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Aggro Duality

Michael B. Lesh

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AGGRO DUALITY

By

Michael B. Lesh

(Under the Direction of Professor Marc Moulton)

ABSTRACT

Aggro Duality features sculptures inspired by skateboarding and custom–automobile cultures. This body of work is inspired by the manufacturing process, physicality of materials, individual aesthetic, and attention to craft. Each sculpture in Aggro Duality is created through intensive construction techniques that aim to modify materials into a unified form; which indicate a combination, a duality of mechanical and organic coexistence. Within the skateboarding and custom/automobile cultures there is an aggressive attitude that pushes individuals above and beyond boundaries of traditional standards, meaning, and styles. These cultures intend to create products that are dramatic, personalized, and stand-out from the norm. This is known as “*Aggro*” and it is expressed through personalization of color, form and attention to detail.

INDEX WORDS: Sculpture, Mixed- media, Wood, Steel, Resin, Automobile-customization, Skateboarding, Sub-cultures, Aggro Duality, Artist, Art, In-the-making, Mechanical, Organic, Unity, Cohesiveness, Biomorphed, Machine Marx, Blue Ooze, Machine Flow, Mike, Michael, Lesh, Custom and Skater.

AGGRO DUALITY

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

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Onyile Onyile

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Summer 2015

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my parents, family and daughter. Without their support and love, I would not be able to make it happen. It is your encouragement and consideration that motivated me to be the best I can and to challenge myself as often as possible.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION
SUBCULTURES AND CREATIVITY

Subcultures

My artistic expression started while participating in the subcultures of skateboarding and car enthusiasts' and further developed with an education in the Fine Arts. Design principles are my aesthetic guidelines and I work with the material to achieve a high craft and a blending of conceptual and physical objects. I use basic elements of design when developing ideas and often consider Line, Shape, Color, Texture and Form. I use these elements and principles throughout the artwork because it is important to question how artwork is perceived and understood.

Within the skateboarding and custom-automobile cultures there is an aggressive attitude that pushes individuals above and beyond boundaries of traditional standards, meaning, and styles. These cultures intend to create products that are dramatic, personalized, and stand-out from the norm. This is known as "*Aggro*" and it is expressed through personalization of color, form and attention to detail.

This body of work is inspired by the manufacturing process, physicality of materials, individual aesthetic, and attention to craft. Each sculpture in Aggro Duality is created through intensive construction techniques that aim to modify materials into a unified form to indicate a combination/a duality of mechanical and organic coexistence.

This paper will address the methods and processes I use to make artwork, from the gathering of materials to the designing of the artwork. As I work, I imagine the interaction of materials and design and strive for a dialogue to be developed between the combination of materials and forms. The materials I use are visually strong and I work to achieve a cohesiveness and unified form. These cohesive forms embrace one another to become a singular sculpture.

Chapter 2

Aesthetic Approach and Method of Working

Aesthetic Approach

My artwork is influenced by the years, my late teens and early twenties, spent immersed in the subcultures of skateboarding and automobile customization. As contemporary artist, I am driven by visual aesthetics and attention to refined detail. Skateboarding aesthetics are visually aggressive with loud color, sharp edges, and multiple figure ground relationships. The graphics mirror the progression of rider stunts to match greater technical ability, physical aggression, and risk.

My sculpture is a cross between two subcultures, skateboarding and customizing cars. I did this for years, as a teen and well into my twenties and thirties. The material I use in my artwork reflects the physicality I used within these subcultures (Wood, Resin, and Steel.) I am a skateboarder and I work on cars.

The aesthetic I developed comes from the individuality of skateboarding and the Aggro culture that seems to be ever so progressive. This insistent temperament is visible

everywhere you go; marks are visible on walls, curbs, handrails and ledges. These marks are the evolution of skateboarding and how it has adapted; which is how the term Aggro developed. Most skateboarders test their abilities by creating tricks and executing them but this is not enough. This expression is ever so changing, that the skill-set is so advanced, that skateboarders are learning how to do the techniques by combining tricks and even going as far as learning how to do it switch. The example would be that you write with your dominate hand so to switch it to learn how to use the other hand equally so. The stunts and tricks create an identity, which enables the skater to be known by. When we think of skateboarding we think of loud and obnoxious kids, which is where the punk attitude comes from. That same attitude is interpreted through the material that I manipulate. I want to use traditional knowledge but I also want the freedom to apply different techniques from various other processes and have my own impact on the artwork. I want this progressive application in my work and to be able to express it as me the maker, this together would be a development of me and the material and how I create.

