



FARIS NAKAMURA
XOXO SKELETON



Detail of *Xylotrupes* (2023)

Anatomy of Armour

by Euginia Tan

The insect kingdom is rife in assortment of armours: Examine a spider or beetle and you will understand how their survival instincts are sharply honed. Insects can withstand tough conditions, while compactly travelling around for food and shelter. In their bodies, armours are inherently present. In humans, we too assemble our own choices of armour— Whether made from a range of materials, or a series of behaviours, we find ways to protect, defend and adapt ourselves.

As a writer who has been trained in theatre practices, we are often taught that the body is instinctive. Depending on one's life experiences and history, our bodies carry invisible vulnerabilities while compensating these in subtle gestures. For example, it is a common syndrome for a writer to have one's neck stiff, chin slightly jutting out. It is an armour and a consequence my body creates, from frequent late-night reflections and thought processes on how to best articulate with a piece of text. My body is then moulded to give me speed over mind, in a posture that can quickly transmit thought to keyboard. Unknowingly, my exoskeleton serves as a personal armour to provide the immediacy of the written word and deliver my work on time.

Drawing on the reactive formations of our body frames, feminist activist and scholar Silvia Federici encourages us to pay heed to a bodily discourse. In her essay *The Body, Capitalism, and the Reproduction of Labour Power*, Federici states

that “there is no doubt that the body is today at the centre of political, disciplinary, and scientific discourse, with the attempt in every field to redefine its main qualities and possibilities”.¹ She further elaborates by wishing for this discourse to include “a history of capitalism written from the viewpoint of the animal world and of course the lands, the seas, and the forests”.²

In his fourth solo exhibition with Richard Koh Fine Art, Faris Nakamura identifies this crucial need to allow insects as a species to be considered and reflected upon. *XOXO Skeleton* features ten works exploring the overlaps between insect and human skeletal frames. How similar are an insect's exoskeletons to ours? How do we evaluate ourselves as part of a larger nature? As an avid carer of insects over the years, Nakamura pays tribute to the majesty of an insect form using his sculptures as a pseudo love-letter and scientific study. The exhibition combines research from both his interests in entomology and community groundwork, pushing the realm of installation with possibility, enduring care, and bug-eyed wonder.

In this essay, I will attempt to draw parallels from Nakamura's previous and present body of works, his superimposed investigation onto armour and spatial protection, as well as offer some biological and metaphorical insight regarding the choice of insect species influencing the artist.

1

Lorenzo Sandoval and Tono Vizcaíno, *Industry / Matrices, Threads and Sounds* (IVAM Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Archive Books, 2022), pg. 83.

2

Ibid, pg. 84.

Beetle Diversity

This essay is a continuation of my engagement with Nakamura as a writer, yet the process is starkly different. With the Covid-19 virus becoming a new normal, humans have more room for interaction. Travel is permitted and masks are no longer compulsory. What may have been forgotten, amidst the flurry of recovery, is the lingering sense of displacement the pandemic did cause. We saw groups of people given access from points of privilege. On the other hand, many who were deemed irrelevant or less affluent received far less. We are now reckoning with the choices we have made with other humans, other lives. Regarding diversity, a crisis surely highlights certain lessons to learn from.

Since we can now research in closer proximity to one another, we discuss an array of topics. Whether it is the aftermath of the pandemic on our industry, the social climate of Singapore, the psychological impact of creation, this discussion between writer and artist is fruitful. Inevitably, we do touch on diversity in our conversations. We may associate this awareness of diversity as merely an accompaniment of being human. Contrary to that, diversity is not new to the beetle as a species.

