

The Art of Deception

by Philip Hitchcock

-A three part series examining misunderstood and misrepresented techniques, mediums, and terminologies in Art and sculpture.

PART TWO:

Casting from life...Am I cheating? How to combine elements of Bodycasting and Sculpture to your best advantage.

In 1877, Auguste Rodin exhibited his sculpture "The Age of Bronze" at the Paris Salon. The statue created an instant scandal among critics because they refused to believe that Rodin could create such a realistic sculpture without using a cast of a live model. So incensed was one naysayer that he hung a sign on the statue which read "Molded from the model!"

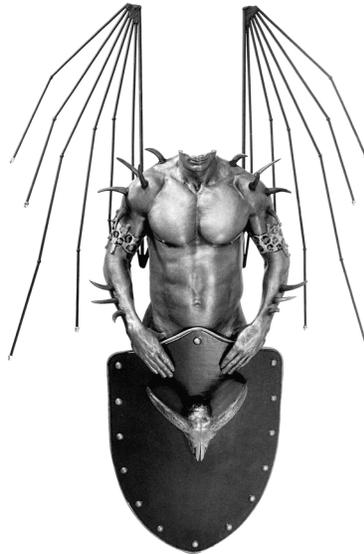
Lifecasting, the process of replicating shapes from human models, has a rich and somewhat controversial history in the art world. Though many still regard it as craft or technique, a number of artists (myself included) have elevated the process to real artistic expression. In fact, the best "lifecasting" incorporates many elements of traditional sculpture. So to spare Monsieur Rodin any further controversy, let us define sculpture simply as the creation of any three-dimensional form, in the round or in relief, and let us count lifecasting among the many techniques available to that process.

A Little More History

The oldest known lifecast is over three thousand years old and dates back to Roman days. Upon death, a statesman's "Deathmask" was made as a three-dimensional reference for carving a marble bust.

(One marketing note here: A LIFEcast is a much easier sell than a DEATHmask!) Before the french art critics would *accuse* Rodin of lifecasting, Madame Toussaud had already become notorious for casting the guillotined heads of famous criminals to create figures for her wax museum. In America, The sculptor Volk made casts of Abraham Lincoln's face and hands

to create a portrait of the young statesman. He had Lincoln hold a broom handle in his right hand and make a fist with his left. These casts took on such great significance, that they were copied over the years in many different forms and eventually became the guide for the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C.



"Winged Warrior"- This wall mounted piece is just under 7 feet tall. The wings are welded rebar and the shield is fiberglass over foam. The ram skull is real although it is covered in epoxy resin. The horns protruding from the body are made of cast urethane resin.

In more recent times, lifecasting has been used as a basis for creating prosthetics for medical and dental applications. Hollywood has also made great use of lifecasting to create special effects for movies. But several artists have used this technique as an art form unto itself.

George Segal used plaster gauze to make "shell molds" from models and then assembled them into full figures. In this technique, the gauze applied to the body became the actual positive. Still others used materials to create negative molds from their subjects that were later cast in positive form to create life-like figures. The best known of these artists was Duanne Hansen, who created amazingly realistic figures in vinyl, some which are virtually

indistinguishable from their human counterparts! Willa Shallit has also been a ground breaker. She founded the "Touch Museum" where blind people are encouraged to touch the lifemasks of famous people so they might "see" how they look. Her work is distinguished by the emphasis she places on the frozen



"Jamie" - This wall mounted piece is composed of three models. Two were present for the actual pose and the third was added later. Can you tell who's who? (Answer: The face was the only portion added to the original casting.)

moment in time and the communion between artist and model.

Though many people are fascinated by the intensely personal aspects of casting an individual's face, I try to objectify the body, to make it more like architecture. The sculpture becomes more *personality neutral* and more universally accessible. The work is less about the model's identity and more about my message as an artist.

"So what do you do?...

just kinda' lay somebody down in plaster?"

I hear this question all the time and the person asking it is usually very serious. The thinking behind this question is wrong on so many levels that it's difficult to know where to begin. Let me say, first of all, that with the state of the art being what it is, no one should be using plaster to make a mold from a human model! It requires a vat of Vaseline and a near motionless subject. Additionally, plaster is so brittle and without flex, that large human casts are nearly impossible. The heat generated by plaster, or worse hydrocal, causes unnecessary discomfort to the model and in some cases burns! So, if someone ever offers to "plaster" you in this fashion, my advice to you is ...RUN! The only exception to this would be the use of

plaster gauze, laid up in sections as George Segal does. But remember this is not a true negative mold and is greatly wanting for fine detail.

