

DIRECTIONS

Tim Hawkinson

March 15–July 1, 2001



H.M.S.O., 1995 (checklist no. 3).

ENTERING AN EXHIBITION OF works by Tim Hawkinson is like stepping into a visual and intellectual playground. The visitor sees no single style or medium, as Hawkinson creates art from almost anything: plastic bottles, clothes, cardboard, glue, paper, string, aluminum foil, furniture, foam, and even hair or fingernails. But variety of materials is not his primary focus; his goal is to transform them. Like an alchemist, he mutates the mundane.

Born in San Francisco in 1960, Hawkinson matured in California's "anything goes" culture, which ran the gamut from the Bay Area's Funk Art to Hollywood's entertainment industry. After earning a master's degree in fine arts from the University of California, Los Angeles, he settled into a studio in the city's downtown garment district, where he scavenges discarded items from the streets for his art.

Hawkinson's sculptures and drawings are fundamentally about process; they evolve physically and intellectually from questions and perceptions regarding himself and the world around him. His works are self-referential but not self-confessional. The artist rarely offers verbal explanations of them, noting that "I am not a verbal person; if I were, I would be a writer instead of an artist."

A tinkerer at heart and possessed of a scientific mind, Hawkinson fuses wit and imagination with rational inquiry and philosophic themes. His fascination with systems results in ingenious mechanical contraptions that often involve movement and sound. Rather than employ sophisticated computer-programmed equipment, he prefers a low-tech, handcrafted approach that is nonintimidating. Hawkinson's quirky gizmos invite one to marvel not only about *how* but *why* they function. Viewers who

are initially intrigued by the idiosyncratic appearance of his works soon perceive an underlying logic with provocative implications.

Ranting Mophead, 1995, consists of a standing mop-figure facing a podium equipped with a sound-generating device; the scenario suggests a public forum where an individual questions or opposes the symbolic authority of the dais. Instead of recording actual voices, Hawkinson synthesized sounds from junk components that function like a player-piano reel. The sculpture "speaks" words and phrases like "I am a man" and "I want to mop your violin" that convey no rational message. Indeed, the synthetic voice of *Ranting Mophead* suggests whining more than oratory. While the sculpture seems amusing, it incisively critiques the quantity and quality of speech in contemporary society: what is being said, how is it expressed, and who is listening?

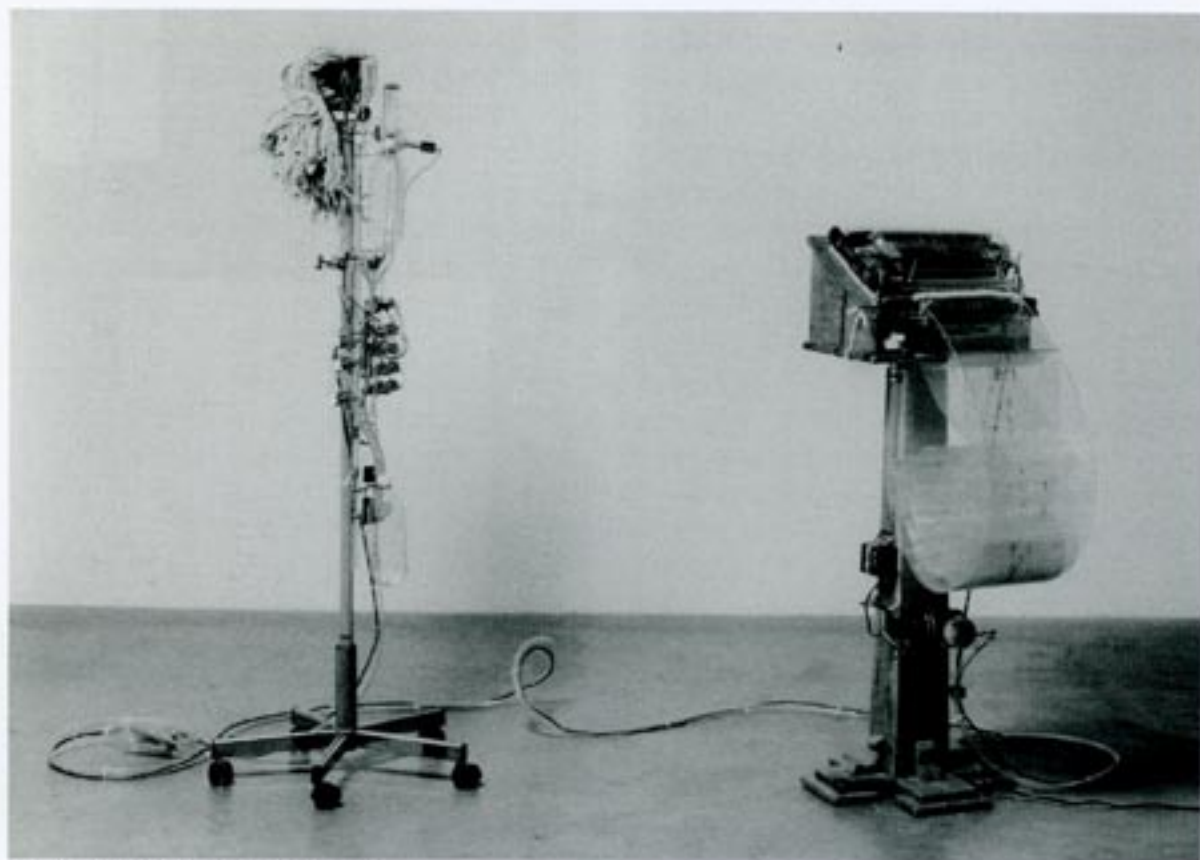
In *Signature*, 1993, a mechanism signs the artist's name onto pieces of paper which then accumulate in a heap on the floor. Because the machine rests on an old school desk, *Signature* evokes the experience of children learning to write their names by rote. The growing pile of paper alludes to the amount of time cumulatively spent in the repetitive, lifelong task of confirming one's identity by signing one's name. *Signature* offers an especially sly analogy for celebrities, including artists and politicians, who sometimes mass-produce their autographs for self-promotional purposes.

