

A Nonsensical Nature

Emma Jane Wilson

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From space travel, cities in the clouds, and world peace, to collapsed societies where the strong and powerful prey on the weak, to worlds where humanity has ceased to exist or has been replaced by whatever comes next in our evolutionary line, science fiction writers have created and dreamt of millions of visions of the future. Imagining the future is not only reserved for writers. Scientists have created models of our future using data from cutting edge techniques. Ice core sampling has been used to chart our ecological history and the end of the world has been estimated by comparing population growth and potential food output. In a BBC documentary titled *The Search for a New Earth*, Stephen Hawking states “with climate change, overdue asteroid strikes, epidemics, and population growth, our own planet is increasingly precarious” (Zorthian). The aggressive spread of COVID-19 proves that we must address issues like these if we would like to continue existing as a species.

The humanoid sculptures that make up this body of work are imagined products of our actions, but it is left open to the viewer to contemplate what caused their evolution. Did water sources become so contaminated that, much like cancer, we mutated out of control? Was there a mass epidemic that wiped out millions of people leading to the melt down of unattended nuclear plants? With the inevitability of change, the state beyond our current humanity should repeatedly come into question. This surreal series of clay sculptures delves into the intersection between posthumanism and the philosophical concept of absurdism by depicting a new human species made out of unnaturally large

fingers and fleshy masses. I construct these characters with the backdrop of a posthuman world where we have faced the threat of extinction, physically evolved, and navigated shifting values. As we hypothesize about our post-humanity it is crucial to also recognize major characteristics of the current human condition, such as the absurdity of our existence and our reliance on socialization. The absurd is innately linked to being human in that we continuously search for meaning and order in a world where neither are known to exist.

Though not perfect, I often imagine that these evolved humanoid sculptures have mutated so far through the difficulties of the human experience that they have found a way to accept any hardship. They accept that change is inevitable. We are not as in control as we may think and whether we have a purpose or not the fact remains that we exist and change. Evolution is fascinating and comforting because of that. If we continue to survive, we may come to a point where we are beyond gender, beyond race, and beyond humanity as we know it. Humans have to evolve or cease to exist. Though we will change, our immediate humanity interests me the most because of how absurd we are. Humans are ruled by emotion, defined by behavior, and burdened by the desire for purpose and in these regards, we are all the same. This is not to say that any of these characteristics negates logic but they are all components that are ingrained in our existence though experiences with each vary from person to person.

Absurdist philosopher Albert Camus believed in accepting the absurdity of our existence by continuing to explore, learn, and live in the moment. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus stated: “The absurd is not in man nor in the world but in their presence together...it is the only bond uniting them” (30). If a purpose for humanity either doesn't exist or is unattainable then we could accept that, create our own purpose, and live in an experiential way. We could live fulfilling lives as collectors of experiences rather than needing everything to add up to one grand meaning. The seemingly nonsensical nature of the sculptures in this series is visually reflective of the absurdity of humanity and the absurdity of the act of making them.

Prior to quarantine friends were greeted with smiles and friendly hugs, acquaintances were welcomed with handshakes, and intimacy was often communicated through physical connection. Our familiarity with physical contact caused us to take these acts for granted. Due to this lack of physical connection the psychological impact of quarantine has become increasingly apparent. The order to distance during the pandemic has made it even more evident how closely we associate physical contact with socializing and how much we desire both. The structure of our society being so dependent on work and face to face interaction has left the vast majority of people unprepared to face quarantine. Governments and doctors called for social distancing, a term that seems to not quite suit the act but brings up an important characteristic of the human species. We are not socially distancing. We are physically distancing. Perhaps the word choice reveals

just how closely we associate physical interaction with social interaction. Data collected during quarantine is revealing how reliant we are on physical and social interaction. However, this information isn't new but is becoming more commonly known due to the universality of our situation. Humans do not do well in isolation.

A 2015 study published in PNAS (*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*) found that perceived isolation increases our vulnerability towards chronic illness by up-regulating inflammatory responses and down-regulating antiviral responses (Cole, et al.). In short, isolation, even if it's only perceived, makes us sick and weakens our immune system. To be clear, this is not to say that quarantine is unnecessary. This brings us back to the point that, though it is difficult and somewhat unfamiliar, we can still be socially connected while physically distanced. Still, it is worth remembering that we spent millions of years as a species where close physical contact was part of each and every day. Social contact is part of who we are as a species. For example, another study reveals the positive impact physical contact can have in a relationship when verbal communication fails us. This study, published in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, provided evidence that responsive touch, such as a hug or hand holding, can buffer the negative impacts of maladaptive emotional coping mechanisms, such as thought suppression (Debrot, et al.). Physical and social connection is deeply rooted in the survival of the human race. Given the current pandemic and those to come, we may need to explore the potential for meaningful

social contact in a physically distanced world. Thus, the importance of fingers as a metaphor in my work especially now.

