

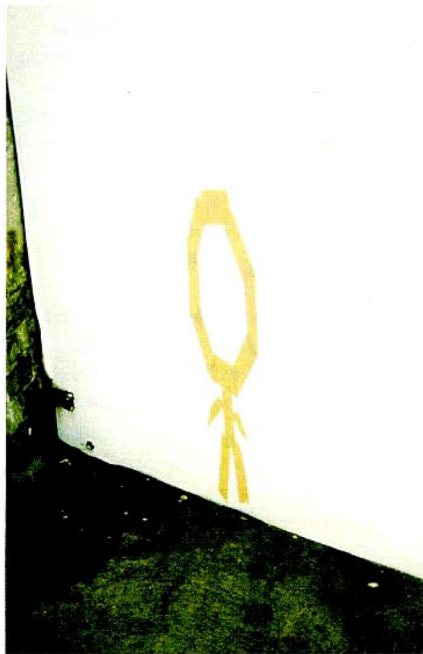
Herbert, Martin
"Transformer"

Frieze.

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LUHRING
AUGUSTINE

531 West 24th Street
New York NY 10011
tel 212 206 9100 fax 212 206 9055
www.luhringaugustine.com



All images courtesy: greengrassi, London

- Above: **Golem** 1999. Emulsion paint. 73x16 cm
- Below: **Animal** 1998. Polyurethane resin and enamel paint. 21x14 x 4 cm

Transformer

Martin Herbert on David Musgrave

'There was no end to the conditions of golem-making, just as there was no end to the appearance of one golem after another in the pullulating procession of golem-history [...] but what interested Puttermesser was something else: it was the plain fact that the golem-makers were neither visionaries nor magicians nor sorcerers. They were neither fantasists nor fabulists nor poets. They were, by and large, scientific realists.'

Cynthia Ozick, *The Puttermesser Papers* (1997)



A humanoid figure, fashioned initially from humble stuff, subjected to transformative rituals and imbued thereby with fragile but purposeful life – that's a fair abstract of the golem created, according to Jewish legend, by Great Rabbi Judah Loew in 16th-century Prague. (This creature, having been moulded from riverbed clay, circled around seven times and entreated with elemental incantations, subsequently rose up and rampaged through the Czech capital on a mission to purge it of evil-doers.) This description also serves to summarize virtually every artwork that David Musgrave has exhibited in recent years.

Musgrave's own *Golem* (1999) – produced as a transient, site-specific work for

a London group show in a colonized space – appeared at first blush to be a stick figure with a chronically hydrocephalic cranium, rapidly and carelessly constructed from overlapping strips of pale brown masking tape slapped on to the wall. What you saw, however, was the ghost of a gesture, and an untrustworthy ghost at that. For *Golem* was a *trompe l'oeil* wall painting, based on a drawing of a masking-tape figure, and as such it deceived on several levels. There was no tape; there were no overlaps between the strips, but instead sections painted in the darker tertiary tones that overlaps would create (two elements creating a third is a central aspect of this artist's cosmology); and

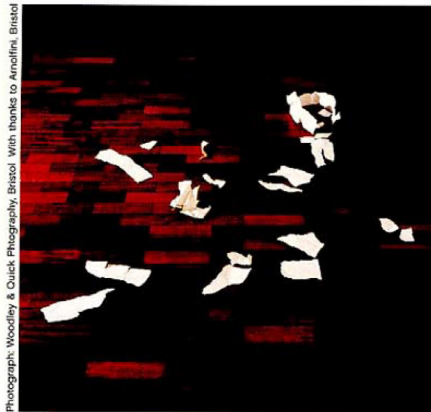
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• **Approximate Figure** 2003 Aluminium and acrylic paint
Dimensions variable

there was, finally, no spontaneous figure. Musgrave had consciously brought a linear iconographic scaffold to the point where it began to signal a human form, painstakingly reproduced it and left his deluding snare lying around for viewers to step into. Reckless imaginations did the rest, falling repeatedly for its illusions until the final wising-up. Even at that point the work had a half-life that justified its title: *Golem's* instability – its unceasing oscillation, before your eyes, between multiple forms and referents – might have been taken for a heartbeat.

Such switchback rides are Musgrave's *métier*. *Poured Figures Overlapping* (2002), one of two similarly constructed and titled works, again encourages the viewer to travel through several distinct phases of cognition: the initial perception, which registers a silent pool of multi-hued liquid on the ground, vivid like exploding oils; the second, which (aha!) reads it as

The sections of acrylic in *Poured Figures Overlapping* (2002) are all flush to the floor, and have been shaped and tinted to suggest the illusions of pouring, mixing and overlapping – a liquid improvisation snap-frozen into permanence.



