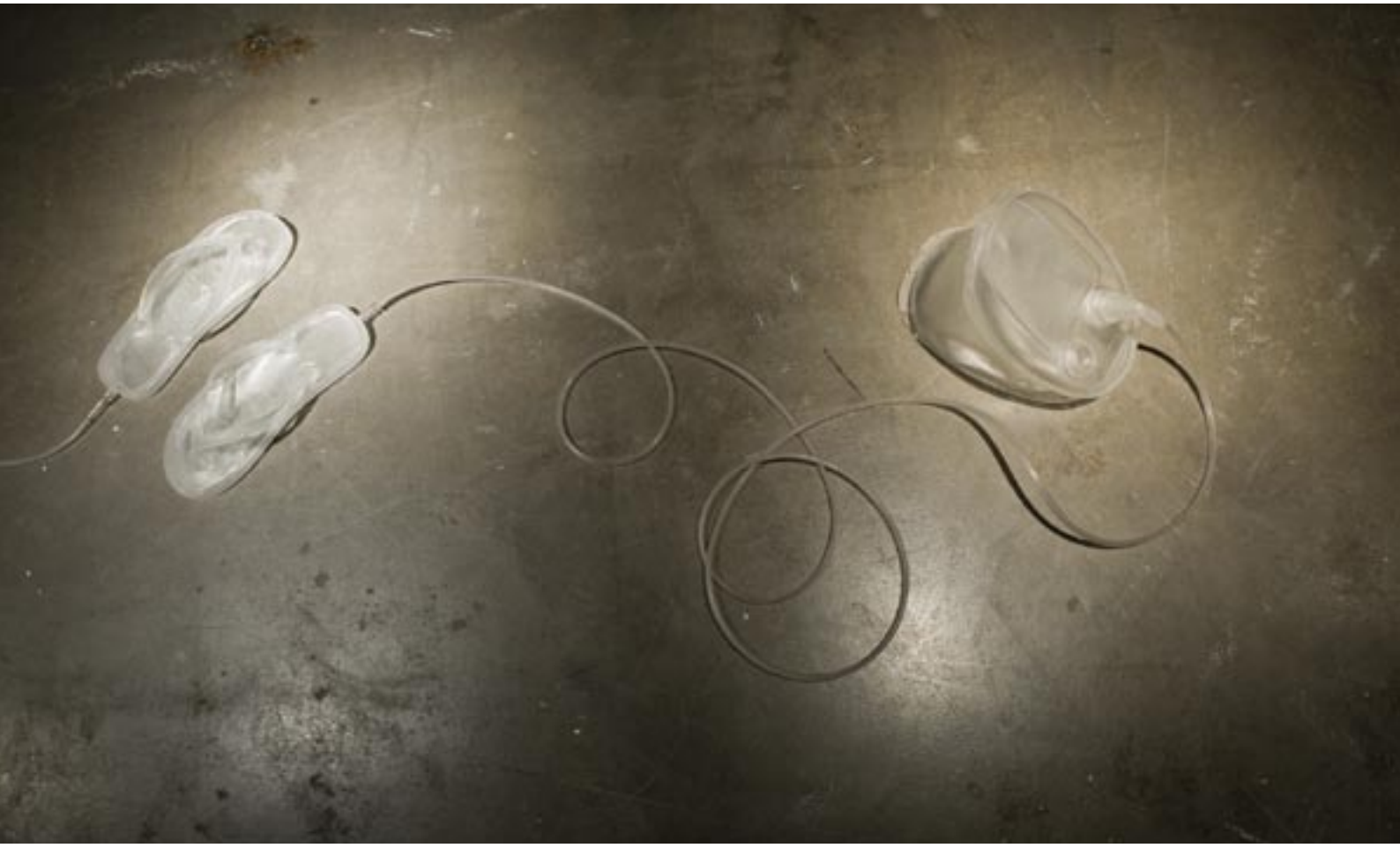
Touch Me Gertude Stein

Joseph Falsone, General Manager M16 Artspace

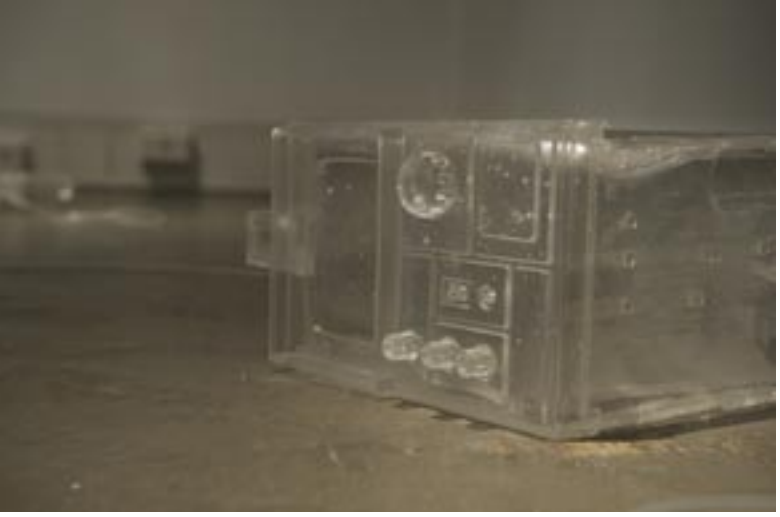


In Jay Kochel's *Touch Me Gertrude Stein* a sparse collection of transparent assemblages is carefully arranged in the gallery: some suspended mid-air, others laid out on the floor or placed on a shelf. The artist has cast in clear plastic an assortment of tools, consumer items and accessories, a shining sample of detritus for a future archaeologist of our times: i-pod, scuba-mouthpieces, vibratory massager, thongs, enema-nozzles, foot-pumps and toilet plungers. Spot-lit in the dim gallery space, the objects are presented in seemingly incongruous pairs, joined together or connected by thin plastic tubes. The height of each object corresponds to the body part that would most appropriately interact with it: headphones hang ready for the head, foot-pumps lie in wait for the feet. On first inspection each object is a meticulous replica of its original, down to the engraving of non-slip grips and the glinting texture of screw-thread. And yet on closer observation the forms are not perfect and it is hard to determine by eye if they are hard or soft. The *Slumpy bottle and pump* is just that, and there is a sense of plastic fluidity about even the best-replicated objects that adds a tinge of the uncanny, as if we are observing a temporary stage in the creation or dissolution of each piece.

One might well imagine the spectre of early twentieth-century collector and author Gertrude Stein moving among them, foraging in the back corners of this serenely transfigured two-dollar shop. What is she up to? The exhibition title is tantalisingly ambiguous. Who is speaking? Who is being addressed? Is this the voice of the artist praying to the high priestess of modernist art collectors? Are the objects calling out to the viewer, wanting to be poked and prodded by more than a curious eye (are we to feel the tug of their purposive design, the raw beginnings of a marketing campaign)? Or is it Stein herself yearning to be touched, asking us to solve the riddle of her own art and its potential influence on Kochel's practice?

Stein's capacity for meaningful meaninglessness is relevant to the work in this exhibition. An author who wrote such sentences as "sugar is not a vegetable" well understood the disturbing and potentially revelatory effect of unconscious association and absurd juxtaposition. One suspects Stein might have appreciated a set of *thongs and pumps* for the analogy such an artwork holds with her own process of melting down language and recasting it in a kind of lucent (if not exactly transparent) plastic prose. But the direct influence of Stein as an artist is perhaps less important here than Kochel's suggestion that we consider the ways in which objects are tactile and consumable, in art and in life.

