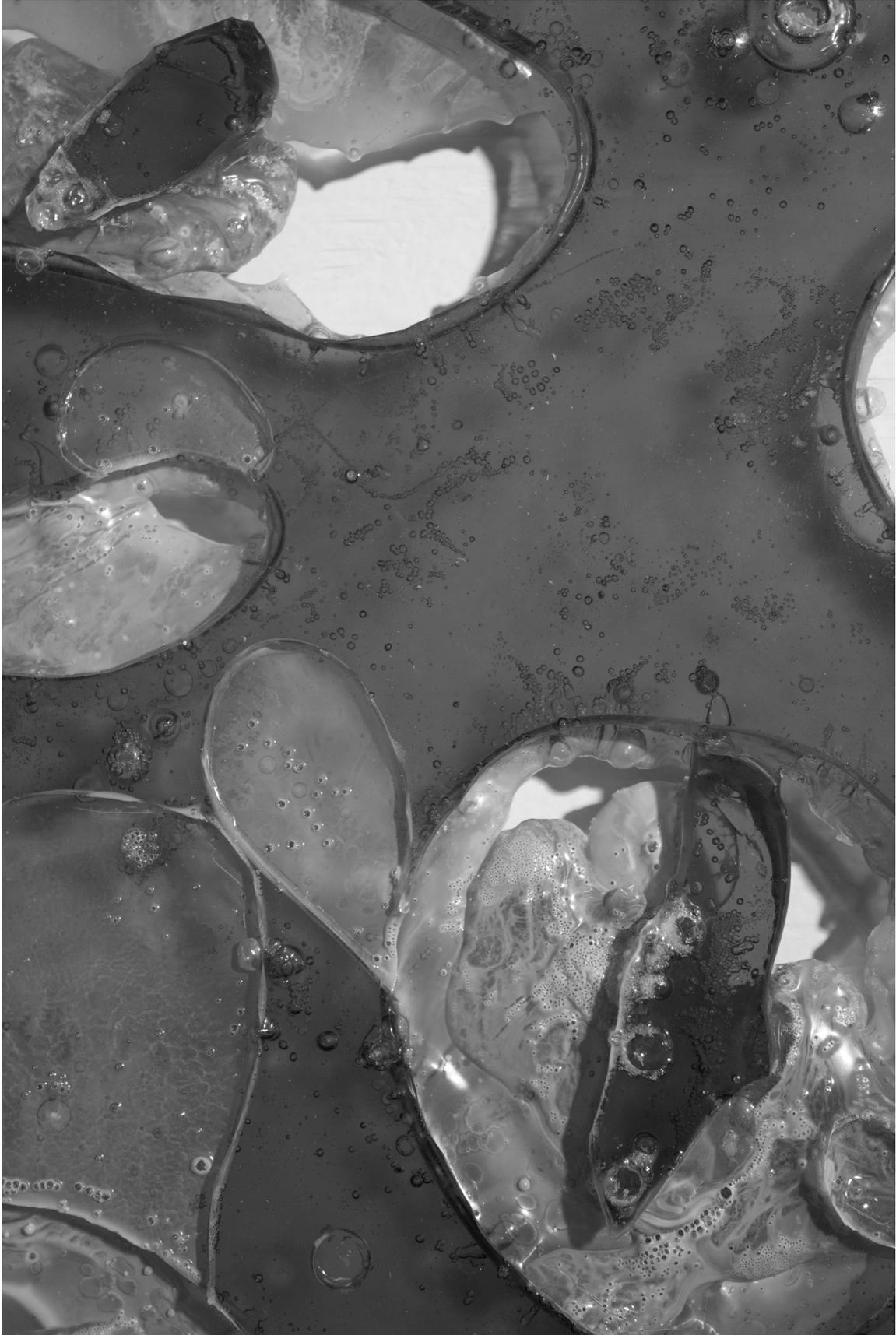




WHITE FLAG LIBRARY

Jesse Greenberg

September 21 – November 9, 2013



Let's get right into this getting to know you interview. There's a lot of variance in your work between the forms that you're using. Some with the more rigid geometry, and some with the more biomorphic forms. I'm wondering where they originate, and how you're developing them.

