

Genesis BELANGER

*Art and Object,
Reshaping Reality: An Interview with Genesis Belanger*

December 2020

Reshaping Reality: An Interview with Genesis Belanger



PHOTO: PAULINE SHAPIRO. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN
Genesis Belanger, *You Never Know What You're Gonna Get*, 2020.

Blurring the boundary between Pop Art and Surrealism, Genesis Belanger makes ceramic sculptures that explore psychological power structures and the anxieties that go along with them. With a background in animation, fashion design, and advertising, Belanger constructs colorful staged scenarios that seem enchantingly dreamlike.

A fast-rising art star, Belanger has rocketed from an initial solo show at a small gallery in Queens, NY to the international stage, with current one-person exhibitions at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, CT and Rodolphe Janssen in Brussels and past and

upcoming museum and gallery solos at the New Museum in New York, François Ghebaly in Los Angeles, Perrotin in Tokyo, and the Consortium Museum in Dijon, France.

We recently caught up with the talented artist in her Williamsburg, Brooklyn studio to discuss the marvelous, transitional spaces she creates and the fascinating objects she presents within them.



PHOTO: PAULINE SHAPIRO. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN

Installation view of *Genesis Belanger: Holding Pattern* at the New Museum, New York.

Paul Laster: After studying animation and fashion design in undergrad, how did you come to making ceramics and sculpture?

Genesis Belanger: I applied to grad school at New York's Hunter College with a painting portfolio, but knew right away that I'd be happier making three-dimensional work. Hunter has one of those programs where you don't have to choose a major, even though you apply with a concentrated body of work. Once I was there, I started making sculpture and experimenting with all kinds of materials. My studio was right next to the kiln so I experimented with ceramics, as well. However, I didn't do ceramics again until a few years after grad school, when I bought my own small kiln. As soon as I got it, I transitioned into ceramics full time.



PHOTO: PAULINE SHAPIRO. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND RODOLPHE JANSSEN
Genesis Belanger, *Checks and balances*, 2020.

PL: How do you see your past interests, along with your more recent employment in advertising as a prop maker, informing your current work?

GB: I use a lot of the skills that I learned in fashion design school to make the work I do now. All of the clay objects start as a flat slab of clay. I actually make patterns for a lot of these shapes I create, so it's been quite technically informed. I was initially attracted to advertising because of how brilliantly that industry uses visual language. Although I'm not entirely behind the end goal of that ability, I'm still very impressed with how they utilize imagery. I think about that when I'm making my own work—like how beauty and complex imagery can translate really complicated ideas, even if the viewer isn't consciously aware of it.

PL: What was your first big break?

GB: My show at the gallery Mrs. in Queens, NY. It was the first time that anyone had offered me a solo show. It was my first opportunity to make a whole exhibition and create a world. The reception of that show was just so unbelievably positive. I think it's definitely what launched my career.

PL: What had more of an impact on the recognition of your work, the 2017 solo show at the gallery or your one-person presentation at Mrs.'s booth at the NADA Art Fair the following year?

GB: I definitely think NADA had more impact, as more people saw it. The show in Queens got a good response from the press, with a critic's pick in *Artforum*, a *New York Times* review, and a review in the *New Yorker*. The NADA presentation got a little press, but mostly within the art fair reviews. Collectors, however, were instantaneously excited at NADA. The booth sold out quite quickly, whereas my gallery exhibition took a little longer.



PHOTO: PAULINE SHAPIRO. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND RODOLPHE JANSSEN

Genesis Belanger, *We are done here*, 2020.

PL: Do you still watch animated cartoons and look at fashion advertisements for ideas?

GB: I do. I just don't watch as many cartoons nowadays because I don't actually watch that much TV. I grew up watching *The Simpsons*, which was airing when I was in middle school. I thought it was such an effective way to address and unpack complicated ideas. The show's ability to deal with the most relevant political issues of the times in such a light and digestible way, while simultaneously being intelligent, was really influential.

PL: And fashion ads?

GB: Yes, I still look at a lot of vintage advertisements and contemporary ads on the Internet.

