

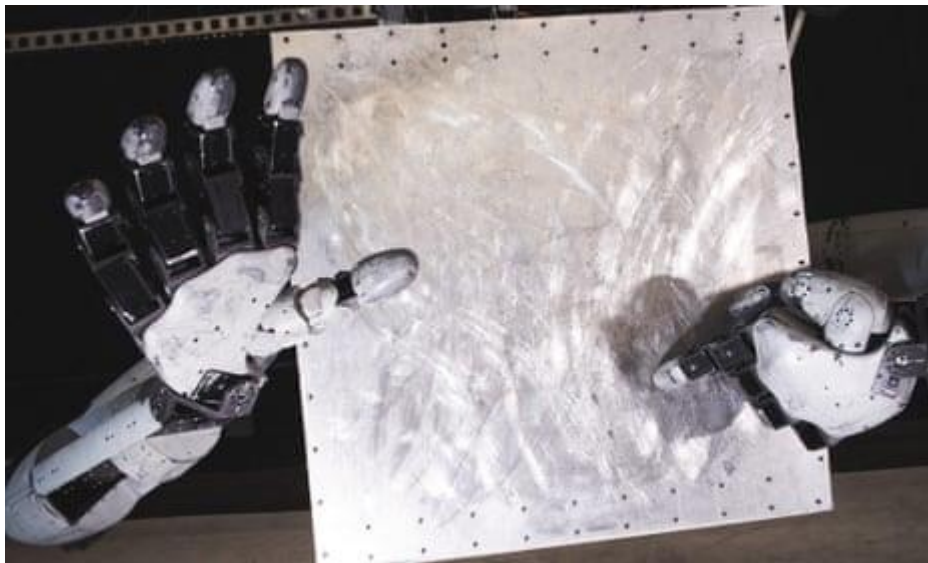
GAGOSIAN



## Jordan Wolfson's robotic cube simulates sex and suicide. He says it is his most universal work yet

*When the National Gallery of Australia spent millions on the controversial artist's latest artwork, it was described as a 'cultural slap in the face'. Wolfson has finally unveiled it*

Oliver Giles



*Artist Jordan Wolfson – whose new piece, Body Sculpture, is to be unveiled in Canberra's NGA – says it is so different from his previous artwork he's not sure how people will respond to it. Photograph: David Sims*

Jordan Wolfson has a reputation as a provocateur. The 43-year-old US artist shot to fame in 2014 when he unveiled *Female Figure*, a lifesize animatronic sculpture of a dancer that gyrated against a mirrored wall, wearing nothing but a negligee and knee-high boots. The robot was embedded with facial-recognition software that enabled it to stare audience members in the eye as it performed its creepy seduction.

Was it a comment on sexism, or was the work itself misogynist? The argument raged in the media and controversy has dogged Wolfson in the years since, as he's produced sculptures, videos and virtual-reality works that have ignited debates about racism, homophobia, antisemitism and violence.

Throughout it all, Wolfson has remained inscrutable, dancing around difficult questions and even arguing that his work has no moral meaning at all. "I would really hate it if my sculpture is taken as a morality lesson," he told the Guardian in 2018, shortly before he unveiled another animatronic

sculpture, *Colored Figure*, at Tate Modern in London. “I’m no moralist trying to shock people into behaving better ... I don’t care about your interpretation.”

But sitting in the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, two days before his most ambitious robot to date is unveiled to the public, Wolfson seems to be changing his tune. “There is the fear that someone might judge me in a way that scares me,” he says, speaking so softly he’s almost inaudible. “Being an artist, you have to grow a thick skin. But do I get scared? I do.”

There are plenty of reasons for Wolfson to be anxious. The NGA bought his new work, *Body Sculpture*, in 2019 and the announcement was not well received. Initial reports stated that the NGA had paid US\$5m for the sculpture, which was described as half of the gallery’s annual acquisitions budget at the time. Nick Mitzevich, director of the NGA, now says those figures were incorrect and that true cost was US\$4.5m (AU\$6.67m), which was roughly 40% of the gallery’s acquisitions budget.