A lot of it comes in an intuitive way from what the materials can offer. If I were using steel, which comes in rigid, long sticks or flat sheets – the steel is already talking about structure, strength, support, rigidity, and straight lines. It's also the way it's used in our world, and so form will come from the material. If it's steel, it's going to suggest a cubist, minimal thing to begin with. If I'm using the resins and the plastics – because it is a fast setting liquid – it goes from a two-part compound that's mixed up as a liquid to a sludge, a goo, a hardened clay, and finally a solid material within a matter of two minutes. The process involved with that material speaks to flows, currents, drips, and amorphousness.

Even with plastics in our world, the way that the car, or car interiors are all smoothed out, rigid, bubbly, and our products, they're all smoothed out and the corners are always rounded – that's speaking to the process of mold making. It's a lot harder to make a mold for a perfectly rigid cube. It's a lot easier to make a mold for a tapered edged cube like the way that a chocolate bar or a gold bar is folded because it pops right up out of the mold. Design does come from process even in an industrial way. With the plastics especially, I'm witness to these bizarre liquid moments, and though I'm making sculpture, my medium is liquids. I work by creating membranes and walls that will restrain the liquids, so I can create an area to control a liquid as far as possible. Very often, a lot of it comes from the evolution of accidents. Drips and spills are appreciated and then exaggerated in future pieces.

Your work possesses a Sci-Fi quality, as though it could be a prop in Dune. And much of it has an invented hieroglyphics embedded in it, and makes a more direct allusion to Sci-Fi. Which one came first, the interest to evoke those visuals; or, an interest in the mold making and an art practice really rooted in design?

In the beginning, there was a huge interest in making really tactile, ergonomic, touchable things. The urge to do that was to break the hand barrier between things – between the viewer and the piece – and to create and add a more intimate sense to the viewing experience. Just touching. Thinking about the rules of how something would appear touchable, my mind went first to products like cellphones, pens, plastic bottles, really hand held types of things. That led me to create these smaller sculptures that had rounded edges, which were seemingly ergonomic to fit in the hand without having that grip molded thing, but to still have something that looks like “This is a palm area” and “It looks like there is a finger mold area.” That creates this Sci-Fi thing anyway, because they look like these unnamable products that perhaps could be a future cellphone, or some sort of communication device.