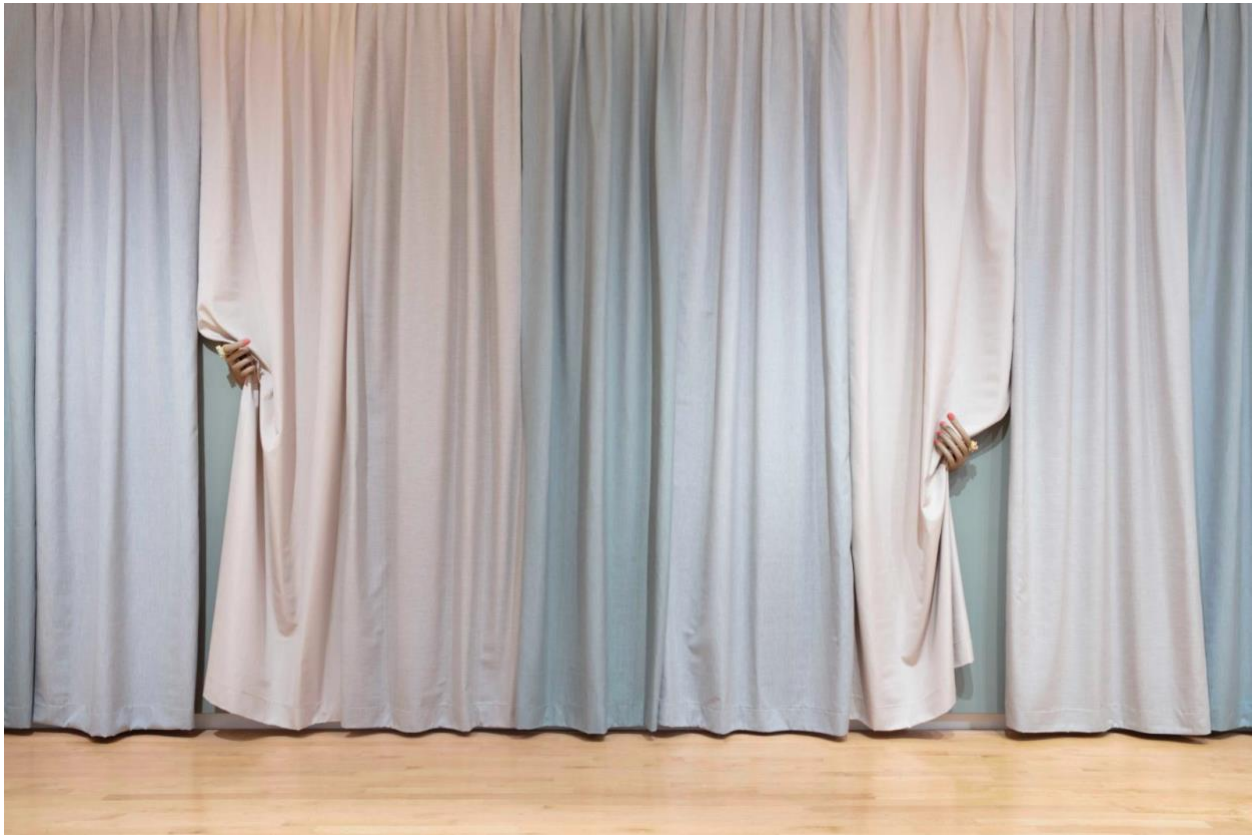


PHOTO: GUILLAUME ZICCARELLI. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN

Installation view of *Genesis Belanger: Through the Eye of a Needle* at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT.

PL: In the New Museum show, *Holding Pattern*, you used long drapes to define a waiting room and have expanded the role of the curtain as a sign of a transitional space at the Aldrich Museum, where one is in limbo yet senses that there's something on the other side. It made me think of the Red Room scenes in *Twin Peaks*, which makes me wonder if David Lynch's film work may have also been an influence on you?

GB: Definitely, I actually think about those scenes all of the time. There's something about what he does—where you watch it and it almost seems nonsensical. Yet the visual language coalesces into an idea over time, which I think is really fascinating.

PL: You also both use dismembered body parts as clues in your overall narratives. How did that type of thing develop in your work?

GB: I think it's a direct reference to how the advertising industry uses bits of women's bodies to sell products, and how effective that seems to be. You don't need the whole body to understand that we're talking about something related to a person.



PHOTO: PAULINE SHAPIRO. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND RODOLPHE JANSSEN

Genesis Belanger, *Slurp*, 2020.

PL: In *Holding Pattern*, you also widened your exploration of our coping mechanisms, which had been seen in your earlier works, through the inclusion of pills, caffeine, cigarettes, gum, snacks, and booze in the objects on display. What's your interest in these props and what role do you see them playing in both your scenarios and our lives?

GB: I'm interested in how human we are. One way to address complex and complicated ideas is to be aware of our own limitations and not try to present ourselves in the best light—to comfortably own our flaws. So, I think of these props as markers of what it is to be human and flawed.

PL: Pop Art and Surrealism, and more recently the Chicago Imagists, have also been discussed as points of departure for the language you employ. How do you see the products of these art movements in relation to your own work?