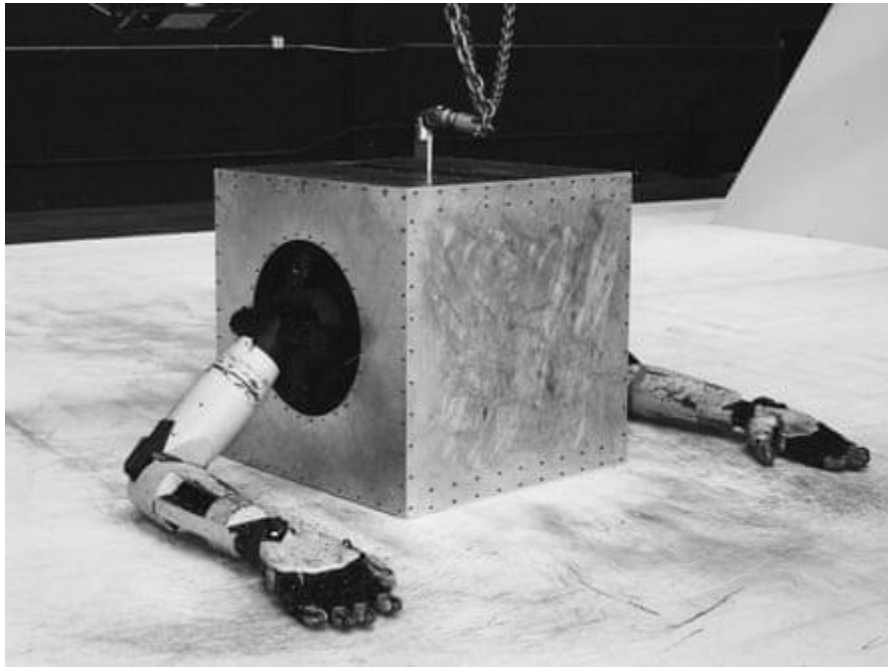
*‘Being an artist, you have to grow a thick skin’ ... Jordan Wolfson. Photograph: Karlee Holland*

Nevertheless, critics attacked the price and Wolfson’s previous works, arguing that his art only had shock value. The artist Adam Geczy described it as a “cultural slap in the face” and argued that the NGA should be supporting artists from underrepresented groups, rather than a straight white man from New York. (The same year the NGA bought *Body Sculpture*, it launched the Know My Name initiative to improve the representation of female artists in its programs).

That was before any details of the work had been announced. Now that *Body Sculpture* is about to be unveiled, Wolfson says that it is so different from his previous robots that he’s not sure how people will respond to it.

“My previous two animatronics dealt with topical ideas,” he says. *Female Figure* explored sexism, while *Colored Sculpture*, a puppet of a boy that was repeatedly smashed into the ground, reflected on violence. The boy is white, but the work’s title triggered questions about race and racism. But Wolfson believes *Body Sculpture* is “about something more universal”.

Body Sculpture is a metal cube with two animatronic arms, complete with large hands. A chain snakes out of the top of the cube and connects it to a robotic arm, which in turn is attached to a scaffold. The robotic arm moves the cube back-and-forth across a 13-metre-wide stage over the course of roughly 25 minutes, while the cube performs a series of gestures. Among these are some benign actions, such as when the cube hugs itself, and more disturbing scenes, including a vignette in which the cube imitates sex with the floor. At one point, the cube makes a gun with one of its hands, then repeatedly points it at itself.



*Wolfson's Body Sculpture. Photograph: David Sims*

Wolfson describes the work as an exploration of the universal experience of being a living, breathing human – “a conscious entity, a piece of soft, vulnerable intelligence that’s born and dies and sits in a body”. Through having the robot mirror recognisable human gestures back at us, Wolfson hopes to “activate” viewers’ own bodies, to remind them of their base physicality.

“After I meditate, I sometimes look at my palms and they look foreign to me for an instant,” Wolfson says. That’s the experience he wants to capture , by comforting, surprising and disturbing viewers through the robot’s mimicry of human movement.

Prof Anne Marsh, an art historian and the author of *Doing Feminism*, a history of women’s art in Australia, hopes people will engage with Wolfson’s work with an open mind. “The artists who show us where we are culturally can’t help but push moral and political boundaries,” she says. “The thing about violence, disgust, repulsion in art is that people don’t expect it even though they happily devour this content on TV every night.

“What Jordan Wolfson and artists like him do is to make this distant violence and suffering more real, more present.”



*Wolfson with Colored Sculpture in London's Tate Modern in 2018. Photograph: Martin Godwin/The Guardian*

Body Sculpture's simulations of sex and suicide might shock some but the robot's lack of a gender, ethnicity or sexuality mean Wolfson is not wading into a public debate on a hot-button issue, as he did with Female Figure. Wolfson won't mind if this results in Body Sculpture generating less press.

"I was never trying to evoke that noise," he says. "I was just trying to do what I thought was interesting. We live in a sexist society. I was making an artwork about that. I wasn't making an artwork to drool and gossip over, or to objectify women."

It's easy to theorise that the media circus around Wolfson at least partly inspired him to retreat into the more abstract – and less controversial – ideas that underpin Body Sculpture. Perhaps he's tired of having his art interpreted as a reflection of his personal politics. Or maybe it's not anxiety that led Wolfson to making Body Sculpture but excitement. Wolfson talks in a quiet, measured tone throughout the interview but he becomes enthused when discussing the idea behind his new robot.

"It's a really big, core, foundational concept: what does it mean to be consciousness housed in flesh?" he says. "I've tried to ask myself a lot of different difficult questions in my artworks. Now I want to ask myself this."