

Carr, Adam, 'Untitled', Hannah Levy in conversation with Adam Carr, **Mousse Magazine #68**, Summer 2019



**It seems wrong to try to sum up HANNAH LEVY's work in so few words. And perhaps the whole point is that her work exists in between words, in between language, as it incessantly slips and moves out of order. Think about a baguette that seems to fall around its own support. A chair that walks on feet and hands. Human is nonhuman here and vice versa. Things seem stretched beyond their limit, forming new skins. Moments of the past have an imprint of the future. Industrial design conflates digital interfaces and captures how our touch penetrates. Our desires are projected onto Levy's works, and they project back both what we know and what we do not know.**



*Untitled (detail)*, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and mother's tankstation, Dublin

## ADAM CARR

Your work directs, or rather redirects, the viewer, from thinking about one material to another, one scale in relation to an opposite, and one discipline to the next. There are different paces in your work, it seems. Your pieces do this to-ing and fro-ing, oscillating frequently as they do, while they also seem to rest and stay still in a kind of liminal zone. Speaking of the speed between disciplines, you were attracted to industrial design before coming to the visual arts...

## HANNAH LEVY

I like to base my work in things and forms that are familiar. Many existing objects are alluded to, but nothing is quite settled down on. I've referred to this in the past as a kind of design purgatory, the idea that the visual language is familiar yet not quite placeable because I'm borrowing from lots of different contexts. I like to use round polished steel as a kind of jumping-off point because it's something so commonly seen in everything from classroom furniture to medical equipment. There's something nice about that way it purports to be "sanitary," but its physical reality is somewhat sticky in that all interactions with human skin leave some kind of clammy trace on its pristine, polished surface. There is a physical stickiness of the ultraclean.

## ADAM

The familiarity in your work, a kind of art *déjà vu*, is placed at odds with feelings of being repelled, especially when confronted with some of the materials that you use. While your work draws from a multitude of contexts at once and speaks of a number of languages, both visual and conceptual, could you talk about some of the works where the forms are more pointed in their reference to other people's work?

## HANNAH

This duality of the familiar unknown is basically the uncanny. It's well-trodden territory and has been explored by many artists before me. In my work, it often links back to a kind of body anxiety, the terror and ridiculousness that is having a body. The artists I'm always thinking about are Robert Gober, Paul Thek, and Louise Bourgeois, but I'm constantly thinking about and referencing other artists as well, including my peers. I like to have fun with other people's work and add their visual language to the kind of language I'm trying to build. Hopefully we're all contributing to some larger conversation.

## ADAM

And there is the architect and designer Charlotte Perriand, to whom some of your pieces pertain.

## HANNAH

I look at Modernist furniture a lot. The bent tubular polished steel I use owes its origin in furniture in large part to Modernists. I like to kind of track its progression from its original industrial purposes to its popularization in contemporary design via its prevalence through Modernism. It's everywhere—school, hospital, and office furniture. Charlotte Perriand is a favorite of mine. I've always loved the iconic lounge chair she's best known for but only later understood her unique position as a woman within the design world of the late 1920s and 1930s. The pieces I've made that are most closely borrowed from her are a set of lounge chairs I first showed at C L E A R I N G in New York,

in 2018. They are three scaled-down chair pieces made in round polished steel dressed in a skin-like gridded silicone and embedded with a smattering of pearls. The design is based on a sketch of a bamboo chair from 1943 that was never realized. I remade the form in the original tubular steel she's best known for and upholstered it with a gridded silicone skin loosely based on clothing patterns. The gridded silicone distorts slightly as it stretches, allowing the feminine curves of the chair to be magnified while the pearls embedded in the surface relate to the video that accompanied it and act as a kind of adornment subtly in conflict with the virtues of Modernism.

## ADAM

Thinking about industrial design: your work suggests mass production, yet it seems quite important that you are heavily involved in its making. Could you speak about some of the processes and technical aspects involved? Also, the use of your hands seems particularly pertinent in other ways, which points back to some of the materials and concepts that your practice deals with—this use is perhaps most pronounced in the video work featuring oysters.