Materials

Alginate

Cotton (in roll form)

Johnson & Johnson, 4" Green label Plaster gauze (One of the following three cements)

Plaster of Paris

Hydrocal

Ultracal 30

Hemp fibers

Plastic Buckets

A willing model

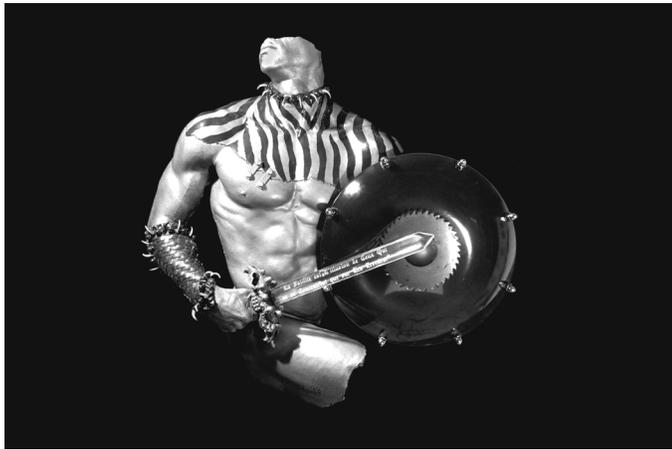
The industry standard for lifecasting is dental Alginate. (pronounced Al-ja-net) Alginate is a completely organic, water activated seaweed derivative that creates tremendously detailed molds. (There are various silicones that are designed for casting from life but these are usually rather expensive.) Additionally, Alginate requires no release, which effectively eliminates the need for Vaseline and messy lubricants. The material is fast drying, clean, and with a little practice, relatively easy to use. There are many brand names for alginate: Just be sure to use a formula with a 3-4 minute gel time or longer. Gel time can be extended by using colder water. (Your models will love that!) There are also retarding agents available. Most dentists use a formula that gels in 60 seconds or



"Flight"- When I originally cast this subject, I had him rest his chin on his fist. When I pulled the piece from the mold, I instantly realized that he appeared to be punching himself in the face! Since the model had already taken a fight back to Canada, I found someone of similar size, cast his hand and attached it as you see it. Because the hand no longer made contact with the chin, the face had to be re-sculpted.

less. This will be too fast for the techniques I will

describe. My own preference is a Prosthetic Grade Cream by Alpha Dental.



"The Warrior"- This is a good example of mixed media. The model was cast in the pose you see, with his right hand held open where the engraved acrylic sword would eventually be placed. On a separate wall mount, I hung the shield which is made of cast polyester resin. (Note the embedded saw blade.) The sword arm is sheathed in woven leather that is studded with Muskrat claws.

A Word About Plaster Gauze

Generic aspirin has usually done the trick on my headaches and "brand X" mouthwash seems to keep my breath minty fresh. But when it comes to plaster gauze, there is no substitute for a brand name. The plaster gauze will be your "mother mold," and it must be fashioned and removed within 15 minutes. Don't sabotage your lifecast by using inferior materials. Johnson & Johnson plaster gauze (designed to set broken bones) is by far the best. The art store variety is inconsistent and often poorly packaged. The Johnson & Johnson brand is sealed sterile and airtight and works every time.

Preparation

It's a good idea to have all your supplies and tools laid out around you. You don't want any surprises while your model is panicking under a layer of goop. Let your machine take all calls and leave a note for the delivery man. Have all your plaster gauze pre-cut into 10-12 inch strips and your cotton laid out in sheets. Portion out enough alginate to do your pose, and have your ultracal pre-set in buckets. I always think of the cooking shows on television where everything is pre-measured in its own little container ready to be scooped up and thrown into the pan!

Choosing a Pose

Selecting a model and his or her pose will have a major influence on the outcome of your piece. Advertisers have known for years that youth and beauty directly impact the bottom line. So unless you are interested in a particular human abnormality, I suggest you start with an attractive model, and select a pose that is artistically strong. **Smaller areas are easier to master than larger areas.** Your mistakes will be smaller, too.

Choose an area that is about 12" x 12". When you have mastered this scale, gradually extend your reach. Place your model in the position you would have gravity effect his body. Usually this means your model will be vertical. Make sure that an appropriate wall or apparatus is in place to support his pose. He will, after all, be under the knife for about twenty minutes. Leave as little to chance here as possible. Consider all the things that might go wrong. What can you do to minimize the model's discomfort?

Ready...Set...Go!

Your gauze is cut, your cotton is ready, and your model is in a zen-like trance. Spray the area to be cast with some cold water. The mist will reduce bubbles and shock your model into readiness. Begin adding cold water to the alginate. One formula recommends 17cc of water at 72 degrees to 50 gms. of alginate. *(Too much science takes the fun out of it, don't you think?)* Just run your tap water until it's as cold as possible and add it to the alginate, quickly mixing it to a consistency like runny



"African Princess"- This one is a bit complicated. First I took a cast of the woman's face. From it I made a secondary mold of silicone rubber. I cast into the rubber mold melted Plastilina clay. This gave me a malleable positive. I sculpted the headgear, opened the eyes and made another silicone rubber mold of the new clay sculpture. The piece shown is one of six castings in a pewter finish.

oatmeal. Start with 1 part alginate to 1 part water by volume. You will probably want to add a little more water.

