

Nicole Lane, S., *Between the flesh and the machine*, **Chicago Reader**, 1 November 2021

# READER

ART REVIEW

## Between the flesh and the machine

*Hannah Levy straddles the line between industrial design and morbidity.*

by S. Nicole Lane  
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Art by Hannah Levy on display at the Arts Club of Chicago.  
Credit: Courtesy the artist

Skin and stone, organic and sterile, hard and soft: juxtapositions aren't new in art. This push-and-pull tactic has been done, and done again, but it's not always executed well. New York-based artist Hannah Levy manages to push and pull her viewers in the right direction for her new solo exhibition, "Hannah Levy: Surplus Tension," now on view at the Arts Club of Chicago. Levy exaggerates form—into curves and lumps—as well as challenges our ideas of modern design. The large-scale sculptural works include steel and silicone that create tension between beauty and repugnancy. The works are chic and fashionable. They are shiny and new. They might repulse you. They might turn you on.

In a 2007 interview, artist Louise Bourgeois told writer Richard D. Marshall that her sculptures are portraits of a relationship: ". . . they embrace each other, they hold onto each other, and they are tied together forever. Yet they hang by a point, which symbolizes their fragility." Bourgeois concluded, "In all my work, there is the fear of abandonment and separation." In Levy's work, the fragile and the solid are stitched together in a way that reminds me of Bourgeois's sculptures, something that appears solid but symbolizes softness. Their relationship keeps them together forever, although it may be a meeting of opposites. This vulnerability is evident through materiality in Levy's work. Introducing rubber, silicone, and nickel-plated steel with claw feet creates a stress between flesh versus machine.

Levy's works are dangerous and kinky. They are metal-erotic. Sexy and smooth. Walking throughout the space, I'm reminded of *Titane*, the first film I've seen in theaters since the pandemic started. *Titane* is a body-horror film about a serial killer who becomes impregnated by a car. It's a film about gender identity, sex, and murder. In one scene, a pregnant belly rips open, exposing metal and chrome in between layers of flesh. Here, at the Arts Club, a daring piece, *Untitled*, greets viewers like flesh on a meat hook as the thin silicone drapes over a silver chandelier-shape from the ceiling. Metal claws arch and are encased in beige silicone that ties up like a corset—the light reflects through the material. It's taut as it attaches to the tip of the claws. Thinking of *Titane*, of how machine and body meet, it's evident that art can be dangerous and erotic. How do we define the difference? Are the works seductive because they could harm us or are they provocative because they divulge someone with paraphilia?

I'm not entirely sure what the answer is to this question. And I don't think Levy intends for us to figure it out,

either. An on-the-nose critique would suggest that flesh is sexy and we recognize these materials as tactile Caucasian skin begging for a little touch. Another could dive into how repulsion charms us into being curious. We feel intrigued by the shudder-effect that some of the large-scale works imprint on the viewer.

This sexual tension can also be because we think we know what we are looking at. Much of Levy's work has a sense of familiarity, common shapes that remind us of ordinary objects. We can look at a piece and recognize characteristics, but as a whole, Levy combines various forms to assemble a newly surreal object. In a 2019 interview with the website Dezign Ark, she said, "In combining those things I try to create something that I think of as a design purgatory," where they exist between what we think we know and what we do not know.

Moreover, Levy's work is heavily influenced by elements of design and modernist furniture. The elegance in her work references luxury consumption—something functional but ornate, essentially making it entirely useless. A piece of furniture that matches the carpet, but cannot hold body weight. A nod at elitism and the influence of objects that exist purely for pleasure.

The writer Whitney Mallett called Levy's work "hyper-designed minimalist homeware from an alternative dimension." Levy takes design and drops it on its head. She rethinks the idea of office furniture, similar to Mies van der Rohe's concept of "skin and bones" architecture which emphasized the steel structure and blurred the lines of interior and exterior with glass. Levy's transparency, with the bones (steel) of her works appearing through the skin (silicone), makes her an anatomical artist (similar to the anatomical architecture of van der Rohe).

There's a sense of perversion to the material used for the chair-like sculptures in the space. Are they inviting? Or are we tricked into believing they are inviting? The silicone Levy works with in her practice is the same material used in medical prosthetics and special effects in horror films. The "neutral" tones in Levy's work are reminiscent of American interiors. Bland, bleak, and beige. They are clinical and cold. But they also beg to be touched. The line between attraction and repulsion is thin.

Levy told Dezin Ark, "I think there is a lot of hidden sexuality in our design forms just because humans at the end of the day are pretty basic in our urges." And with this, a simple exaggeration of a curve in metal or tension of silicone can send a viewer into a salacious headspace.



In *American Women Artists*, an exhibition catalog from 1980, Hannah Wilke wrote that women must create sensuality in their own terms, ". . . to touch, to smile, to feel, to flirt, to state, to insist on the feelings of the flesh, its inspiration, its advice, its warning, its mystery, its necessity for the survival and regeneration of the universe." And here, Levy is creating a sensuality that confuses and intrigues.

In addition to Bourgeois, we can see Lee Bontecou, Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, and Meret Oppenheim—who eradicated the function of home wares and made them useless—as clear influences for Levy. Here, in the world of Levy's erotic and fantastical works, similarities of the somatic and sensual penetrate the themes that we see in these earlier artists who worked in modernism.

"Surplus Tension" is a nod at pleasure and pain, a hook through the skin, a chain of flesh, a transparent diaphragm stretching across steel. The friction between materials and context blur the boundaries of what makes us wince and what makes us aroused.

Like Levy told *Galerie* magazine in 2018, "Revulsion and attraction exist side by side. I guess there's some body anxiety in my work. It's mildly grotesque in the way having a body is mildly grotesque."