While also being involved working on cars, I window tinted, painted, altered suspension, for friends and even paying customers. Working with cars in this way started at an early age for me, before I could even drive a car myself. I learned most of this from my older brother. He worked as more of a motor and engine rebuilder. However, his influence on me came out as being comfortable around cars and I was willing to attempt to do massive body modifications on cars for friends and also paying customers. These body modifications were fairly extensive; they went as far as cutting on brand new cars.

This automotive connection I have with my artwork is visible with certain finishes of my work. The refinement with metal is usually sanded and painted; the wood is sanded so fine that it is smoother than the paint. I allow certain indications within the material I use so that it is evident of the hand that made it. For instance, the cuts in my wood are obviously not natural and the adding of resin and lights are neither.

These two cultures have given me the ability to interpret process with material, this method or research enables me to experiment with one technique with multiple materials.

These cultures enabled me to work with material that is used in construction environments and is quite durable. With the strength of steel and the softness of wood a contrast between the two becomes unified and creates cohesiveness that the two can exist as one. The mechanical and industrial forms progress with the wood in a fusion that grow as an idea within the viewer and questions the real to the hypothetical.

Method of Working

I primarily work with steel, wood, resin, and light. Through design and crafting I attempt to create both dialog and identity that aesthetically relates to influential cultures of skateboarding and car customization.

I often begin with found objects—natural wood forms, scrap steel, mechanical objects. These found objects are combined with each other and enhanced by additional materials such as resin and lighting. The material evolves as I work with it. A free-spirited spontaneous interaction with material is evident in the smaller metal tubing, colorful resin, dramatic lighting, and unusual forms that I use.

I have the ability to work with various tools, equipment, and process to manipulate materials; with this, I am task driven. I set goals to work towards, sometimes labored days go well into the night, this is helpful with accomplishing a lot of work because being in my studio and creating seems to be a benefit that enables me to refine and do that work that is needed to be done on my sculptures. Working for me begins with process. I sometimes do things the hard way, but it is the way I learned it. This stubborn ideal is strength while I work and I tend not to give in to problems; I just look at them as research. With this positive drive, I am able to resolve and modify and then continue to stay on task.

This work is about my involvement with movement, color, texture, and scale. A viewer will first notice that the work is rather large, hanging from ceiling to floor. This scale is intentional and is intended to draw the eye upwards and create a sense of awe.

My work is about my visual energy, activity, and movement. Color, texture, and scale are used to draw the eye along a path and to create interest. A viewer will first notice that the work is rather large, hanging from ceiling towards the floor. This scale is calculated and is intended to draw the eye upwards and create a sense of awe.

For example *BIOMORPHED* (**figures 1-4**) suspended from the ceiling and scaled at 10.5'x12'x 9' was the first of this series and is made with steel, wood, resin, bolts, washers and LED lights. The wood and steel form has an organic appearance that is connected to a 1.5" diameter pipe that suspends from the ceiling. The other section of this sculpture is a mass of .5" tubing that is bent in fluid like movement. This form begins as a wide mass over the viewer and as it descends it begins to taper until it reaches the wood and steel portion. When designing this, I was thinking of overwhelming the viewer with this noise of material that hovered over the space the viewer stands in.

This noise of material creates a focal point down to the organic and steel; which also creates tension with the wall it angles towards. The scale of this work is impressive and the use of the smaller pipe adds to creating an overwhelming feeling while standing under this form. From the front view of this there is a subtle indication of lights in the resin between the wood sections that were cut. This faint light within the material is enough to draw the participant in for a closer look. On the backside of the form closest to the wall, resin casts of small engine components with Led lights inside them. This

lighted surprise is well worth coming in for a closer look.

(Figure 4) The engine casts add a machine like quality to the resin and wood portion. One thing I want to do with all my work is give a unity to such different material. By using the line patterns in the resin and wood and adding mechanical casts, I give the three materials a bond that grows. The vine like growth that seems to spread, as it gets higher, this organic/mechanical forms is powered and thriving. This collaboration of unified materials is thriving through adaptation and changing. My cutting and laminating started after seeing a Japanese artist work with broken discarded skateboard decks.

