

Time Enough at Last

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## Abstract:

As an art history buff and sci-fi aficionado, I'm constantly thinking about the stories told of human progress, or lack thereof. Have modern humans surpassed their ancient ancestors or have they only managed to create more technologically advanced ways of carrying on with their same base drives for power, status, and violence? If we turn to popular media, this question becomes particularly intriguing. Our visions of the future are often just a confused jumble of the past; we reanimate old ideas and images when trying to imagine the things to come. An example of this can be found in *Star Trek* where explorers aboard spaceships encounter societies that resemble Ancient Rome or Nazi Germany while exploring the edges of the galaxy. Even when imagining new worlds, we keep returning to ones that mirror our own.

In my most recent work, I explore Retrofuturism, an atemporal phenomenon where the "future blends with the past." I fuse ancient artifacts and futuristic technology within the same works. Cell phones are reimagined as ceramic tablets and robots are transformed into archaic stone statues. I take modern techniques like 3D printing, laser engraving, and silicon mold making, and combine them with ancient materials like clay, earth pigments, and plaster.

By making this kind of work, I can tackle the objects, ideas, and materials that I encounter while studying the past and daydreaming about the future. Giving form to this exploration allows me to reach a more nuanced understanding of Retrofuturism and why it affects us so deeply.

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## Introduction

The best metaphor for my art practice is the “conspiracy boards” found in thriller movies. These are the props used to visualize the efforts of obsessed detectives and paranoid schizophrenics to explain whatever mystery is consuming them. The hallmark of a good conspiracy board is a huge amount of newspaper clippings and images covered in a web of red strings connecting everything together. The hope expressed by these objects is that the mystery can be solved by brute force through an intense accumulation of anything tangentially relevant, followed by an arrangement of these disparate clues into an explanatory roadmap.

My obsessions are the passage of time, the construction of history, material culture, and perhaps most of all the strange inter referentiality of culture which results in all sorts of captivating assemblages, odd rhymes, continuities, and contradictions. My artwork is more or less a compulsive attempt at communicating to others all the confusion I feel and the strange connections I see.

In my work I blend styles and materials associated with different cultures and periods of history in order to create confounding objects. Bagels fuse with Italian marble dust, candlesticks merge with Star Wars ships, and handheld electronics merge with traditional Japanese ceramics. In making these combinations, I seek to highlight the heuristics we use to interpret objects, that is, the sort of “common sense” interpretation we employ when encountering objects and trying to assess their origins and functions.

I’ve always been interested in *retrofuturism*, which refers to the conceptions of the future that were held in previous times in history. Something like a flying car is a great example of a *retrofuturistic* idea; it’s a late 19th-20th century technology that is reimagined to a fantastic extreme in the imagination of its users. While temporalities certainly mix together in daily life, Retrofuturism provides extreme examples of the ways that different temporalities collapse and meld in our culture. We often don’t recognize, for instance, that an Iphone camera makes a shutter sound only because we have an

historical association between a shutter sound and the act of taking a picture. The flying car is much flashier and much more apparent.

I consider my work to be most in dialogue with artists like Huma Bhabha, Louise Bourgeois, Claes Oldenburg, Eduardo Paolozzi, George Segal, Ed Keinholz, and Anselm Kiefer. I will focus in on three artists in particular that I feel capture the bulk of the various “conversation points” I have with this larger group of artists: Huma Bhabha, Louise Bourgeois, and Claus Oldenburg. Bhabha’s use of apocalyptic and archaic creatures deeply informs how I think about imbuing my own work with history and pathos. Bourgeois’ work has shaped how I think about the boundaries between figuration and abstraction in sculpture. Oldenburg’s dedication to material culture and the acts of collecting and recreating have strongly shaped the way I think about creating serial works.

### Huma Bhabha

I was first introduced to Huma Bhabha’s work after seeing her show, *They Live*, at the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art. The exhibition featured masks, collaged and painted portraits of alien monsters, and the totemic foam creatures she is best known for. I quickly fell in love with Huma's work and still remain deeply enamored.

