

Ugelvig, Jeppe, *Hannah Levy Pendulous Picnic* review, *ArtReview*, April 2020

Hannah Levy *Pendulous Picnic*

Casey Kaplan, New York 23 January – 29 February

The body is a strange thing in the eyes of industrial design: soft, sticky and lumpy, it hardly fits the mechanic idealism of twentieth-century modernism, with its slick formalism, shiny surfaces and total celebration of glass and steel. Corporeality – feeling *like a body* – seems almost totally repressed in the last century of interior design, and this is what makes Hannah Levy's sculptures such an intensely seductive encounter in the present. Made in two conflicting materials – polished steel and luminous, flesh-toned silicone – Levy's speculative objects manipulate the somatic to an almost comical extreme, and in the process highlight the anxieties about the body repressed beneath our sanitised designed environment.

But the artist's first exhibition at Casey Kaplan appears to skip the modern era in search of a more complicated object–body discourse, landing somewhere in eighteenth-century decorative arts. Three large chandelier-like structures (all works *Untitled*, 2019 or 2020) hang at eye height from metal chains in the first room, their grand and dramatically curved steel arms shaped into eerily sharp hooks or claws. Silicone appears either as corporeal lumps

coldly pierced by the steel, or as skinlike tissue stretched to 'dress' these antagonistic yet playful structures, suggesting some kind of posthuman sacrifice: silicone is the stuff of prosthetics – the ultimate uncanny cutaneous substance.

Along the wall, a line of curvy, sconcelike fixtures (again in steel) each support a single asparagus stalk enlarged and cast in fleshy silicone: resting languidly against the cold reflective metal, they evoke the body as a fatigued alien limb, collapsed there or put on display for its decorative quality. In the back, a small trampolinelike structure sits on the floor with hostile, sharp hooks pointing against a potential user. While both Paul Thek and Eva Hesse come to mind as formal precedents, Levy's camp anthropomorphism is more evocative of the monstrous sensuality of Rococo, whose artists similarly equipped furniture with animal feet and manipulated wood resembling skin (quick research into eighteenth-century Italian furniture led me to several wonderful pieces that could easily fit within the artist's oeuvre).

But while Rococo's grotesque is often discredited in art history, Levy's objects read

as totally *chic*: sleek, tactical, humorous and thus highly Instagramable, they capture the zeitgeist of contemporary design aesthetics as it exists between the luxury object and its circulation as image. Building up aesthetic associations through shape and surface, Levy manages to formulate a larger point about the complexities of tastemaking: while the sensual and grotesque haunt design modernism (which still haunts today), the language of 1960s postminimalism has been recouped in the design world of the present, albeit congealed and reduced to pure form, to fashionable *surface*.

The body, meanwhile, continues to float as a scattered set of signifiers, appearing almost accidentally in objects and images, leaving us anxious, triggered, turned on. This point seems unnecessarily underscored in a series of stocklike photographs of manicured hands delicately baiting a fishhook in the back of the gallery, directly referencing the earlier chandelier: unnecessary, perhaps, because the sculptures already speak so powerfully, so penetratingly, about the corporeality of imagehood.

Jeppe Ugelvig



Untitled, 2019, nickel-plated steel, silicone, 66 × 48 × 5 cm.

Photo: James Wyche. © the artist.

Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York