Hawkinson likes to challenge habitual modes of perception. Most of his works involve or allude to the passage of time in ways that are both playful and cerebral. He has made sculptures that function as timepieces, measuring increments as short as a few seconds and as long as 10,000 years.

These mechanisms invite consideration of how time passes in different ways and at seemingly different speeds. In 1996, for example, he transformed ordinary objects into surreptitious clocks—strands of hair moved almost imperceptibly in a brush, and toothpaste oozed from a tube. Observers may laugh when they suddenly perceive the function of these objects; amusement then morphs into pensive awareness of how much time is actually consumed by routine daily chores.

The scope of *Wall Chart of World History from Earliest Times to the Present*, 1997, is vast, both chronologically and physically. On a roll of paper thirty-three feet long, Hawkinson drew a labyrinth of visceral forms in red ink. He commented that "the imagery can be read as representative of the rise and fall of history's world

powers, or as empires swallowing up diminishing ones and in turn taking their places. ... It can also be read as a mapping of the internal structures of the human body." The length of the paper and its intricate forms invite viewers to explore this visual maze in a process akin to reading a topographical map, following a laparoscopic camera through the human digestive tract, or visualizing the neural network of the brain. The artist enhances this effect by hanging the paper in a serpentine configuration suspended from the ceiling, rather than flat on a wall. The related but independent sculpture *Index (Finger)*, 1997, presents a realistic enlargement of the artist's chopped off digit, complete with dirt under the fingernail as if to suggest that art is a messy affair. The inside of the finger appears to be filled with blood vessels; in reality they are the red pens used to



Ranting Mophead, 1995 (checklist no. 5).

make *Wall Chart*—an inference that the artist has poured his life's blood into art.

Hawkinson transformed the real into a facsimile of itself in *Root Ball*, 1999, a "tree" made from the by-products of trees (cardboard and paper). The sculpture represents different ways of perceiving and registering the passage of time. The rings inside the exposed tree trunk allude to a method found in nature, whereas the cord-like roots refer to systems contrived by man, specifically the Inca *quipu* calendar which used an encryption method of knots in bundled strands of string. On a symbolic level *Root Ball* refers to the origins of language, ideas, family, and culture. Although this "tree" has been cut down and lies upended, its writhing roots seem uncannily alive, as if to imply that the organism once possessed extraordinary vitality. *Root Ball* thus serves as a *memento mori*—a reminder that every living thing will eventually die.

Many of Hawkinson's works arise from a process involving his physical body as well as his inquiring mind. With frank curiosity and cool analysis, Hawkinson considers his body as an alien "other" to be studied. He described the genesis of the full-length nude "self-portrait" in *Bathtub-Generated Contour Lace*, 1995, as a conceptual process: "I lay in a bathtub that was filling slowly with black paint, photographing every few minutes as the paint crept up and over the diminishing islands of skin. Superimposing these images, I developed a contoured pattern which I then rendered on paper." Within that sophisticated intellectual premise, however, is the nostalgic memory of a child happily playing in a tub.