The exhibition was titled after the David Cronenberg film of the same name, which tells the story of a man who gains access to special glasses which reveal that the whole world is run by disguised alien monsters.<sup>1</sup> The film is a sci-fi cult classic, appreciated for its intriguing conspiratorial plot, snappy dialogue, and wild action sequences. Science fiction is an exciting place where the cerebral and existential implications of scientific advancement are mixed with eye catching lasers, spaceships, and intergalactic Don Juan types (ahem, Captain Kirk and Han Solo). Such is the case in Huma’s work, where very serious topics like Colonialism and war are intertwined with a clear love of eye-catching monster movie imagery. Each work challenges binaries such as humor/ tragedy, serious/silly, and old/new. The resulting gray area between these various poles makes for incredibly compelling sculptures that have identities and bodies

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<sup>1</sup> “They Live.” *The Official John Carpenter*, <https://theofficialjohncarpenter.com/they-live/>.

as complex as any human, which is what I strive to create perhaps more than anything else in my own work.

I have made various creatures of my own, though one in particular exemplifies the influence Huma has on my work. My piece *Bagel Terminator* [figure 1] is born of the golem, a misguided, artificial creature from Jewish mythology, the most famous of which is the Golem of Prague. This golem was formed from the dust of the earth to protect Prague's Jewish ghetto, although its power became too much for the Jews to control and they ultimately destroyed it. Frankenstein and robots are the contemporary inheritors of this mythology—dangerous artificial lifeforms born of hubris.<sup>2</sup> This sculpture merges the humble Jewish bagel with the metallic body and red eyes of the Terminator.

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<sup>2</sup> "Golem." *Jewish Museum Berlin*, <https://www.jmberlin.de/en/exhibition-golem>.



Figure 1: *Bagel Golem*, 2022, toasted bagels, shellac, 3d printed eye, wood, and metallic paint, 60 x 15 x 15 in



## Claes Oldenburg

I have a strong affinity for Claes Oldenburg, a fervent collector, admirer, and creator of tchotchkes and wonky replicas. My favorite of his works is *Ray Gun Wing*, a collection of objects resembling handguns, in so far as they shared a similar “L” shape. The collection consists of sculptures made by Oldenburg, as well as toy guns and found objects that resemble guns. In poring over the hundreds of collected guns, it becomes all but impossible to distinguish which guns were made from scratch, which were collaged together from existing materials, which were purchased, and which were simply found. Oldenburg has, in words taken from MOMA’s 2013 showing of this work, created an “equivalence between collecting and creating, while dissolving the distinction between everyday items and museum treasures.”<sup>3</sup>

In my own personal life, I have a propensity for collecting all manner of objects that catch my interest. Some highlights include: chunks of the Berlin wall, Americana salt and pepper shakers, Zippo lighters, men’s leather shoes, Simpsons comic books, yoyos, and fountain pens. Let’s take the leather shoes for example. While I was in college I began experimenting with fashion as a way of exploring personal expression. Different clothes signal a range of things from social status, wealth, age, racial identity, subculture identities, and gender identities. Men’s leather shoes in particular fit into a range of historical and cultural styles which were determined by the class and culture of people who traditionally wore them as well as the original intended function of the shoes. Certain shoes were worn by elite college students while others were worn by athletes, soldiers, and blue collar workers. I became obsessed with studying these histories and acquiring shoes that ran across this full spectrum. I collected shoes of different levels of formality in a range of materials from suede to shell cordovan, a highly prized leather made of horsehide. My collection could collapse an enormous range of history and culture into a single shoe rack.

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<sup>3</sup> “Claes Oldenburg: The Street and the Store / Mouse Museum and Ray Gun Wing: Moma.” *The Museum of Modern Art*, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1296>.

In my art practice, this obsession with material history and collecting has fueled a series of works that consists of handheld electronics made out of ceramics. I designed a hybrid cell phone/PDA/Gameboy in 3D modeling software, and then created a silicone mold that I could use to turn the model into a series of iterative clay works. The resulting devices are somewhere between a copy of real electronics and an invention of my own. I have used different types of clay from stoneware to porcelain as well as different firing techniques like woodfiring, oxidation firing, and reduction firing. All of these material and technical choices affect the physical and visual qualities of my handheld devices while also channeling specific ceramic traditions from various cultures [fig. 2].

Woodfiring, for example, has a long history in Japan where it has been used to create pots covered in unpredictable drips, textures, and colors that are determined by fluctuating temperatures, exposure to the flame, and the amount of wood ash deposited on the pot. This process requires the potter to make peace with uncertainty and all manner of happy accidents. This philosophy is called wabi-sabi, and in my own life it has helped me manage anxiety about the future and better understand the existential thought of figures like Camus. Other of my calculators use glazes made of cobalt oxide and copper carbonate which have been used across the geography and time for the rich blues, reds, and greens they can produce.