Hiroshi **(Figure 19)** a Japanese artist uses recycled skateboards and laminates them into sculptures. His work ties in with some skate culture but now that he is a famous artist he has broadened his work to other areas besides skate culture related sculptures. His resourcefulness seems to be a great advantage to those who are involved with the skate sub-culture; we tend to make the most out of minimal things. His work inspired me to do a series of laminated work that eventually evolved into the current body of work with LED lights and resin in found tree segments.

MACHINE MARX (figures 5-8) exhibits visual energy and active movement through the arrangement of the colored LED lights and the metal forms. Machine Marx hangs from the ceiling and is suspended about two feet off of the ground. The center consists of a wood form that is bent at a 45 degree angle that has been sanded to a very smooth touch. The wood piece has a channel in it with LED lights which have been submerged in resin. When lit the LED lights are magnified within the resin. On each end of the resin

are steel forms which have the LED lights traveling through steel form structures. The structures are open which allows the lights to be visible within it. I have used access panels or doors to incorporate into the piece which also allow the illumination to be visible. The top and bottom piece replicate and have a turbine like quality that taper and give a spinning implied movement. The welds, the grinds, and cuts all have evidence of a machine like quality and maintain a rawness of material. It is obvious that the material is important because of the identity and the features still seen within the entire piece. The flow of the material creates a zigzag pattern that is suspended above the floor. Within the sculpture another form that mimics the sharp turns of the pipe. This form mirrors the wood and steel, but allows space to exist between the two. The form connected to the top of the ceiling travels down as a separate form and then connects in the center of the wood piece with a resin pipe form. There is a nice contrast where the connection of the steel and the resin are. The metal seems to become organic before it connects with the wood and the resin. This connection provides the piece with a disconnect, but also allows the viewer to see the union of the two forms. Looking close at the doors or panels, it is evident that there is some craft and planned calculations in executing the panels. The bottom metal piece has resin suspended from the center. This resin seems to mimic the steel as it begins to follow the form. The resin seems to have a playfulness that travels throughout the form which enables movement or implied performance. The viewer is challenged to question the existence or if it might serve or perform a task. Does it exist? What could it be doing? How might it work? What might it be used for? These are questions the viewer might ask. The top steel portion just above the wood flows into the wood, it seems to have an organic reference close to a beehive

reference. This metal form is finished off by another turbine which also has lights seen within it.

Machine Marx, playful title, comes from childhood memories, and the toys that Marx brothers made. Toys, like the green machine, that we all rode on and did power slides. Also the color green seems to have the same value as did the green from that mean green riding machine. I think it's the past cultures and childhood experiences that have developed my work ethic and material process. I enjoy laboring over the material and sanding it and manipulation the metal to a refinement. This refinement is also evident in the subculture of customizing automobiles. The same attention to detail we put into painting cars and the body work; that finish, that labor, that attention to detail and hours of work are ever so evident. The low rider culture and car audio enthusiasts' use neon lights to accentuate auto personalization. The light themes seem to enable the owner to be present in this form of expression through specific and unique custom modifications.

While interested in automotives, I also was an avid skateboarder. This free spirited attitude and progression to excel as an individual pushed me to skate faster and perform harder stunts; this attitude was known as being "Aggro". This same aggressive nature and expression is also noticeable in my work. The work seems to be refined and well thought out but it is obvious that there is evidence of the individual that made it. This personalization embraces the material for its natural Integrity, and also has certain rawness as a natural material. That rawness is the same "Aggro" aggressiveness and individuality expressed in skateboarding. Pushing your limitations and boundaries is a natural high in skateboarding; this individual expression enables me to explore material

in a way that is not traditional, which is evident throughout the work.

Jesse James (**Figure 18**) has captivated my attention for years; he began long ago with car builds on a show called Monster Garage. He would bring in a group of experienced technicians and try to make something that has never been done. Then through the years, he became known for his involvement in the motorcycle customizing. He added a twist to the elements that most fabricators did not. He put his unique style into everything; custom builds began to have themes. He wasn't a motor head, he was all of the above. He would mix builds with airbags and hydraulics to see if one was better than the other. He considered what the outcome would look like as the builder and customer and made sure it would perform as well as it looked. My sculptures take on that same personalization as custom built autos.

