

Mileaf, Janine, *Hannah Levy's Unnerving Splendor*, Curatorial essay, *Hannah Levy: Surplus Tension* Exhibition catalogue, **The Arts Club of Chicago**, 2021

Hannah Levy's Unnerving Splendor Janine Mileaf

Imagine the meeting of a sharp metal claw on a polished marble slab; the metal has been carved to a point, the stone shined to a gloss. The contact generates a visceral response, something akin to nails on a chalkboard—something felt within the bones. There is an imagined sound that approaches screeching and the lighter echo of sharp tapping—the internal sensation of friction and hardness. You sense danger or loss of balance, but also elegance and something close to levitation that comes from the delicate claws meeting a slick surface at a point. And there is desire. The thrill of these materials in contact conjures the French poet Lautréamont's often-cited image of an umbrella and sewing machine on an operating table, a dissonance that charged the surrealists who praised the juxtaposition of disparate elements brought together in the theater of corporeality. The Spanish language offers a word for this grating sensation of near disgust—*grima*.¹ In English, there is no equivalent.

In *Hannah Levy: Surplus Tension*, the sculptor lowers our point of focus to the ground level and finds there reflective black marble terrazzo that signals a luxurious yet bodily form of mid-century modernism recognized in its details. In contrast to the well-worn image of hygienic white walls and straight lines, the decor and finishes of The Arts Club of Chicago's current building comprise sumptuous velvets, silk and leather, as well as polished metal, stained wood, travertine and lacquer. Inherited and inspired by The Arts Club's 1950s site designed by famed Bauhaus architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, they invite rumination and lingering, and if you look closely, something less apparent—the reverberation of sharpened talon on polished stone, or this is what Levy helps us to encounter in the precarious stilts, pendulous chandelier, stretched silicone tent, recumbent seating, and subversive swing that inhabit the galleries.

Levy explores modernism's unrecognized underbelly in devising this exhibition, which articulates her grappling with forms that vacillate from the aesthetic of manufacture to the danger of desire, and seek to express the transition of materials from soft to hard, or treacherous to enticing. Working in an idiom that hints at historical precedents, Levy has invented a language that cuts across the body, design, and movement, implementing successive moments of suspension, balance, and swing to generate visceral responses on the part of the viewer. In the bright clacking of nails on a polished floor, her work offers a third term between the finish of Bauhaus and the flesh of the surreal.

Since about 2014, Levy has been overt in her investigation of eroticism. An early untitled video displayed in an MDF frame (fig. 1), 2014-15, features her own hands manipulating a silicone cast from an EarPods case. The commercial, branded object is recognizable in 2021, though transformed into a new, malleable material. What strikes the artist about these audio implements is the way they are designed to meet a person's form—a molded insert to plug the body's crevices. This meeting of mould and model is what the artist Marcel Duchamp would

¹ Schweiger Gallo Inge, Fernández-Dols José-Miguel, Gollwitzer Peter M., Keil Andreas. "Grima: A Distinct Emotion Concept?," *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017). Accessed online July 2021: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00131>.

have called “inframince,” an infinite thinness between complementary elements. In the video, the artist’s hands stroke the headphones in a masturbatory manner. They are ungendered prompts that provoke discomfort and yearning at once.

In other works, like *Untitled* (cat. 1), 2018, Levy goes further to acknowledge and explore kink and desire. Her inspiration in this work came from three distinct images: a child’s swing, a sex swing, and a spider sculpture by Louise Bourgeois (fig. 2).² Using a metal zipper and chains dipped in pink silicone, Levy concocted a playful apparatus that spans innocence and knowing, an umbilical cord-cum-bondage harness that breaches the strongly enforced taboo of childhood sexuality. Shaped like the lower portion of a woman’s torso, the toddler-scaled swing meets the ground at a sharp point on each of four legs, thus delicately balancing the implied motion on a note of precarity and precision.

As in the case of the EarPods video, Levy often selects everyday objects that interact with or derive their shape from bodies as sources for her sculpture. An early simple gesture was to enlarge a bobby pin (fig. 3). The undulating metal shape of such pins is designed to capture hair; the ends are capped by soft plastic to decrease the potential for damage to the scalp during insertion. As a vertical sculpture, the giant pin moves from a hand-held, disposable object to one that addresses the human viewer as counterpart. The combination of metal and silicone, which in *Untitled*, 2015, came from the original object, has become Levy’s signature. In bringing together materials that exist at the far ends of the spectrum of hardness—one industrial, the other fleshy—she actually highlights similarities in how they merge with and capture remnants of the environment. Both shiny, polished metal and sticky, cast silicone pick up the debris of contact, holding on to traces of gesture and touch, soiled over time.