Figure 2: *Untitled (Gradient Phone)*, 2022, woodfired ceramic, 5 x 3 x 0.3 in

## Louise Bourgeois

Lastly, I turn to Louise Bourgeois, whose uniquely extensive oeuvre has something to leave anyone in rapture. I am most drawn to Bourgeois' series *Personages*, which consists of totemic figures that "Bourgeois has characterized...as surrogates for the family and friends she left behind in France when she moved to New York."<sup>4</sup> The clear influence of Primitivist art is complicated and problematic, however the way that they fuse together abstraction, figuration, and ancient art is exciting. The monolith, a simple upright form, recalls both ancient monuments and skyscrapers creating an entanglement of history.<sup>5</sup> *Quarantania*, a 1941 sculpture in the collection of the Whitney features five personages huddled together with blank cyclopes faces.<sup>6</sup> It's a difficult scene to read, and you wonder what exactly to make of the relationship between the figures. What is clear is the dedication that Bourgeois has for invoking pathos with vaguely formed anthropomorphic objects.

My piece *Halavai (I Should be so Lucky!)* [fig. 3] similarly features an arrangement of simple upright forms with simple faces consisting only of eyes. Their blank expressions are unreadable, and the viewer must decide for themselves how they feel. Their forms recall tombstones, and when presenting them I often cover them with pebbles as is customary in Jewish cemeteries. Similarly, their eyes are made of bagels, a traditional Jewish food, and their bodies consist of a clay made of crushed bagels, Jewish rye, and Carrara marble dust, the latter being an art historical material famously used by Michelangelo in sculptures such as *David*.<sup>7</sup> I think of the squarish figure as a man while the more shapely figure is a woman, creating the kind of heteronormative coupling I seek in my own life. My intention, however, is to create generalized enough figures that any viewer could project themselves onto; being rectangular or elliptical

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<sup>4</sup> "Louise Bourgeois. Sleeping Figure. 1950." *The Museum of Modern Art*, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80752>.

<sup>5</sup> Tate. "The Art of Louise Bourgeois." *Tate*, Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/louise-bourgeois-2351/art-louise-bourgeois>.

<sup>6</sup> Bourgeois, Louise. "Louise Bourgeois: Quarantania." *Louise Bourgeois | Quarantania | Whitney Museum of American Art*, <https://whitney.org/collection/works/2527>.

<sup>7</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "How a Rejected Block of Marble Became the World's Most Famous Statue." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/story/how-a-rejected-block-of-marble-became-the-worlds-most-famous-statue>.

hardly portrays a complete identity. The figures are hard to place into a specific moment of history, which is fitting as the designs of tombstones are often fairly uniform across time.

In this next section, I will be transitioning into a compendium of some of my own musings as well as bits and pieces of topics I've researched. As I will explain, my goal is to decompress my influences back out into bits in pieces that I come across. It provides a would-be reader or viewer of my work an opportunity to see the sorts of bits of information that precede my work.



Figure 3: *Halevai (I Should be so Lucky!)*, toasted bagels, jewish rye, carrara marble dust, paper clay, found rocks, and acrylic paint on wood, 30 x 60 x 4 in

## Scott Lerner Compendium

This section is a literarily oriented companion to my sculptural works and is meant to capture my obsession with all the ways time becomes distorted via jumps, skips, repeats, rhymes, lapses, speculations, and all things *deja vu*. I am not particularly concerned with the scientific or factual nature of time; rather, I'm infatuated with the emotional dance humanity has with time, that is, with its history and future.

Here you will find a collection of the musings, quotes, stories, and histories that have informed my art making and best demonstrate my thinking. This section is largely an anthology and exists as an act of compilation and accumulation more so than an act of synthesis. In muddling through all I've compiled, one can identify various starting points from which to enter into my artwork. These literary chunks are not sequential and do not have to precede or follow one another.

If you're feeling particularly generous, you can take this section as an embodiment of Deleuze's concept of rhizomatic thinking.<sup>8</sup>

If you don't want to think about Deleuze or haven't read much of him—I certainly haven't—then think of the format of this section in a much simpler way: it's assembled like a messy computer desktop. Everything is interrelated and exists simultaneously. Folders contain subfolders that break content down into categories and subcategories. Some things are alphabetized or ordered by upload date. There is extensive curation, but sometimes things are tucked away into one place or another simply for the sake of convenience and to alleviate the clutter.

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There is a Kierkegaard book titled *Either/Or*, written in 1843, which was the namesake of Elliot Smith's 1997 album. Existentialism has an echo.

