

Genesis BELANGER

Still Life

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Left, ceramic sculptures by Genesis Belanger featuring surrealist elements. Right, the artist in her Greenpoint, Brooklyn studio this March



STILL LIFE

Sculptor Genesis Belanger meditates on mourning and loss

PHOTOGRAPHY: JILLIAN FREYER WRITER: TF CHAN

One blustery morning in early February, Genesis Belanger is showing us around her studio, in a 1930s industrial building in Brooklyn. The American sculptor is at a pivotal moment in her career – having mounted an installation for the New Museum's Storefront Window last year, she is now working on solo exhibitions for the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, CT and the Consortium in Dijon, France. Works in progress dotted throughout the space suggest recent, frenetic activity, yet the atmosphere is also oddly subdued: four moodboard images pinned against a wall show historic interiors with furnishings cloaked in dust sheets; in the space nearby, what appears to be a dining table, chair, ottoman, upright piano and fireplace – custom-made plinths for Belanger's ceramic works – are similarly shrouded in muted grey fabric.

The funereal mood, which now seems to have presaged the imminent pandemic, reflects Belanger's fascination with ritual. 'I was thinking of how any

transition, even a positive one, results in a period of grieving, because change is inherently a loss. That brought me to the question: how do we support people in the most extreme circumstances?'

The answer, Belanger noticed, often comes in the form of bouquets and dishes of food, which are the starting point for her Aldrich show. Among her new sculptures are a meal tray for one, fruit bowls, and neatly configured floral arrangements, in a soothing palette of pastel and neutral tones. Each element is slyly subverted – the fruit looks bitten into, with apples almost reduced to their cores, and in a surrealist touch, beckoning fingers and lips sprout among the flowers. The tableau is completed by an array of outsized pills (a comment on how pharmaceuticals seem to have become part of the American diet, she says), and burnt candles and matches that highlight the passage of time.

Subtly humorous beneath their mundane surface, these objects are typical of Belanger's artistic output, »



‘These absurd temporary objects are made in a material that literally will last forever’

Above left and top right, sculptures and custom-made plinths for Belanger's Aldrich show, including a tray of 1950s food that the artist calls 'so weird and strange, and kind of gross'

Above right, the Skutt automatic kiln she uses to fire all her sculptures

which has explored such themes as the manipulative tactics of the advertising industry, where she had worked as a prop stylist before her MFA; the objectification of women; and the inner lives of ordinary people (her New Museum show centred on a receptionist's desk, with an open drawer revealing what one might consume to cope with daily stress). Compared to her earlier work, the Aldrich pieces hit a more sombre note that feels in tune with the times.

Belanger has devoted equal attention to her furniture-shaped plinths: 'I want them to also participate in this moment when humans almost emotionally recede from their lives,' she reflects. Their clean, modernist forms often incorporate salvaged bits of midcentury furniture. Supporting the dining table, for instance, are bases from Charles and Ray Eames' 'Aluminum Group' chairs, which have been powder-coated to match the tabletop fabric. Belanger is careful to highlight that the use of midcentury American motifs isn't rooted in nostalgia: 'It's the idealised myth that fascinates me, because of the political climate here, with President Trump declaring that he's going to Make America Great Again. But that's never going to happen.' Drawing attention to the human cost of midcentury prosperity, she also gave a set of lounge chairs bronze fingertips for legs: her way of making idealised forms more relatable, and alluding to how 'certain people are almost utilised like objects'.

The Aldrich exhibition – since postponed to mid-September – will be Belanger's solo institutional debut, and while the museum is small, it has a strong track record, offering first museum shows to the likes of Olafur Eliasson, Huma Bhabha, Kaws and Mark Dion. Belanger's prospects look good, even as the new show suggests collective disquiet: the ceramic sculptures and their plinths will constitute one elegiac space, while a separate, smaller corner will be dressed up as 'a little purgatory', comprising a wall-mounted phone, a long bench and plants; and a 30ft-long pleated grey curtain will line an entire gallery wall, alluding to 'what lies beyond'. The show's title, 'Through the Eye of the Needle', refers to the Christian adage that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Explains Belanger: 'We exist in this world, where we're just trading stuff, and accumulating stuff, but ultimately that is super temporary.'

Would Belanger say the same of her own artworks? 'These absurd temporary objects are made in a material that literally will last forever,' comes the reply. 'Archaeologists of the future can dig up some weird cigarette butt or lipstick, and infuse meaning into it that was never present.'*

'Through the Eye of the Needle', 21 September-9 May, The Aldrich, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, CT, USA, aldrichart.org; genesisbelanger.com