

mother's annual 2018

### **Hannah Levy *Panic Hardware***

May – July

For some years now, and despite being a non-smoker for most of them, I have been consumed by a one-sided love affair with an ashtray. We, the ashtray and myself, first met over dinner at mother's tankstation, when it was produced to satisfy the invariable post-prandial need for nicotine. On first glance, it resembled a simple but undoubtedly modernist, stainless steel cup.<sup>i</sup> Closer inspection revealed another steel component, a perfect half-sphere suspended level with the cup's rim, held in situ by steel pins set into tiny curved cutaways, one acting as a revolving hinge, the other a handle. With a gentle twist of this handle, the semi-sphere then made its entrance, upending on itself to dispense with the ash before again resuming invisibility. This movement was delightfully satisfying. Appearing to flatter the human body, the human hand, it seemed to me that this object had the capacity to transform even the gesture of smoking into something elegant, natural, completely *right*. At every subsequent dinner, I would then anticipate its arrival, excited by the chance of holding it, looking at it, taking in its pristine curves and the way it came to such unforeseen life. It should be stated that I do not usually form strong attachments to objects. But here I sensed something of the erotic charge of objects — even purportedly cool and libido-effacing, Modernist classics — made all the stronger by my dispossession of it.

Perhaps inevitably, I recalled this ashtray — and more vitally, my *feelings* for it — when I began to look and think about Hannah Levy's work. *Panic Hardware*, her first solo exhibition at mother's tankstation, is a collection of sculptures that plays with the conventions of both everyday and modernist design, pushing their unspoken rules to their logical, if extreme, conclusions. If objects or commodities are material satisfactions of a (typically sexual) lack, and overwhelmingly designed and marketed on this premise, Levy creates art objects that shamelessly cater to it. The exhibition comprises five sculptural works — two wall-based, and three playing out on the gallery floor — all made over the last year. While powerfully and fastidiously made — aside from the steel nickel-plating, Levy sculpts, casts and assembles everything herself from her South Bronx workshop — it seems to me that the real adventure starts with the associations these sculptures set off, running amok in the dark and unconscious recesses of the mind. Uncannily attuned to the resonance of materials, she typically uses 'super synthetic'<sup>ii</sup> materials like silicon, nickel-plated steel and rubber, chosen at least partially because of their familiarity to the human body. The point is, we *know* what these materials are like; we can feel ourselves, our bodies, in the bracing frisson of silicon and steel. We know what silicon feels like, because we can recognise in it the uncanny jiggle of not-quite-human flesh; often, as with sex toys and prosthetic makeup, it is even used as our proxy. On this material level, then, Levy invites intimacy with her sculptures. Sometimes this identification results in a shudder; at other-times, it may precipitate something very like desire.

Levy's sculptures have the uncomfortable habit of pulling the unexpressed, dirty or dark association out into the light. In this way, they play on a recurring anxiety of mine — usually prompted by conversation with other people, rather than art. A person might say something and in response I think a thought — rude, obvious or generally inappropriate — but resist its expression. At this point I have to cover my tracks, and dissimulate with another innocuous response so as to conceal the unexpressed other, the one I fear they will otherwise sense or see. And it seems to me that it is precisely this unease of making-transparent that Levy delights in, fuelled again by her specific materials, which are open to multiple, confused readings — a characteristic most obvious with her sculpture *Untitled* (2018), which occupies a considerable portion of the gallery floor. A commanding presence, the sculpture is seven and a half foot tall, and composed of four individual curved legs of nickel-plated steel that meet in the centre. Luxuriously curved, its pointed tips meet the ground with a delicate flick outwards. Under the central meeting place hangs a rubber-seating device in a shade of fleshy light tan. A large gory zipper runs from front to back, presumably for ease of getting in and out. Certainly, the work consciously recalls Louise Bourgeois' famous Spider sculptures, while the elegant legs that support it remind me of four confident brushstrokes, a Matisse, say. Into the semantic mix go the sex-swing and the toddler's play area, despite being clearly designed to cater for adult dimensions. The play is in how these components are distilled in the viewer's mind, and, more tellingly, what takes precedence over

what. We go to great lengths to cover our tracks, looking to art historical reference points, when clearly this is much more an artwork about sex, design and commodification, and about the efforts we expend pretending otherwise. Levy's sculptures seem to really enjoy pushing us into this uncomfortable place. Despite what we tell ourselves, though, we are not nearly as complex as we think.

Take the asparagus, for example: a vegetable that has featured heavily in Levy's work – most recently with the installation of six muted sculptures in a window of the famous Manhattan department store, Bergdorf Goodman.<sup>iii</sup> At mother's tankstation, the vegetable lends its form to the two wall-based sculptures, both untitled and both made in 2018. As in the New York installation, the asparagus has been laboriously cast in silicon, scaled-up from its unthreatening, finger-like dimensions, to something much more ambivalent. Now flesh-toned, tree-like and the length of a fairly tall man, while supported by claws of nickel-plated steel that emerge out from the wall, their considerable weight means they invariably bend and buckle, utterly distinct from the appetising crunch of their real-world reference point. Despite their weight, they also appear almost weightless – no small feat, considering the roughly thousand pounds of pressure exerted at the point where steel meets the wall. Resembling handrails made by a designer unconcerned with ergonomics, the sculptures clearly reference the 'Panic Hardware' of the exhibition title, which refers to the range of design solutions for emergencies. But the asparagus also lends itself to another, more allegorical interpretation; because, as is well known, its consumption makes itself quickly apparent in a bodily sense.<sup>iv</sup> With the asparagus, the inside turns outside, becoming unpleasantly tangible. Still, *taste more broadly* is framed as a question of cultivation, rather than more basic drives. But, as shown by the example of the asparagus, no amount of language or clever commodification will surpass this more physiological reality.

