

Bailey, Stephanie, *Form and Function Come Alive at ICA, Philadelphia*, **OCULA**, 1 November 2023

OBSERVER

Form and Function Come Alive at ICA, Philadelphia

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Hannah Levy. Exhibition view: Moveables, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (18 August–17 December 2023). Photo: Constance Mensh.



Hannah Levy, *Untitled* (2021). Nickel-plated steel and silicon. Exhibition view: Moveables, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (18 August–17 December 2023). Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan Gallery. Photo: Constance Mensh.

At the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, form and function merge across works by Jes Fan, Nikita Gale, Hannah Levy, Ken Lum, and Oren Pinhassi.

Riffing off the term for any object within a building that is portable, curators Alex Klein and Cole Akers have created a spectrum that moves from readymade to sculpture in *Moveables* (18 August–17 December 2023).

On one end of the gallery hall, Ken Lum's two sculptures made from store-bought furniture, *The Photographer or The Mirror?* and *The Curse is Come Upon Me*. (both 2023), are simultaneously conjoined and divided by a freestanding wall.

On one side, a large, brown leather four-seater couch meets a line of mirrors mounted on a mint-green partition, producing the illusion of a conversation pit. On the wall's opposite face, painted canary yellow with two arched mirrors, a pink velvet love seat with a matching side table and lamp on either side, forms a u-shape with matching grey armchairs that flank it; their armrests cut off at the point where they meet their reflection in the mirror.

Nearby, a lone ottoman—apparently ordered by a colleague of Lum's and loaned for this exhibition—sits under a spotlight. A black line on the ground indicates to audiences how close they can get to the artwork, highlighting the elevation of a common yet aspirational design object into a figure of rarefied contemplation. All of which raises a question about value: when this ottoman leaves the gallery, presumably to resume its function, will it remain an artwork?

Hannah Levy massages that question into striking steel sculptures that reference the French Art Nouveau architect Hector Guimard, who designed the Paris Métro's wrought-iron entrances, and was interested in accessible, affordable objects and structures.

One untitled sculpture from 2023 takes the form of a standing lamp. Hanging from the tip of an elegant, nickel-plated steel swan-neck rising from a tripod shaped like stretched claws, is a luminous, pus-coloured glass bulb that seems to ooze out of the steel web that holds it.

Hanging from a steel chain nearby is a 2021 sculpture where a peach-coloured silicone corset is stretched at its top and bottom from four corners, held by stainless-steel claws to form a chandelier-like skeleton. On the ground, disembodied bird's legs with sharp talons form stilt-like heels for a pair of razor-pointed stiletto slingbacks. Invoking the menacing yet captivating aura of Alexander McQueen's Armadillo shoes, each is adorned with a gold-plated spur at the back of the ankle strap.

Influenced by prosthetics, medical aids, and other types of designed supports, Levy's sculptures embody an uncanny equilibrium, where function sits on a knife's edge with aesthetics.



Left to right: Hannah Levy, Untitled; Untitled (both 2023). Exhibition view: Moveables, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (18 August–17 December 2023). Courtesy the artist; Collection of Deborah Dupre and Richard Rothberg; and Casey Kaplan Gallery. Photo: Constance Mensh.

In one wall-based work, a smoky glass bulb whose coarse surface is pimpled like the gourd from which it was cast, is slumped like a deflated balloon over a steel rail shaped into a thorn-covered branch.

Materially, Levy's works seem to defy fragility—a resistance that is accentuated by the sharpness of the artist's sculptural forms. Jes Fan's compositions, on the other hand, lean into their precarity. Diagram XXI (2021), for instance, layers fine, leaf-like, sea-green aqua-resin sheets cast from parts of the body on a wall to create wave-like shelves that encase a bulbous blown-glass glass drop within their folds. In Rack II (2022), resin sheets hang like wet towels from a green metal rack alongside glass lumps.

Screened on the wall is Palimpsest (2023), an HD video that transforms the three-year process that Fan undertook collaborating with scientists from the University of Hong Kong to implant oysters with the four Chinese characters for "Pearl of the Orient"—Hong Kong's colonial sobriquet—into a poetic layering of ambient sounds and images.

The video shows these characters—which are made from a shimmering, pearlescent material—being placed in the internal membrane of an oyster shell. Subtitles note that pearls are produced as a natural reaction to irritants; an act of transformation triggered by an incursion and an instinct to survive.

As if to mirror that state, Left and right halves of torso, stacked (2022), arranges two pigmented aqua-resin casts of the artist's body to create a mollusc form that encloses a glass orb injected with selenium—a mineral that oysters are rich in.

The natural and the artificial are thus fused into a single form—a fusion that reaches its figurative climax in totemic sculptures by Oren Pinhassi. Made from sand, burlap, and plaster, each figure is perched on a rough stone plinth, as if to amplify a primordial likeness.

In I Do Not Fear Time (guardian) II (2023), a pole-like figure with a flat circle atop its head dons a poncho-like cascade of leafy breasts, invoking the form of the ancient goddess Diana of Ephesus. The upper body of Blind Spot II (2023), on the other hand, takes the form of a lancet-shaped window with open louvres.

Another series of sculptures by Pinhassi are characterised by the application of sandy green pigment that mimics the patina that forms on oxidised copper. Equally totemic, One in the Mouth and One in the Heart (2018) gathers umbrella frames into a standing bouquet while Untitled (2019) recalls the form of a cactus. Flat, circular shelves replace the blooms at the top of each arm, from which green-and-white toothbrushes slot through holes.

Pinhassi's sculptures circle back to Lum's furniture compositions, in that they animate readymade objects—moveables—by incorporating them into abstractions of life. All of this gets to the heart of a show whose title activates the artwork as an object that performs, while inviting a sense of theatricality to the readymade.

Amplifying this staging is Nikita Gale's PRIVATE DANCER (2020), which is presented in a darkened, closed-off corner. Attached to a chaotic pile of aluminium stage trusses are moving spotlights that shoot beams into the gallery space, each programmed to move to a soundtrack from Tina Turner's eponymous 1984 album, which remains inaudible.

The effect of that framing, which triggers the imagination to complete the picture offered in the work's accompanying wall text, is a playful activation. Suddenly, a collapse of theatrical gear comes alive. —[O]