The tactility of these objects (the way we might touch them and the way they are made to touch each other) is their most obvious enigma. In their original form, all are designed to interact with the human body in some way, as tool, wearable item, bodily or sensory interface. Their casting in hard or soft plastic and the way they are combined both reinforces and undermines their interactive possibilities and their human function. In an absurd poetic conceit, the artist yokes together the like and the unlike. In *two hands, four hands and TV*, for instance, industrial-grip toilet plungers are presented as objects to be held tight and confidently wielded, a fact emphasised here by the way they are offered in space almost as a set of handlebars. But in their pairing, plunger and anti-plunger are joined in an ineffectual kiss. Connected to them at the other end of a lithe tube is the retro-shaped TV: eye-caresser, brain massager or impossible-to-pump cloaca. The scuba-component in *breathe*, likewise, is there for your lips. The headphones to



which it is wired are for cupping your ears. The title and the way they are linked offer a closed communication loop: an invisible breath floats down to the speakers, inaudible sound wafts back for ingestion.

Throughout the exhibition, objects touch each other in a surreal logic of unexpected relationship and visual puzzle, defying our notions of cause and effect. Each work is a pun that depends on the easy familiarity with which we read the language of industrial design. In *thongs & pumps*, the robust foot-pump, if it worked, would seem in Kochel's arrangement to pump up the flimsy thong. We might normally expect to see the inverse: a thong on the footpad of the pump. Even the mild deformities of the casting process betray visual clues of tactility, traces of pressure, where things have been oozed, squashed or stretched. The oddly shaped bottles in *Slumpy bottles and pump* or *Belly bottle and pump* are pierced, in a stomach-turning systemic short-circuit, by the enema's needle. The whole experience of the exhibition is a quiet but dizzying rhapsody of implied holding, squeezing, blowing and caressing. It is an impossible meditation on our daily interaction with objects we acquire, use, become attached to, and discard.

A second enigma of the work concerns visibility and invisibility, or what we know or do not know about the most commonly used objects. We know through habit of use that the models from which these objects are cast were most likely made of hard plastic, rubber, glass or metal, often brightly coloured. They are tools, accessories and gadgets designed to be eye-catching, ergonomic and suitably durable. The primitive vibratory massager on the shelf, for instance, circa 1975, might have been made of bright orange plastic. It is an object designed to be used without necessarily knowing what is inside. While the inner workings of more elementary apparatus (a pump or bottle) are self-evident, who can draw a diagram of the most familiar but complex household item, or sketch the guts of an i-pod? In his choice of objects, in his process and above all his obsession with clear plastic, Kochel betrays a childlike curiosity to look inside, a dream of x-ray vision, a desire to pull apart, analyse and expose the contents of the suburban cupboard or garage.

To make this body of work, Kochel's studio was transformed into a pseudo-industrial laboratory. The artist constructed a rotational-casting device using a drill motor, bicycle chains, rubber bands and primitive gears. In the laborious process of moulding and casting, Kochel not only deconstructs the model but makes it transparent, allowing us to see inside precisely at the moment the object is rendered useless for practical purposes. The process involves gaining greater knowledge of the original, but it is not necessarily a functional knowledge. Objects are not pulled apart for their working organs but are transformed into transparent invertebrates or shells. The see-through object does not reveal a hidden function or meaning, but rather a hollow and empty beauty, as ghosts of our consuming desires and aesthetic whims. We find ourselves back at the surface, considering again how we use, know and view the object.

Images (previous page): **Jay Kochel**, *thongs & pumps (detail)*, 2009, Urethane and PVC pipe; (this page left top to bottom) **Jay Kochel**, *two hands, four hands and TV (detail)*, 2009, Urethane and PVC pipe; **Jay Kochel**, *iPod and Breather*, 2009, Urethane and PVC pipe; (this page bottom right) **Jay Kochel**, *breathe*, 2009, Urethane and PVC pipe. All Photos: Creative Image Photography.

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Touch Me Gertrude Stein
Jay Kochel
27 March - 2 May

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