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Jordan Wolfson Enjoys Being at the Center of the Storm

The artist discusses violence, AI, his latest work and how he comes up with his ideas.

Jessica Simmons-Reid



The sculptor Jordan Wolfson reclines near the entrance of his Los Angeles studio. Credit...Joyce Kim

Jordan Wolfson's studio is strangely absent of gesticulating robots. Located in a nondescript industrial park near the Atwater Village neighborhood of Los Angeles, the 1000-square-foot space functions more as a staging area than a laboratory; the animatronic humanoid sculptures that have made Wolfson a flashpoint in contemporary art are brought to life elsewhere (mainly a larger fabrication studio in the San Fernando Valley). Aside from the dismembered, garnet-hued body parts of a boyish puppet ("Red Sculpture," 2022), currently splayed across a black folding table, much of the work here is entombed in wooden shipping crates, the mark of a busy exhibition schedule.

Wolfson is known for sculptural works that deploy technology in complicated, expensive and occasionally novel ways, resulting in objects that elicit dread and discomfort. The infamous “Female Figure,” a dancing female cyborg with blood-red lips and a ghoulish visage, became a viral sensation when it appeared in an otherwise empty David Zwirner Gallery in New York in 2014. “Colored Sculpture” (2016), a snarling Howdy Doody-esque doll whose disjointed body is suspended by a chain and thrashed against the floor, received similar attention at the Tate Modern in 2018. These robotic sculptures were equipped with state-of-the-art facial-recognition technology, enabling them to make intermittent and seemingly intentional eye contact with the viewer, an unsettling flirtation with sentience.



A photograph of John F. Kennedy Jr. paired with one of the artist as a young child, imagery Wolfson used in a recent exhibition in Basel, Switzerland. Credit...Joyce Kim



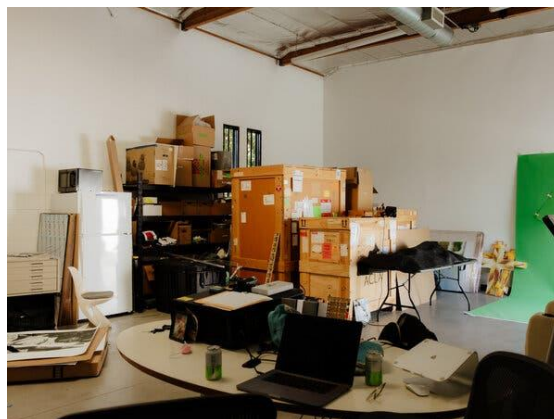
A storage area in the back corner of the studio, with reference photos of police officers (a subject Wolfson is currently examining) on the far wall.

Born in New York and educated at the Rhode Island School of Design, where he received a B.F.A. in 2003, Wolfson entrenched himself in the art world in the early aughts, quickly establishing a reputation as a provocateur who agitated liberal sensibilities. Perhaps his most famous — and controversial — work is “Real Violence,” which appeared at the Whitney Biennial in 2017. To experience it, viewers donned a virtual-reality headset and noise-canceling headphones to watch, over the course of about two and a half minutes, a man in a gray T-shirt armed with a baseball bat (a facsimile of the artist himself) beat another man (a CGI-enhanced dummy) until his head bursts open with grim realism. A third man, unseen but audible through the headphones, sings two Hebrew prayers over the course of this bloodletting (Wolfson is Jewish). “We live in a complex world,” Wolfson said during a visit to his studio in October. “I’m simply trying to make art about the times we live in. And I find the times we live in to be terrifically violent and quite honestly terrible.”