Beetles are arguably the most diverse, species-rich group of organisms on the planet. Their artistic impact has been one of enduring longevity. Since the dawn of representative art, beetles have featured heavily in mythology and literature. The discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922 led to a

surge of interest in Egypt, where people began to note Egyptian-style scarab beetles as a common feature of buildings and art movements in the past. Albrecht Dürer painted his famous stag beetle in 1505, at a time when nature was neglected and overlooked.³

Why is the beetle diverse? With so many species equipped and inhabiting varying parts of nature's ecosystem, beetles keep different aspects of the food chain flourishing with activity. For example, many beetles feed on decaying plant and animal matter on the ground. This act of consuming decomposing matter results in a clean slate for other species to thrive. German forest scientist and writer Peter Wohlleben reinstates the beetle's role in the forest as that of "more than just funeral directors: they are midwives too. It's somewhat easier to understand the process of death and renewal if we look at what's happening to large dead animals... A dead animal is an ecosystem unto itself, a bit like a small planet in the universe of nature".⁴

This explanation provides a brief teaser on our beetles' existence and how they have been archived through numerous generations. Understanding a little of this theory allows us to probe into Nakamura's entry point for the sculptures *Skull*, *Spine*, *Sacrum*, *Ulnas* and the *Scutoid* series. With this in mind, we must note that the works *Phalanges*, *Xylotrupes* and *Mecynorhina* are not based off beetle parts.

3

Maxwell V.L. Barclay & Patrice Bouchard, *Beetles of the World: A Natural History* (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2023)

4

Peter Wohlleben, *The Secret Network of Nature* (London, Penguin Vintage, 2019), pg. 92.

Skull, Spine, Sacrum, Ulnas



Picture of the head and thorax of a Molossus dung beetle (*Catharsius molossus*) resembling a skull.



Picture of a Trilobite beetle larva (*Platerodrilus svetae*) resembling the human spine.

In thinking about armour, what distinguishes types of armour is a utilitarian intention versus an ornamental one. A strong armour withstands pressure and injury, while a decorative armour might serve as a base for proclaiming strength and evoking intimidation. Both armours work depending on the context of the situation. In a beetle, the adult body is divided into three parts: head, thorax, and abdomen. A beetle also has six legs and a front pair of wings, which protect the abdomen and folded flight wings. Beetles also have biting mouthparts instead of a sucking tube for feeding. For the works *Skull*, *Spine*, *Sacrum* and *Ulnas*, Nakamura has picked distinct parts of different species of beetles, both utilitarian and ornamental. We can see the functions of a diverse, working society in each of his beetle choices.

Skull is a model of the thorax and head of a Molossus dung beetle, an apt helmet for a sturdy recycler role. This hardware protects a mighty beetle worker building relentlessly. *Spine* modelled after the abdomen of a trilobite beetle larva, comprises of a long trail of leg-like protrusions. It is the emblem of a youngster ready to dabble in all directions, taking its first wriggling foray into the world. This links to *Sacrum*, representing the thorax

of a full-grown trilobite beetle. In the sacred shape of a seed, the young grow and are ready to become stable anchors of the insect world. Finally, *Ulnas* are the mandibles of a rainbow stag beetle. In a pair of two horns, the mandibles represent the strength in a beetles' procreating process, ensuring it gets first choice of an ideal mate.

The liberation Nakamura embraces in making works from fragments of a beetle's armour perhaps affirms the artist's joy of his reality. In his previous exhibitions, his works bring out a certain isolation in uniformity and inhibition in stigma. Like a beetle in a phase of discovering its life cycle, Nakamura comes full circle in taking charge of his practice and proclaiming independence from a period of pondering and confinement. Nevertheless, the devotion to his craft is evident in scaffolding the beetle parts as the diligent workers they are, hands-on and careful. This is how our armours serve us well- When we know how and why they are pieced together, we can then be willing to break them apart.



Picture of the thorax of a Trilobite beetle (*Platerodrilus ruficollis*) resembling our sacrum, the shield-shaped bony structure that is located at the base of the lumbar vertebrae and that is connected to our pelvis.



Picture of the mandibles of a Rainbow stag beetle (*Phalacrognathus muelleri*) resembling the ulna, one of two bones that makes up our forearm.