There is a fantastic album by Todd Rundgren titled *Something/Anything?* From 1972. To my knowledge, Rundgren's album is not a reference to Kierkegaard in any way; however in my mind the book and the album reside closely together due to the way their titles conceptually rhyme.

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<sup>8</sup> Mambrol, Nasrullah. "The Philosophical Concept of Rhizome." *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 26 Apr. 2017, <https://literariness.org/2017/04/26/the-philosophical-concept-of-rhizome/>.

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*Robot walks into a bar  
orders a drink, lays down a bill  
bartender says, "hey we don't serve robots"  
and the robot says, "Oh but someday you will"*  
-Frontier Index Lyrics, Silver Jews, 1996

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"The words of a dead man/Are modified in the guts of the living" says WH Auden in his poem *In Memory of WB Yeats*.<sup>9</sup> This is to say that the work of an individual takes on new meaning in those who inherit it. When the poet is gone, his poems remain and what happens then is not up to the poet. Here Auden refers to poetry, though we can just as readily extend this logic to inventions, histories, and philosophies.

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"Time is a great teacher, but unfortunately it kills all its students."-attributed to Hector Berloiz<sup>10</sup>

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In the epic of Gilgamesh, Inkedu is described as a wild man from nature who did not know the ways of civilization—in contrast to Gilgamesh, who was a city ruler. This story suggests that there is a transformation required for an individual to leave the state of nature and become "civilized" rather than simply being an animal. What is meant by civilization in this story is not quite clear; however, sex, bread and wine seem to be some of civilization's most compelling features.<sup>11</sup>

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A common theme in science fiction is a failed utopian society that, in its quest for an efficient or logical solution, forgets its humanity. The cure is worse than the disease.

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<sup>9</sup> Auden, W.H. "In Memory of W. B. Yeats by W. H. Auden - Poems | Academy of American Poets." *Poets.org*, Academy of American Poets, <https://poets.org/poem/memory-w-b-yeats>.

<sup>10</sup> Scientist, Dr. Soklaridis: Senior, et al. "Time Is a Great Teacher, but Unfortunately It Kills All Its Pupils': Insights from Psychiatric Service User Engagement." *JCEHP*, [https://journals.lww.com/jcehp/Fulltext/2021/04140/\\_Time\\_is\\_a\\_Great\\_Teacher,\\_but\\_Unfortunately\\_It.5.aspx](https://journals.lww.com/jcehp/Fulltext/2021/04140/_Time_is_a_Great_Teacher,_but_Unfortunately_It.5.aspx).

<sup>11</sup> *The Epic of Gilgamesh - Uruk-Warka.dk*. <https://uruk-warka.dk/Gilgamish/eog.pdf>.

An example of this is the Original Series Star Trek episode (Season 1, Episode 23) Taste of Armageddon, where two warring planets have decided to conduct their war via a computer simulation. However, when casualties occur, each side has their people commit ritual suicide proportionally. The reason for this method of warfare is fairly simple: by simulating the war it saves each planet from costly infrastructure damage and keeps each civilization from turning to rubble. Captain Kirk comes to the conclusion that by not experiencing the full brutality of war, they have become desensitized to it. They could hardly distinguish between war and peace. Kirk then destroys the devices the two civilizations use to simulate their war, forcing them to reconsider diplomatic solutions.

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“I did an interview a couple of years ago for a guy called Redbeard,” Waters told the *Radio Times*. “He said, ‘Would you ever perform *The Wall* again on stage?’ And I said, ‘No’... Indoors, it made no sense financially; it’s too expensive. And, as it’s partially an attack on the inherently greedy nature of stadium rock shows, it would be wrong to do it in stadiums...I said, ‘Well, I might do it outdoors if they ever take the Berlin Wall down.’”...

-Roger Waters

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Several stories feature protagonists who face various dilemmas before falling asleep for hundreds or even thousands of years. This slumber provides a convenient way for the protagonists to face the long term consequences of their choices. Alternatively put, they are afforded the impossible opportunity to see how their own story ends.

Yoni the circle maker, a figure from Rabbinic literature, has such an opportunity. The story goes that Yoni encountered an old man planting a carob tree. Yoni mocks this man, saying that he will never live the 70 years it will take for the tree to bear fruit. The man stresses the importance of acting in kindness for the sake of the future—the tree will bear fruit during the lifetime of his descendents. Further, the man would not have had carob himself if his ancestors didn’t plant carob trees as he was doing now. Yoni then proceeds to fall asleep under the carob tree and wakes up 70 years in the future to see this man’s son harvesting carob from the tree. Yoni then goes in search of his own descendents. He meets his grandson, who refuses to believe that his grandfather could still be alive. Yoni is ostracized and unable to join the future society—the world had moved on and there was no place for him. He prays for death and is granted it. The



moral of the story is to appreciate the foresight of one's ancestors and to pay their generosity forward.