## HANNAH

The process of making my work, or that fact that I make it myself, isn't so important to me. I try to get my work to a place where my hand is somewhat muted, where maybe your first impression when looking at the work isn't that it's a handcrafted bespoke item but rather something that exists within the dominant visual conversation of mass-produced items. Of course, upon closer inspection, there are obvious signs that the work is handmade. At the moment, I make all of my work because it's the most convenient option. I really value having an independent studio practice that, for the most part, doesn't rely heavily on anyone else. It gives me a certain freedom, and at the moment feels like the only feasible option to create the amount of work I want to. I often start a piece by going into the metal shop I share with two or three printouts of pre-existing objects or pieces of furniture that I want to combine into one thing, but I don't really have a drawing or anything. Working in this way gives me a certain freedom to make decisions in the moment.

The hands in the video piece with the oysters you mention are, in fact, not my own. It was important to me that the hands digging through the soft bellies inside the oyster shells be notably feminine with long, natural nails. I liked the relationship, soft tissue producing smooth hard surfaces, that exists between pearl and nail as well as the class connotations of each. I have chronically dirty sculptor hands, so mine weren't an option... While I guess one could read the actions of the hands as "making," as there are workers whose hands operate on similar oysters daily, to me these hands are mostly exploring, digging, massaging, and extracting. Their motions are both practical and sensual while also related to the slime and pimple-popping worlds of Instagram.

## ADAM

Could you speak about the process of casting that re-occurs throughout your pieces—perhaps its conceptual conceits? Its visual offerings and capabilities, which differ in a way from, say, 3D printing, seem to be upheld in your practice.

HANNAH

Casting is an almost magical way to replicate a given form. I like how simple yet precise it is, that it's a kind of timeless process that can produce results that can feel radically contemporary. Silicone is a material I tend to favor in casting and is also a component of most of the molds I make. I first came in contact with silicone through mold making as it's commonly used as the material for the mold itself.

I like silicone because of its fleshlike consistency and the way it holds light. There is a kind of luminosity to it if you add just the right amount of pigment that makes it look like it has some kind of life of its own. I like that the texture of silicone is so relatable to the experience of having a body. When silicone is pinched, there's a kind of visual understanding of what that pinch, pressure, or stretch feels like from the other side. There's also a delightful stickiness to the material. It's ultra-clean, ultraslick, and completely filthy in its propensity to attract nearly all particles to its surface. Everything leaves a trace, but nothing permeates its slick exterior. It's the material of Hollywood prosthetics, medical equipment, and nonstick baking sheets.

ADAM

This is what attracts me to your work: the range of seemingly contradictory connections and connotations. You made mention of Instagram, and there seems to be an engagement with digital interfaces—the digital and social media condition seems to reverberate throughout—yet when viewing your pieces, it is apparent, materialistically speaking, that they are very much aligned with traditional coordinates of art making. This adds to that liminal zone where your work could be seen to rest, inducing feelings of ambivalence, where you are not entirely sure what you are looking at...

HANNAH

I like to include a variety of different reference points in my work, creating pieces that appear pared down but are also a medley of visual quotations. Because we are surrounded by digital culture, there are points of reference to various digital platforms, et cetera. I'm someone who prefers to make work outside of that space, but it's not an indication of some larger judgment.

ADAM

There is sometimes a notion that your work could be performed, and this performative element—the idea that it would involve other participants and in particular that it could be worn and used—was presented at MoMA PS1 in New York.

HANNAH

I don't think of my sculptures themselves as necessarily performative. There is often a suggestion of use, which is, in some ways, a by-product of them being based on furniture designs but also because they exist in relationship to bodies. I think of sculpture mainly through its relationship to a body because that's the only way I know how to interact with things. I've collaborated with performers in the past a few times, most recently at PS1 for a performance that was choreographed by Phoebe Berglund. That collaboration stemmed from a series of jacket sculptures I was making. They are cast silicone jackets with long arms that are really heavy. I was including them in sculptures but had designed them to be wearable. I wanted them to be somehow shown on a body but didn't

like the idea of that presentation being stagnant. The attraction to them being on a body had a lot to do with the weight of them—they are very heavy—and the kind of noises the long arms would make when worn. I liked the idea of them being a kind of wobbly straitjacket. I think of the metal objects I make as almost a type of skeleton; it's important to me that they have a similar character to the silicone elements rather than acting as a kind of pedestal or stand. I think of a performer's body existing in a similar way. If someone is wearing a piece, I want the costume and the performer to have equal footing. It was important to me that the pieces be performed in rather than just worn.

