

PRESSBOOK

Genesis BELANGER

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The artist creating uncomfortable clay sculptures to reveal the dark side of femininity

Genesis Belanger's surreal objects evoke hidden desires

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"Daily Adoration" (detail), 2018.



Left: "Show Me That Smile", 2018. Right: "Full Embrace", 2018.

Genesis Belanger's work is most commonly described as "uncanny". Like all things which fit that description, the Brooklyn-based artist's unglazed clay sculptures contain elements of the familiar alongside the strange, the quirky, and the dreamlike. When I ask her about the common usage of "uncanny" in relation to her work, Belanger tells me that she "aims to make objects that are relatable" but "where the recognition is uncomfortable". For the artist, that discomfort is rooted in the spectator's psyche — her sculptures stir up embedded memories, or faint internal fragments, whispers of secrets buried in the unconscious. As she says, "It may be uncomfortable because it's reflecting some part of our personal psychology".

For her latest exhibition, *A Strange Relative*, at Perrotin in New York, Belanger hones in on personal psychologies through the prism of gender. Alongside the Texan artist Emily Mae Smith's similarly perturbing, surreal paintings — elongated, sausage-like feminised figures stare wistfully out of windows, or head-in-hands surrounded by siren-esque bulb lights — Belanger presents ice cream-hued sculptures that cackle with their knowing feminine connotations — bouquets of flowers, jewellery and makeup licked turquoise or strawberry pink.

Among the objects on display — there are smooth vases cradling a rainbow loot of fruit, or a bouquet of flowers gruesomely festooned with criss-crossed fingers — is a pale brown, stoneware vanity, where Belanger has arranged a number of clay objects: a square Chanel-style perfume bottle, an eyeshadow palette and applicator, an ashtray with stubbed-out cigarettes and a wodge of chewed pink gum. Surrounding these more innocent items are disturbing (and oddly corporeal) intrusions: a vase of flowers and fingers, a disembodied eye, a pink tongue emerging from a lipstick tube, the tip of a penile object poking out from a bottle. The domestic is infiltrated with strange disturbances.

For Belanger, both hers and Smith's work "uses objectification and personification as modes to engage in a dialogue about women's experiences in a patriarchy". Beneath Belanger's dressing table, is a tongue-pink mule with a toe of jagged white teeth enclosed in a curling lip. Elsewhere, there's a large standing sculpture of fingers — nails painted — poised and kicking like a dancer's legs. These objects tap into the idea of femininity as sexy and mysterious, but take it too far — you get the "feminine mystique" but with a side ordering of creepy. Here, feminine experience becomes inseparable from visceral invasions and pervasive phallocentrism that pops up where it's least expected.



"Daily Adoration", 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

There's also another narrative running through Belanger's work. Amid the miscellany of gorgeous and grotesque objects on the table, are sky-blue pills, reminiscent of the mild tranquilizer, Xanax, or perhaps even Oxycontin tablets — the drug partly held responsible for America's opioid crisis. As well as prescription pills, Belanger frequently engineers curling and discarded cigarettes as flaccid props studding her sculptural scenes. When asked about this thread in her oeuvre, she's forthright and thoughtful. "Addiction is a key theme in my work. I consider addiction to be one of the perversions that result from inequality. If someone is squeezed into too tight of a space, they are forced to find ways to cope."

In recent months, Belanger's objects have been gaining traction on Instagram, augmented by a spate of profiles. Her equally good-humoured and provocative approach to sculpture seems connected in some way to the Internet and its vernacular — one critic even referred to her enticing pieces as resembling "emojis". Arguably, there's a lot more going on in her work than the flattened visuals of chat-speak. Belanger's sculptures are more akin to diagrams of desire pulsating with hidden psychic currents — it should come as little surprise that she describes Belgian surrealist René Magritte as "the master ... he has been my guide".

Through the silky, unglossed contours of her curiously animate stonewares, Belanger provides a new sculptural language for the contemporary moment. Hers is funny yet serious, beautiful yet gross, reductive *and* complicated, superficial yet utterly complex. Of course, she's looking to one of the key components of life in 2018 — incessant, eye-watering consumerism and the significance placed on inanimate objects as indicators of status, personality and virtue. "In our contemporary consumer culture, a coat is not just a coat. A coat, or a pair of sneakers, or a watch are all things that can define who we are. They become surrogates for ourselves," explains Belanger, who once worked as a commercial prop designer. "Someone sees your shoes and they 'know' who you are." Belanger, meanwhile, "capitalises on the pre-existing relationship" that we have with objects by playing with their meanings. "I aim for my objects to embody the dark and complex bits of our personalities, not just the parts we want to strut and flex."

"Genesis Belanger & Emily Mae Smith: A Strange Relative" *runs through to 22 December at Perrotin, New York.*

All images courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

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