Another characteristic motif in Levy’s oeuvre that merges desire and design is the asparagus, a common vegetable that translated into silicone takes on anthropomorphic form. Levy has worked with the form since 2013. In an untitled work of 2016 based on the structure of a campfire grill, she first blew one up to a scale that changed its meaning (fig. 4). Oversized and stylized, this grill traps the bended forms of two flaccid, variably flesh-toned spears of asparagus within its slats (one spear is darker than the other). Levy deploys the phallic vegetable, which is famous for its ability to affect its consumer by altering the smell of their urine, as a surrogate body part. She typically enlarges the asparagus spears to the scale of human limbs—a finger, an arm, a leg—or uses them in groups at the height of a person. Here, they are the length of Levy’s own arm, served up as a creepy offering on a sterile grate. Elsewhere, they appear suspended by claws and approximating sconces (fig. 5). In these sorts of material and corporeal strategies, Levy defines herself as a descendent of Matthew Barney, the consummate fabricator of bizarre and exquisite paraphernalia.

More recently, Levy shifted the scale of an everyday bodily prosthetic to make a public work. In *Retainer* (fig. 6) 2021, which was installed for a year on New York’s Highline beginning in April 2021, Levy posits an orthodontic retainer in Italian marble and stainless steel. Levy’s preoccupation with this form again comes from the way in which it is generated by the body.

² Hannah Levy interview with author, July 17, 2021.

Here, the mouth and teeth propose inverses of themselves as casts. Actual retainers take form from a hard material cast from the soft palate of the mouth. Its purpose is to constrain the wearer's bite. Levy's giant retainer was carved from marble and formed of stainless steel, yet it maintains that sense of a bodily constriction and transformation from soft to hard. The uncanny of the mouth's mutability was equally noted by Jenny Holzer in *The Living Series*, where she wrote about how "[t]he mouth is interesting because it's one of those places where the dry outside moves toward the slippery inside."³ At street scale, Levy's impression of the mouth's interior appears as furniture, a hardened bench accommodating casual conversation.

A consideration of the ways in which bodies have formed and been formed by design objects runs through Levy's oeuvre, particularly in work inspired by chairs. The earliest of these depart from an idea Levy had of a generic "cafeteria chair." In avocado green, *Untitled*, 2017 (fig. 7), presents a set of anthropomorphic, deformed chairs in tight-fitting "dresses." Distended, they walk as if on stilts, dancing in a manner that is at once humorous, sexy, and menacing. In fact, these chairs sit not on legs, but on claws. They are the first example of Levy's use of the avian appendage that defines this exhibition.

For *Surplus Tension*, Levy isolated the "claw foot" from its chair, and literalized the furniture feature to fierce effect. She fashioned pairs of metal claws in different heights as pointed stilts for human use—a sadistic high heel of sorts (cats. 2–4). Wearable with pvc sandal straps but exceedingly dangerous, they offer an invitation to the viewer to embody risk while experiencing the physical sensation of *grima*. At the same time, their gleaming bone structure punctuates the exhibition with short notes of visual pleasure. To render the clawed stilts and much of metalwork throughout her oeuvre, Levy takes an unusual route and carves welded steel rods by hand, rather than using the more usual methods of foundry casting. This labor-intensive process has long served Levy as she shapes sumptuous chandeliers (fig. 8) and oversized bones (fig. 9).

A second chair project, inspired by French furniture designer Charlotte Perriand, appeared in an exhibition at the Brooklyn gallery C L E A R I N G in 2018 (fig. 10). These reclining *chaises longues* exist at ¾-human scale and derive from an unrealized design for rattan that Perriand conceived while living in Japan in the 1940s (fig. 11). Perriand's classic tubular steel contour chairs have often been credited to her more famous male collaborator, architect Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret).⁴ Yet Levy consciously responded to a design that Perriand made after her involvement with the architect. In Levy's version of Perriand's chair, she has embedded pearls in the stretched silicone seating. Pearls, as Levy explains, are like human nails or claws in that they convert a gelatinous, corporeal excretion into a durable form—another instance of presumed elegance debased through its animalistic connotations.⁵

³ Jenny Holzer, *The Living Series*, 1989.

⁴ Joseph Giovannini, "Charlotte Perriand, Stepping out of Corbusier's Shadow," *New York Times* (Nov. 21, 2019). Accessed online July 2021:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/21/arts/design/charlotte-perriand-le-corbusier-review.html>

⁵ Levy interview with author, July 17, 2021.

