



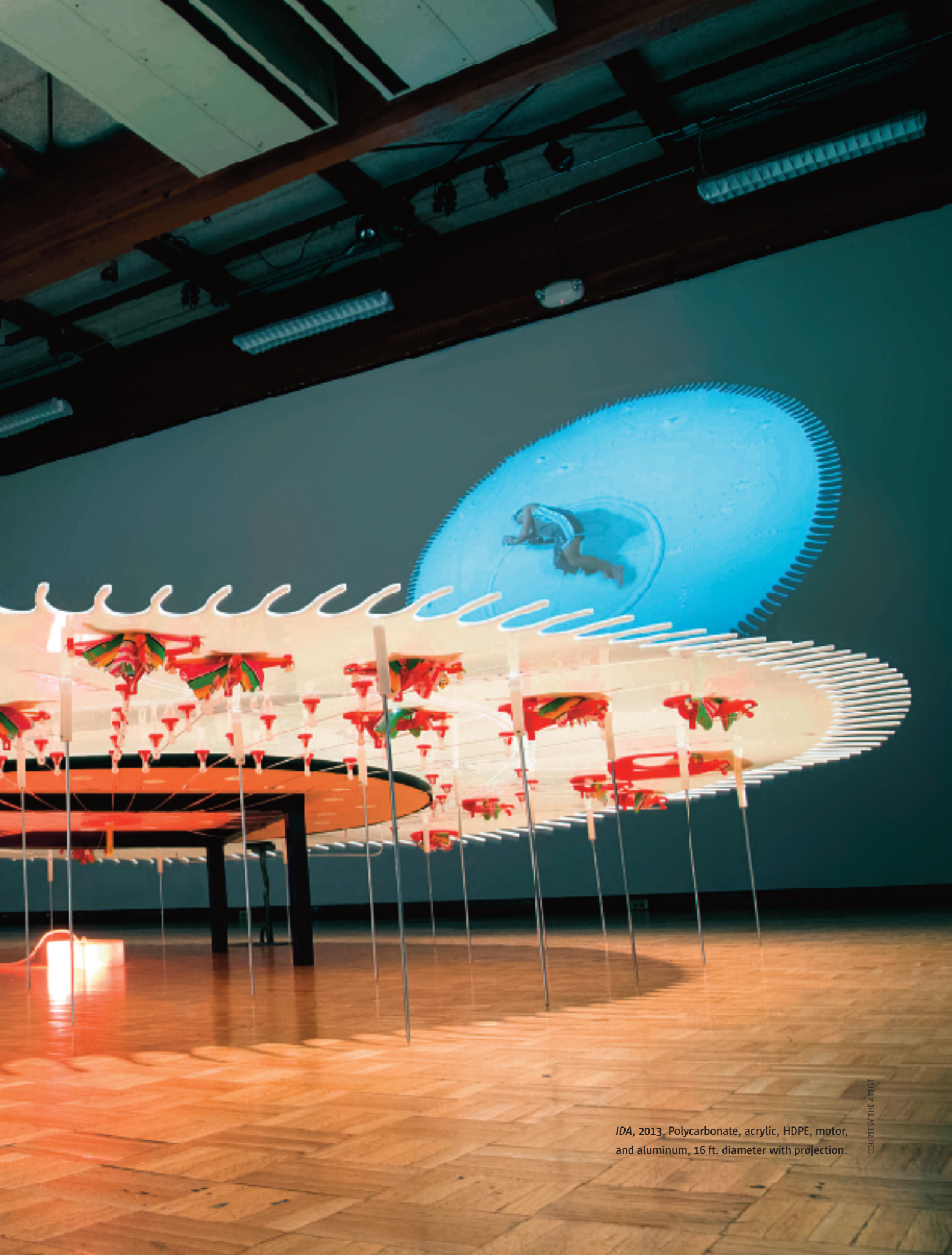
# Looking for the Wreck

A Conversation with

# John Umphlett

BY JON ISHERWOOD





*IDA*, 2013. Polycarbonate, acrylic, HDPE, motor, and aluminum, 16 ft. diameter with projection.

COURTESY THE ARTIST



For the past 15 years, John Umphlett has developed a body of work in which his own body, placed under extreme duress, is a central feature. Whether dangling over cars, somersaulting through the air, or being slowly dragged through a gallery, Umphlett relentlessly explores the limits of bodily endurance through his provocative performance pieces. Some of his works are playful spectacles; others take the viewer on intimate, meditative journeys. His performed sculptures expose the vulnerability and precious nature of life even while defying them. Perhaps unexpectedly, his works are also distinctive for their imaginative use of materials. “Evolving Resolution,” Umphlett’s 2013 show at Bennington College’s Usdan Gallery, featured a sculpture called *IDA* in which the artist physically connected himself to a large, electrically charged platter. Endurance—for both the artist and the viewer—is central to the manufactured tension that makes these works unique and provocative.

