

Dafoe, Taylor, *Hannah Levy Makes Sculptures That Look Like the Unholy Union of Corbusier and Cronenberg—and the Art World Can't Get Enough*, **artnet**, 22 June 2022

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Hannah Levy Makes Sculptures That Look Like the Unholy Union of Corbusier and Cronenberg — and the Art World Can't Get Enough

The young sculptor's work turned heads at this year's Venice Biennale.

Taylor Dafoe, June 22, 2022



Hannah Levy in her studio, 2022. Photo: David Schulze.

If the luxury items around us came alive in order to get their revenge, they might look like Hannah Levy's art. Imagine an Eames chair sprouting chrome claws, or a pair of sleek stilettos perched atop taloned stilts.

Striking a balance between seductive and scary, functional and farcical, Levy's sculptures exude a kind of forbidden-fruit appeal: in her elongated chairs, you want to sit; from her barbed chandeliers, you want to swing. Except for the fact that the objects seem just as likely to impale you as hold your weight.

At 31, the New York-based artist belongs to a rising generation of sculptors, many of them women—artists like Ivana Bašić, Andra Ursuța, and Yu Ji come to mind—who employ heavy-duty fabrication techniques to make corporeal forms that are at turns chic, erotic, alien, and grotesque. Implied is a contemporary critique about the structures built to contain women, like Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" updated for the millennial mind.

Levy's visual language has attracted numerous admirers, including curator Cecilia Alemani, who included four of Levy's sculptures in "The Milk of Dreams" at the Venice Biennale. One of them, a marble peach pit the size of a small boulder, literalizes the forbidden-fruit ethos: it alludes to the fact that the seeds of stone fruits carry trace amounts of hydrogen cyanide, a poison.

"It's funny," Levy recently told me over video chat from her studio in the South Bronx. "You put your mouth on this thing all the time that has a little pod inside that can kill you."

"Funny" may seem like an odd word to choose when talking about poison, but it feels right coming from an artist who makes monsters that look like they belong in the MoMA Design Store. Levy's forms appear recognizable at first—a coat rack, a swing set, an inverted umbrella—but look again, and you aren't sure what you're seeing. Most are made of fleshly silicone that's stretched over, or punctured by, machined metal—the membranous squish of the former totally at odds with the industrial heft of the latter. Think Le Corbusier by way of Cronenberg.



Installation view: Hannah Levy, 59th Biennale Arte 2022 di Venezia.
Photo: Luigi Ricciari.

Born in New York in 1991, Levy was raised in Morningside Heights. Early on, she was fascinated with furniture—"Growing up, I would ask for books about chairs," she recalled—and, later, with industrial design. "I would just obsess over tactile moments as a kid," Levy said. "It wasn't necessarily a show I saw at a museum, it was more a tactile feeling—like the way that hot thighs stick to a car seat in the summer."

Eventually, the obsession grew into a goal. "I didn't know what industrial design was in high school—I maybe even still don't—but I wanted to make furniture," she said. "I really wanted to work with my hands and didn't really understand that that's not what most industrial designers do."

For undergrad, Levy went to Cornell, and it was there that she started making sculpture. Early on, the artist found inspiration in utilitarian forms of design: swimming pool stairs, shopping carts, handrails. Gym equipment was another big one, she said, "because it felt like a lot of it was designed for such a specific ergonomic purpose rather than to be looked at in a certain way. I wanted to make an object that referenced that, but was designed to be looked at."

It was around this time that Levy began incorporating silicone into her work—an impulse that surely came from the "thighs on a car seat" part of her brain. In stretchy, skin-like synthetic, the artist cast everyday objects (lobster claws, croissants, crookneck squash, salted pretzels), transforming their recognizable textures into something exotic.

Levy's favorite object to cast? Stalks of asparagus. You'll likely encounter examples in her studio right now, although they look more like extraterrestrial appendages than spring produce.

"I started working with it when I was in school and learning about Duchamp's idea of the *infrathin*," she recalled, referring to the French artist's definition for that barely perceptible thing that separates one action from another, like the sound of a gunshot from the appearance of a bullet hole. "The way that asparagus makes your pee smell weird is almost the *infrathin* of that vegetable in that it leaves this lasting effect on your body. It's this thing we all know but don't talk about."

Working at a foundry for a summer during college, Levy learned to weld and polish steel—two labor-intensive processes that she continued in graduate school at Städelschule in Frankfurt, Germany, and that still take most of her studio time today. (Her work may evoke some of the greatest hits of 20th-century industrial design, but she doesn't benefit from any of the mass-production techniques that made it possible.)

For some sculptors, ideas become sketches, which become models, all before the final product is realized. Levy works from head to hands, fusing raw metal rods together one by one—a process she jokingly called “carving with steel.” To make this untitled piece from 2018, for instance, she waltzed into the metal shop with a vision and three references: an image of a child’s swing, a sex swing, and a Louise Bourgeois spider.

Bourgeois is a name many reach for when talking about Levy’s work. It’s who Casey Kaplan, Levy’s New York dealer since 2019, sees in the artist’s output, along with Meret Oppenheim, Lilly Reich, and Matthew Barney. Critic Rob Goyanes wrote in 2020 that Levy’s work is “at once very Bourgeois and very bourgeois, recalling the surreal forms of the French-American artist as well as impeccable, slightly intimidating pieces of upscale decor.”

After graduating from Städelschule roughly six years ago, Levy returned to New York and had an enviable run of shows: at C L E A R I N G (2018), Jeffrey Stark (2019), and Casey Kaplan (2020); a prominent installation on New York’s High Line (2021); and, of course, in Venice. Her work is now in the collections of the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark, the National Gallery of Victoria in Australia, and the Rennie Museum in Vancouver.



Hannah Levy, *Untitled* (2018). © Hannah Levy.

Prior to Venice, Levy’s biggest outing was a solo exhibition at the Arts Club of Chicago last year, which found her looking to the venue’s Mies van der Rohe-designed staircase for cues. To the modernist’s clean, boxy lines, she responded with curvy, distinctly feminine sculptures: those high heels and that Bourgeois-nodding spider-swing, as well as a hanging corset cinched so tight so as to almost turn in on itself.

Many of these same works will be included in a forthcoming solo exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA). For Claire Frost, the curator of the new show, the appeal of Levy’s work goes beyond the invocation of corsets and high heels—it’s about how she “makes a body’s soft fleshiness visible.”

“Design,” Frost explained, “assumes a neutral or objective perspective that we can see is false because its function and efficiency only work through the erasure of people, forms, and ideas whose gender, class, race, and many other characteristics don’t fit within its patriarchal expectations.” Levy’s mix of clean lines, femme clothing, animal forms, and uncanny materials “contradicts these rules and illustrates the way we fetishize unrealistic ideals as well as the otherness that they generate.”

For BAMPFA, Levy is also trying something new: a glass sculpture.

“Hannah is constantly evolving,” Kaplan said. “She remains true to her rigor, unique sense of humor, history, and the uncanny.”