin and E-Waste, 2021  
57cm by 87cm by 50cm  
*(without base)*





## Threshold

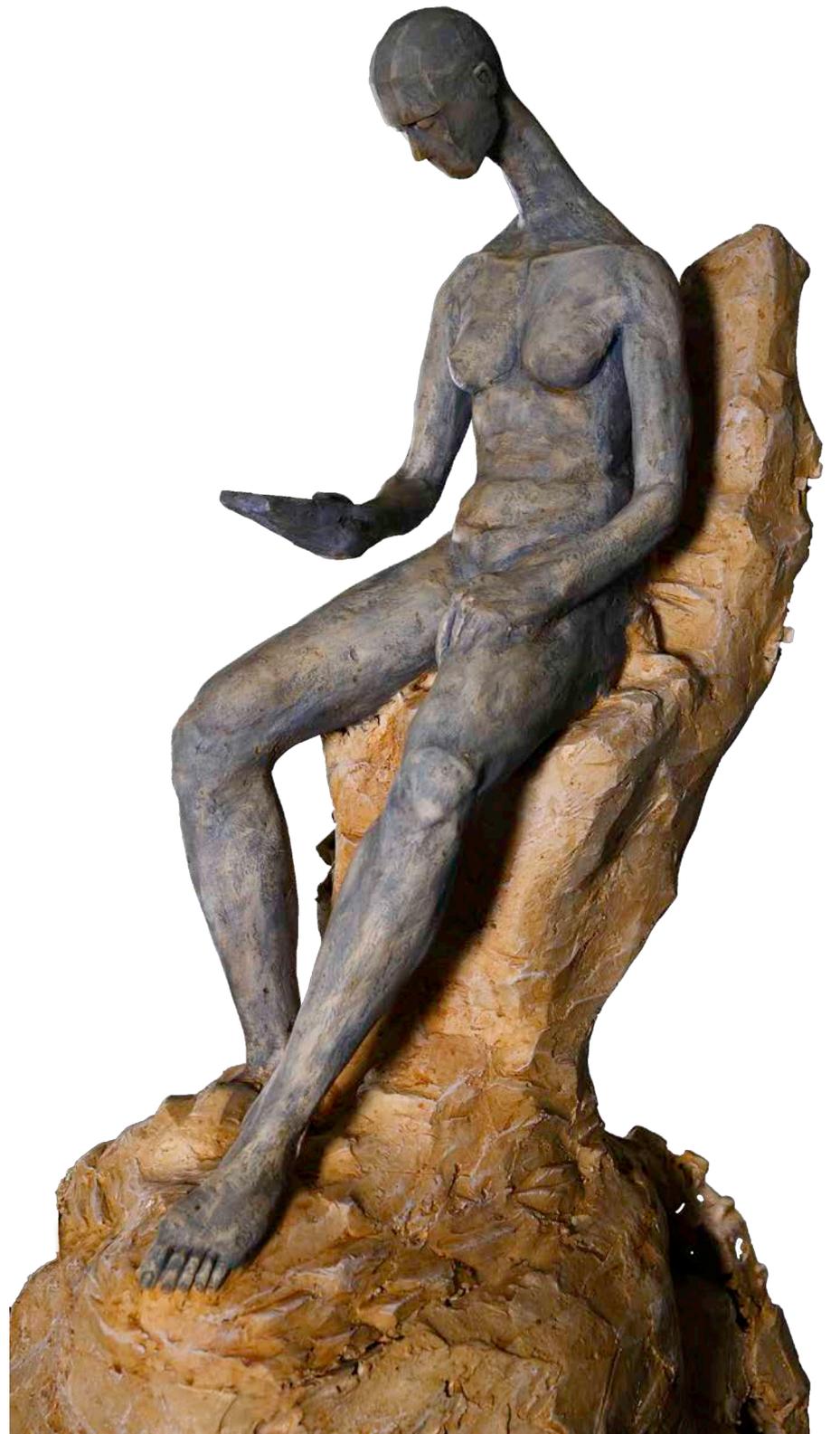
Cretestone and E-Waste, 2021  
40cm by 93cm by 27cm  
*(without base)*



## Digital Rapture

Cretestone and E-Waste, 2021  
30cm by 50cm by 65cm  
(without base)





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## Acknowledgments:

A huge thank you goes out to everyone who has helped me on this four-year-long journey.

First and foremost I would like to thank my family for everything they have done and sacrificed over the years for the sake of my art. Thank you to Keith and Tania, Daniela, Ethan, Kyle and Jessica. Your advice and help has been invaluable.

Thank you to my supervisor Jane Alexander for going out of her way wherever possible, she was the reason I came to Michaelis and working with her is a dream come true. Thank you Jane, for teaching me how to sculpt in Creststone and for giving me the tools and input to create this body of work.

Thank you to Duncan Meyer, Charlie van Rooyen and Johann van der Schijff.

Thank you to all the people who have given me advice and direction over the years:

Kamyar Binesh-Tarigh, Parker Donaldson, Elizabeth Alves, Levi Harris, Sherwyn Jentjies, Bonginkosi Majoka, Mzwanele Henyana, Tatenda Mapisire, Klaré van Heerden, Daniel Tucker, Ingrid Langenhoven, Katlego Phetlhe, Patrick Bongoy, Jean Doyle, Anton Doyle, Dr Willie Bester, Mandy Coleman, Mandy Johnston, Ronald Muchatuta, Bonolo Kavula, Melvin Pather, Ariel Taverner, Johan Els, the UCT Cleaning Staff and Security.

Thank you to Tania Robbertze for the amazing photographs and thank you again to Daniela Alves and Ethan Robbertze for posing as reference.

And to anyone, I forgot to mention,

Thank You



**Cassian Robbertze**  
casrobbertze@gmail.com  
063 474 4537  
Instagram @CasArt22  
Faceook: CasArt