**Jon Isherwood:** *The art critic Roland Penrose proposed that formative childhood moments exert a powerful influence on artists’ work. Is there a moment you could pinpoint?*

**John Umphlett:** I don’t know if there’s one thing to pinpoint there, but I can remember lying in my bed when I was a child and having to get up and turn out the light. I thought that there should be a better way, without having to go to the switch to turn it off. So, I devised this little string thing that you could pull to turn off the light while lying in bed. I think every child goes through that and starts to make contraptions and stuff.

Other people have made connections between my work and the fact that I grew up in a family of funeral directors and morticians. Back then, a funeral home would be “on call” for a particular area (Newport News, Virginia, in my case), which meant that whenever a death occurred, that funeral home would pick up the body. Often I would go to homicides to pick up the pieces.

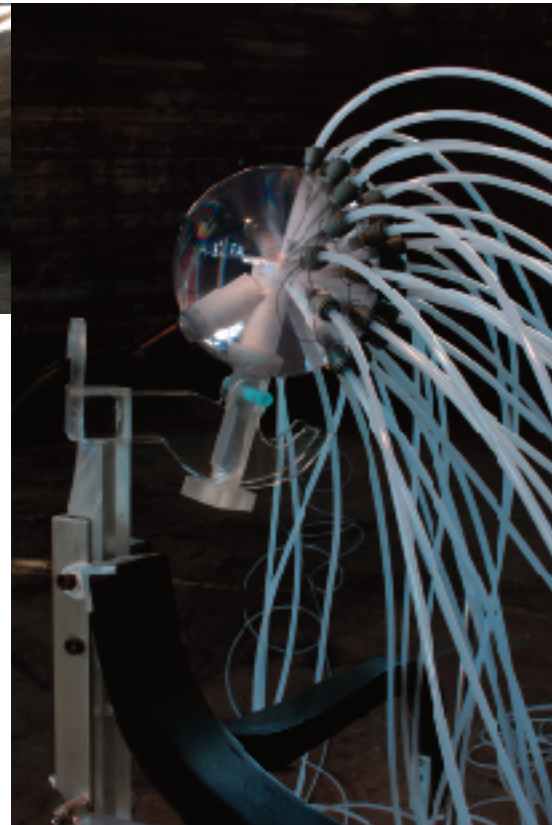
**Jl:** *How old were you then?*

**JU:** I think I was 14. There were some vivid experiences. I don’t know if they were traumatic, because growing up with something like that you get used to it. I think snakes scared me more than the sight of a body lying in a casket, but there were moments that I remember specifically. My best friend’s dad shot himself with a .38 Special. I watched my dad rebuild this man’s head—he was shown to his family, open casket, which was really incredible.

**Jl:** *Is that in any way connected to your piece thirty eight’s special?*

**JU:** I don’t know if it’s about a specific narrative. It taps into that space in my mind where there is overwhelming emotion.

**Jl:** *You studied art at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) and received an MFA from Bennington College. How did those experiences shape your work habits and your aesthetic?*



Above left and detail: *thirty eight’s special*, 2012. Acrylic, poly tubing, 3-liter bottles, compressor, and arduino, dimensions variable.

**JU:** I went to VCU because of a girl—I’m married to her now. They had an intensive class called art and application. I couldn’t believe that I could get credit, get a degree, for making work. Something really kicked off for me when I got into a sculpture class. At VCU, I was starting to make work with motors in which the motor took on the life of the piece. Then, at Bennington, I started getting deeper into why and what I was doing, and my body began to replace the motor. That was an interesting shift, and now I’m coming back to that.

**Jl:** *At Franconia Sculpture Park in 2002, you built a contraption that suspended you above the windshield of a bright red convertible. Could you talk about that piece?*

**JU:** It was called *don’t hit that big fat chicken*. I didn’t want to express how a fly or a bug hit the windshield; instead, I wanted to be that thing in the moment right before it hit the windshield. That sense of capturing the moment between





*don't hit that big fat chicken*, 2002. Vehicle, resin, suction cups, latex, nylon cord, and aluminum, dimensions variable.

two states also happens in *flipping one over a bush*. I describe that piece as only being finished in the split second when I'm somersaulting and my head is going through the bush when I'm in action. The construction looks like a roller coaster, but really it's the sharpest line you can draw between the ground being one bun and the sky being the other; I'm the meat and the bush is the lettuce, building a sandwich of a split second.

**JJ:** *In Greatest American Hero, you are suspended way up in the air, and you seem to be controlled by an old Cadillac. What's that about?*

**JU:** The title came from a TV show that I watched when I was little. There was a guy who had the power to fly, but he just sucked at landing. So, the piece was built as a response to an image in my head. I merely wanted an image of me over a vehicle. Sure, there was a contraption in between, like an upside-down marionette, but the inspiration was again an image of a car and me above the car.

**JJ:** *Speaking of heights, could you discuss Middlebury College Talk (2013)?*

**JU:** Oh god, that was terrible — never again. I was asked to work with some students there last winter. When I saw the wall in the Johnson building, I knew what I was going to do.

