

Where Surfaces Break: On Rebecca Halliwell Sutton's Sculptures

by Matthew Holman

I ■ Night Café

Rebecca Halliwell Sutton's sculptures erupt with raw, elemental energy—each piece feeling less like static statuary and more like a living force frozen mid-transformation. Her work engages with the alchemical properties of silver gelatin prints, whereby silver is wrested from ancient stone and gelatin is coaxed from the quiet architecture of bone, and together these transformed materials—one born of the earth, the other of living tissue—are fused into a light-sensitive surface. On this thin plane of silver crystals suspended in gelatin, light writes its brief passage into a more permanent form of statuary. For Halliwell-Sutton, this process relates to an ongoing concern that in most of her work there is, as she describes it, “a desire to pierce the surface of something to look beneath, to see the unseen or understand the unknowable.” For this writer at least, such formal process speaks back to Sigmund Freud’s idea of psychoanalysis as a form of archaeology, two emergent disciplines in the nineteenth-century, in which he describes the mind as a layered site in which present consciousness rests atop buried strata of memory, desire, and trauma, much like ruins beneath a city. “The destruction of Pompeii was only beginning”, he said, “now that it had been dug up.” To uncover meaning, analysis works like excavation—carefully brushing away surface material so that what is hidden, repressed, or fragmentary can emerge into view. In Halliwell-Sutton’s work, for instance, the liquid residue that resembles tears or bursts in Untitled ii are exhumed from an earlier work, Openings (2024). We see the traced remnants of a past lost in time that refuse to remain as such.

Around twenty years ago, while still an adolescent, I was lucky enough to discover Halliwell-Sutton’s earliest work. She was a photographer then, less a sculptor. For several years now, and especially since her formative years at the Manchester School of Art, where she graduated in 2016, those categories have been inverted (although I suspect that such distinctions remain, in her mind, fictive). The necessarily analogic way of thinking that requires all photographers to examine the distances and resemblances between the gesture of a lover and its photograph, all that messy magic between world and image of world, still governs her practice, a practice that requires a certain kind of enchantment with the capacity of pictures to re-mystify, and not merely de-mystify, experience. As the critical theorist Kaja Silverman writes: “Analogy governs [all aspects] of photography; a positive print analogizes the negative from which it is generated, every other print that is struck

from that negative, and all its digital “offspring.” Photography is also unstoppably developmental. It began with the pinhole camera, which was more found than invented, morphed into the optical camera obscura, was reborn as chemical photography, and lives on in a digital form. It moves through time, in search of other “kin.” I like to think about Halliwell-Sutton’s sculptures in a similar way. These works seem to remain, on some level, within the photographic space insofar that they are built from the residue of objects perpetually loved through time.

A brief outline of how these works were made feels instructive here. The work begins with large, flat sheets of aluminium, which are cut down into panels sized to move easily through the darkroom trays. Each panel is slowly persuaded out of flatness: passed through the English wheel, the metal begins to curve, its surface stretched into a gentle arc. When a deeper bend is needed, Halliwell-Sutton turns to a round plastic hammer and a yielding sandbag, coaxing the metal into its intended form before sending it once again through the wheel to smooth away the blows and settle the shape. Along the edges, a metal hammer and dolly are used to thin the borders of each panel until they approach brittleness, giving the piece its fragile perimeter. The inner face is then varnished, preparing a receptive ground for the gelatin. Only then does the work enter the darkroom. A single layer of silver gelatin is brushed onto the curved metal surface and left to dry in darkness. Once sensitised, the panels are laid beneath an oversized digital transparency and exposed under the enlarger’s light. In a sequence familiar to photography but unusual for metal, the panel is guided through trays of developer, stop, fixer, and finally water, its image emerging slowly across the cool aluminium curve. When the panels have dried, they are drilled and riveted together, each segment locking into the next, completing the transformation from industrial sheet to luminous photographic object.

In *Untitled (structure)* (2025), the base metal’s cool and sullied off-black colour emphasizes the precision of its geometry, yet the circuitous vertical dance of the rods suggests the silhouette of impossibly thin columnar trees reaching for sky and light, or gravity-defying reeds dancing in a stiff wind, and so the object feels less like a fixed sculpture than a mechanism quietly registering the room around it. This feels like an important distinction for a body of work that interrogates the barrier and the boundary as form as well as subject. It is in this sense that the exhibition’s title – From skin to land, from walls to world – assumes its meaning. “My work is grounded in a feminist critique of land ownership, bodies and desires”, Halliwell-Sutton writes, “and a constant thread in my work is tracing the intergenera-

tional connection of the boundaries between and inside those bodies, guided by a curiosity that looks beneath and between the surface as emotional, psychological, metaphysical, spiritual, archaeological, geological, historical phenomena.” Like earlier generations of artists – sometimes explicitly feminist, sometimes sculptural and often conceptual, and almost always interested in the lines between the body and the work of art, from Eva Hesse and Alice Adams to Roni Horn and Nancy Holt – Halliwell-Sutton makes work that seems in explicit conversation with the world around her, opening up space for where our bodies can be.

Given that Halliwell-Sutton’s mounted sculptures are constructed with the soft post-transition metal of aluminium, their surfaces seem to catch and scatter light like a fractured mirror. They each curve and twist in such a way as to open space along their central horizontal axis, mimicking the familiar contours of a highway guardrail—but here that sense of a boundary is violently deformed, each time folded in on itself, as though crushed by immense force. Deep creases run through the metal, giving it the look of something once rigid now rendered fragile, like the aftermath of an impact frozen in time. Certain sections jut outward in jagged angles, while others entirely collapse inward in smooth, buckled waves, evoking both the chaos and eerie stillness of a crash site. Despite its solid material, the piece feels unsettlingly weightless, as if the aluminium remembers the moment of collision. The play of hard edges and fluid bends gives the impression of debris transformed into an object of contemplation—an abstract monument to the vulnerability of thin boundaries that fail when pushed too far. If we look close enough, we identify the wild flow of former photographs, as though historical documents of speed and vitality contained and yet, in that containment, refuse to offer

Halliwell-Sutton has acknowledged being influenced by the Sondrio-born, London-based philosopher Federico Campagna, whose work—particularly in *Technic and Magic and Prophetic Culture* (2018)—offers a provocative framework for thinking about sculpture as a negotiation of boundaries. Campagna argues that every world-system rests on an underlying “metaphysical architecture,” a set of fundamental assumptions about what is real, what matters, and what can be said. Within what he calls the *Technic* regime, reality is imagined as an absolutely ordered and fully determinable domain. Boundaries in this worldview are hard, surveilled, and functional: they demarcate zones of control, legibility, and purpose. Sculpture, however, can operate as a mode of resistance to such metaphysical rigidity. Campagna’s alternative vision—*Magic*—restores ambiguity, and what he calls “the ineffable” sense that “reality” as we conceive of it varies with each new

era of the world. In this frame, boundaries are not walls but thresholds: unstable sites where forms emerge, dissolve, and reconfigure. Sculpture that foregrounds material indeterminacy, shifting surface-states, or the trace of the maker can be read as participating in this magical metaphysics. “This relates back my interest in photography being a form of negotiated reality – even mechanically, as our eyes and cameras produce an upturned image, we have to rotate the image and transform it in order to understand”, reflects the artist, “and so this made me think how our reality is always being mediated.” For Halliwell-Sutton, her sculptures propose that form is not an imposition of final order but a temporary crystallization, perpetually opening ever more expansive potential fields of material intervention.