In the story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, a group of Christians attempt to escape persecution by the Romans through hiding in a cave. The Romans learn of their hiding place, and seal the cave with a boulder to give them a cruel death. Hundreds of years later, the cave, seemingly forgotten with time, is happened upon, at which point it is opened and the seven Christians are found asleep and aged not a day. One of the seven returns to town and is surprised to find a cross at the city gate—in their slumber Christianity had won the day.

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Punk rocker Iggy Pop's 1977 debut album *The Idiot*, is named after Fyodor Dostevsky's 1869 novel of the same name.

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Billy Idol, the rock star famous for songs like *Eyes Without a Face* and *White Wedding*, released an album titled *Cyberpunk* in 1993. It engages with various themes of the genre with songs like *Neuromancer* (presumably named after the William Gibson novel of the same name) and *Concrete Kingdom*. The album notably features an electronic dance track titled *Heroin* that heavily samples Lou Reed's *Heroin* as well as Patti Smith's *Gloria*. The punk aspect of *Cyberpunk* is taken very literally here. The album was received fairly poorly as Idol's investment and sincerity in the genre were considered dubious. The album was placed on a list of the "least essential albums of the 90's" by AV Club, which described the cover of *Heroin* as "monumentally inexplicable."

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The 1975 movie *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is riddled with art historical allusions from the very first scene. During the rendition of *Damnit Janet*, two figures dressed as the pair from *American Gothic* can be seen. They are standing in front of a church with Gothic inspired, pointed arch windows that are quite similar to the notable window on the house in *American Gothic*. A copy of the painting can be seen in Dr. Frankenfurter's mansion as well as copies of the *Mona Lisa*, Michelangelo's *David*, and Myron's *Discobolus*.

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Technological innovations shape the trajectory of art history and inform the techniques employed by individual artists.

Most obviously, photography could not exist without the invention of the camera.

Ceramics only became possible following tons of experimentation with materials and the development of kilns that could reach controlled, extremely high temperatures. At the most basic level, humans couldn't even create ceramics until the discovery of fire.

Roy Lichtenstein's signature style was born of Ben-day dot printing, a technique used in industrial printing to create complex images by layering arrays of dots of different colors and spacing.

Pixelation as a stylistic choice required the invention of the digital image.

The list goes on, however my favorite examples relate to painting. Paint is so ubiquitous as an art material that we often don't really question its existence; it seems to have always just been around since humans first painted the walls of caves.

The stylistic -isms of painting were not simply caused by intellectual shifts but material ones as well. Impressionism was heavily shaped by the invention of portable paint tubes that allowed artists to leave their studios and work *en plein air*.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, certain paint pigments were only invented in the 19th century, such as cobalt blue, cadmium yellow, and synthetic french ultramarine. These new paints allowed for a new intensity of color that was taken in stride by the Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, and perhaps most blatantly, the Fauves. The evolution towards Modern art was not merely conceptual, but material and technological.

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I constantly collect short quotes and poetic phrases that I come across in hopes of using them as titles for my work or as Jenny Holzer-esque truisms etched into the screens of my various sculptures. I recall the source of some of these lines, but most are lost, as it were, to history. Here are a few examples:

Backseat bingo

Heaven just got another angel

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<sup>12</sup> "From the Archives: The History of the Metal Paint Tube." *Winsor & Newton - North America*, <https://www.winsornewton.com/na/articles/art-history/history-metal-paint-tube/>.

There is no more  
room in heaven

Such unlikely lovers

Don't do this, you're too good at making me nervous

Asleep at the wheel

Lunatic fringe

What's it to you lover boy?

Bad news for flower children

Supernatural male enhancement

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In *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the meaning of life is said to be 42. This is also the number of Jackie Robinson's jersey. This is likely a coincidence.

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It remains an open question as to whether or not an artist can escape the ideological constraints of the time they are working in. Further research is necessary.

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Get up I feel like Being a Sex Machine by James Brown

Iron Man by Black Sabbath

The Robots by Kraftwerk

Robot Rock by Daft Punk

Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots Pt. 1 by the Flaming Lips

Mr. Roboto by Styx

Are 'Friends' Electric? By Tubeway Army

(A few songs about robots)

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