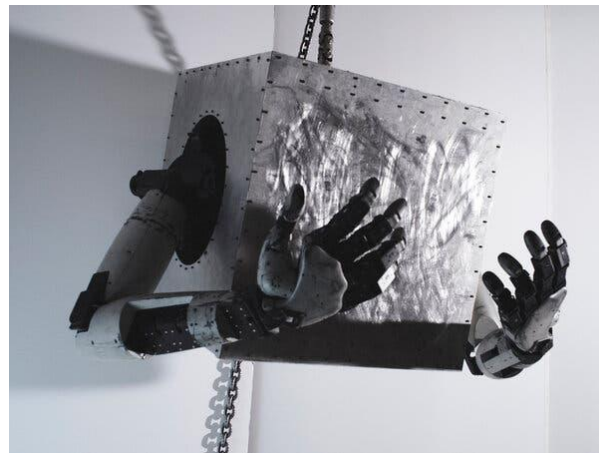
A box of clothing featuring Wolfson’s work. Left: a sweatshirt with an image of “House With Face” (2017). Right: a T-shirt featuring “Female Figure.” Credit...Joyce Kim

While Wolfson positions himself as an earnest “witness” to the depravity of human society, his critics are less generous, unsure of how to parse his work’s unpleasantness. In a 2020 New Yorker profile, Dana Goodyear probed the intentions of “Female Figure,” writing, “Did the piece express misogyny, or a criticism of it? Homophobia? A veiled confession? It was impossible to say for sure; Wolfson’s medium is plausible deniability.” When I asked him about these reactions to his work, he rejected the notion that his sculptures are mere spectacles: “I’m not making things with the intention to get attention and to be provocative,” he declared. “That would be an unserious life.”



Many of Wolfson’s larger sculptures are currently in shipping crates. One of these crates contains “Female Figure” (2014). Credit...Joyce Kim

His latest work is “Body Sculpture,” a 36-square-inch metal cube with elaborately crafted robotic arms. Like many of his earlier works, the sculpture performs a repertoire of uncanny gestures. It points, gyrates and “plays itself like a drum,” choreographies that Wolfson refers to as both “silly” and “quite serious.” “Body Sculpture” will debut at the National Gallery of Australia, which paid \$5 million to fund the work’s creation, on December 9. The project began in 2018 with the kernel of an idea (something Wolfson frequently refers to as “a download,” as if he were invisibly tethered to a supercomputer), which grew into a pitch video that was subsequently presented to multiple institutions, a strategy designed to both secure funding and “articulate what [the work] could be or what it’s trying to be.” It has been in technical production with Los Angeles-based fabricators ever since. Wolfson views the work as an expression of “the dark and light sides of the human experience,” from violence and aggression to curiosity and playfulness. When I ask him if “Body Sculpture” is intended to function as a surrogate for a specific person or thing, he responds decisively: “It’s a surrogate for *you*.” To accompany its presentation, Wolfson has selected an array of works from the National Gallery’s collection, including pieces by Robert Mapplethorpe, Claes Oldenburg, Diane Arbus, Andy Warhol, Elaine Sturtevant and Donald Judd.



The artist’s latest work, which will debut in December. Credit...Jordan Wolfson, “Body Sculpture (detail),” 2023, National Gallery of Australia Kamberri/Canberra, purchased 2019 © Jordan Wolfson. Photo: David Sims. Courtesy Gagolian, Sadie Coles, and David Zwirner

Wolfson answered T’s artist questionnaire in his brightly lit studio on an uncharacteristically misty October afternoon, accompanied by the hypnotic chirping of a hidden cricket. We sat at a table adjacent to a wall of peculiar AI-generated imagery (a process he was testing using OpenAI’s DALL-E imaging system), which included a bowl of apples strewn with chains and a leather-gloved hand cradling a cross. As we spoke, Wolfson, casually dressed and with tousled hair, was most animated when discussing the basic tenets of sculpture — mass, weight, gravity, form.

When did you first feel comfortable calling yourself a professional artist?

I thought of myself as a professional artist the minute I started making art. I remember thinking I was a professional artist by the time I was 18, just because I was so serious about it and committed to doing it. You could say a professional is someone who gets paid for what they do, and I had sold some paintings when I was a younger person. But anyone who has a commitment to what they do and takes it seriously can call themselves a professional. But who am I to judge what anyone calls themselves or doesn’t call themselves?