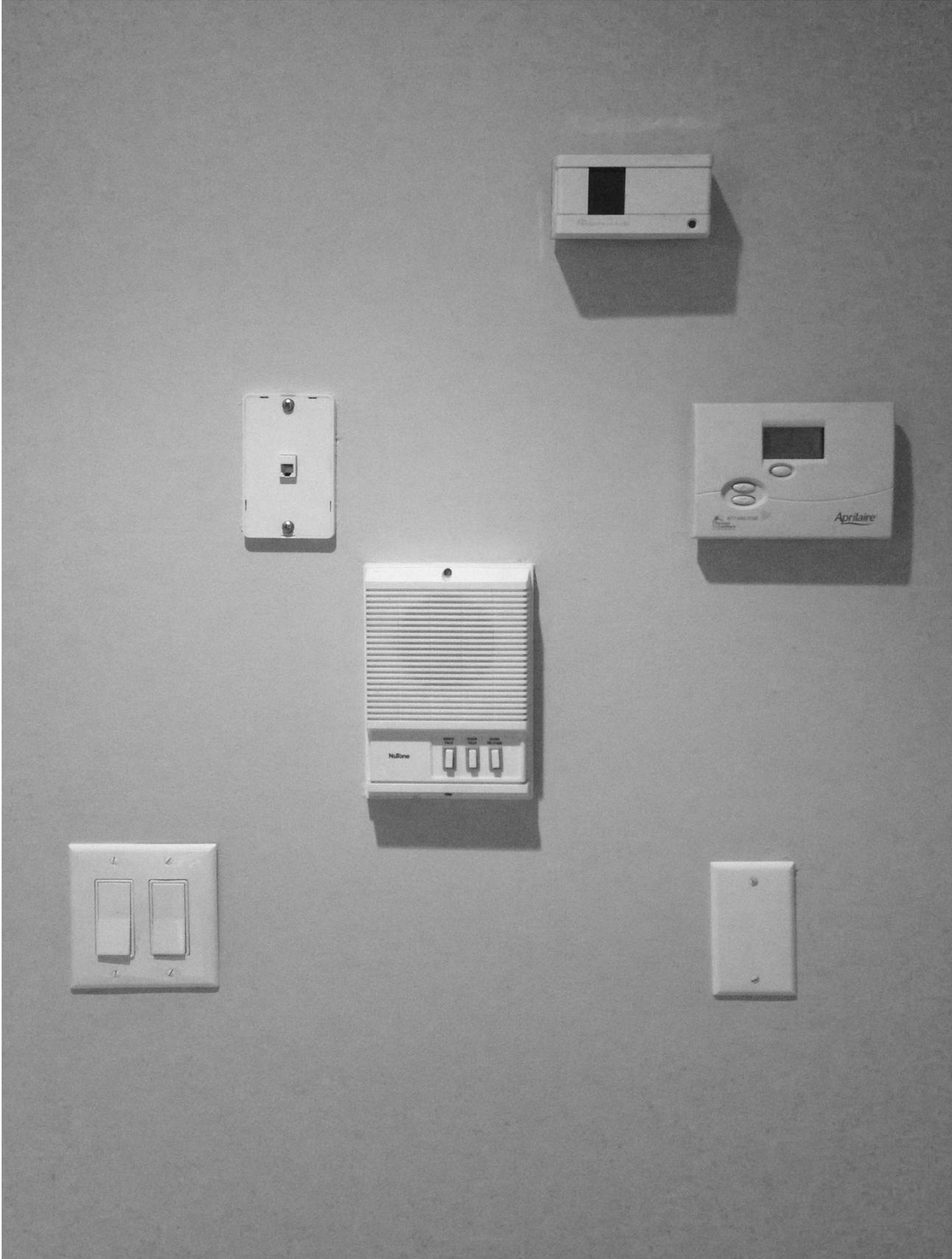
Because they're so intuitive to grasp physically –

Yeah.

– that they seem to possess a certain intelligence, or are imbedded with an intelligence.

Depending on what finish, color, or gloss, it really gives it that placement and determines if it looks futuristic, or if it's of the present, or in the past. I started to think about how stumbling upon, something futuristic, with only a vague functionality, is really similar to archeological dig sites. You're finding remnants of something, one edge is rounded and one edge is broken and it looks like these rounded edges fit together and you put it together and you find out what these tools or vessels are – even without knowing the reason or purpose.

Recently, I have been trying to make things that have elements of Sci-Fi and archeology. Like a Rosetta Stone broken tablet, or a Stonehenge arch. Things existed and things will exist. This grounds us in the present and here we can locate those types of character forms or lettering pieces that I have. They don't have real letters or characters, but they look enough like it to represent these ideas that mark, shape, and gesture have always had meaning to us. And the rules of that meaning have evolved over time.



You're also effacing that. It makes me think about the controversy around Yucca Mountain in Nevada where they were going to store nuclear waste. One of the big controversies, apart from the environmental devastation that it threatened, concerned how they would construct an iconography to warn people, because the waste has a half-life of, like, 10,000 years. And in 10,000 years, the symbol still needs to be meaningful.

To an unknown future. I've taken a lot of architecture classes and that's a very popular architecture contest for young students to do, because it's anti-architecture.

When you win, you lose, because it doesn't work.

People are trying to make this architecture that is absolutely nauseating, and confusing, and just makes me not want to be there. It's still interesting to think of how to communicate in this way.

With ideas about the future and bringing in these archeological ideas that ground us in the present...It seems that trying to construct an everlasting universal iconography of warning can only be judged and the winner of that contest would only be representative of people now and people's ideas of the future now.