For *Surplus Tension*, Levy constructed a new set of scaled-down *chaises longues*, this time in snake-textured silicone the color of caucasian flesh (cats. 5–6) and based on an unrealized design by Mies (fig. 12). As actualized by Levy, the chairs entreat one to sit upon them, even as they do not look as if they could actually accommodate the curves of the human body. Levy has noted that the sinuous, seemingly feminized shape of the proposed “double cantilever” chair was not pursued by Mies who favored more rectilinear seating like the classic Barcelona Chair. Indeed, the Barcelona Chair, of which The Arts Club owns two, was again the product of a collaboration for which the female designer has been overshadowed by her more celebrated partner.⁶ Like Le Corbusier and Perriand, Mies worked closely with designer Lilly Reich to realize that chair and other projects. For a trade fair about women’s fashion in 1927, Reich and Mies experimented with hanging textiles to separate and define space in a manner that would recur in Mies’s Arts Club design. Their Velvet and Silk Cafe (fig. 13) featured hanging walls by Reich that mimicked the flow of fabric in clothing promoted at the fair. There, Mies also debuted his iconic *MR 20* cantilever chair of leather and tubular steel (fig. 14). In Levy’s research for this exhibition, she recognized the MR chair’s debt to a woman’s bodice—the leather seat is stretched around the tubular steel frame and laced tightly in the manner of a corset. The stricture of women’s bodies by such enforcing ties are familiar material in popular eroticism. In her double cantilevered chaises, Levy uses a similarly enticing detail on the underside, lacing silicone sheaths in a criss-crossed v-pattern that is visible not only through the layers of translucent material, but also in the floor’s detailed reflection.

Levy’s fascination with the architecture of skin stretched over armature as in the form of Mies’s leather MR chair finds its consummate expression in the current exhibition’s *Untitled* (cat. 7), 2021. Here, Levy departs from the image of a bat’s wing to imagine a truncated tent or giant, lumbering creature with shiny, carved knuckles and translucent skin (fig. 15). Toned a transparent red, the color of a tongue or thinly sliced meat, the tent looks flayed and domed, while prompting one to crouch down to greet it. The bat’s wing, like no other in nature, relies on thinly stretched flesh—not feather—to enable flight. Its delicate bones are visible through the transparency of tissue. As Levy has noted, the bat has haunted society on a global scale in this year of pandemic, while the tent has become a sign of urban homelessness.⁷ The bat/tent form’s associations with spreading disease and world crisis somehow do not overshadow the wonder of its construction. Instead, it highlights the repellent sensation of finding beauty in destructive form.

The discomfort of opulence amid the carnal further resonates in Levy’s *Untitled, 2021* (cat. 8), a monumental hanging chandelier placed at the forefront of the exhibition. Grand, suspended lighting fixtures of this ilk conjure images of mirrored halls, reflective crystal, and regurgitative feasts. Levy enrobes the shine of her nonfunctioning apparatus with the stretched silicone skins of a cinched bustier, anthropomorphizing the chandelier as figure, and further fixing it in the plushness of the past. The silicone surface of the laced “dress” is imprinted with the texture of crocodile skin and rendered in a sickly, dirty yellow. It is held in place by grasping claws at top

⁶ Christiane Lange, *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich: Furniture and Interiors* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2006).

⁷ Levy interview with author, July 17, 2021.

and bottom, leaving the viewer to ponder some sort of arcane torture or macabre trophy. The hanging, wasp-waisted dominatrix might even reference Duchamp's "bride," a pendulous female form from his epic *Large Glass*, 1915–1923, which he described as "blossoming," or orgasming, as she hovers above a group of ill-fated suitors.

In an earlier incarnation of the chandelier, Levy speared its arms with pale-skin-toned gourds (fig. 16). These vegetal/corporeal morsels are reminiscent of the 1960s Polish surrealist Alina Szapocznikow's resin tumors (fig. 17). Suffering from cancer, Szapocznikow made pustulated fragments (mouths, heads, and breasts) that iterate a diseased female body through gritty materials and deformed surfaces. They convey the repeated trauma experienced by Szapocznikow, who was a survivor of the Holocaust as well as tuberculosis. Her detached body parts strive to endure as they personify both disease and the subject who carries them. Levy's appendages, on the other hand, sanitize the tumorous vegetables in a way that maintains a haunting sense of surreality. It is as if she has eased the pus from their festering wounds and is left with the semi-hardness of molded silicone, clean for the moment but vulnerable to accumulated filth.

Decades ago, feminist artists declined to facilitate visual delight in the depiction of their bodies in order to thwart facile pleasure. This move resulted in a number of alternate strategies to address the notion of gratification in art; yet there was also a widespread resistance to picturing pleasure. In *Surplus Tension* and throughout her oeuvre, Hannah Levy has imagined a vocabulary of desire that avoids the one-sided, devouring gaze without foregoing sensuality. Daring to be explicit about fantasy, she negotiates the line between horror and ecstasy, masterfully crafting a gathering of haunting forms that speak of polymorphic pleasure through the combination of everyday object and bodily imprint. Without recourse to figuration, Levy evokes teetering ankles strapped into stilts, the sharp intake of breath as a corset is fastened, or the slap of bodies making contact.