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Just for a Frill: A Review of Hannah Levy at the Arts Club of Chicago

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Artist Hannah Levy's latest suite of nickel-plated steel and silicone-swathed skin-and-bone sculptures benefit from their present location at the Arts Club of Chicago. The contemporary galleries, designed by John Vinci in the late nineties, are emblematic of the enduring legacy of Bauhaus sensibilities in Chicago and pay tribute to the former club interiors designed by German American architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1951. Precisely positioned in relation to the grid and grout of the Arts Club's black terrazzo tile floor, Levy's sculptures prick the parameters of modernist aesthetics in which material constraints and utilitarian desires breed measured elegance. Ensnaring the Miesian adage, "Less is More," Levy's work coyly prods at the equivalency of excess embodied through restraint.

Levy models restriction through tempered promiscuity. Borrowing from the language of boudoir fashion, her glossy tubing—smoothly bent into the shape of accent pieces, fixtures and accessories—is scantily clad in beige and blush skins resembling negligee and shapewear. Composed of skeletal armatures not unlike underwire, arched rods of steels and bulbous joints skim, squeeze and stretch at silicone shells. In a ceiling-suspended work resembling a chandelier, a fleshy bodice cinches around five curved steel rods—their talon-like tips tug at the corset's periphery like garter straps. Across the gallery, three pairs of heeled stilts take after strappy sandal and stiletto designs with puce translucent bands wrapped around slick metal soles.

And yet, Levy's steel-tubed instruments never tread beyond mere suggestion. Somewhere between a body and a base, her sculptures posture as pure supports. Akin to anatomical scaffolds, they pose and primp, ready to hold someone, or something in their spinous clutches. Outwardly seductive, these apparatuses lure you, tease you and dare you take the bait. However, Levy's sculptures are fundamentally indifferent to the viewer. Reserved, self-absorbed and reflected in the high-gloss gallery floor, they prey inwardly, preoccupied with the engrossing drama of form kissing form.

Lurching toward the anthropomorphic, Levy's work mimics the surface of reptilian epidermises, adopts the shape of bird and bat bones, and expresses the curve of a hip or the arch of a foot through negative space. Despite these organic characteristics—corresponding with the scintillating impulses of Surrealism and the willowy ornament of Jugendstil—Levy's sculpture tends more toward critic Lucy Lippard's 1966 concept of "Eccentric Abstraction," in which form is embodied through its sensuous objectivity. A form is a form and nothing more.

Inherently, accessories are objects of excess—their form often following their lack of function. Levy subverts the language of adornment, presenting only what is left over. Like ornamental remainders stripped from the context of bodies or interiors, her sculptures do more with less. (Alexandra Drexelius)

"Hannah Levy: Surplus Tension" is on view at the Arts Club of Chicago, 201 East Ontario, through January 29.



Installation view, "Hannah Levy: Surplus Tension" at the Arts Club of Chicago/
Photo: Michael Tropea