BLUE OOZE (Figures 9-11) made from Oak, Epoxy Resin, Plexiglas, Steel pipes, and LED lights is scaled at 72" x36" x36". The formed pipes have deliberate turns which present a geometric look that eventually connects to a blue resin pipe that then connects to the Oak tree section. This section encases LED lights which illuminate the resin with the blue pigment. From the bottom part of the tree form, the resin appears to be extruding and flowing out onto Plexiglas which also gives it a puddle like appearance. The idea was to have an industrial pipe implying that it was connected to the wall with the implied notion that it performed a task. This task transitioning through the wood is heightened by the lights giving the fluid like notion spilling out onto the floor where the viewer is standing. I have embraced certain aspects of the materials I am using to allow the viewer to see the material as it is but there is also indication of the

artists hand in manipulating the material. The steel is cut and welded and the welds are only polished with a steel brush to allow the commercial appearance common in an industrial setting. I have also added a flange; like used in a commode (toilet), this also provides a utilitarian read to the larger pipe. The smaller pipes branch off of the larger line just as a plumbing drain lines come off a main drain. The resin in the oak tree is housing led lights providing vibrancy to the resin and illuminating it.

The oak tree is sanded many times to give the smooth feeling and provides a seamless transition between the resin and the wood parts. I wanted the viewer to see the natural aspects of the tree section as its shape and organic appearance in conjunction with the hand of me the maker in the finish of the wood. Working on cars in custom builds, I have used neon lights to add the visual sophistication in auto competitions. By having prior experience, I am using the lighted resin to give seductiveness to the resin which also gives the material a flow like quality.

I use seductive as the term as I might use it in talking about a car that has been the attention to hundreds if not thousands of hours of labor. Sometimes owners give their autos names or refer to them as their baby after many hours of customizing their autos. This work is playful because it engages with a pre-existing space or wall and gives the idea of an interaction or performance occurring.

Ruben and Efram Lopez from Reds Hydraulics (**Figure 20**) seemed to push the competition that I was involved with in hydraulics and truck customization. They were top competitors when I was entering competitions around the Nation. I looked at their work and was disgusted by the way it was presented. They made their hydraulics

perform and not look good, so I made hydraulics and airbags look good and perform because I mixed the car stereo aspects to the performance with sophisticated upgrades. By adding larger wires and gold and silver connectors, these systems were clean and fully operational. Eventually Plexiglas and other stereo components were considered and now it is used everywhere. Because of our different styles I was pushed to try to fix what they did. And because of the Lopez brothers' involvement with hydraulics, it pushed me and others to take what they were doing and add our own twist to the way things work. The same sophisticated finish with lights and paint in the low rider culture is the exact direction my sculptures take on with lights, and resin, and Plexiglas.

MACHINE FLOW (**Figures 12-14**) evolved out of a large section of a tree branch and stands freely on the floor. This form is made up of flat metal banding that is mounted in a spinning articulation. This form has holes between the metal which allows you to see through to the inside. Another metal form represents a fan or turbine motion within the lower section of this work. There is a light component, this LED lighting travels within this fan-like form and extends up vertically into the wood above. This conical form transitions to the organic shape of the wood form with tension because of a precarious leaning of metal and wood. The conical form has a spinning helix gesture to it; within this gesture, it appears the steel form is leaning precariously.

There is a tension between the steel and wood union which allows a contrast as in a wedged turn or zigzag pattern that is evident in other materials within the sculpture.

The wood form is in a V shape, "crotch cut", with cut patterns filled with LED lights and colored resin. This red resin has lights embedded in it, giving it a vibrant glow. The resin

filled cuts allow the viewer to segment the wood in an unnatural manner; this is quite evident of the hand that made it. Resin is imbedded into voids throughout the wood to embrace the material imperfections or character. These areas are not lighted, but they allow the surface of the wood and its natural character to be visible with resin. The top of the V shape form has two pieces, one being smaller and the other larger. The larger form has a manifold like reference of 1 ½" in pipe holding a hexagonal form.

