

Interview

The Disquieting Artist

By Haley Weiss
Photography Victoria Stevens
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Dan Herschlein's art appears to fall within the horror genre—the psychological kind that slinks in the shadows rather than scares you out of your seat. But his visual language holds evocative content that's more than just disconcerting; his works are suggestive of inner turmoil, addiction, and the weight of expectations. His figures, for example, often lack limbs or heads, and perhaps a hold on themselves: in one work on paper, *These Walls To Which I Confess Cannot Forgive Me*, a man sits on a broken stool facing a window, and the hallway behind him offers entry only into dark rooms; another, *Tourniquet*, shows a man ostensibly

held together by a belt mid-torso, his neck ending in a slit, as though his skin is a sweater likely to shed. Herschlein's sculptures are equally uncanny. Most recently, for his show "The Stillness of Eddies" at 56 Henry in New York, he built a partial body into a life-size tub. Its faucet streamed continuously into an aptly placed orifice, where the person in question appeared to have sunk away entirely.

Performance and installation have been part of Herschlein's practice since he graduated NYU with a BFA in studio art in 2010, but figurative sculptures emerged more recently. He began making them after a friend passed away in 2013 and they've since become a staple in his work. Now 27, the Brooklyn-based artist is focusing solely on sculptures in preparation for his spring show "Safe As Houses" at JTT gallery. "I'm negotiating how to get around making the more installation-based stuff that I usually make," he says when we meet on a particularly cold December day. "I'm trying to make sculptures that sum all of that up in themselves and are contained. It's a fun thing—it's interesting and it's been extremely difficult in the most satisfying way."

HALEY WEISS: You wrote three short stories tied to your last three shows. What's their relationship with this body of work, "The Stillness of Eddies"?

DAN HERSCHLEIN: I'll start just by explaining what those were. The first one [*By The Shade That Wanders*] was a project

that I did at NADA [in 2015] with Signal, and for that I built the whole booth into a room basically. My practice comes out of performance, so for that one in particular I was interested in how to relate an installation or a sculpture to performance. One way that I was interested in playing with that was by writing a very literal narrative of what the room or scene was, adding in little details and stuff, so it's like a play-by-play and giving a perspective. So the first one was in this NADA project booth, that was a really weird space for it—it was kind of cool. The second one [*The Enthusiast*] was the first show I did at JTT [in 2015], and that had more of a narrative of an outside perspective looking into a thing rather from the internal sculpture's perspective. And then the third one [*Worm*] kind of broke from the more literal description in a sense and went more into the science fiction/horror genre, where most of my work really comes out of.

WEISS: Have you always written like that or was that something new to your practice?

HERSCHLEIN: That was new but it was helpful. It was like making drawings, because I'd be making the sculpture and writing simultaneously, so I'd be writing and realize that this part either had to be built into the sculpture or something that was necessary to the sculpture had to be written into the text. It was this interesting way of working it out and thinking it through when I was at home not at my studio. It was pretty useful for me.

This body of work [at 56 Henry] is a text-less body of work. It's functioning in a similar way but I wanted to... I set that project up so that I would do three. I didn't want it to be the only thing that I do; I just wanted to do it as a project. So this body of work was letting myself be a bit more ambiguous, I think, and trying to just keep everything in the actual materials, playing with how much it was an installation versus a sculpture, and vice versa.

WEISS: Was it freeing to return to not having a text that you were basing the project out of?

HERSCHLEIN: Totally. And rather than the writings, I started making drawings a lot more, so they were functioning in that way but it was absolutely freeing. Realizing how limitless that can be—you can make whatever.

WEISS: You said you came out of performance. And you studied at NYU?

HERSCHLEIN: I didn't study performance at NYU, I took mainly sculpture classes, but I was doing performances kind of as sculptures.

WEISS: So when you make a sculptural work to occupy in a performance, is it a ground that needs to be occupied or is it a work in itself that can be activated?

HERSCHLEIN: It's definitely a work in itself that needs to be activated. It's not a set or a prop; it's its own thing that exists the same way that a room would exist, like a room doesn't require people to be a room.

WEISS: You said sci-fi and horror are a part of the work you create. Are you influenced by films?

HERSCHLEIN: I watch a lot of movies. I'm not really informed about films, though—I watch a lot of pretty shitty movies. I love found-footage horror films in particular. Those are the most exciting to me because they deal so much with settings, so I think that's what I get really into. I watch horror movies a lot while I'm doing something else and just take in the settings and watch them if they're good. I've always loved them since I was a little kid.

WEISS: Can you tell me about how the works here at 56 Henry came about?



HERSCHLEIN: The bathtub itself came out of this—I guess imagining a performative gesture, or not a performative gesture but just the gesture of sitting on the edge of a tub. To me, that's a really contemplative and absorbing place to sit. The reasons you sit and think on the edge of the tub, you're usually like, "What the fuck have I been doing," whether it's last night or your whole life.