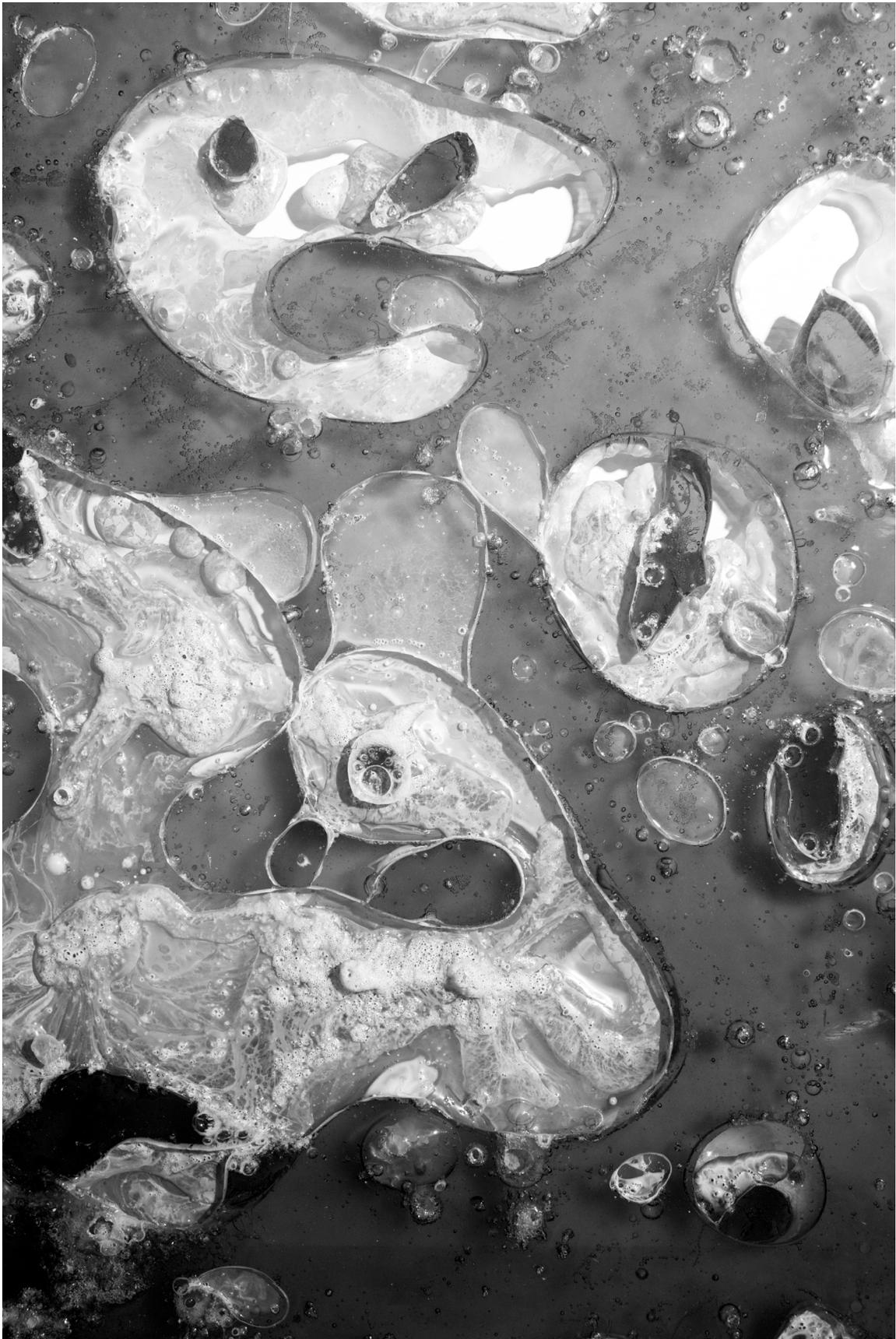
I've always thought that would make an amazing Sci-Fi story. Imagine eons in the future, a research team has stumbled upon this bizarre ancient relic and there's a huge radioactive signal coming from the central core. They just want to get in, because it must be special. Then, of course, they get in and they all die.

