

**Martha Todd**  
**Embodying the Unreal**

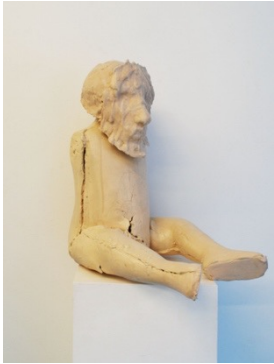
Martha Todd spent seven years as a mannequin maker. Her experiences during this time led her to her current PHD by practice, *Embodying the Unreal - The Mannequin and its (Re)Making in Contemporary Art*.

The work presented in this exhibition is informed by considerations of the mannequin - a figure whose aesthetic and physical makeup has evolved greatly since its invention. Through direct experience of working in industry, both as a sculptor's assistant for mannequin company Adel Rootstein Ltd and as a model-maker and sculptor for contemporary visual merchandising company Proportion London, her research uncovers what lies beneath the surface of the polished exterior of the contemporary mannequin.

*"I witnessed a notable evolutionary change in the shop mannequin. What was originally a refined sculpture or representation of a real person had become an imagined representation of a figure that never existed. There was no longer any presence of a real human model anywhere in the making of the high street mannequin. Shop display figures had become an idea of what the industry perceived was the perfect human body. The mannequin has entered the "realms of the hyperreal" (Baudrillard, 1994)"*

A series of photographs taken during the time of working in the mannequin factories is presented as the story of the origins of the contemporary mannequin. The images offer a narrative that reinstates the mannequin as a reflection of reality. Todd's research proposes that the evolution of the mannequin has followed the Jean Baudrillard's four phases of the image in his text *Simulation and Simulacra* (1994). The final phase being a time where the image "... has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard, 1994). These un-staged images are an exposure of what lies beneath the surface of the pristine shop window display. They reveal the life cycle of the display figure, offering a glimpse into the hinterland between the familiar façade of the high-street display mannequin and the uncanny iterations of the mannequin's pre-existence. The images expose "... everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open." (Freud, 1917).

The objects consider how mannequins, and their making processes can be used as a reaction to the commercial, consumerist society to which the mannequin is so deeply connected. Todd's practice investigates the visceral, doppelgänger world that parallels that of the fashion industry. Walter Benjamin's theories on authenticity inform the research and practice. Benjamin wrote "...authenticity is not reproducible, the intensive penetration of certain (mechanical) processes of reproduction was instrumental in differentiating and grading authenticity." It is proposed that through methods of pausing, reversing or adapting moments in the making of a mannequin, prior to it being mass producible, the practice can subvert the contemporary mannequin and produce an authentic work of art.



**Asphyxiation at 18 months**  
Press-moulded earthenware, engobe 2018

*“The head is something I mould on a regular basis. I enjoy the process. You can still recognise the features but this thick dripping, suffocating mask gives the head more meaning, it's the first point at which the life is drawn out of the clay sculpture.” - Todd 2018*

Marking the significance of this moment, a mould was taken of a half made mould of a head, the new mould being a method to record a unique and affecting moment in the process.

*“It was taken from the mould too early intentionally. The clay had set its new form. There was slip in one hand and a hairdryer in the other. There was swearing and laughing as the bits came together and I was shoving clay into the seams in a hope that it would hold. It held, it dried and then I covered it in a beautiful engobe that gloops and cracks as it dries and fires to the colour of well chewed nicotine gum. It's disgusting and beautiful. I have spent an entire six months sculpting faceless, formless children. I've been in a battle with my conscience as I've sweated over clay, then plaster, then resin, then body filler and lots of sandpaper. There has been no joy in the making, no love, just labour. I needed to make this as a cathartic outlet. It has given me peace.” - Todd 2018*

**Serene, 2017**  
School Buff Clay, Slip,  
Glaze



After de-moulding the male head clay sculpt produced for a mannequin for the exhibition 'Heavenly Bodies', at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, Todd kept the clay; scarred from being pulled from the mould. This piece was sprayed with black slip, glaze reflects the colour of the PVA glue that is evident after the de-mould of a mannequin master. The piece is an original one-off sculpture. All symmetry is lost, the finger marks a permanent reminder of the anonymous mannequin maker.