Skull

2023 Epoxy emulsion on fiberglass resin 106 x 78 x 66 cm



Spine

2023 Epoxy emulsion on fiberglass resin 125 x 50 x 20 cm



Sacrum

2023 Epoxy emulsion on fiberglass resin 80 x 62 x 15 cm



Ulnas

2023 Epoxy emulsion on fiberglass resin 80 x 70 x 12 cm

Phalanges, Xylotrupes, Mecynorhina

Curiously, *Phalanges* diverts off the path of beetles and is modelled after a tarantula. Yet it is no coincidence that Nakamura keeps this offbeat work in this current exhibition. Like a pair of hands, *Phalanges* splay out as a powerful, winged apparition. Recently, upon a return from Spain, I came across a political ideological term known as Falangism. An aspect of Falangist ideology holds that the state should have the supreme authority over the nation. This belief embodies the need for total authority, hierarchy, and order in society. Experts generally agree of Falangism's highly rigid tendencies, and this is wherein lies an interesting parallel to the work *Phalanges*.

A spider is a flexible creature, while its appendages are deceptively simple. Its phalanges comprise of many parts working in tandem to allow it to multi-task. Nakamura offers a vision that our phalanges be allowed movement in the face of rigidity, the work lends a contributing opinion to the freedom of an artist against the blanket of a state's regime. If a spider is scant in its limbic functions, it is obviously unable to spin a web. Yet, if the same spider becomes too tense, its movements are also limited and restricted. *Phalanges* provides a commentary of the balance in our limbs, the weight of our socio-cultural burdens and the potential hold of our narratives via the kind of webs we spin.

Xylotrupes and *Mecynorhina*, inspired from human vertebrae, are tender reminders to the footnotes of our bodies. When we place them beside the other sculptures, there is a collective bond we associate amongst the works. Federici sums up the autonomy of various bodies in a succinct call to interrogate physical and social anatomy. "We need to look at 'the body' from all these viewpoints to grasp the depth... To speak of a war is not to assume an original wholeness or propose an idealized view of 'nature'. It is to highlight the state of emergency in which we currently live and to question, in an age that promotes remaking our bodies as a path to social empowerment and self-determination..."⁵ Nakamura offers a similar pledge to co-existence; we cannot deny that the world is getting smaller with the advent of technology and limitless borders. Still, there is room for a world where us and insects roam together.

5

Ibid, pg. 84.



Picture of Xylotrupes, a genus of a rhinoceros beetle.



Picture of Mecynorhina, a genus of a giant flower beetle.



Phalanges

2023 Epoxy emulsion on fiberglass resin 90 x 180 x 20 cm

Xylotrupes
2023 Epoxy emulsion on fiberglass resin 82 x 80 x 70 cm



Mecynorhina
2023 Epoxy emulsion on fiberglass resin 58 x 68 x 80 cm



Scutoid series

6

Nature Communications, Springer Nature USA. "Scutoids are a geometrical solution to three-dimensional packing of epithelia" Science Abstract. Last modified 8 October, 2018. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-018-05376-1>

1

7

ScienceDirect, Elsevier, Netherlands. "Outside or Inside" by David Taylor. Last modified March 2011. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1369702111700438>

A scutoid is a particular type of geometric solid between two parallel surfaces. The boundary of each of the surfaces resembles polygons. As animals develop, tissue bending contributes to shape the organs into complex three-dimensional structures. Some of these diverse tissue cells adopt a novel shape that we also term "scutoid".⁶

Why do we need to consider properties in our exoskeletons? Skeletons are essentially mechanical organs; they exist to provide stiffness for posture and movement, and skeletal material needs to have strength and toughness. This demonstrates ways in which materials science overlaps with structural engineering because both material properties and geometry need to be considered. Sometimes, biology gets involved as well.⁷ When we understand the coordination of the exoskeleton, we see perspectives on how we tessellate and form structure upon structure.

In the *Scutoid* series, Nakamura demonstrates a scutoid shape in what we know to be part of a beetle's shell. The miracle of scutoids are how they can ply against each other seamlessly. A scutoid then, might come to represent the shape of memory for the artist, where stray contours soon coalesce as a unified mass.