What was the first work you ever sold?

I had a gallery show when I was in high school, and I sold a painting. I really regret selling it because it's something that I would have liked to keep. I would have liked to keep a lot more of my work.

What was the painting?

It was a painting of a photograph from Life magazine, a very popular magazine in the '50s and '60s. It was a man in overalls standing and looking into the light — it's hard to describe. But there was always this Americanness in my work, the subject of American life or American culture. It was a very American image.



A framed picture of "Colored Sculpture" (2016), with a photograph of "Female Figure" peeking out behind it.

I'd like to hear more about this idea of Americanness and how that plays into your work now.

I've lived in Europe, but I was never good at making art in Europe. For whatever reason, I've always felt more comfortable making art here in the U.S., and I always thought that it was my target. It's easier to make art while living in my target. Being in the center of the rainstorm rather than outside of the rainstorm.

Do you feel like you're in the center of the rainstorm now?

Yes. But in my newer work, I'm looking more inward. I'm looking more at physicality, rather than at topical American content or historical content.

Why do you think people often focus on the violence in your work?

My work is about the human animal. We live in a complex world. There's an enormous amount of human animal content that's mediated through changing and developing technologies. Our history is a violent history. Our future is a violent future. I'm simply trying to make art about the times we live in. I don't agree with the violence. I don't subscribe to the violence. But when I take my job seriously as an artist and I'm trying to allow myself to be seen, I'm trying also to see. Do you want a witness who's going to not describe what they actually see?

Do you think an artist has a social responsibility to bear witness?

I think artists can choose to make any type of work they want. But I have wanted to bear witness in the most honest ways that I can, dealing with different subject matter.

What is your process of creating a new work? Where do you start?

I get an idea really quickly. It could be three and a half minutes. I can get a whole piece.



A digital projector. The photographs in the background were made with OpenAI's DALL-E system, which generates images based on text prompts. Credit...Joyce Kim

And what is the idea? Is it an image of the piece?

It's almost like ... Have you ever typed something into Chat GPT? It gives you this big answer all of a sudden. And you're like, How can there be so much immediacy and detail? I don't know how to describe it, but it's kind of like that.

Part of my job is preparing myself to work, and if that means clearing my head because I stubbed my toe earlier, or I had a flat tire or whatever, that's part of my job. I've been clearing my mind and meditating for about 14 years. I won't touch my work if I haven't done it. I won't come to an important meeting or do an interview, anything.

So you meditate every day?

Sometimes multiple times a day.

What is your typical day like?

I wake up, I try to go for a walk with my dog, and then I drink coffee and have breakfast, and then we sit in the grass and then we go, and I meditate. I talk to everyone [to] get an understanding of what's going on in the day. And then I work with an artist named Russell Barsanti. He's my main technical person. I'll usually meet up with him and we'll work for about 3 to 4 hours. Together, there's a lot of driving around. There's a lot of visiting different fabricators. Having discussions

about things that I find really exciting, like the surface of a sculpture. I also have an office [at] home. I try to exercise, and I like to see friends at night, and I like to read at night.

What are you reading now?

I'm reading the screenplay for Ingmar Bergman's "Persona" (1966). It's amazing. It's a masterpiece.

Are you bingeing any shows right now?