ADAM

You are currently participating in *The Magnetic Fields*, a group show curated by Cecilia Alemani taking place at Gió Marconi in Milan. The show takes as its inspiration André Breton's and Philippe Soupault's automatic writings, bringing together historical works by artists with a much younger generation of practitioners. The show is in many ways looking at Surrealism and is in dialogue with issues of identity, desire, and representation. What are you presenting in the show?

HANNAH

The show is set up to be a kind of cabinet of curiosities. I'm showing two pieces, a video work of hands massaging a silicone cast of an Apple headphone case, and a large yellow silicone asparagus hung off the wall by two metal claws. In both works, everyday items are distorted from their usual context and, through scale, material, and color, made more sensual and bodily.

ADAM

The presentation of video is rendered as an object, made sculptural. I'm thinking about your show at C L E A R I N G where the screen is held by your polished steel armatures and the piece presented at the show at Gió Marconi where the screen is framed in MDF with hues of flesh and skin.

HANNAH

Because I make objects, it's important to me that objects in my work are not be understood as default. I've never really used a pedestal, and in the same way, it would be hard for me to ignore the contours of a screen without it also being addressed as a sculptural object. Although both pieces you've mentioned exist on a screen, the videos themselves are about objects. The scale they are presented at, the size of the screen, is also important to their objecthood.

HANNAH LEVY (b. 1991, New York) is an artist who lives and works in New York. She has held recent solo exhibitions at C L E A R I N G, New York; mother's tankstation, Dublin; Fourteen30 Contemporary, Portland; White Flag Projects, St. Louis; and Galerie Parisa Kind, Frankfurt. Her work has been exhibited at museums and galleries internationally including the Yuz Museum, Shanghai; David Zwirner, New York; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk; MoMA PS1, New York; Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt; SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles; Lever House, New York; and Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt. Her work is included in public collections such as the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; Rubell Family Collection, Miami; Philara Foundation, Dusseldorf; G2 Kunsthalle, Leipzig; M. Woods Museum, Beijing; and Aishtī Foundation, Beirut.

ADAM CARR (b. 1981, Chester) is a curator and writer, as well as senior lecturer and head of curating, BA Fine Art, at Liverpool John Moores University. He has curated more than sixty exhibitions worldwide since 2004. He was previously curator and head of exhibitions at MOSTYN, Llandudno, Wales, where he curated solo exhibitions featuring Ryan Gander, Amalia Pica, Annette Kelm, Bedwyr Williams, and Nina Beier, among others, as well as a large number of group exhibitions for the institution. He has also curated exhibitions for Castello di Rivoli, Museum of Contemporary Art, Turin; Kadist Art Foundation, Paris; ICA, London; Francesca Minini, Milan; Yvon Lambert, Paris; and Artissima, Turin, among many others. His writing has been published by ICA, London; Tate, London; Whitechapel Gallery, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Singapore Tyler Print Institute; Rennie Collection, Vancouver; GAMEc, Bergamo; and Liverpool Biennial.



*Untitled, 2017.*  
 Courtesy: the artist and mother's tankstation, Dublin

*Untitled (stills), 2018.*  
 Courtesy: the artist and C L E A R I N G, New York / Brussels





*Untitled*, 2018.  
Courtesy: the artist; Casey Kaplan, New York;  
C L E A R I N G, New York / Brussels.  
Photo: JSP Photography



*Untitled*, 2018.  
© Stan Narten. Courtesy: the artist and C L E A R I N G, New York / Brussels

*Untitled*, 2014-2015.  
Courtesy: the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

*Untitled*, 2018.  
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New York / Brussels