The style of this drawing is also significant. Hawkinson defined the image

through interwoven cursive lines that appear effortlessly drawn yet are as richly patterned as Celtic manuscripts. In most Conceptual artworks the artist's manual dexterity is irrelevant or unimportant; Hawkinson's adept draftsmanship is therefore a declaration of artistic individuality. The meticulous documentation of a bath in black paint, in itself the antithesis of bathing, is thus transformed into an artwork of consummate skill with overtones of childhood innocence.

Fundamentally Hawkinson's art is about exploration, traversing the realm of ideas and experimenting with the detritus of a material world. It seems particularly apt, therefore, that he sometimes uses the motif of sailing ships, which historically have symbolized the desire to escape from mundane life and venture into a vast, unknown world. One such piece, *H.M.S.O.*, 1995, hangs from the ceiling like a giant wheel or clock; its handcrafted inner "workings" consist of the masts of tiny boats with white sails and intricate rigging. Although the overall shape suggests circumnavigating the globe, these ships are trapped together in an inner "harbor," thus paradoxically suggesting both frustration and refuge. *H.M.S.O.* also evokes the fun of toys and hobbies like model making. The title is ambiguous; the acronym presumably stands for His/Her Majesty's Ship "O," but does "O" mean the letter "O," the exclamation "Oh!," a circle, or perhaps a zero? Hawkinson remarked that "maybe the ship is the model of self-sufficiency, and I want my work to be this way—where I draw on whatever resources I have. ... But I don't want to be a ship lost at sea or stranded on a desert isle."

The variety and complexity of Hawkinson's sculptures and drawings reflect his personal explorations of human nature and the transience of



(clockwise from bottom) *Wall Chart of World History from Earliest Times to the Present*, 1997 (checklist no. 10); *Wall Chart of World History from Earliest Times to the Present*, detail; *Index (Finger)*, 1997 (checklist no. 9).

existence. From mechanical contraptions to virtuosic drawings, from biological forms to miniature ships, from deadpan humor to philosophic contemplation, these disparate works convey a singular vision of voyaging through an intriguing and incongruous world of possibilities.

Valerie Fletcher
Curator of Sculpture

The exhibition was supported in part by Trellis Fund, Tony and Gail Ganz, and contributions to the Hirshhorn's Annual Circle.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

1. *Signature*, 1993, wood desk, pen, paper, and mixed-media mechanism, 37 x 28 x 24 in. (94 x 71 x 61 cm). Collection of Tony Krantz and Kristin Dornig, Los Angeles.
2. *Bathtub-Generated Contour Lace*, 1995, ink on paper, 80 x 32 1/2 in. (203 x 83 cm). Private collection; courtesy Ace Gallery, Los Angeles.
3. *H.M.S.O.*, 1995, wood, fabric, and string, 90 x 90 x 10 in. (228.6 x 228.4 x 25.4 cm). Collection of Dean Valentine and Amy Adelson, Los Angeles.
4. *Humongolous*, 1995, acrylic on paper, 162 x 48 in. (412 x 122 cm). Private collection; courtesy Ace Gallery, Los Angeles.
5. *Ranting Mophead*, 1995, mop, podium, mixed media, and voice-synthesizing mechanism, 67 x 28 x 84 in. (170 x 71 x 213 cm) [length variable]. Collection of Tony and Gail Ganz, Los Angeles.
6. *Bird*, 1997, fingernails and glue, 2 x 2 x 1 1/4 in. (5 x 5 x 4.5 cm). Private collection; courtesy Ace Gallery, Los Angeles.
7. *Egg*, 1997, fingernails and glue, 1 x 1 1/2 x 1 in. (2.5 x 4 x 2.5 cm). Private collection; courtesy Ace Gallery, Los Angeles.
8. *Feather*, 1997, hair and glue, 2 1/4 x 2 in. (7 x 5 cm). Private collection; courtesy Ace Gallery, Los Angeles.
9. *Index (Finger)*, 1997, pens and pencils in Bondo, 6 x 4 1/4 x 4 1/4 in. (15 x 12 x 12 cm). Private collection; courtesy Ace Gallery, Los Angeles.
10. *Wall Chart of World History from Earliest Times to the Present*, 1997, red ink and graphite on paper, 51 x 396 in. (130 x 1006 cm). Private collection; courtesy Ace Gallery, Los Angeles.
11. *Root Ball*, 1999, cardboard, paper, glue, and string, 80 x 60 x 34 in. (203 x 152 x 86 cm). Private collection; courtesy Ace Gallery, Los Angeles.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Quotations by the artist were drawn from sources cited in the Selected Bibliography, in addition to interviews with the author.

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