The manifold also has a bisecting tubular form. This pipe-like form seems to mimic the same zigzag manner throughout the piece. The hard edges and turns seem to be mechanical, yet industrial. The industrial component shows evidence of the hand that made it, there are obvious welds that are visible and tool marks from grinders. This form is not grinded just merely polished with refinement. This pipe-like form that bisects the manifold seems to have a fluid composition. This movement seems to flow throughout the entire artwork. It starts at the bottom metal form and seems to visually penetrate the wood and disperse through the manifold extending diagonally into the air. These fluid like characteristics reference motion. This action is represented in half inch pipe. It is whimsical, yet implying some type of performance. What performance? Not sure. This material replicated with the steel seems to visibly render smoke or a fluid-like, or plasma context.

Having the wood section in the middle; works nicely with the steel mechanical forms as anchors on each side. The focal point of this piece would be the wood filled with illuminated resin. This illumination in the wood seems to pull the eye back after following the twisting metal and direction flow of the pipes and metal pieces throughout the sculpture. This form has an industrial influence with elements that give a mechanical

component. I used a slight abstraction with this, which appears to be an exaggeration from normal plumbing or pipes. This exaggeration of forms is an aspect in the evolution of this series of works. I am thinking of craft and how to finish material throughout my sculpture; Artists like skilled masters, inspire me to work hard to get the refined element I want.

Martin Puryear's (**Figure 21**) work compels me to be a better practicing studio artist because of his ability to spend numerous hours laboring over materials until he mastered them to perfection. I have that drive to continue with an idea and make the most out of it. My material research and process are similar to that of Martin Puryear and I would hope to be able to strive towards his skill-set. Martin Puryear also speaks of how material speaks to him and allows a certain tolerances. This acceptance seems to be an intuitive response to the material as he we gains an understanding for the amount of manipulation he has over it.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

Aggro Duality is influenced by past interactions with skateboarding and car culture. It is through these subcultures that I have been inspired to create work. After gaining insight and getting a Bachelors of Fine Art Degree, I understood the importance of taking basic principles and elements of design and using my past influences to create a body-of-work. By using materials and processes from these subcultures, I developed a body-of-work that combines their differences and allows them to be adorned in form, scale, and interaction. Using the organic elements within tree remnants, steel, and resin lighted LED's, I have been able to unify the materials and create a hybrid-linking of the organic form with the machine and industrial elements.

PHOTO REFERENCES

1. **(Figure 18) Jesse** James, <http://www.westcoastchoppers.com> (accessed April 5, 2015) Page 35.
2. **(Figure 19) HAROSHI**, *Foot with Invisible Shoe 2*, 2012, Jonathon Levine Gallery, New York, sample image from the web, <http://www.artsy.net/artwork/haroshi-foot-with-invisible-shoe-2> (accessed April 5, 2015)
3. **(Figure 20) Ruben Efram Lopez**, Reds Hydraulics (Owners), sample image from the web, <http://my-first-blog-a.blogspot.com/2012/01/photos-by-jaebueno-for-lowrider.html> (Accessed April 5, 2015)
4. **(Figure 21) Puryear**, *Timber's Turn*, 1987, Honduras Mahogany (7' 2.5" x 3' 10.75" x 2' 10.5"), Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Photo Lee Stalsworth, sample image from the web, <http://www.NGA.GOV/exhibitions/2008/puryear/brochure.pdf> (accessed April 5, 2015).

APPENDICES



Figure 1, Title: BIOMORPHED, 10.5'x12'x 9', FALL 2014
Wood, Resin, Steel, Nuts, Bolts and LED lights



