



THERE IS A DELIBERATELY MISLEADING DIRECTIVE, A PARADOX, HARDWIRED INTO HANNAH LEVY'S SCULPTURES THAT DEFIES, OR PERHAPS, IRREVERENTLY THUMBS ITS NOSE AT EXPECTATIONS. SHE DISCUSSES THIS AND THE ROLE HUMOUR PLAYS IN HER WORK.

# TACTILE SUBVERSION

'Gross' is one word I would use to describe Hannah Levy's sculptural work. 'Elegant' is another. Surreal, minimal, tactile – these all apply too. The New York artist opened her first solo show in Ireland at mother's tankstation last month, titled *Panic Hardware*. 'Panic hardware' is an actual type of hardware, and includes things like emergency exit door opening bars. "It's basically things that allow for exit or egress in times of emergency, but it also has a poetry to it," explains Levy. So what's the emergency?

Sinuous and lithe, yet grounded and contemplative, Levy's work is far from evoking a state of emergency. I meet the artist at the gallery where installation of the exhibition is underway. Already in place are two of the pieces from the show, a pair of stalking, claw-footed chairs. They each have a pair of long, sleek nickel-plated steel legs, arranged mid-step, constrained by a clingy skirt of green silicon that curves upwards into the shape of a plastic cafeteria chair with a steel backrest. Levy works most often in metal and silicone, forging counter-intuitive concoctions of texture and shape, placing everyday forms in uncanny arrangements. She has made silicon casts of all manner of objects, but especially food – walnuts, crab claws, the bread roll from a giant submarine sandwich and, repeatedly, asparagus. She likes to scale the asparagus up so that it's giant. It's both threatening and comical.

Evoking conflicting responses in the viewer, emotional and physical, is a trademark of Levy's work. Her sculptures play with attraction and revulsion, burrowing deep into the subconscious where these often-twinning impulses hide out. Smooth and sleek metal structures prop up or pincer fleshy, bumpy and floppy silicon objects. Or, fleshy, floppy and bumpy silicon objects are often draped over, or twined through, smooth and sleek metal structures. Many of the silicon objects are phallic. Among the imagery on her

website is an unnerving picture of a silicon croissant, with blue veins running beneath its ridged surface. The sculpture is displayed in a lusciously curved plastic holder, a found object designed to hold a remote control. A video on her website shows a silicon cast of a pair of i-phone headphones in their packaging case, the soft, pink form being massaged insistently by a pair of disembodied hands (Levy's own). It's distinctly masturbatory. Levy has a fascination for how design uses sex to attract us.

"The design techniques that draw us to something are often sensual or curved and that's drawing on our basic instincts. I thought about studying industrial design when I was looking at schools and deciding what to do, but at the end of the day you're probably sitting in front of a computer, making work for somebody else. I like the flexibility I have in art-making, and there's also such freedom in not having to structurally hold a body, so you can really exaggerate some of the ideas of industrial design."

One of the works in *Panic Hardware* is a large, four-legged swing structure. The curved, steel legs taper down to delicate, single-talon-like feet. The seat suspended from the apex of the structure is silicon, based on the shape of a toddler's swing seat, one with holes for the legs to hang through. When I visit the gallery, the swing is mid-install, with just the metal frame in place. It crouches, spider-like.

"There is a bit of a Louise Bourgeois reference, but there are also swings that are that shape. They're mostly sex swings for at-home use. But I also really liked the shape of a child's swing, so that's in there too. It's something between those three things."

A child's swing, a sex swing and a crouching spider. Again, Levy is coaxing combinations that nigger at something in the subconscious, tug at a well of disquiet. The work appeals to the visceral as much as the intellectual, maybe more so. Her

sculptures are the type of objects that hit you in the guts and in the groin, raising a gag at the back of your tongue and the hairs on the back of your neck. Levy's consciousness of how a lot of design plays on our basic drives and desires has led her to push those buttons in her own work.

"I definitely want to elicit some kind of physical response. I think there's something interesting about playing with the idea of touch in a space where touch is the one thing you can't do often. I take a lot of inspiration from things that would seem to be very utilitarian. There's a specific kind of handrail on double-length New York buses that I love, or there are these subway rails I think are amazing. I think those things are sexy and I don't think it's a coincidence because there's a designer behind them."

Somewhere inside this desire to subvert and play freely with design principles is a lightly handled wariness of the power structures they enshrine. She has spoken before about how the colours that are considered 'neutral' and 'tasteful' in interior design are close to caucasian skin tone. "Certain colours or design tropes indicate the values of the society they come from – I think it's an interesting thing to reflect on or be cautious about, but also have some humour with."

'Humour' is a word Levy uses repeatedly to talk about her work. For all the finesse and sleek curves of her sculptures, there's also something vaguely slapstick about them that undercuts their tendency towards the sinister.

"I think it's important for me that art not take itself too seriously. I think the role of humour anywhere is important. In a lot of ways, it's often the one place where people are most honest. At the end of the day, it's nice for art to be enjoyable. And humour is often part of that. And if humour is a point of access to the work, that's great, because maybe it will go somewhere else after that. But also I don't have a problem if it ends at humour for you."

Above: Right: Hannah Levy, *Untitled*, 2016. Nickel plated steel, silicone.

Right: Hannah Levy, *Untitled*, 2017. Nickel plated steel, silicone.

All images are courtesy the artist and mother's tankstation, Dublin | London.

*Panic Hardware* shows at mother's tankstation, Watling Street, Dublin 8, until July 7.

[hannahlevy.com](http://hannahlevy.com)