WEISS: Right—existential terror at the tub.

HERSCHLEIN: Yeah, the existential edge of the tub. So it came out of that, and I had made this sculpture that was going to be sitting on the edge of the tub, and I originally was making this whole bathroom. I made all of these sculptures and scrapped all of them to focus on this tub that I ended up building the torso into the bottom of. I realized it captured more of what I meant.

WEISS: How did you come up with the title "The Stillness of Eddies"?

HERSCHLEIN: It was pulled from a book that I was reading—I don't know which one it was at this point, I think I probably read it when I was in college—and I made multiple iterations of pieces with that title, but it's just come to be a pretty meaningful one to me, like circulating this stagnant feeling.

WEISS: Do you see the prior pieces that all had the same name as related to one another?

HERSCHLEIN: Yeah, but they're more attempts at finding what that meant to me—they're related in that sense. The title came first, and they're attempts at it, and this is for me the most finalized and most true to what I was trying to say.

WEISS: Are you going to attempt again at the title?

HERSCHLEIN: I don't know. I guess I never think that I'm attempting it again when I make it. I'm probably retiring it.

WEISS: Within your short stories and your past works partially dismembered bodies are a motif. When did that first become a powerful image to you to use within your work?

HERSCHLEIN: Well, the first time that I realized a way of talking about what that meant to me was when I reading about conversion disorders, which is a kind of old-fashioned psychological thing, where a past trauma, whether it's physical or psychological, manifests in the body with unrelated symptoms, like an arm will go numb with no physical cause except that it's a blocked pathway or something in the brain. I guess the body parts that I'm thinking about, for me, they're not dismembered—they're just isolated. It's not about dismemberment, it's not about hacking people to bits, it's about the emotional locations in bodies where they hold things, and trying to emphasize that.

I'm trying to talk about emotions that I don't know how to talk about, so they're not specific locations. I couldn't map out a chart like acupuncture. They're much more intuitive than that for me. A lot of times the relationship to that is their relationship to an architectural piece or something—architecture and hauntings are very much a part of [it]. I guess I'm thinking about how emotions haunt bodies, and then bodily emotions haunt houses and rooms and furniture.

WEISS: You said it's a way of talking about emotions that you maybe could not otherwise express. Do you see your art as that avenue for you—this is your way of expressing something that words won't suit?

HERSCHLEIN: In a certain way. I think I'm more interested in the idea of people's willingness to express emotions. A lot of the stuff that I do deals with masculinity as a role and a feeling and something that you learn, and the ways that men are very inhibited by that, and the ways of escaping that—or this feeling that you want to sink away, or that you want to sink into your surroundings—to not be who you are, because it's so wrapped up in these specific identities, they're very confining and difficult.

WEISS: What's the most interesting reaction that someone has had to one of your works? Something that has stuck with you, whether that be positive or negative.

HERSCHLEIN: I recently did this show upstate called the Green River Project that my friends run, and it's this really funny space in a barn, and it's really low-key; there's a bonfire and beer and pick-up truck scene. There was this piece that I had done that's like a doorframe with an upside-down body being pushed through a cloth that's coming through the doorway. I had that piece and then I had a sculpture that was legs with feet laying out on the floor with a shirt over it. It was in this basement room of this barn, and this local guy came that had—he was really freaking out, and was really bothering a lot of people, he was on a lot of acid—and I sat down and talked to him for like an hour about what all of this stuff meant to him, and we had these really amazing conversations about death and bottled up emotions. He had told me about how he had just recently had a friend of his that passed away, which was an experience I shared with him, and how this was... He was trying to explain it, and he was on a lot of drugs, which was interesting to me because I think it allowed him to even talk to me about it, and I don't know that he was somebody who may have without that. But he just couldn't get over his attraction/repulsion to it. He kept telling me that he hated it and that he hated me for making it, but then getting into it. That kind of reaction is perfect to me—that's how I feel, I guess. They're difficult things to feel, I think, and it's nice to see somebody, regardless of their state of inebriation, to hear that they were feeling it. And to have such an engaged conversation—I never really experienced that before then.

WEISS: It's interesting how you describe loss and bodies as being part of the architecture of a space, like when a body you're used to being near or having as a staple in your life is no longer there, and the emotions placed on the body of the person.

HERSCHLEIN: Yeah. And the idea, for me, of crafting a body out of material, going through every curve and shape of it is such an intimate thing. Even though they're usually very much of my body, the way that it makes me think about bodies in general and relating that to loss, it's... Especially when I first started doing it, which was around the time that I lost this friend of mine, it was a very intense thing for me. It felt like I was trying to subvert the feelings or something, or get around them by somehow by forcing them on myself. It was a perverse action, putting myself in this position that was extremely uncomfortable but one that I was controlling, ultimately.

"Safe as Houses" opens March 3, 2017 at JTT gallery in New York

For more on Dan Herschlein, visit his <http://danerschlein.tv/>