Figure 2 Title: BIOMORPHED, 10.5'x12'x 9', FALL 2014

Wood, Resin, Steel, Nuts, Bolts and LED lights

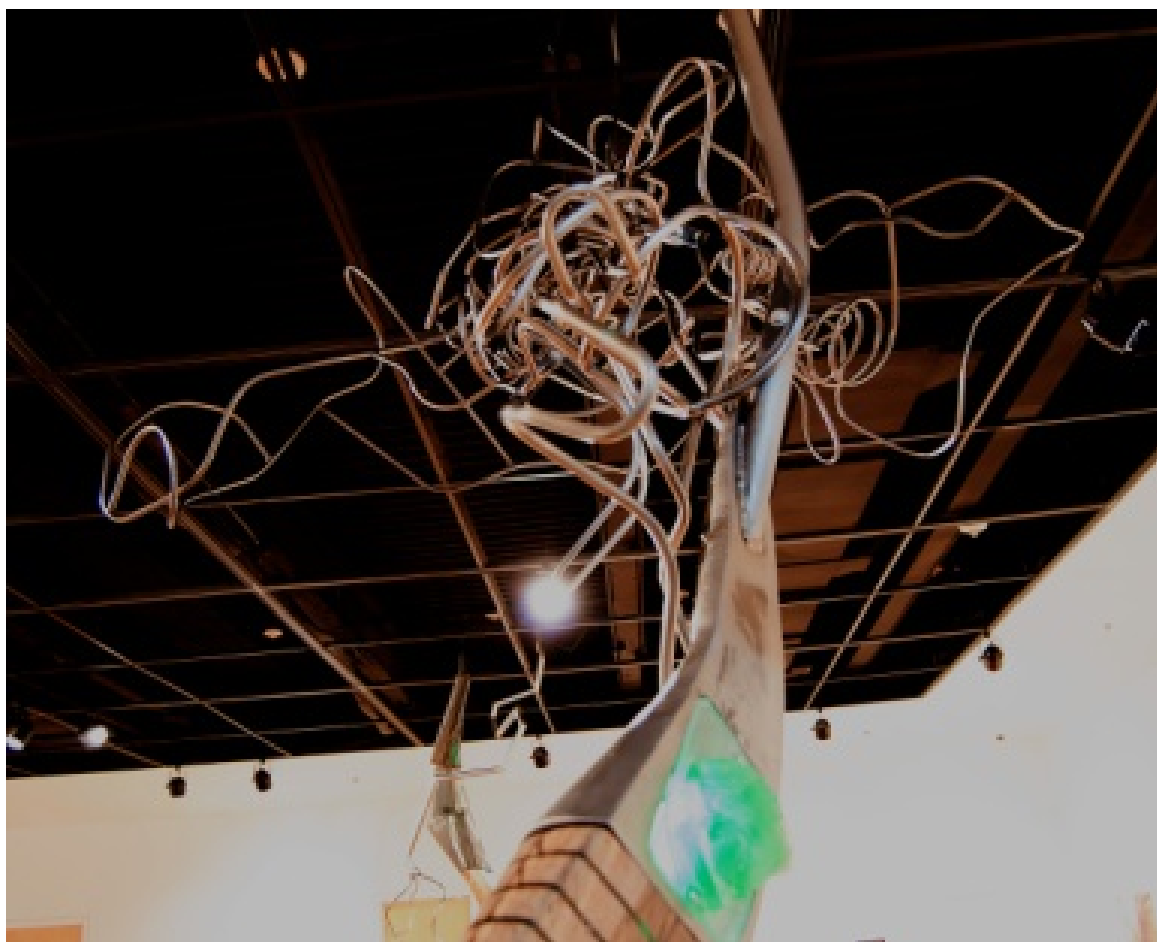


Figure 3 Title: BIOMORPHED, 10.5'x12'x 9', FALL 2014
Wood, Resin, Steel, Nuts, Bolts and LED lights



Figure 4 Title: BIOMORPHED, 10.5'x12'x 9', FALL 2014
Wood, Resin, Steel, Nuts, Bolts and LED lights



Figure 5, Title: MACHINE MARX, 11'x 6'x 6' Wood, Resin, Steel, Nuts, Bolts and LED lights, FALL 2014



Figure 6, Title: MACHINE MARX, 11'x 6'x 6'
Wood, Resin, Steel, Nuts, Bolts and LED lights, FALL 2014



Figure 7, Title: MACHINE MARX, 11'x 6'x 6'
Wood, Resin, Steel, Nuts, Bolts and LED lights, FALL 2014



Figure 8, Title: MACHINE MARX, 11'x 6'x 6'
Wood, Resin, Steel, Nuts, Bolts and LED lights, FALL 2014



Figure 9, Title: BLUE OOZE, 72" x36" x36"
 Wood, Resin, Steel, Nuts, Bolts and LED lights, FALL 2014



Figure 10, Title: BLUE OOZE, 72" x36" x36"
Wood, Resin, Steel, Nuts, Bolts and LED lights, FALL 2014