In working with the artist, the scutoids of my memory also become pillars for where the work can go. At the many tenets of an artist's journey, there are several "scutoidal" choices we actively make to empower their individual voice. As a writer, I have been honoured to witness and appreciate many works of visual art. But there is a vital point where your research and respect for the artist must match, the same way scutoid surfaces merge. It then becomes a mutual agreement where the artist understands: That beneath the armour, what you are writing does ring true.



Picture of a beetle from the Cetoniidae family with its scutum, scutellum and elytra forming the shape of a scutoid.



Scutoid
2023 Epoxy emulsion on plaster 24 x 20 x 20 cm



Scutoid Fig. 1
2023 Epoxy emulsion on plaster 48 x 20 x 20 cm



Scutoid Fig. 2
2023 Epoxy emulsion on plaster 24 x 35 x 22 cm





Faris Nakamura (b.1988, Singapore) is a visual artist based in Singapore and London. He is curious about the tectonics of urban space in relation to its functional uses and architectural design. Although these inquiries come from his experiences as a city-dweller, Faris is deeply interested in the natural world, especially the insect kingdom. He draws links on how the design process of city structures parallels aspects of entomology. In his practice, Faris wishes to showcase the resilience in various species (humans, plants, animals) and their respective adaptations to habitats.

Faris is interested in observing how urban and natural spaces contain liberation and freedom, as well as their opposing attributes of concealment and shame. His artistic practice often refracts the layers of social identity, and questions how we can expand perspectives of architectural and natural history.

Faris graduated with a Bachelor in Fine Arts (First Class Honours) from LASALLE College of the Arts in partnership with Goldsmiths, University of London in 2014. He is the Finalist of the Sovereign Asian Art Prize, 2023 and the Winner of the IMPART Art Prize, 2020. He was awarded the Young Talent Programme Winners' Solo, 2017/2018, the Grand Winner at the Shitsurai International Art Competition, Kobe Biennale, 2015 and the Winston Oh Travel Award, 2013.

Faris has exhibited in shows both locally and internationally. He has showcased at venues such as Marina Bay Sands Expo and Convention Centre (Singapore), Gillman Barracks (Singapore), The Substation (Singapore), ION Art (Singapore), Meta APAC HQ (Singapore), 80 Queen's Road Central (Hongkong), Richard Koh Fine Art (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia), Georgetown Festival (Penang, Malaysia), Ku Bar (Bangkok, Thailand), FASS Art Gallery (Turkey), Kobe Biennale (Japan), and Palazzo Ca' Zanardi (Venice, Italy).

Education

- 2011- Bachelor (First Class Hons) of Fine Arts, Goldsmiths, University of London by LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2023 *XOXO Skeleton*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore
- 2021 *The Periphery Of The Other*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2019 *Remember This Place, For We Will Be Back Here Again Someday*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore
- The Camouflaged Man: Invisibility & Mimicry*, S.E.A FOCUS, Gillman Barracks, Singapore (with Richard Koh Fine Art)
- 2018 *The Light Between Walls, Young Talent Programme Winners' Solo*, ION Art Gallery, Singapore
- 2015 *Between Places, NMH x Flanuer 5.0: Between Places*, New Majestic Hotel, Singapore

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2023 Sovereign Asian Art Prize Finalists Exhibition – 80 Queen's Road Central, Hong Kong, China
- Diverse Visions*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore
- ART SG*, Marina Bay Sands Expo and Convention Centre, Singapore (with Richard Koh Fine Art)
- 2022 *State of Play*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks Singapore
- Gestures of Landscape*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks Singapore
- Workshopables*, Supernormal, Singapore
- WWF Singapore's AR-mazing Tiger Trail*, Raffles Hotel, Singapore

- 2021 *As We Were (Selections from the Michelangelo & Lourdes Samson Collection)*, Artspace@Helutrans, Singapore

- 2020 *In Our Own Frame, RKFA SG 10th Anniversary Show*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore

Finding the Art in our Heartlands: Important Local Services, Plural Art Mag online, Singapore

Streets of Hope: An Initiative by National Arts Council, Civic District, Singapore

Nothing To Hide: Private Collection of Contemporary Southeast Asia Art, Oxley Bizhub, Singapore