Each coil built humanoid character is made with a series of unnaturally enlarged fingers held together by an excess of fleshy masses. In this body of work, fingers represent a universal human desire for communication, physical contact, and understanding. Fingers are a significant connection between ourselves and our surroundings. They relate to one of our strongest senses: touch. A sense that by no means is exclusively human but remains a defining factor in our humanity as it speaks to both physicality and the social nature of human beings. Human connection is as vital to our survival as evolution. Fingers become a vessel to create visually ridiculous characters out of something that is ubiquitous to humans and I use that absurdity to explore the more abstract qualities of humanity, such as the extreme absurdity of our existence. The use of fingers to create humanoid forms encourages the viewer to relate the sculptures to themselves whether they are making physical and behavioral comparisons or relating the pieces to their overall existence. Our commonalities and our understanding of each other is what helps us function as a community. Our relational tendencies are so ingrained in our being that as a survival mechanism it may be one of the human qualities that remain. The fingers cause us to relate the sculptures' body language to ourselves as a way of understanding the pieces which further humanizes them.

These sculptures show a new species curiously peering, pointing, wrestling, and dancing. They are the embodiment of moments of curiosity. As I design and sculpt them, I mimic the characters and imagine what their next movement would be. These instinctual movements associated with observational learning are part of what is so appealing and amusing about making them. I want these pieces to move beyond being sculptures to becoming characters filled with so much movement that they seem to possess a life of their own. They activate the space with their body language, color, and size. They are playing, dancing, and exploring just as I am when I make them. One piece is playfully standing on one limb as though it is bouncing back and forth on its two legs dancing while another has its back hunched and seems to be sneaking around exploring. People naturally relate to their three-dimensionality, their body language, and their undeniable presence within the space.

Scale, repetition, and a Frankensteinian reconstruction of appendages and bulbous clusters disrupt the familiarity of the human body. A distortion of the subject matter encourages the viewer to imagine another place or time that these may exist. Despite the possibility of physically evolving from cancer, pollution, or failed genetic experiments, they are healthy, thriving, and curious. Color, varying sizes, and the repetition of fingers breaches a divide between reality and fantasy by constructing an otherworldly character from a familiar thing. The unrealistic and bright color pushes that they are a species of their own while the fingers tell the viewer that they may have once been human as we are today. They vary in

size, while some stand on pedestals the height of a person, and some are only a few inches tall. The size of the fingers, however, are for the most part comically larger than life. Bright colors in conjunction with the subject matter maintain a level of illustrative whimsy. The surface is intended to be reminiscent of my favorite stage of working with the piece. When the clay is still wet and has this soft, waxy but also velveteen sheen to it. At that stage, it is closer to human than it ever could be when fired. It is strong but somewhat malleable and the monochromatic surface of leather hard clay with its varying textures captures light in a beautifully seductive way. Shadows and highlights dance around the curves of the form and catch the smallest details like fingerprints left behind from the sculpting process. The last tool to mark the fingers is always my own hands leaving behind these deeply personal impressions that are more true to the human body even though these are not meant to be hyper-realistic. There is an intimacy between the maker and the made that is captured in preserving the natural qualities of the clay and the final touches on the material.

My androgynous, post-human sculptures address the complexities of human behavior, absurdist philosophy, and evolution. Evolution is inevitable and so is our impact on this planet, therefore, we must consider the effect we have on our future and the future of our planet. I do not intend to paint a picture of a condemned humanity, but rather jumpstart a line of thought about our future and what makes us human now. The absurd, behaviorisms, and relational tendencies are all fascinating parts of humanity that will hopefully remain a part of us even

after we evolve into a posthuman species that we may not be able to comprehend today. These sculpted characters are acknowledgments of my acceptance of change and the absurd as well as an homage to things like bliss, play, and curiosity. I enjoy the mystery and discovery that comes with making these pieces: the technical, the physical, and the visual. In an abstract expressionist way of thinking, it is the process that draws me in the most. Even more captivating is the material itself and its ability to communicate humanity in terms of flesh as well as emotion. Clay is strong and powerful yet humble.

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