

Genesis BELANGER

Genesis Belanger: Seduction and Repulsion

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by Scott Indrisek





Installation view of "Coins for the Ferryman," 2019.

IAN BYERS-GAMBER, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND FRANÇOIS GHEBALX, LOS ANGELES

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Sometimes a hot dog is not just a hot dog. For sculptor Genesis Belanger, the humble frankfurter is a way to biting critique things that irk her—in this case, the patriarchy—while still maintaining a sly sense of humor. The 41-year-old artist's pastel-hued ceramic creations might communicate slapstick comedy, but there's a simmering seriousness beneath her disembodied hands, half-eaten foodstuffs, stubby cigarettes, and anthropomorphic lamps. Frustrations both everyday and global are boiled down into lighthearted tableaux, but what seems silly or cartoonish is actually the product of intensive research into American consumerism and visual culture.

One reason Belanger's work feels fresh is that her career path thus far has been idiosyncratic. She received a BFA from the Art Institute of Chicago, with



One For Me and One For My Friend, 2019.

Porcelain, stoneware, wood, powder-coated steel, and cotton blend, 48 x 43 x 43 in.

PAULINE SHAPIRO, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND FRANÇOIS GHEBAY, LOS ANGELES





THIS PAGE: PAULINE SHAPIRO, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND FRANÇOIS GHEBALY, LOS ANGELES / OPPOSITE: IAN BYERS-GAMBER, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND FRANÇOIS GHEBALY, LOS ANGELES

a concentration in fashion design. After graduation, she worked in the field for a mere six months before transitioning into a career as a prop stylist's assistant, with projects that included editorial commissions for *Harper's Bazaar* and commercial gigs for The Children's Place. While she delighted in the treasures found within New York's cavernous prop houses, with their "record of all the beautiful things from history," she eventually burned out on the industry. "At some point I started to question the purpose," she told me during a recent visit to her Williamsburg, Brooklyn, studio. "I thought, 'Is this what I want to do with all my creative energy? Wake up one day at 50 and be like, yeah, I made the best Victoria's Secret ad ever?' It seemed awful. I wanted to be more of a mastermind, and fine art seemed like you could create your own world and not really have to make any compromises."

Belanger regrouped and reinvented herself as a painter. Over the course of a year, she put together enough work to land a coveted spot in Hunter College's MFA program. She describes her compositions as being primarily of "people sleeping, with lots of textile patterns, and plants," all rendered with homemade egg tempera pigments. "I was already trying to make it as process-oriented as possible in some ways," she said, wondering: "Did I like making the paintings, or did I like making the paint?"

Once at Hunter, she changed gears yet again, abandoning painting in favor of sculpture. Her preferred materials were cheap bric-a-brac, "paper and wax and rubber bands, things from the dollar store, Sculpey clay"; she jokingly refers to these works as a "shittier material version of what I'm doing now." There were brief diversions with metal and LED light fixtures. Compositionally, Belanger envisioned her sculptural scenarios as evidence of a "party gone wrong," a narrative of debauchery and abandon. When she discovered ceramics, everything came into focus. "Anything I could think of, I could make," she says. "It felt limitless." The transition was liberating, but also crazy-making. Like many artists working with clay, Belanger is both thrilled and daunted by the challenges of the medium—"a total bastard," she says, lovingly. "I'm still in the learning curve," she admits. "Clay is really dependent on the weather. It's an entirely different process each season."



FROM OPPOSITE:

***On the Road*,
2019.**

Porcelain and stoneware,
2 x 7 x 5 in.

***Hostess (detail)*,
2019.**

Stoneware, porcelain,
cotton, and hardware,
6 x 8 x 11.5 in.; curtain
dimensions variable.

Belanger's lust for formal complexity doesn't make life in the studio any easier. A single work in progress—an elastic hand, its fingers sporting gaudy, removable rings—presents myriad challenges. Mastering ceramics means exploiting a “rigid material” in order to “maintain a soft, fluid gesture.” It takes a great deal of effort to imbue these heavy, static things with a sense of movement: a limp cigarette seems to slither onto the cusp of an ashtray, while a fleshy tongue fondles a pill. “My ultimate goal,” Belanger says, “is for the sculpted object to be as fluid as a drawing.”

It's easy enough to draw a line between Belanger's previous commercial career and her current artistic practice—each show or installation has the feel of an elaborate set. “Design is just as important as the discrete works that go into an exhibition” for her, says Sara Maria Salome, co-founder of Mrs., a Queens-based gallery that was instrumental in raising Belanger's profile. “This could be attributed to her past experience as a prop stylist—or maybe she's just becoming a very good storyteller.”

Those stories are propelled by the details they include, as well as the ones they leave out. Consider “Holding Pattern,” a show featured in the New Museum's storefront space earlier this year. There is a simple receptionist's desk, its surface littered with common (albeit outdated) office accoutrements: tape dispenser, calculator, a cup full of pencils. An open drawer provides a glimpse of a liquor bottle and a chocolate bar. Each object seems ready to enact a weird, Disney-fied dance. The tape dispenser is actually unrolling a grotesque tongue; the pencils wilt. (If you haven't guessed by now, drooping objects with phallic implications are a favorite of Belanger's.)