• Above: **Poured Figures Overlapping** 2002 Acrylic 0.3x75x39 cm
• Right: **Painted Form No. 2** 2003 Epoxy putty and enamel paint 9x5x19 cm

first one, then a short succession of foetal human shapes; the third, which (back-pedal, back-pedal) intuits that the reflective 'pool' is actually made up of overlapping pieces of glossy coloured acrylic; the fourth, which (slap forehead) clarifies that there are, as in *Golem*, no overlaps. The sections of acrylic are all flush to the floor, and have been shaped and tinted to suggest the stepped illusions of pouring, mixing and overlapping – a liquid improvisation snap-frozen into permanence. At the end of this rainbow, revealing the title as a trilogy of untruths, there are no identifiable figures: only a sad, status-less shape that, when you elect to resolve it into something human, becomes an X-ray of what representation is and does.

The manufacture of artworks whose every element is questionable, translated, and therefore demands to be noticed, perused and interpreted – leading to a state of upgraded sensitivity to materials and resemblances, and to the axiomatic habit of trusting the fallacious evidence of one's eyes – this is an apparent aim of Musgrave's method. His work is not, as some have suggested, predominantly an inquiry into anthropomorphism, except insofar as it spotlights a tendency to grab anthropocentric lifebelts while negotiating the rushing stream of an apparent abstraction. As was made evident by the parade of slumped, disintegrating, barely-there beings in his recent retrospective at the Arnolfini in Bristol, Musgrave's art also trails a palpable sadness along with it, and increasingly so: he's unlikely to make another work so archly Pop-cultural as his calling card, *Animal* (1997), a plastic cross-sectional relief of Snoopy that revealed Charles Schultz' cartoon beagle to possess real internal organs. But again, that's not his priority. Rather, he is, by and large, a scientific realist – enlisting what something is not, or is no longer, to specify the essential quality of what it is now; and, most productively, to explore the various possible upshots of superimposing the two.

Take *Approximate Figure* (2003), whose scattered elements, blown apart or swept together on the floor, form the barest compass points of a horizontal hominid. They look exactly like crumpled paper but turn out to be feats of metallic origami – slim, deftly bended sheets of aluminium painted white. The exploded figure, a failed Frankenstein's monster, pulls the viewer along on a wave of irrational melancholy. But what stays with you, once the various veils surrounding its facture have been dropped, is a feeling for the implacable

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reality of that worked paper/metal; for the way that the artwork, by trapping in amber its varied history of making (the thoughtless, violent crushing of paper; the precise, laborious curling of metal; the soft whitening lick of the paintbrush), seems to synthesize in the mind into a third, slow-fast, soft-hard, white-silver material, like an overtone heard simultaneously alongside two distinct notes struck on the piano.

A fascination for hybrids and past incarnations reverberates through other works. Musgrave's early 'Doodle' series of seven drawings (1996-9) began with a human-like figure moulded from Plasticine; this was photocopied, then ciphered into a Photorealism drawing in pencil or biro. The eventual images' wan vitality surely comes partly from their flaunting of previous stages of existence, but one wonders whether the clay figure's exposure to the irradiating beam of the photocopier had anything to do with it. *Painted Form* (2002) started out as a swirl of extruded paint, vaguely in the shape of a human head (or, more exactly, given that it took the artist numerous attempts to get the result he wanted, in a shape that is specifically vague in referencing a human head). Musgrave scaled it up to several centimetres across, cast it in polyurethane and painted it in glossy, wet-look brown enamel; the result is spontaneous and calculated, wet and dry, excremental and sensual, human and alienated – a primer in properties.

This is not the only occasion on which Musgrave's sidelong scientific procedures have taken on an aesthete's delicately unhealthy tinge. *Small, Crumpled Tape Figure* (2002) has fallen to Earth in a devilish, dandyish attitude, its inwardly curving body undulating like a sine wave or a plume of smoke, legs crossed, head seemingly dominated by a pair of giant masking-tape horns. Again, as in his wall pieces, the artist constructs a fantasy of overlapping tape through variant chroma of pale yellow acrylic paint; again what looks papery is actually fine aluminium. This figure, though small and crumpled, knows more about itself than you do; it has a superiority complex to play out and, subsequently, secrets to spill. Yet once you're familiar with its ways, it needs you to admire its uniqueness, its easeful rapprochement between incompatibilities of form and appearance. A golem has such a short, fraught existence. Your sustained gaze – making it swing between its various associations, perpetuating its tiny rumour of a heart – keeps it alive.

