

Out of design history research and distinctly synthetic materials, the New York-based artist creates uncanny, kinky sculptures that underscore the bodily and evoke the anthropomorphic, inviting interaction and leaving the viewer wanting for more.

JM You and I worked together last summer, but I've noticed recently your works are evolving. Can you describe these shifts?

HL I've been working with polished nickel-plated steel finish. I like the way this material relates to modernist furniture, and it's so much a part of the interior landscape in both domestic and office spaces. Recently, I've begun to carve and sculpt it in new ways, so the material curls to evoke something anthropomorphic.

JM What kind of personas or beings are your sculptures meant to conjure? Do you see them as human or animal?

HL I've made some pieces with claws. They reference the clawfoot furniture that has existed for centuries: the clawfoot bathtub, the clawfoot table, which themselves are animal citations. In my work, I'm pushing these claws, combining them with a pared-down modernist aesthetic for a result that becomes more brutal.

JM Between the metal work and the silicone casting, your work is quite physically intensive.

HL That's true. I'm at a point in my production where I'm doing all of it. There's a lot of physical labor, which affects the scale of my work, and what I can do. I think of my bodily involvement more as a constraint or limitation, but not in negative terms. I guess you could also see my practice as a "woman working in metal," which people have asked me about before, but that's not something I'm so interested in. It's just what I like doing, and what I'm physically capable of doing.

JM What's interesting, though, is that while much of your practice underscores the bodily, you also use distinctly synthetic materials, which you could argue is about the absence of the body, the banishment of the organic.

HL The silicone I use is the same material employed in medical prosthetics and special makeup effects in Hollywood horror films. The fact that it is a very synthetic thing is something I like to play with. There's something about the surface of silicone, or even polished steel, that seems sleek and polished from afar, but has a totally different physical reality up close. When your finger interacts with a polished metal surface, it makes a mark, or even squeaks—the surface is actually sticky. When you look at silicone closely, it's usually kind of dirty or covered in dust. I'm quite interested in this tension between something that looks sleek and clean, but is actually anything but.

JM So you're saying that synthetic materials are susceptible to the streaks, marks and residues of our organic body material. Thinking about design and ergonomics as a discipline, it's all about encouraging this kind of interactivity. What does it mean to have a relationship where we design objects that seem sprung out of the realm of some kind of atomized, supposedly "neutral" aesthetic, made from materials that look impervious to human matter, that in the end are meant to be used by humans, and that, as you point out in your work, end up becoming a kind of portrait of the bodies that use them?



HL That's one advantage of making sculpture: I can really push that relationship further than someone who's making work that has to be sat on, or has to hold a body on a regular basis. Even though some of my work does allow for interaction, at the end of the day, it's mostly meant to remain untouched, allowing me to play with and poke at the vulnerability of sleek surfaces.

JM Is there something performative about the objects you make? Do you view your sculptures as having a performative life?

HL Not quite, but there are elements of my sculptures, such as the jacket that was used in the performance at MoMA PS1, that have been used in performances. They are objects that have retired from the human body but have the potential to return. I think of my metal sculptures as a type of skeleton. I never want them to be a pedestal or a prop for the silicone elements; I want them both to have a similar effect. I think of performers' bodies existing in a similar way: when the jacket is worn, I intend for the costumes and the performers to have equal footing. There is some kind of parallel between the pedestal in a gallery and a model on



✕ The advantage of making sculpture instead of functional design is that I can really

push



the relationship between the object and the body ✕

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a runway; they are each objects/people that are, in this context, simultaneously overlooked and overstudied.

JM So in performance, the silicone is a surrogate for the flesh and viscera of a human body and vice-versa? Do you think you'll always think of your sculptural work in bodily terms?

HL Yes, I think the way I think of objects is always going to relate to the body, because the way I interact with things is through a body.

JM To what extent is sex and seduction important in your work?

HL I think there's something sexual about my work, but more so, perverse. The way I first considered furniture in that way was through playing with pleather, a material that's designed to look like leather, but which usually comes in these strange beiges that mimic a Caucasian skin tone. These were a kind of a jumping-off point for me in thinking about furniture in this really kinky way, about how perverse it is that our design spaces indicate so much about the society we're coming from. Everything is a product of our environment, and our prejudices find their way into the colors of a "tasteful" interior space. I was fascinated by the idea that bodies sit in chairs that have the same color and consistency of that person in the chair's own flesh. What a weird, kinky, perverse thing!



JM There's an emphasis in contemporary life on everyday objects that not only interface with our surroundings, but are also connected digitally. Is that of interest to you? I feel like your objects are engaging with that conversation in some way, though when it comes down to it, they are decidedly analog, materially speaking.