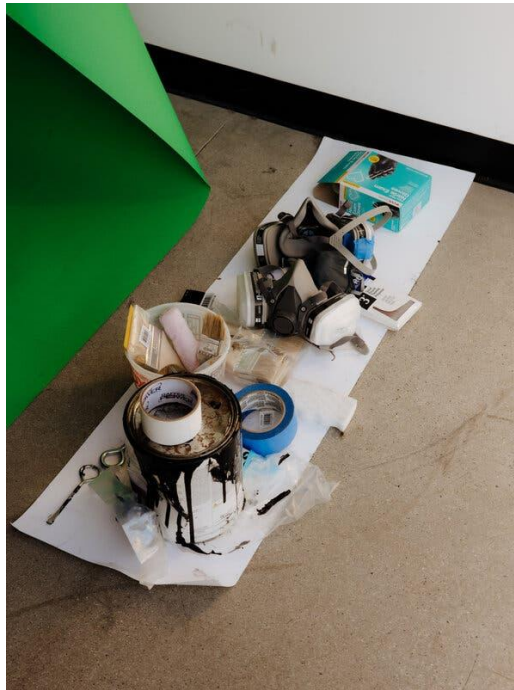
No, I don't watch TV, but I like films. The last interesting movie I watched was "Minority Report" (2002).

What's your worst habit?

Not trusting myself. So I try to fight that.



Several reference objects, including a wooden plank embellished with gold crosses, lean against shipping crates.



Paint, masks and other materials sit on the floor adjacent to a green screen, which Wolfson uses to film pitch videos designed to secure institutional support for new projects.

What embarrasses you?

Everything. So much can embarrass me. Not knowing something. Saying the wrong thing. Feeling foolish. Being too eager for someone to like me. All things can embarrass me. Having food in my teeth. Being accidentally rude to someone embarrasses me.

Has that happened?

It's happened my whole life.

What's the last thing that made you cry?

I was with my mom's body after she passed away. For some time, I stayed with her.

I'm sorry. Was that recently?

In August.

Has a work of art ever made you cry?

[Caravaggio's] "The Calling of St. Matthew" [1599-1600].

Is there an artist whose work you really admire or are jealous of?

The most prominent sculptors of the generation before me or two generations before me: Katharina Fritsch, Charles Ray, Paul McCarthy, Jeff Koons. **But there's** a number of really terrific artists: Carol Bove, Rosemarie Trockel, Isa Genzken. So many. I'm really grateful I get to do this. I also get to know with some intimacy and some affection other practitioners.



A framed photograph of a Brancusi sculpture sits atop a stack of flat files. The image includes a quote from Tolstoy: "The function of art is to make that understood which in the form of argument would be incomprehensible."

Do you talk to other artists regularly?

Oh, all the time. It's incredible. I was so invested in art as a young person, and I have proceeded to become friends and acquaintances with so many of the artists I've idolized. It's so cool. The person I would've wanted to meet the most — and I actually had lunch with [his collaborator] Paul McCarthy last weekend — was [the late visual artist] Mike Kelley.

How do you know when a piece is finished?

It has a generative feeling. So you're looking at it and it goes into this feeling of stasis. And then there's either a higher level of energy or a lower level of energy, but in the right way, with the right tone and the right attitude that's not collapsing into moralism or didacticism or this or that. There's a kind of intense frequency of vagueness or ambiguity. And the piece holds that, and it maybe does something that I haven't seen, or I haven't seen in my own work before. I try for that. The point is not for the work to be original but for the work to have ...

A tension?

Exactly. And so when the work has the right tension and it's balanced out and nothing's perfect — OK, there. Done.

Do you think of your robotic sculptures as being sentient or as having the potential to be sentient?

People ask that all the time. I feel like I'm so boring when it comes down to my relationships with these works. It's not really a Pygmalion relationship for me. It's really very pragmatic. And I think that's because I demand so much from them. I don't demand [from] them as individuals; I demand so much from something as an artwork. And I feel that if I anthropomorphize it or have an attachment to it, or if I have an imagined emotional relationship to it because it's figurative or humanoid, then that would distract from my ability to push the work to its limit. It's a weird thing. I remember when I was doing "Female Figure," while we were programming it, it was installed [on the] top floor of this furniture warehouse. And I remember being alone with it, and it suddenly looked through the mirror and up at me and I **just** screamed. I ran out and it was dark. And I screamed and I got in my car, and I drove home. After that, I wanted to have a very neutral relationship with it.