Emerging: Collecting Singapore Contemporary - Selections from the DUO Collection, The Private Museum, Singapore

- 2019 *Guessing Game*, Ku Bar, Bangkok, Thailand

- 2018 *The Concerned Citizens Showcase*, The Substation, Singapore

Departure 3, Ipreciation, Singapore

- 2017 *AAF: Young Talent Programme*, F1 pit Building, Singapore

VADA: Untapped Emerging, Shophouse 5, Singapore

- 2016 *EPHEMERA*, The Substation, Singapore

Contemporary Venice: Architectures of Identities, Palazzo Ca' Zanardi, Venice, Italy

- 2015 *Art Bounties*, Central Public Library, Singapore

Art of Our City: Young Singaporean Artist, The Art Space@Suntec, Singapore

Affordable Art Fair, F1 Pit Building, Singapore

Art Discovered Edition 1, The Art Fellas Gallery, Singapore

Shitsurai Art International Exhibition, Kobe Biennale 2015, Meriken Park Kobe, Japan

- 2014 *Lasalle Show 2014*, ICA Gallery, Singapore
Dibs Collaboration, Dibs Restaurant, Marine Terrace Blk 55, Singapore
Open field: Offbeat@Winstedt, Winstedt Road No. 9, Singapore
"sMall iDeas", FASS Gallery, Sabanci University, Tuzla - Istanbul, Turkey
- 2013 *Art of Giving Exhibition*, Scotts Square, Singapore
Winston Oh Travel Award 2013, Praxis Space Gallery, Singapore
Lasalle Show 2013, ICA Gallery, Singapore
George Town Festival, Penang, Malaysia
- 2012 *And the Story Goes*, Brother Joseph McNally Gallery, Singapore
Raw & Craft, Ngee Ann Kong Si Library, Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore
- 2011 *Exhibition With Heri Dono*, Critique Room, Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore
Beyond Limits, Praxis Space Gallery, Singapore

Awards

- 2023 The 2023 Sovereign Asian Art Prize Finalist
- 2020 IMPART Awards Winner, Visual Artist Category
- 2017 / 2018 Young Talent Programme Winner's Solo
- 2015 Kobe Biennale Grand Winner, Shitsurai Art International Competition, Kobe Biennale
- 2014 First Class Honours, Bachelor of Fine Arts
- 2013 Winston Oh Travel Award

Projects / Talks / Workshops

- 2023 ART SG Open Studio Artist Pick, Goodman Arts Centre, Singapore
- 2022 *The Ar-Mazing Tiger Trail*, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Raffles Hotel, Singapore
- 2021 Facebook Open Arts Commission, Facebook APAC HQ, Marina One, Singapore
 Faris Nakamura: Zoom Artist Talk, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore
 Conversation Space: Studio Faris Nakamura, Goodman Arts Centre, Singapore
- 2020 Streets of Hope, National Arts Council (NAC), Hill Street, Singapore
 Safe Spaces: Artist Talk with Faris Nakamura, Online artist talk through BlueJeans online, Singapore
- 2018 In the Works, Artists on Process, ION Art Gallery, Singapore
 Making Imagined Spaces, ION Art Gallery, Singapore
- 2015 loveLASALLE Open Night: Surviving the Brave New (Art) World, Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore

Euginia Tan (b. 1991) is a multi-disciplinary writer with experience in poetry, theatre and creative fiction/ non-fiction. Her curatorial writing for Richard Koh Fine Art includes - solo exhibitions for Faris Nakamura, Melissa Tan, Ben Puah, Odelia Tang and Svay Sareth, as well as group shows (*In Our Own Frame*, *A Decade Apart/Together*, *Bread Crumbs*) for the gallery's commemorative anniversaries and milestones.



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Front cover: Detail of *Phalanges*, 2023



Founded in 2005, with spaces in Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok and Singapore, Richard Koh Fine Art is committed to the promotion of Southeast Asian contemporary art on regional and international platforms. Centred around a core belief in developing an artist's career, the gallery looks to identify understated, albeit promising practices, and providing it opportunities to flourish. Through its regular exhibition cycles, print & digital publications and cross-border gallery collaborations, Richard Koh Fine Art engages the art community with the aim of developing regional and intercultural dialogue.