The entire tableau has a goofy, antic vibe—the psychedelic nightmare of someone who fears their belongings might come to life when no one's watching—but “Holding Pattern” actually grew, circuitously, out of the madness of the 2016 election. “I had just learned that white women basically elected Trump,” she said, alluding to polling which suggests that somewhere between 47 and 52 percent of that demographic voted for the president. “I wanted to make a sculpture about a gatekeeper, someone holding up the status quo. I was thinking about how there are always these

Genesis Belanger in her installation “Holding Pattern,” New Museum, New York, 2019.





CHARLES BENTON



“ My ultimate goal is
for the **sculpted object to**
be as fluid as a drawing. ”

Reception (detail),
2019.
Wood, wool felt,
stoneware, and
porcelain,
36 x 72 x 28 in.

people who operate waiting rooms like little dictators.” An arm on the desk, grasping a hot dog, is the most straightforward (and winsomely sophomoric) allusion to how women have helped hold up a misogynistic society. “The desk’s covered with tropes of busywork—and then all of the things that one indulges to make that type of lifestyle tolerable—candy and junk food and liquor and pills.”

Much has been made of Belanger’s nostalgia-tinged aesthetic—the soft-toned color palette (an effect she likens to objects left out to be bleached by the Los Angeles sun) or the emphasis on *Mad Men*-era furniture and clothing. Partly, she says, it’s a result of mulling over the meaning behind #MAGA—thinking back on previous eras of supposed American greatness. “Who was this great *for*?” she wonders. (Spoiler alert: Men. White ones.) Belanger is both appalled and fascinated by 1950s advertising and the sedate, suburban utopia it’s meant to conjure. She’s obsessed by the trappings of that time period, including the quasi-competitive “hors d’oeuvres culture” that birthed some real culinary monstrosities. A sculpture in progress in the studio, destined for a solo exhibition at François Ghéraly in L.A., depicts an oversize snack: a cracker graced with a robust dollop of cheese and an olive. It looks like nothing that you’d ever want to invite into your mouth. These sorts of “gross and ridiculous-looking” foods, prepared by long-suffering wives, are of special interest. Belanger speaks, awed, about one example that she recently discovered in the archives: “a Jell-O mold, with tuna fish and olive slices in it, in the shape of a fish.”

Throughout her practice, there’s an ongoing push and pull between the appealing and the disgusting. “If I’m trying to flesh out an installation with things that are going to fit together to tell a story,” she says, “it’s really easy to have some things I’m repulsed by, and some things that I think are the best thing ever—like a donut.” An elegant flower arrangement might be disrupted by a stray human digit or mouth. Common objects become strange and unsettling, a kind of domestic body horror. Belanger shows me another new work headed to the West Coast, one that plays with the implications of the “Princess and the Pea” story, which she interprets as projecting crackpot ideas about the female gender’s supposed “sensitivity.” The sculpture

in question is an oversized hairbrush, with dozens of fingers in the place of bristles. It's both oddly sensual—maybe such a thing would feel nice—and completely skin-crawling.

Cigarettes are another recurring character in Belanger's practice, and one that falls in the "repulsed by" camp. They serve as legs for furniture, or as after-thoughts—discarded butts, or something for an elbow to lean on. The artist, for the record, does not inhale—"I think smoking is a character flaw," she admits—and her interest in them comes primarily from how cigarettes were marketed to free-spirited women in the 20th century, as so-called "Torches of Freedom." "The fact that one object carries this huge history is fascinating," she says.

Leveraging a single object to convey a broader experience or personality type is one of Belanger's specialties. "We have this relationship with objects in which we already think about them—like a watch or a pair of shoes—as a stand-in for a 'whole man,'" she explains. "We already have this habit of reducing ourselves and others to single markers." She points to another new sculpture of footwear nearby, waiting to be fired and finished. "They're business-formal shoes, with absurd pom-pom ankle socks that don't match," she says. "Just the sock choice is an indicator of things about that person; it starts to flesh out a portrait with the most minimal information. I'm giving you enough clues that you can construct a narrative." Who does she imagine inhabiting these shoes? "You're working in finance, but that's not all you are," she riffs. "You're not even that organized...you don't do your own laundry."

The object stories that Belanger tells us may soon change. She seems frustrated that her work is seen as light and whimsical, which she finds annoying, if understandable. "A lot of my work starts from a place of anger," she says. That anger, though, leaves her stuck. "I feel sort of powerless, and all I can do is make jokes...some ridiculous, jokey narrative about a really heavy subject—then give it a pastel sheen." Though she's thinking about pushing the sculptures in a "more directly dark" direction, it's those contrasts—between blood-red rage and a cool lavender tone, between repulsion and seduction—that already make Belanger's sculptures so complexly unnerving. ■

Reception,
2019.
Wood, wool felt,
stoneware, and porcelain,
36 x 72 x 28 in.



PAULINE SHAPIRO,
COURTESY THE ARTIST



“ I wanted to make a sculpture about a gatekeeper, someone upholding the status quo. **I was thinking about how there are always these people who operate waiting rooms like little dictators.** ”