HL My process of making is really analog. This idea that we are connected to objects is talked about more in terms of our attachment to our phones, but we've always had a relationship with objects. That said, I do think digital space has affected contemporary design strategies, where objects that exist in physical space still seem designed to look good on a floating digital screen.

JM Can you elaborate some of these strategies?

HL There's a lot of curvature and sharp angles in architecture and industrial design that couldn't have existed prior to the invention of certain software. Things are made to appear impossibly lightweight, sometimes in a way that's almost sci-fi. In part, it's because plastics and software have advanced, but I think there's also a link to the introduction of a floating digital space into our daily visual consumption.

JM What is your vision for the interior in a contemporary moment where gendered

labor is being protested, destabilized and redefined? Do you think that will in turn change how we conceive of the domestic front?

HL The way I approach working with the interior space is from a female point of view, because that's the perspective I have. I tend to be attracted to objects that have sleek curves, and I think there is something very womanly about curvature. Having wider access to digital production also means that certain curves are easier to make than ever before. Also, at the moment there's this love of millennial pink and Ettore Sottsass, who uses lots of curves in his work.

JM A lot of the work that you're making is engaging with a design history. As social roles shift, so will our daily relationships with design. We've been tracing these different demographics and the aesthetic reputations that attend them, but because industrial design as a field is responding to the functional needs of people, it stands to reason that social re-definitions will have reverberations within our objects.

HL I'm constantly doing design research, trying to get into certain libraries to look at books of different designers and materials, collecting images for study. My own contributions or reactions to that research aren't based on one design in particular, but rather arise from the collisions inherent in this research. For example, Charlotte Perriand is a reference. There are three chairs in my most recent show at Clearing in New York that are based on a drawing she did, but mine are at 3/4 scale of her drawing. She made this sketch when she was living in Japan, and moving away from the modernist ideas that were central to her work in Paris, so her chairs were designed for bamboo. I was interested in this moment in design that was atypical of how we think about this design figure, and in a specific object that was never actually made, which seems appropriate.

JM Appropriate because it's an unfinished thought, maybe. Your work especially encourages projection from your viewers, and what better vehicle for projection than the prototypical, imagined, or even fantastical? Your hybrid forms, many of which are based on food, reference a different kind of bodily interaction. How do you select those foods? What's important about that which is edible or consumable?

HL Strangely enough, I think my interest in food is similar to my interest in furniture. I'm drawn to things that are so ubiquitous that their shape is often overlooked. This

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applies even to organic forms like fruits or vegetables, which are consumer goods in the context of a grocery store. I usually choose them mostly based on aesthetics, the shape and size of something. I like the way they translate to different materials, and different colors. There's something about taking food that you'd put in your body, and making it bodily. But there are also some specific reasons for some specific foods. I was talking about the six-foot-long bread earlier—how I liked its play with scale, and also its American connotations, and the way it reads once removed from that context. I actually had so much trouble getting the bread, because those sandwiches are really expensive, but the bread is cheap, so nobody wants to sell it on its own. None of the places in New York would sell it to me as just the bread, so I had to drive out to a bakery in Rockland County. There are other examples, of course. I like that the walnut in the shell looks like male anatomy, but removed from its shell, it's female. I also use the asparagus as a shape in a lot of my work, which I was originally drawn to because of its shape and scale—like an appendage, in a way—but also because it has a weird effect on the body, making your pee smell weird. It's almost like the infrathin of the asparagus is this weird smell. So this creepy

bodily thing became very interesting to me. I could go on and on.

JM When you think about consuming the objects that you make, which themselves resemble flesh, it brings it back into this reverse fetish realm. This simultaneous seduction-repulsion that goes on for a viewer and ends up being seductive and intriguing. It makes people want to look more.

HL I also have this countertop laminate that is meat-patterned. I've only really shown it at an exhibition I did at Galerie Parisa Kind in Frankfurt, where the reception desk was done in this salami pattern. I thought of it less as a discrete sculpture than as some kind of display sample. I like these meat patterns because they resemble abstracted stone, like Formica or something you would see on a countertop. There is something repulsive about seeing salami at an 8x4' table scale, but then I like that the pattern can also be subtle. You might not notice that it's not abstracted marble or Formica unless you really take the time to look closely. And scale is a great sculptural tool to play with. Often, the chairs that I make are not quite chair-sized; they might be 3/4 scale or 1 and 1/4 scale. I like that slight play—it's a way of subtly making things somewhat uncanny. **K**



Hannah Levy (American, b. 1991) is an artist who lives and works in New York. Her most recent solo exhibition, "Swamp Salad," was held at C L E A R I N G, New York, in March. Jocelyn Miller is a writer and curator based in New York, where she is a member of the curatorial team at MoMA PS1. ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND C L E A R I N G, NEW YORK.