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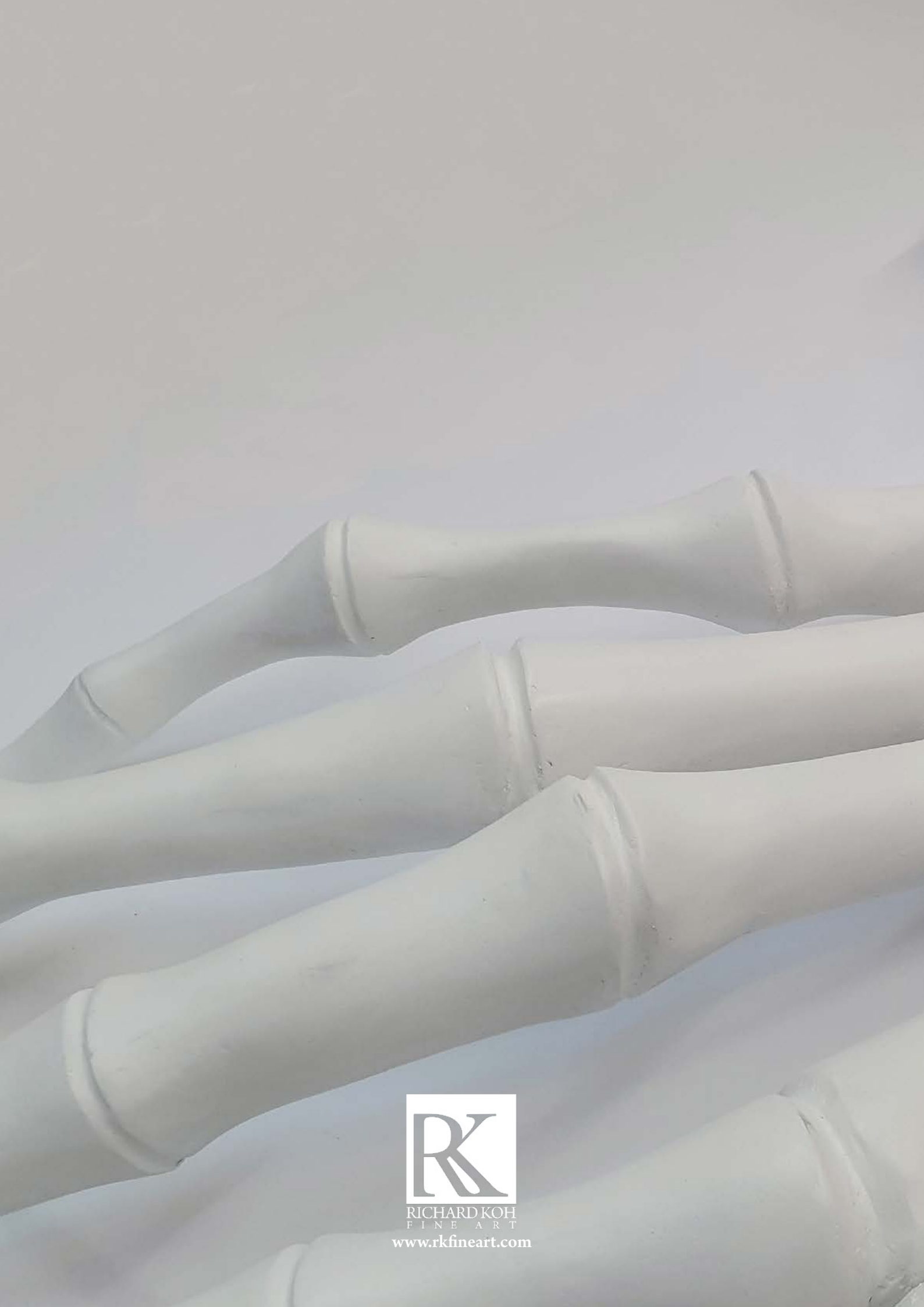
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