Below and right: 3 views from the sculpture/performance *flipping one over a bush*, 2005. Steel tubing, seatbelts, and bush, 37 x 6 x 17 ft.

I tried to fool myself and think that I didn't, but I knew I wanted to be on that wall, which goes from the first floor straight through to the fourth floor. I didn't know what I was going to do at that point, but I ended up putting myself in a position that could have been fatal.

**JJ:** *That's a significant gesture.*

**JU:** I was maybe 35 feet up on the wall, giving a lecture about my work. I wanted to put myself in the position where the



limitations of my body and focus were at their extreme. I couldn't bend over, because if my knees hit the wall I would go back and there was no strap. After an hour, my legs were numb and I was losing it; my legs were shaking, and I had to call for help at the end of the talk. I don't even remember what I was talking about or if it even made sense.

**JJ:** *That seems to have been your most extreme performative work in terms of physical vulnerability. As you say, you could have fallen and died, or at least ended up crippled.*

**JU:** It was even worse than strapping yourself to the front of a car and going down a highway, maybe because it was so still and clear and there were fewer variables.

**JJ:** *It's that thrill factor, right?*

**JU:** Yeah, you get high.

**JJ:** *There seems to have been a change in mood or temperament once your work came into the gallery. There's a playfulness when you're caught in the windscreen or suspended. These pieces are spectacles, in the performative sense, but now you're making pieces in which you're being slowly dragged around. Why the change?*

**JU:** The early works were absolutely spectacle-like. They were outside, for one, so you could get a mass of

Right: *Greatest American Hero*, 2003. Automobile, steel, nylon, rubber, gears, and suit, 17 x 12 x 24 ft. Below: *IDA (detail)*, 2013. Polycarbonate, acrylic, HDPE, motor, and aluminum, 16 ft. diameter with projection.



COURTESY THE ARTIST



*Middlebury College Talk, 2013. 2 video projections, microphone, security camera, and steel stand, performance view.*

people around them. Once everything came inside, it became very intimate, almost dark, in some ways. There was another work connected to the dragging piece that involved seven other people placed in uncomfortable positions, who were part of a cable. The cable went through that combination of people and ended up pulling on parts of my body and then dragging me. That was the beginning. Looking back on it, I really wanted to slow down and make the work more about the individuals viewing the thing, so that they could internalize it. If we were talking about food, you could say it was less like eating a burger and more like someone spending a lot of time preparing a meal and being able to taste every spice. Because the experience is slowed, there's more material involved—it's intimate, it's inside, the sound is softer, and they are watching this body being pulled to extremes or in a sedative state.

**JJ:** *You use a lot of materials, often in unconventional ways. Could you talk about the driving force behind that, about pushing a material away from its utilitarian use?*

**JU:** "Unconventional," that's an interesting word. I think that I use materials more like they are actually used in the world—though the combinations may be less like you would see in the world. The clearest example for me would be *IDA*, which I designed with the 3-D modeling program Rhinoceros. The main surface is high-density polyethylene. I was first attracted to its milky quality—it's almost alive, with a green tint through the white. But mostly I was interested in its real world application—polyethylene is the same material that's used to make the chopping blocks that you cut poultry or flesh on in your kitchen. So, here I am displaying my body up on this device. I don't know if it's sacrificial, it just made a lot of sense to me. It was the right choice because of how the material is normally used.

**JJ:** *There's also a lot of manipulation of materials—you heat them, stretch them, pull and mix them. I've seen you use fur against PVC, which is what I meant by "unconventional," and it seems that you're searching for a certain expression or narrative through such combinations. It also seems that you put your body through the same exploration and pressure of manipulation as you would with a material. Is that the case, that you're taking your body to its limits in terms of physical capacity when you're performing within the pieces?*

**JU:** Not every work is like that obviously, but there is a place in which I like to put my body. It's like running a marathon; one's brain just goes to some other place. Another part of what my body's going through when I



forcibly put myself in these extreme places is that I'm having to sense the energy that my body's using.

**JJ:** *You've said that you do not want viewers to sense the distress that your body may be in when you're performing. What is it that you want them to get?*

**JU:** I guess they see that I'm in a stressful situation, but I don't want them to wonder, "Oh, is he going to get hurt?" I want them to read my body as a material in itself. I would hope that people internalize and actually consume the viewing and ask their own questions about the space that they're in.

**JJ:** *There's something important about your endurance while you're performing, but there's also something about the endurance of the viewer. I noticed when you performed in a gallery recently that the audience stayed with you for the whole 40–50 minutes. If they're staying that long, they're obviously absorbed, and it seems that they are revealing something about the experience of viewing. As you say, there's a certain stress factor for you being held in that position and going through this kind of motion, but there's a voyeuristic dynamic that seems rather tranquil for the viewer. Do people talk about that?*

**JU:** People want people to get hurt. Or they want something to happen.

**JJ:** *Like NASCAR?*

**JU:** Yeah, they're looking for the wreck.

*Jon Isherwood is a sculptor based in Hudson, New York.*