That's hilarious. The last time we talked, you brought up David Cronenberg, and you've spoken about him in reference to your work quite a bit. What initially drew you to him and why do you think it's been such a lasting influence?

One thing that drew me in is obvious: the biological machinery or technologically integrated biologics. Like the insertion of videotapes into ones gut and TVs breathing with veins pumping through them. I love this animalification of objects, of giving life to objects that are seemingly passive, but objects we deal with so much that they really are the peripheral...or prosthetics to ourselves. They're part of us and to give them life and give them blood makes that connection to my work obvious. I just got hooked on his stuff, because, in the beginning, I loved the aesthetic of those things. *Existenz*, although it wasn't really my favorite, has the best stuff in it.

That remote control.

The massaging remote control pods you directly input into your spine and building the gun out of the bones of an animal. It's incredible stuff. Even when he started making the not-as-Sci-Fi ones, like *History of Violence*, which has nothing Sci-Fi about it at all. There are so many acute details in that movie that are still giving life to those objects. It's subtle, but the mob dudes are in a black Cadillac and that Cadillac is creeping up the cornfields to the house, and the windows are tinted. It's a very classic thing to do, but that machine, that car, becomes a panther, becomes this predator. It's scary and it's prowling and the men inside of it are doing that as well and they are in their own prosthetic, which is accentuating that. I love the idea that we are all animals still, and his movies show us as the animals we are and that everything we have surrounding us are just feathers and claws and brains and accentuate our animalian motives. There are a lot of moments in that movie, as well as in *Eastern Promises*, that are even more fine-tuned, realistic integrations of technology with ourselves, that create these bizarre parasitic relationships with the things that we create for ourselves and the environments that we've built.



That came from just an initial interest in Cronenberg's work before being able to bring it in, but now that you're more deliberately seeking out Sci-Fi, what are you looking at and what are you trying to draw back into your work? Are you going to recreate the semiotic chambers in Neuromancer?

It's interesting, discovering the types of Sci-Fi that I've become more attracted to over time. I saw *Elysium* the other night and it was okay, it wasn't great but the production, the design of everything is what's so amazing. The details of the planet are incredible. The idea that there can be a future where there might not be sewage and plumbing, but you do have a cellphone, or that there are space shuttles, but they're covered in graffiti and everything's dirty. You have the technology, but everything sucks. I like this idea that with technology, things aren't necessarily better. I'm trying to get this more human, gritty, realistic thing.

You brought up this idea of prosthetics a little bit earlier. Can you talk a little more about prosthetics and how they might relate to what you're doing?

I am interested in prosthetics in the same way that I love how Cronenberg imbues his objects with an animal life force. Similarly, my work is not necessarily passive. It's not necessarily a rectangle on the wall to behold and to observe, but, very purposefully, the rectangle will be pushed off the wall and slanted. It's a subtle, easy move, but there's a relationship. It is looking at you and you are looking at it. And it is asserting its presence and it is saying, "I'm doing something and I'm definitely doing something different than the thing next to me."

I'm designing these things through the rules of functionality from product design and engineering, architecture and public planning. These rules are more, "We'll have a counter at elbow height to make it more efficient for this..." using these types of rules of efficiency to create something aesthetic.

It's making me think about how aggressive a gesture that slant is. Say, with Richard Serra's public sculptures, I never really understood how aggressive that was until I had finally experienced a few of them and realized, "Oh, this is extremely claustrophobic. This is extremely authoritarian. He's carving up public space." I always thought it was a great fault of New York to tear down Tilted Arc (1981), but now I see how that thing just loomed over their heads. Like, after a while, the oppressed want to fight back, in a way. Not that New York's financial elite was exactly the oppressed...