GB: I can understand the Surrealism references, because I'm interested in human psychology, but I don't necessarily spend a lot of time thinking about myself in relationship to the Surrealists from the past. I definitely think that I'm working in a Pop Art lineage. I'm interested in advertising and so were the Pop Art artists. I think that there's some overlap there. Maybe the Chicago Imagists are a hybrid between the two. Their work seems like it's interested in human psychology and also comes out of a Pop Art lineage. I'm not sure if that's an entirely accurate assumption, but it's my best guess.



PHOTO: GUILLAUME ZICCARELLI. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN

Installation view of *Genesis Belanger: Through the Eye of a Needle* at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT.

PL: What's the title of the Aldrich Museum show, *Through the Eye of the Needle*, meant to convey and how do the objects in the exhibition express that idea?

GB: It's from the Bible. I believe the proverb is "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." I often consider our habits as consumers and how capitalism can lead to a kind of emotional poverty, where we think that we can buy ourselves out of emotionally complex situations. I had started to think about grief and the way that we show condolence. It seems trivial to buy a bouquet of flowers for someone who has lost someone that they love or to bring them a dish, a casserole, or even worse to buy a fruit basket and have it delivered. These are markers that make us feel as though we have been emotionally supportive, but all that we have been is consumers. I wanted to investigate those feelings and thoughts. I created an installation that looked like a house that was closed down for the season, with the furniture covered, as a metaphor for the way a person grieves. With that as the context, I then propped it with all of the things that others provide as condolence.



PHOTO: PAULINE SHAPIRO. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN

Genesis Belanger, *Abundantly Empty the Ceaseless Void*, 2020.

PL: Beyond the continued critique of consumerism, are you also commenting on the political state of affairs and Trump’s notion of “Make American Great Again” in this installation?

GB: Yes, for sure. I feel like that sentiment is pure nostalgia, and that nostalgia can be immensely powerful. It evokes this idea that at some point in the past things were better and that they could be better once again. I’m often asking myself, when was America great? When was this magical time period when America was great and who was it great for? I look for images from that imagined time period and use them as direct references for the things that I make.

PL: And when you say that “imagined time period,” are you referring to the 1950s and ‘60s?

GB: Yes, for example, with the banquet table in the show I looked at lots and lots of food made during the 1950s. I first started looking at it because of all of these ideas that we’re discussing, but then I noticed that the elaborate investment of time that went into making those dishes is just inconceivable to a contemporary person. However, if you think about women having very limited possibilities in the workforce and being expected to stay home and take care of their husband and children—and how crazy that might make an intelligent person if they had no other outlet—you can start to understand the focus on food in that time.



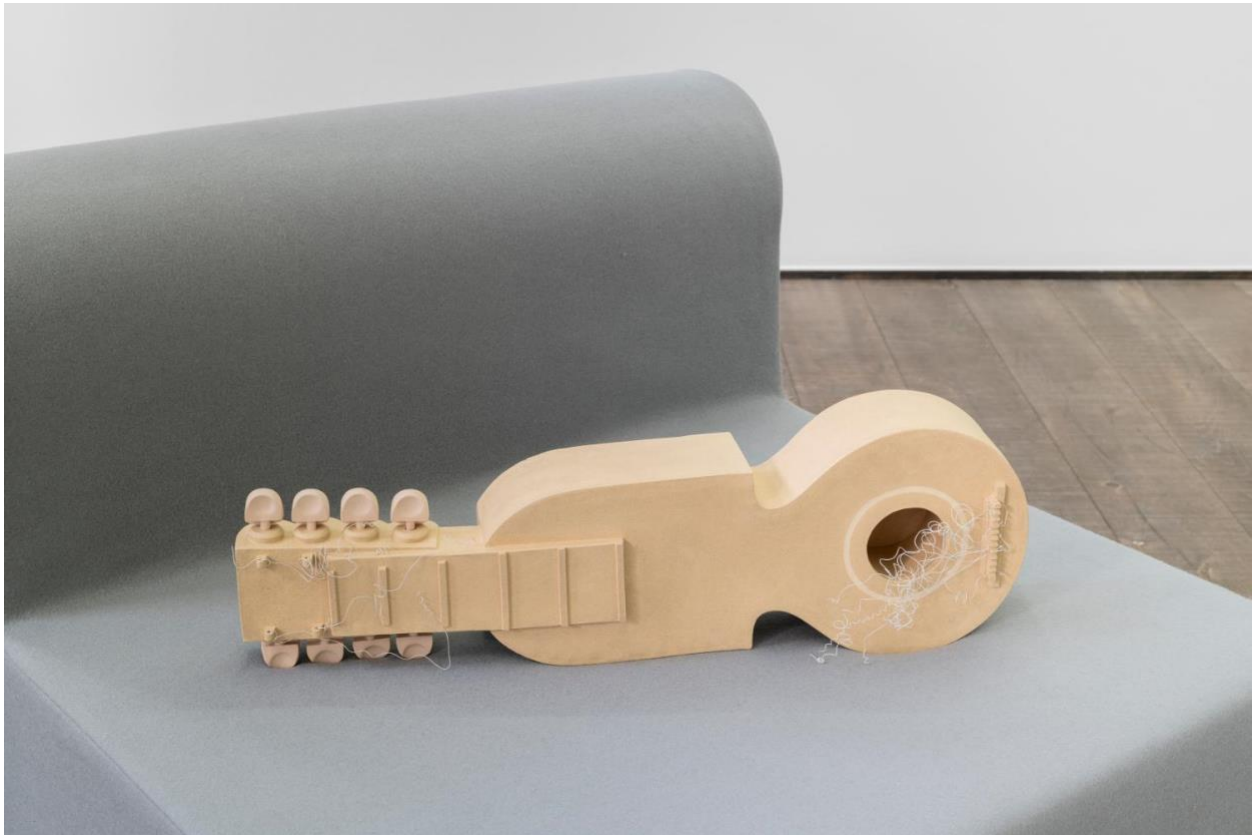
PHOTO: PAULINE SHAPIRO. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN
Genesis Belanger, *A Fortress of Order and Generosity*, 2020.

