

More Helpful Tricks in Life Casting

By David E. Parvin A.L.I.

I have no idea how many hundreds of life castings I have done in the last 20 years. One might think that by now I would have tried every possible variation and settled on the best techniques. That's almost right, I do use what I have found to be the most successful. But I keep discovering better ways both from my own experimentation and from other artists' suggestions. One of "Dave's Laws" framed on my studio wall is, "There's almost always a better way," and I really believe this and am always searching. In this article, I am going to share three new (at least to me) and better ones that I have recently added to my repertoire of "Parvin's Perfectly Pertinent Procedures for Pleasure and Profit." I'll start with the simplest. I will from time to time refer to things that I have written in previous articles. Just in case some readers can not locate every past issue of *Sculpture Journal*, an e-mail to jondavid@verison.net will get you the missing articles.

Often cloth is included in my life castings, sometimes for modesty or to help define something about the subject. Remember the line in the song "The Streets of Laredo," "I can tell by your outfit that you are a cowboy." To which the Smothers Brothers added, "Get yourself an outfit and you can be a cowboy too!" But alginate tends to cling to the fuzziness of whatever cloth is covering the model. The degree of clinging is proportional to the fuzziness of the cloth, minimal with spandex and aggressive with terry cloth. Whatever one uses as a release agent must be harmless to skin. But most commercial agents come with warnings to avoid skin contact. I have tried all kind of things over the years and up until recently had settled on plain old cooking oil applied from a spray bottle. It works reasonably well and is certainly skin safe. However, since it is my policy to give credit where do, my good friend Guy Louis XVI (see "Guy Louis XVI, Master of Ultra Realism," *SJ*, April, 2004, by yours truly) recently suggested fabric softener as an alternative. So far I have found that it is at least as good as cooking oil and since it isn't as slippery, it is easier to apply a layer of alginate to it. The



Photo #1



Photo #2



Photo #3

brand that I have been using is Downey and I have been applying it with a spray bottle after the cloth is on the model.

The second trick is just as simple, perhaps so simple that many of you have been doing it and I'm surprised and a little embarrassed that I didn't figure it out years ago. For casting a torso as in Photograph

6, I use 8 pounds of water and 42 ounces of alginate (3632 and 1193 grams). The proportions are 5.25 ounces (149 grams) alginate per pound (454 grams) of water. Using my preferred alginate, FiberGel by ArtMolds, the mixture will be thick enough to stay in place almost without any dripping yet is not so thick that there is a problem with air bubbles. What I had always done was measure the water in one bucket and the alginate in another. When ready, the alginate was dumped into the water (never mix water into powder) and stirred with a paint mixer and an electric drill at at least 2400 R.P.M. until creamy with no lumps. That would take just a little over a minute. Then, sharing the same bucket, my assistant and I would spread the alginate over the model. Photograph #1 shows this step being done by three attendees in a recent workshop of mine. The only problem is that that amount of water and alginate is just about the limit that one can reasonably mix. Larger batches take longer to mix and the longer one mixes, the less time is available to apply the alginate before it sets up. A better method is to divide the alginate and water into two equal batches. I mix one half while an assistant mixes the other. With only half as much, the mixing only takes about 45 seconds. Each picks a side of the model and applies the alginate from his/her own bucket which is more convenient than sharing. This may not seem like much of a change, but try it, I am confident that it makes the application of the alginate easier and faster. My next trick takes up where this one ends.

But first, let me digress for a moment. There may be some who still mix alginate by hand, i.e. pour what looks like the right amount of water into a bucket or bowl and stir in the alginate mixing it by hand or with a mixer until it just seems about right. The biggest problem with this method is that it take too long and time is not something one has an excess of in life casting. Once you have determined what you prefer as a consistency, it will take the same ratio time after time. Just measure, combine, mix, and apply. Keep in mind that different brands of alginate will require different water/alginate ratios and occasionally batches of the same brand

may vary slightly which with experience one can easily adjust for.