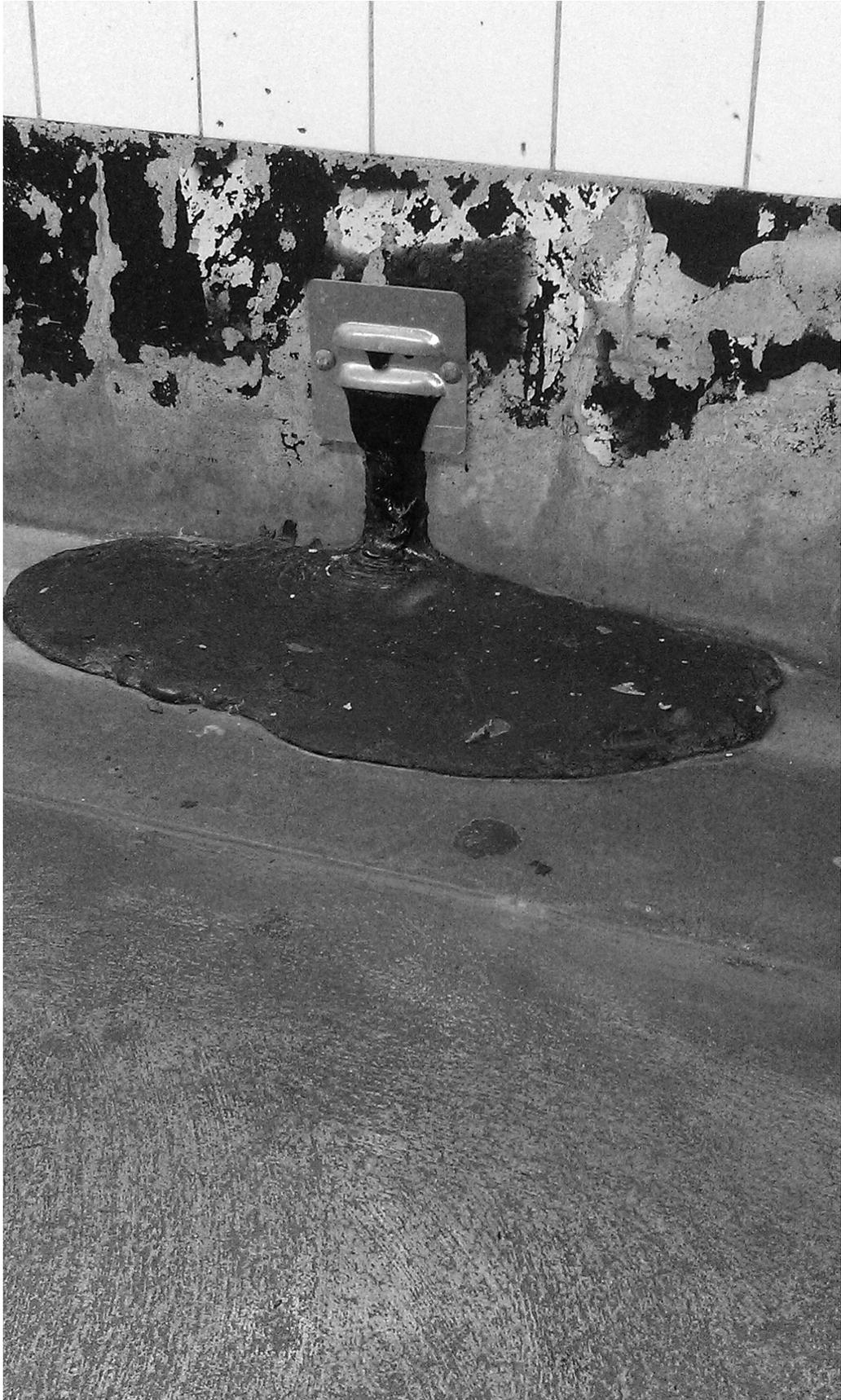
Besides the really aggressive and purposefully mean thought, I would love to have seen the application and the board of people who were backing it and how he explained it. I am sure he didn't say, "I'm going to block everyone." He probably said some sort of "The beauty of this raw material spreading across the plaza," and it probably sounded great. What's truly mean is that he used bureaucracy to get it in place, which is also the best thing about it. I've heard that it also collected a lot of garbage. A lot of trash would pile up near it. I like that it was this collector of everything around it. It was collecting people on one side and collecting garbage and trash on the other.