PL: Even though you made this work pre-COVID, do you think the perception of it changed because of what happened after its creation?

GB: I can only imagine that it did. I don’t know what the reception would have been if the show had opened and there had not been a pandemic. In some ways, I almost felt that it wasn’t a good idea to have a show that centered around grief at a time when we are all grieving culturally, but it also seems like maybe it’s even more timely to have discussions about how we console the people around us.

PL: How did you evolve as an object-maker to become an installation artist with dioramas that tell bigger stories?

GB: I think that's always where I wanted to be and it just took baby steps to get there. With each advancing show I made vignettes that started to grow a little bit bigger and the Aldrich show is the biggest, most cohesive installation I've made.



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND RODOLPHE JANSSEN

Installation view of *Same old song* (2020) in *Genesis Belanger: The Party's Over* at Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels.

PL: Your concurrent exhibition at Rodolphe Janssen in Brussels, *The Party's Over*, points more directly at another theme that you've continuously explored in your work, the notion of patriarchy. Are you using objects, like the guitar with broken strings, to express a feminist rebellion or to state #TimesUp?

GB: Yes, exactly. I wanted to make a show that was almost entirely made up of feminine cliches, but from a bit of a sarcastic or frustrated vantage point. I don't know how many examples we can find of women's bodies being referred to as instruments, but not this one. You're not playing this one—the strings are broken. I think that I was really afraid that Trump was going to get re-elected and how misogyny has made this wild comeback—not that it was ever gone, but it was at least not trendy, whereas now it seems like there's a total acceptance to be openly misogynistic. I had just made this giant show about grief and I wanted to do something quite different, especially since the shows would be on view at the same time. I just dove deeper into this other theme, which I'm always exploring.



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND RODOLPHE JANSSEN

Installation view of *Genesis Belanger: The Party's Over* at Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels.

PL: What are you concocting for your upcoming shows at Perrotin in Tokyo and the Consortium Museum in Dijon?

GB: I have a few bigger pieces that I'm really excited about for the Consortium. One of them is an odd-sized bed, where the mattresses are sort of sinking under the weight of all of these treasures from the sea. There's a pile of shells that are in the process of turning into bodies. I keep thinking about this idea of strange bedfellows and women of your dreams. I've also made a life-size flying carpet, but it's actually a flying picnic blanket with objects that are sort of rolling over the undulating forms. And for my show in Tokyo, I'm going to make something that's quite different—what I'm calling sculptural mosaic. Often as I construct an installation, I make the most minimal elements needed to elicit an environment. That can be challenging when I'm only using furniture and sculptural objects. I wanted to figure out a way to make atmospheric elements that hang on the wall—like a 3D panel that suggests the front of a store or some other element that fleshes out the environment a bit more. I'm really excited about it because it's something totally new for me.

PL: Did you think that you would have gotten this far this fast when you were starting out?

GB: No, I'm still a little bit like what the hell has happened. I'm not lying when I say the pace has been a bit intense.

PL: What do you think you owe it to?

GB: At times I think it must be pure luck, but it's probably a combination of the turn towards figuration and an interest in ceramics and in women artists—all at the same time that I was making this work. It was just a magical alignment of the stars, and I was lucky enough to bump into it.