My last trick is a little more complicated but is more important than the first two. Before I describe trick #3, let me explain what I'm trying to improve. The alginate layer in a life casting has to do two things, make an impression of the subject and be able to bond to the supporting or mother mold. This second purpose is essential. If the supporting mold separates from the alginate, it will be very unlikely that the alginate can be positioned back into the mother mold without some distortion. Secondly, unless you are using FiberGel by ArtMolds, the chances that you will be able to remove the alginate from the model without tearing it are slim indeed. Prior to March 2003, the usual way to bond the two layers of the mold was to push some fuzzy material into alginate before it set up. The fuzz might have been cotton, doll's hair, mock wool, etc. Getting an adequate layer of alginate on the model and applying the fuzz before the alginate set up was sometimes a challenge especially with a larger and/or more complicated casting. Fortunately in March 2003, a product came out called AlgiSlo, also made by ArtMolds, that keeps the surface of the alginate sticky longer so that the application of the fuzz is a cinch. (See "How to Extend the Setting Time of Alginate, Testing a New Product," *SJ*, March 2003, by DP). AlgiSlo has a couple of other uses; one of which is to allow liquid alginate to bond to already set up alginate. Trick #3 uses this capability to make life casting easier and better. In photograph #1, the subject has been covered with alginate. As soon as this was done, the alginate was misted with AlgiSlo keeping the surface soft. The AlgiSlo is effective even if applied to completely set up alginate. Trick #3 is to mix a smaller batch of alginate and spread a thin layer of it over the first. I only use half as much water as I used for the first coat. In this case, 4 pounds of water were used. It is important that this second layer be somewhat more runny to make it much easier to apply. Instead of 5&1/4 ounces of alginate per pound of water, I use 4&1/2 ounces (128 grams). It will not run off because the second layer is so thin. I also use a different alginate, MoldGel Regular Set, primarily because it is a different color making it easy to see where it has been applied. Photograph #2 shows the



Photo #4



Photo #5



Photo #6

second layer being applied while in #3 the model is completely covered. You may be wondering why go to this extra trouble. The main reason is that this second thin layer of alginate will bond to the fuzz even better than if the fuzz is applied directly to the

first layer of alginate. Another advantage is that this additional alginate layer gives one a chance to repair any problem areas that might have occurred with the first layer and possibly improve or even save the casting. This becomes especially important as one progresses to larger and/or more complicated castings.

In photo #4, the fuzz that bonded the alginate layers to the mother mold was being applied. What my workshop attendees were using wasn't rolled cotton or something similar but strips of cheese cloth. I encourage you to try this method which was thoroughly explained in "Another Use for Cheese Cloth..." *SJ*, Sept. 2005, and "More Uses for Cheese Cloth in Life Casting," *SJ*, Oct. 2005, both by DP.

Photo #5 shows the mother mold being constructed. Note, the mother mold was made using cheese cloth and fast setting plaster **and not plaster bandages**. I may not always know the best way but I am absolutely certain that plaster bandages are distant second choice for making mother molds. Fast setting plaster and cheese cloth is faster, less expensive, and causes less distortion than plaster bandages, period. (See "An Alternative to Using Plaster Bandages As the Supporting Mold for Alginate Life Casting," *SJ*, March 2004, by guess whom.)

If you have a trick that you're willing to share, please contact me at (303) 321-1074 or parvinstudio@comcast.net. Even if you do e-mail me, please include your phone number because I would rather talk than type. I promise to give you credit for any new idea that I find useful.

Photographs:

1. Subject covered with the first layer of alginate.
2. Starting to apply the second thinner layer of alginate.
3. The completed second layer of alginate.
4. The application of cheese cloth strips as a bonding agent.
5. The mother mold being constructed of cheese cloth and fast setting plaster.
6. About two hours after Photo #5 showing the casting in Forton MG with metal powder. All that was left to do was allow the casting to cure for a few days, apply a chemical patina, and buff.