*Male mannequin at Heavenly Bodies Exhibition. 2018*

## Memorial. 2019

Press-moulded porcelain, mild steel

Pausing the process of the sculpture of the mannequin torso and monumentalizing the beauty of the hand of the sculptor, the piece was moulded at the point when the artist felt the clay had transitioned from material to visceral object. The sculpture was cast and removed from the mould at varying states of stability. Offering a representation of the clay cast aside after the moulding process. Presented on a steel frame reminiscent of those often used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



## Hand Adjustments. 2019

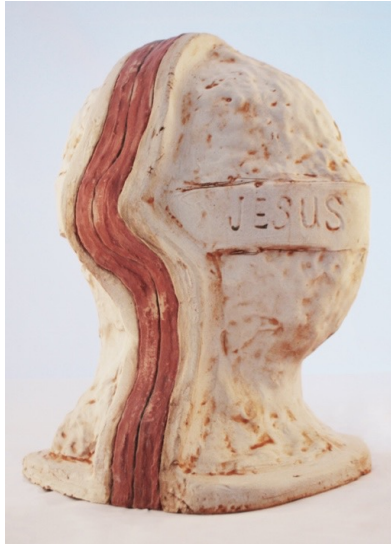
Slip-cast earthenware, oxides and underglaze, plaster, Polyfilla and grey primer



*“The cast would inevitably be imperfect (or imperfect in the sense that it needed to be as generic as the final mannequin). There needed to be no skin creases or finger prints, no air bubbles or chewed nails. Consequently, I would spend the next four weeks transforming the casts. Breaking the fingers to straighten them, filling and sanding holes, sculpting on the desired length of finger nail, adding necessary gaps between the fingers and eventually adding fittings so the hands would fit the mannequin but be removable for ease of dressing and undressing the final piece.” - Todd 2019*

To create this work, Todd took a body cast from her own hand and cast it in ceramic slip as a way of freezing the initial moment that the cast is removed. *Hand Adjustments (1)* highlights the flaws in the cast using metal oxides and ceramic stains. These features give the cast its connection to the original, inducing a feeling that is a fine line between fascination and disturbance. The crosses mark the spots that are distorted and need to be changed or filled to refine the final mannequin hand.

*Hand Adjustments (2)* is the original cast in plaster that has been sanded, filled and amended to create a palatable, almost unnoticeable feature to be attached to a mannequin. A Baudrillardian simulation that is “masking the absence of a profound reality” (Baudrillard, 1994).



### Reflection of a Deception Generator, 2019

Terracotta, slip, beeswax

In one of the mannequin factories was a collection of moulds used for display mannequins in museums. There were two moulds of Jesus. Both interpretations different, both a simulation of an idea of Jesus - an image that the onlooker would believe without question.

In the studio, the moulds became the subject of interest. They encased a perfect simulation; an object with the potential to produce an untruth, a realisation of a speculation of a deity. The mould is a latent negative space with the potential to generate a believable deception.



Todd used one of the Jesus moulds as a master to produce another mould from which to create a representation or reflection of the simulator or generator of deception. The piece is a ceramic sculpture of the form - thus metaphorically freezing the reproduction of this fraudulent Jesus. Terracotta clay was pressed into the mould, creating a sculpture that encompasses all phases of Baudrillard's theories - the piece is a replication of a simulator of a simulation.

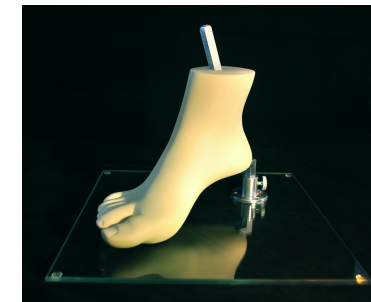
The work deceives, appearing functional. Instead, its function is to halt and monumentalize process by subverting the making process of the mannequin.



### My Foot - A Representation, 2019

Un-fired school buff clay, wood and metal

*My Foot* was a recording of process taking Todd's foot through the phases of Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation and simulacra. Todd initially took a cast of her foot. Using the cast as the model, she sculpted a new foot to the exact measurements of the original in clay. Todd endeavored to maintain the true shape of the foot, but there was an inevitable smoothing and changing of certain aspects. She noticed that the learnt motor skills of mannequin sculpture were difficult to contest. The refinement of the nails and the simplification of the form generated a representation of her foot in comparison to the exact copy or reflection.



From the sculpt Todd took a plaster mould that was cast into with car body filler, resin and fibre glass - the materials used when casting a master form of a mannequin. She spent over a week sanding and filling, refining and spaying the new foot until it became mannequin like. Like Baudrillard's interpretation of contemporary film being "a little too good, too perfect, missing the blemishes and the 'imaginary' of the phenomena they imitate. It is as if they are perfected of their processual origins, of the marks of history" (Robinson, 2012), The foot is void of the marks of history in opposition to the original cast.

**Visceral Reflection, 2021**  
Crank clay, oxides and borax



To mark the final embodiment of authenticity in an auratic and uncanny sculpture that relates directly to the research by practice and offers an alternative or doppelgänger to the pristine contemporary mannequins on which Todd has worked throughout her career as a mannequin maker, she worked directly from and in close physical connection with a human model. *Visceral Reflection* embraces all the factors that arose as important elements in her research. The piece was made quickly and animatedly using materials that related to the mannequin making process. She wanted it to reflect an actual human, both through exposing the artist's process and the model's features. The final piece was press moulded in crank stoneware clay and oxides were used to expose the details of the body and the making, highlight the intimate connection between model and maker.

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