

Kaytie Johnson Interview with Artist Chris Radtke

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Louisville-based artist Chris Radtke is known for creating work that reflects her interest in genetics, and how this form of scientific study has become increasingly prevalent not only in the medical field, but how it has become integrated into agriculture, economics and the justice system. During the 1990s Radtke created work that explored the basis of genetics – heredity and variation – in primarily two-dimensional objects that included chromosomal images from electron microscope photos duplicated on handmade paper, human chromosome pair images etched into clear glass, and painted silk panels that are stretched over shallow trays and reference chromosomal blotting studies.

In the following dialogue, Radtke and curator Kaytie Johnson discuss the artist's recent sculptural work, which retains its references to genetics and the human body, but has become increasingly minimalist and reductive in form, and enigmatic in content.

KJ: Your new work is clearly linked – both conceptually and formally – to your "DNA" paintings on silk, yet the new work is far more reductive. In fact, it seems to be more about form and materials than about mark-making, and elucidating the conceptuality behind your work through the mark. Was this shift deliberate, or did the work change in more organic and reflexive ways?

CR: Eliminating the mark was fully deliberate. When I began making the DNA pieces over a decade ago, the final layer added to each piece was the chromosome pattern on the surface of the silk. I was interested in both the beauty and the information created by the painted lines and marks. But as I made more pieces I realized the work was actually stronger with less reliance on the overt DNA "information" so I kept subtracting the mark making until the final pieces from my last series each had only one painted line. It occurred to me at that point that, no matter what subject matter the work was about, even a single mark on the surface became a framed composition and I was no longer interested in going down that path. Composition was a layer I was willing to shed. "What can I eliminate and still make it work?" is a question I continually ask myself. New rules: no marks and no frames. These, of course, are basic tenets of minimalism, which I find perpetually informative. In minimalism the entire piece becomes the mark. Rather than pursuing the manufactured "ready-made" aspect so essential to minimalism, however, I'm more interested in building pieces that are similar in size to the human body and adding flesh colored, translucent layers that refer to the skin. In that way my work is about form and materials, but even more about the self.

KJ: So, would you consider your work more aligned with postminimalism, since it's formally reductive but does, in a sense, have "content" in that it alludes to something – in your case, the body? Although your most recent work is very sleek and minimalist in form, it doesn't have the industrial aesthetic of most minimalist sculpture – although very nuanced and subtle, evidence of the artist's hand – your hand – is still present.

CR: Minimalism was very much about purity of design with no human reference. It had a huge impact on our architecture, interiors, furnishings, fashion, and technology when it emerged in the 60's and still does so today. I quite frankly don't think any artist wants to be considered "post" anything, but postminimalists have expanded the strict boundaries of minimalism, so yes, I'm in that category. "Postminimalism" has never felt like the appropriate descriptive term to me because, if you think about it, the move to add ideas about content or the self to a system concerned with, and only with, the most clean-lined non-human elements of basic design is a pivotal statement about our current culture.

In my new work I use spareness and repetition of the same shaped piece in a series to develop an impassive coolness, which is a direct influence of minimalism. I add to that a soft, quietly active hand-made surface in order to create a human presence, which is the postminimalist influence. The balance of this duality is important to me and is a long, slow, conscious build. If the impassive cool aspect becomes dominant the piece doesn't work; if the hand-made surface takes over, the piece doesn't work. Keeping the balance is a critical issue.

KJ: When I recently saw your new work in the studio, Eva Hesse's sculptural work immediately came to mind, not only because of the materials you're currently working with – in your case, liquid vinyl and flesh-colored mesh fabric – but also because your work is corporeally resonant without referencing the body in an overt way. Hesse's early work is full of anthropomorphic forms that suggest body parts, and the materials she used – latex in particular – often had a skin-like quality. Do you find that your work is aligned with Hesse's in this way?

CR: I've looked at Hesse's work many times and agree that the reference to flesh via the materials is similar. I'm not as concerned with the inner body or organs as much as she or Kiki Smith seem to be, and I'm not addressing any feminist or feminine aspects. The flaccidity and elasticity of the "skin" of the latex – or in my case, liquid vinyl – and its reference to the body as a vessel with a life expectancy, which is evident in Hesse's work is, hopefully, apparent in mine. I have used silk for a number of years but have put that aside and am now using various shades of nude-toned, mesh fabrics that are often used to make women's lingerie or athletic and dance garments. Liquid vinyl is actually a fabric that is eerily flesh-like. The fabrics are stretched or sutured over thin, narrow six foot rectangular structures: skin and bones. I'm finding that the lingerie and vinyl materials create a decadent, seductive quality, but that is brought to the work by the viewer rather than suggested by me. It's not necessarily male or female, but it is sexual.

KJ: Your work is very sexual, although in a more restrained way. I find the liquid vinyl pieces in particular to be palpably fetishistic – they beg to be touched, much like skin. Another aspect of your work that I find significant is that it isn't gendered – certainly the flesh-toned fabric you're now using brings women's hosiery to mind, but the female-gendered associations of this material are nicely balanced by a "masculine detachment," which is often associated with Minimalist sculpture, especially that of Donald Judd. The male/female aspect of your work brings up something you mentioned previously: duality.

CR: Duality can refer to two opposing elements such as the impassive/active or male/female, but also can refer to two parts that are the same, like a double, a pair, or a twin. Many of my recent pieces have a shiny surface behind the mesh and reflect light. When a person stands before them, as with a mirror, the person's image is reflected and their body "double" becomes the mark that completes the piece—a "like duality". The reflections come and go as people move past so there can be a quiet presence or fleeting impermanence – an "opposing duality." Preventing one element from any of these dualities from tipping into visual prominence is the most difficult part for me to calibrate. As I mentioned earlier, it's all about balance.

For the past several years I have also placed a number of pieces on the floor, leaning them against the wall to ground them rather than hang them on the wall. Many artists have also done this, but the hovering between 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional space, between painting and sculpture, creates another dichotomy.

KJ: Do you feel that you've moved away from your older, more two-dimensional work by absorbing painting into sculpture?

CR: That's a fascinating thought, absorbing painting into sculpture, and one I haven't considered before. I'd have to say I don't think of my work as painting or sculpture anymore, because to me they're intertwined. But you're right, the strokes of paint that impart information and form composition have been sloughed. The paint has become an all-over translucent film – or opaque skin – in the layering process and, indeed, has been absorbed into the piece.

KJ: This brings to mind something that Eva Hesse wrote in a student notebook – she believed that a "logical sequence" in artistic production exists. This clearly applies to your work – your recent sculptural pieces maintain a balance between the geometric and the organic, as well as presence and absence. What do you envision will be the next "logical sequence" in your work?

CR: While I'm making one piece I usually have in mind the starting point for the next piece, but I never have a plan for the one after that because too many small changes take place during the process. I am just starting to work on some new pieces made from unpainted wood that are the exact dimensions of my body – open wooden boxes that I could fit into. The selection of wood as a medium was important, and I managed to locate wide boards with unusual flesh-toned grains. I'm not sure where that's going, but I'm going there.

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