You couldn't see to the other side, so people were really frightened about getting robbed. It does make you hyper aware of your surroundings in that way. There is a Serra in downtown St Louis. It's pretty rough in general and I was down there in the middle of the day, right across the street from the courthouse, and this big triangular Serra made of multiple steel plates takes up a whole block. I remember walking into one of the gaps in those plates, and I thought, "Holy shit, I could get mugged in broad daylight right in front of the courthouse."

In the Serra?

Yeah, because it obscures everything. I had no idea of what I was walking into, which is part of the aesthetic qualities of it, but that which also ignores the social qualities of it as far as deliberate aggression...

You probably know it's aggression, but I'm saying that I don't know if he thinks, "I'm going to get mugged in between it." He probably would not care if it did happen.



Yeah, I don't think so. This also brings us back into architecture. Can you talk about the different ways that you engage with architecture in and through your work?

My interest in architecture doesn't necessarily come from star architects' architecture or even necessarily the history of architecture. It's more our mundane peripheral experience with architecture. Sometimes people know bad design when they see it or experience it. Even when it comes down to a handle on a door, the design of the handle should, if it's something that's protruded with an area to grasp, make you understand that it's a door you pull. If it's a flat plate, you should understand it's a door you are to push. But sometimes architects forget about these simple things and they'll put a handle on a push –

I hate that so much.

It's so annoying. Or even the simplest thing, like an architect in his mind convinces the board of investors that, "Oh, the lobby will be great. We'll have a double glass door. Just clean open glass doors. It'll be all translucent and open." Then what you have is glass doors that people walk right into, because they don't see it, or they think every glass pane is also a door, and you can't find which is the door. Eventually, because so many people have walked into the glass, they have to put some sort of decorative decal sticker on it, so that you can see there's glass there, and then it's ruined.

You can appreciate good design when you don't notice it, basically. When everything is fluid and the architect is invisible is when best design happens. Right now we're in this type of fluid and efficient design. And my interests in design are purely in interior design and not in skyscrapers.

We've also talked about furniture.

It's an interesting scale, furniture, especially when sculpture takes on the scale of furniture for its in-between zone. It's a very easy and reoccurring thing to have shelf-top, pedestal-top, tabletop, sculptural things; or it's really common to have something scaled to the body, or larger and more spectacular. But this type of subdued scale that's shorter than the human, not too long, or squat...it's a weird scale that usually takes place with furniture: tables, couches, and sofas. Something is built into this – we're familiar with that form through dealing with it, and so I want to try that scale. I have a huge scale range that my materials support, but this medium size is really challenging. It's hard to figure out what works at that scale, one that's seemingly moderate and not overwhelming. How do you still assert yourself at that scale? Because furniture is really passive, furniture can only be dealt with when you're on it. Otherwise, you're supposed to ignore it. You're not supposed to say how uncomfortable it is and how cool it looks. If it's comfortable, then you're happy just slumping into it. Or, you can be standing and observing it: good design in furniture appears more as art and not as its function.



It seems like your attraction to furniture also has something to do with an implied use, which seems to run consistent in your work, of the implied touch or as an implied place to sit, but it actually has lots of spatial and architectural considerations, as well as material and aesthetic considerations that are more primary.

Furniture, public architecture, and design act as a counterpart to the body. Our architecture fills in the negative space around us in a way. It's obvious with furniture: we know what to do with it. I like to try to take those rules of design into my own work, where it still feels as if it is filling some sort of need. It's filling either the ergonomic counter-posture to ourselves, or the grip of the hands. In my earlier work, it was all about touch. It was about getting people to touch, knowing they're allowed to touch. I built that into the art itself. It was successful, because people would touch it, but it was unsuccessful in that there was nothing to be gained by touching it except if they could discover two alike-looking things felt differently. One was hard and one was soft and you'd have that short "Eww" moment. The desirability of touching still exists in my work because of the material. Straight, sharp edges you want to run your finger along; smooth, shiny surfaces that you run your hand against; or things that look soft, though they might be hard. It's an open question and people just want to know, "Is that soft?" They want to push it and feel if it's foam or if it's hard. Because it's not meant to be touched anymore, wanting to touch it is stronger than allowing for touch. It's just one more thing that pulls you in. It's a sucker move, but if you want to touch it, then you get up close to it and you look at the edge, you look for air bubbles, you look for some sort of clue as to what it is. In turn, you've been duped into this really intimate experience. You're hovering over this thing, lips and eyes up right to it, really sensual, examining it, discovering it. That's maybe stronger than coming up, touching, and leaving.