Another, even more unspoken rule of design anticipates our perversity: we are drawn to objects that *reflect* us. These offer a way of expressing and also confirming our ideas about the world; and, arguably, a means of justifying our standing in it too. Attentive to this situation, in her sculptures Levy mines a palette of hues across the relatively narrow spectrum of Caucasian skin: beige, taupe, ivory, magnolia, faded peaches – colours the mainstay of "tasteful" interior design (the artist cites American interior design magazines, as well as the ideal of taste propounded by department stores like Bergdorf Goodman, as a source of continued fascination). So-called *neutrals*, these colours demonstrate the idea of neutrality as something inherently bound with whiteness. Using the terms *nude* or *flesh-toned*, we see they refer only to white skin. It is then of little surprise that these colours are so widely used: implicitly again, they affirm whiteness as unremarkable and harmless, classy and natural. This idea of *home* – illustrated in the banal but telling language of interior design – is fundamentally exclusionary, predicated on surrounding ourselves with objects that reflect rather than resist us. Such neutrality, much like Modernism, is always staged in relation to an idea of another, antagonistic reference point; namely, our bodies are natural, while others' are not. Rather than didacticism, Levy offer a critique of this imaginative impasse by making *extremely white* sculptures that, appallingly, appear to brazenly solicit our desire, to fully exploit our lack.

In capitalism, as Karl Marx observed, the relationships between commodities take on the appearance of relationships between people. Commodities begin to perform almost as animate, taking on a 'phantom-like objectivity'.<sup>v</sup> Levy's sculptures hardly resist this central, anthropomorphic kink – a trick at its clearest in the pair of chairs, not quite furniture, placed at a one-stride distance from each other on the gallery floor. Developed from an unrealised sketch by the French architect and designer Charlotte Perriand (1903-99), they are made from pale-green dyed silicon stretched taut over lengths of nickel-plated steel. The chairs' legs are unfathomably long, meaning that the upper portion – say, where a person might sit – is much too short. At the bottom of their legs are claw feet, similar in appearance to the "hands" that clasp the two asparagus. Estranged from any discernible practical use, the chairs' once presumably workable, horizontal and vertical lines, have unfurled into curves. What Levy knows and exploits fully, is that at some point they will stop being read as chairs. Perhaps it is with the addition of claw feet, which recall the unnatural poise of the stiletto-encased foot. Or the "dresses" of silicon, which modestly cover the curves of steel now somehow understood as their behinds. Perhaps it is their curves, pure and simple. Whichever case, at some point it becomes difficult to read them as chairs, and we look at them as women: Edward Kirchner women, severe and strident, sashaying purposefully through the street. The materials have not changed. But Levy knows that modernist design, as with any kind of design, appeals to primitive instincts; with the simple unloosening of some right angles, this tendency is amplified. Rather than objects of desire, Levy's chairs are

objects of *pure* desire: design, and commodification more broadly, pared back to a purely sexual reading. We can't even sit on these chairs, there is no room for us, and that is precisely the point. Desire reduces function to irrelevance.

As in the case of the ashtray, I left *Panic Hardware* thinking about the perverse sexiness of everyday things; and, more particularly, with regard to designed objects usually gathered under the banner of "good taste". We like them and form attachments to them, not just because we enjoy the idea of owning them, but because we in some bizarre way, we want to *be* them, or to *be* the person who wants them, and so to align with the object's characterisation of the world. Modernist design is not set apart from this aspirational relation with objects: there is probably just as much to be gained from being a person who *likes* these objects – and, just as importantly, to be *seen* liking them – as from actually possessing them. Perhaps this explains my love for the ashtray: I love it, not only because it appears perfectly designed, but because it confirms my capacity to understand it as the epitome of perfect design. It makes me feel good about myself, and I feel comforted – unchallenged by difference. As Levy knows, this can easily be cast in a masturbatory light. In a short untitled video piece from 2014-2015, this is made explicit, as we see a pair of hands massaging a soft pink silicone cast of plastic packaging, complete with snugly fitting, protruding headphones buds. While absolutely innocuous, repeated with enough persistence this gesture takes on sexual connotations, as the buds and surrounding holder fold and compress as a stand-in for female genitalia. Quite literally, we are getting ourselves off with commodities. What *Panic Hardware*, and Levy's work in general shows is that anything can be viewed through the masturbatory fantasy at the heart of capitalism production and consumption. This applies as much to the asparagus, as the ideal modernist chair, or ashtray. The kind of designed objects we like, tell us uncomfortable things about our desires.

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<sup>i</sup> Later, I learned that the ashtray was by the Danish Modernist designer and architect Arne Jacobsen (1902-71), probably most well known for his iconic Egg (1957) and Swan (1957) chairs. The ashtray was released between 1964-1967 as part of the 'Cylinda' line, in cooperation with the Danish design company Stelton, with an example held in the Modern Design collection of MoMA, New York.

<sup>ii</sup> Whitney Mallett, 'The "Quietly Kinky" Art of Hannah Levy,' *Pin Up*, 21 January 2018, available at <https://pinupmagazine.org/articles/artist-hannah-levy-pinup-whitney-mallett>

<sup>iii</sup> Levy's installation was commissioned as part of the Artsy Vanguard initiative, run by Artsy, alongside Bergdorf Goodman and Dior, and was on view from March to May 2018.

<sup>iv</sup> Asparagus contains asparagusic acid, which when digested produces the sulphur-containing compounds responsible for unpleasant smelling urine.

<sup>v</sup> Karl Marx, 1990, *Capital vol. 1: A Critique of Political Economy* (B. Fowkes, trans.), London: Penguin, p.281