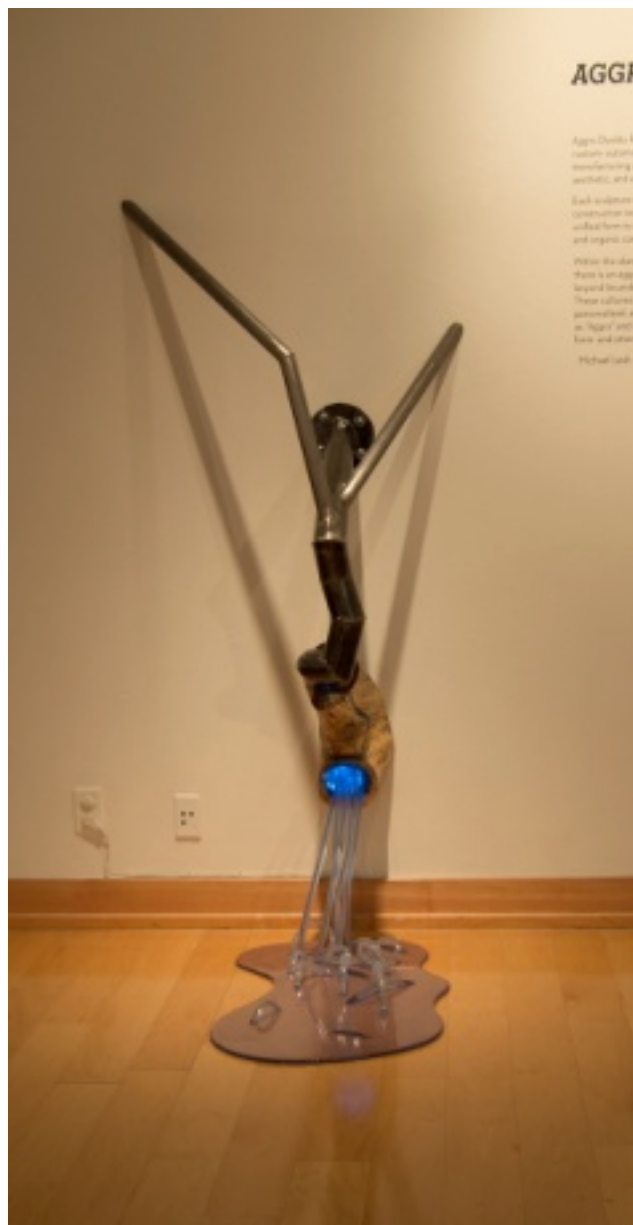


Figure 11, Title: BLUE OOZE, 72" x36" x36"
Wood, Resin, Steel, Nuts, Bolts and LED lights, FALL 2014



Figure 12, MACHINE FLOW, 12'x10. 5'x5'
Wood, Resin, Steel, Led Lights, Bolts and Plexiglas, Spring 2015



Figure 13, MACHINE FLOW, 12'x10. 5'x5'
Wood, Resin, Steel, Led Lights, Bolts And Plexiglas, Spring 2015



Figure 14, MACHINE FLOW, 12'x10. 5'x5'
Wood, Resin, Steel, Led Lights, Bolts and Plexiglas, Spring 2015



Figure 15, Aggro Duality, Gallery View, Spring 2015



Figure 16, Aggro Duality, Gallery View, Spring 2015



Figure 17, Aggro Duality, Gallery View, Spring 2015



Figure 18, Jesse James, Auto and Motorcycle Custom Fabricator, sample from web, (Photo courtesy of: <http://www.westcoastchoppers.com>). Accessed April 5, 2015 Page 35



Figure 19, HAROSHI, *Foot with Invisible Shoe 2*, 2012, Used Skateboards (23.5 x 12 x 28 in), (Photo courtesy of: Jonathon Levine Gallery, New York)



Figure 20, Low rider car Image, Reds Hydraulics, (Photo courtesy of: <http://my-first-blog-a.blogspot.com/2012/01/photos-by-jaebueno-for-lowrider.html>). Accessed April 5, 2015



Figure 21, Martin Puryear, *Timber's Turn*, 1987, Honduras Mahogany (7' 2.5" x 3' 10.75" x 2' 10.5") (Photo courtesy of: Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Photo Lee Stalsworth).