I'm wondering if your appropriation of those rules of design doesn't also serve as a surrogate for discussing bureaucracy and the relationship between this ergonomic, manageable size and the development of bureaucracy at an enormous scale. To also speak to the massive convolutions of government and of politics.

We talked last time about soft surveillance mechanisms and soft people-control mechanisms. The ornamentation of surveillance cameras and security mirrors are the contemporary adornments on buildings, and they are placed in the interiors and exteriors of our architecture now. Like the jewelry hanging on the edge of a building is a security camera, except it's looking at you. It's not hurting you, but there is this eyeball everywhere now. Sometimes it makes us vulnerable when we're being watched. It controls you in a certain way. But, if that camera is like the jewelry of the building now, let's fancy it up, and let's make it really obvious. In my work, these perched things on the edge are always hung higher than a painting, because then it really is surveilling. It sees over you, it sees over everyone. At the same time, it's an obvious thing. If it looks like it's looking at you, leaning on a slope or if there's that cavity that's receiving your gaze, then it's a little bit closer to the ornamentation of authority. It's not just cameras either, but also advertisements in such inappropriate places. It's so dorky that these people think they can put an advertisement here. It's such bad taste. And we forget about it. We think, "That's fine, that's it, whatever." But to highlight it and make it even more fantastical ultimately leads to a major thing that art has done and can do: it can change the aesthetics of the future. We are living in a pretty reduced, minimal, flat, dry-walled world right now, and that's not necessarily because it's the easiest, best thing.

I'm sure that these ideas of minimalism in the past, with the reduction of form, influenced contemporary architects and designers. The people in the past that could afford to have these star, really new architects design a modern home for them paid a fortune. But now, we don't have the choice. All the designers creating their iPads and reduced forms for technology and minimal things—that is the thought they came from. The artists from the 60s and 70s influenced the designers that are alive now. In a way, we realized that, as the artists, we do hold the look and the taste of the future. I think about that in a really genuine way, and this goes for every realm. When I'm in my studio, and I'm thinking about something I'm going to make, and I'm seeing it come together, I am seeing a glimpse of the future for a small population. They're going to come to the show and they're going to see it. I have had the glimpse of the future already. That's a very subtle, little thing, but I do believe that the artist and the designer hold the power to influence the look of an era to come. We can't really affect things immediately, but it's something to be conscious of. And, as these styles develop and tastes are made, and fashions are created, and these affinities are pointed out, these types of things will come back around again. And someone else is going to profit off of it, and reduce it again and mass-produce it. In a way, it's something to think forward to.

That's a real and very Sci-Fi idea of future-seeing, that prescient capability of the artist.



Checklist

Three Flags Party, 2013

Urethane plastic, pigment, steel, spray-paint
21 x 16 x 3.5 inches

Ad-Space, 2013

Urethane plastic, pigment, steel
21 x 16 x 1 inches

Unisex, 2013

Urethane plastic, pigment, steel, spray-paint
21 x 16 x 3.5 inches

Civilian Defender II, 2013

Urethane plastic, pigment, steel, spray-paint
21 x 16 x 3.5 inches

About the Artist

Jesse Greenberg has held solo exhibitions with KANSAS, New York and Loyal Gallery, Malmo. He has contributed work to group exhibitions held with Nudashank/Gresham's Ghost, Baltimore; Marc Jancou Gallery, New York; the Queens Museum of Art, Queens; the Socrates Sculpture Park, New York; and Foxy Productions, New York. He is the co-director of the gallery 247365. Greenberg received his MFA from Columbia University. He lives and works in New York.

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Images appear courtesy the artist and KANSAS, New York.

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