Scoop up the mix and flow it onto your model. Let gravity work to your advantage by starting at the top and allowing the mix to flow down. Really get in there and apply the stuff, don't just drip it on. Use your hands to "paint" the mix on every last square inch. Pat the surface to break any bubbles. On yeah, keep an eye on the clock. Tick-tick.

Remember: You have approximately 3-4 minutes to mix and apply the alginate. This is not a good time to check your notes.

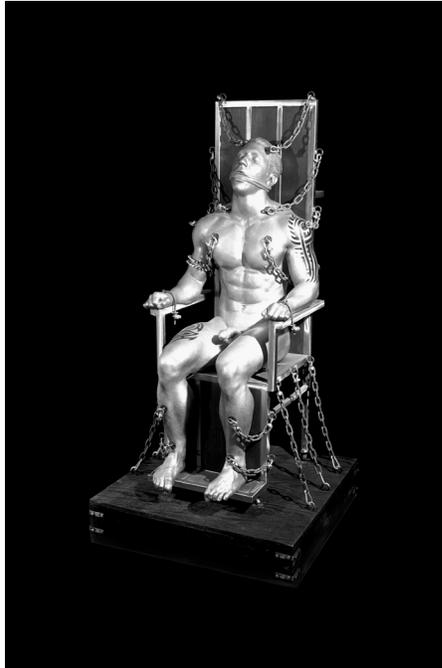
Did I Mention the Cotton?

After the alginate has been applied to the model, but before it gels, you **MUST** push cotton fibers into the surface. Why? Alginate doesn't stick to anything and nothing really sticks to alginate. Consequently, the plaster gauze requires a bit of a nap so it can adhere. The cotton "embeds" in the alginate and the gauze sticks to the cotton. Make sure the cotton gets stuck at the edges!

When the alginate has thoroughly gelled, you should remove the excess cotton, leaving only a light nap. (You will know when the alginate has gelled because it will peel off your hands like a pair of rubber gloves!) If your model appears to have been tarred and feathered, your on the right track.

Start applying the plaster gauze. I usually apply 3-4 strips at a time with the strips slightly fanned out. Dunk the the strips into a bucket of very **warm** water. (Plaster doesn't dry...it cures and heat accelerates the process.) Allow them to drain over the bucket and then apply them to the surface of the alginate and cotton. Again, don't just lay them on but really mold and conform the gauze to the surface of the alginate. The edges usually need a little

YIKES!!



"Seated Male"-While some may find the subject matter and themes of this piece a little hard to take, it is very interesting from a technical perspective. I had the chair welded especially for this sculpture and cast the models while they sat in it. Yes, that's models, plural. "Seated Male" is a composite of three different models and it was cast in six different sections. The backside was sculpted on later.

reinforcement. Work quickly... your model is fading fast.

Removing the Mold

You've gotten this far so don't rush it now. Calmly loosen the alginate at the edges and ask the model to imagine his skin withdrawing from the inside. Slowly remove the mold from the model's body. The subject of body hair often comes up at this time. It would have been a very good idea for your model to have shaved!

Thank and pay your model and get him out of the way. You need to focus on the mold which must be cast right away. Alginate begins to dry out and break down quickly so it's time to start mixing cement.

Plaster of Paris vs. Hydrocal vs. Ultracal 30

All of these US Gypsum products are relatively cheap when purchased in 100lbs... bags but some will work better than others. Plaster of Paris is available everywhere but is very soft and chalky compared to the other materials. Hydrocal has a higher PSI rating and is probably a better material for a beginner. The big drawback is its high rate of expansion while curing. If you lay in gel coats of cement, which is a good idea, an expanding second layer tends to crack the first layer. Ultracal 30, which has an even higher PSI rating than Hydrocal, does not expand significantly while curing and allows for the gradual build up of several thin layers. Mix your cement to a creamy consistency. Again, you'll want to feel into what's right for you, but start with 4 parts cement to 1 part water by volume.

Often I lay my mold on pillows and boxes to cradle it. Fill or slurry your mold with cement. Use wire or

hem to reinforce larger pieces. Allow the piece to fully set, which is usually an hour or more.

The Unveiling

The mold you created is, in effect, a waste mold. You will need to tear, rip, crack, and break it off of your sculpture. Often it's easier to pull the shell off first and then begin tearing at the alginate. Your piece will probably need some touch ups. Fill voids with plaster or spackle and manicure other areas with a Dremmel tool.

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an artist and designer .
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