

M + B

MOUSSE

Playtime

By Andrew Berardini
Issue 52
February 2016

Inverted gears warp inward, raw metal with an organic curve. A post-industrial sea creature, this mouthy hunk of raw metal plunks onto a slick primary-hued plinth, raised just off the floor. Balls in the colors of faded ice cream sag without bounce. Chopped slides arced and prone beam in more cheerful primaries their unuseful curves, some magic of modern material cast just so for the whimsy of children. Old car parts cast shadows on photo paper like those nuclear winters you hear about where the flash of the explosion makes vaporized bodies permanent shadows on thick walls. And these special stones carved just so, a calcite peach, a disembodied alabaster tit, they sit on these bright primary plinths too, though the latter was spotted in a makeshift bar sitting on the glossy surface of a piano, regaled with cheap barroom chatter and an instrumental from the keys of Wham's immortal Careless Whispers. Playground minimalism plunked with curved stones from the pornographic end of Noguchi or Hepworth, the work of Nevine Mahmoud is all of these things.

The locked weirdness between modern materials and shapely living bodies, the natural and unnatural, a yearning for some kind of order refused with a chop, the roughest metal lingering on those perfect plinths. Dangerous pussies or vagina dentata or whatever, anyway you cut those lopsided circles you still don't put your fingers in them. The stones on the other hand beg for a soft touch to see if its translucent skin as yielding as it looks. The peach, though suggestive, still feels PG, laying a finger on that can go down without a hint of the illicit. But wanting to touch the disembodied boob (even thinking of it as a boob without a body) feels just a little bit creepy. One doesn't often view sculpture begging to be handled.

Every time I see one of John McCracken's spacey, leaning planks, I want to smear a greasy thumb across the perfect sheen of its surface. I yearn to mar its perfection with my imperfect, squelching, sweating body. The triumph over the messy living over the perfection of these objects' inhumanly (or post-humanly) modern materials. His work has become easy shorthand for me in thinking about contemporary commodity fetishism and its attendant alienation, another way to throw my body on the machine.

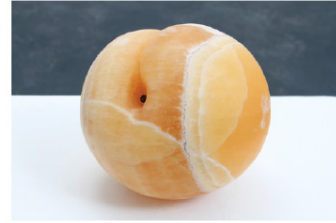
Most minimalists, though less fetish-y, still beg for a hand to finger their unhandled forms and make them more human. If seen as a cautionary tale of our sometimes disastrous love affair with machines, Donald Judd and Carl Andre look like ignored Cassandras making monuments to the tragedy of disappeared bodies. But seen as they wished themselves and their work to be understood, they were butch ultra-literalists. They wanted things that could not be anything but what they were, sucked of all content, smashing old illusions, doing it with all the romance of a stack of plywood. Monuments to an emptied-out monumentality, or truly (at least to me) triumphal sculptures to industry at the moment when its force started to fail. They poured their concrete and stacked their bricks just as all the American steel mills went rust belt and their factories and foundries were dubbed Superfund sites. In chopped forests and mine runoff, in quarried mountains and chemical treatments, the EPA might be able to better tell you how much toxic wastes goes into the creation of that literal geometry of industrial manufacture. Industrial materials were also employed in that generation by female artists as well but to very different effect. Eva Hesse and Alina Szapocznikow made corporeal sculptures with these materials but found themselves in early graves, most likely from their unmasked exposure to their media's carcinogenic chemicals. Szapocznikow, a Jew during World War II, had survived Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen and peritoneal tuberculosis, both experiences that brought a contemplation of corporeality to her work in all its fragile mortality and occasional sex appeal, but it was likely the polyester resins that gave her the breast cancer that eventually took her life. Also a casualty of Nazism, Hesse as a child made it out of Germany, but her uncle and grandparents died in concentration camps. Clearly less representational than Szapocznikow's cast body parts, Hesse's sculptures differed greatly from Judd and Andre in its palpable psychological moods, organic forms, and occasional sexual innuendo.



"New Babylon" installation view at Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, 2015.
Courtesy: the artist and Roberts & Tilton, Culver City



Above: Aline Szapocznikow, *Aufgehört* c. 1968. © Aline Szapocznikow by SIAE, Rome, 2018. Courtesy: Estate Aline Szapocznikow / Fiori Stenalewski / Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris. Photo: Fabrice Goussat
 Bottom left: John McCracken, *Flash*, 2010. Courtesy: David Zwirner, New York / London
 Bottom, right: Barbara Hepworth, *Large and Small Forms*, 1954. © Barbara Hepworth Estate. Courtesy: The Pier Arts Centre Collection, Orkney



1. *Vitrine project* (detail), 2015. Courtesy: JGAN, Los Angeles; 2. Studio view, 2015. Courtesy: the artist; 3. *Flash*, 2010. Courtesy: the artist; 4. From left to right: c. 2015, month, 2015, June 2015. Courtesy: the artist; 5. *Fast & Loose with color box*, 2015. Courtesy: Françoise Chabauty Gallery, Los Angeles

The work of Nevine Mahmoud lives in this tradition of sculpture set forth by Hesse and Szapocznikow through a similar use of materials and concerns. But her meditations on her mediums absorb some of the hard edges leftover from a fetish minimalist like McCracken, the tension between the plinth and the knotted hunk of metal atop it, between the rough industrial skin and the slick surface it rests upon. The corporeality that Nevine brings to her work, through inclusive of both the psychological complex and surreally sexual, also finds a curious element of play: the balls, the slides, those specific colors. Though the elemental metal works look quite menacing in their way, the shapely slides bear a human curve. Looking at Nevine's work, I kept dreaming of Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1963). In his DVD commentary for the British Film Institute, scholar Philip Kemp described the film's plot as exploring "how the curve comes to reassert itself over the straight line." The hard angles of modernity, cookie cutter mass production, the straight lines that the gray worker's walk of the new modern Paris (and the occasional striking color brought by flowers, vivid non-conformists, and the working class). The old Paris construction workers and dancing teenagers walk and move in curved, organic paths and rhythms. Tati's iconic character Mr. Hulot himself in his messy humanity is hilariously and somewhat melancholically lost in the mess of this bloodless, boxy universe. Given this paradigm, it's hard for me not to think of Judd, Andre, and the gang as purveyors of this soulless modernity, and Hesse, Szapocznikow, and Tati as bodies trying to resist its hard geometries on their round bodies, some to more violent effects than others of course (but the world has always been so much harder on women to be sure). This is a false dichotomy perhaps, but I still feel it.

Humor and play itself are rebellions against the efficiencies of modern life, the exhausting churn of perpetual work so many people in the industrial and postindustrial world find themselves in. Our generations ultra-modern materials have long left plywood and concrete behind, but we all stare at the unbroken perfection of computer screens. Apple's triumph was to make the least machine looking of machines; its sleek metal and plastic without orifice as if it was shat from a robot and never saw a human hand (which we artist too much or reduce his work to a single element) this is also a clear tactic of late-capitalism.

"Play" is one of those words that seem to litter contemporary art writing to the point where even I read one of this delightful world with a bit of a pause, but rather than dismissing a cliché, perhaps I'd rather explore why we need to feel this sense of play, why an artist like Nevine choose to make these beautiful, almost classical, post-minimalist objects out of balls and slides, along with those old car parts and menacing hunks of metal. Not a Luddite, I don't wish to attack modernity and its mechanical advancements wholesale but such progress has casualties. The assembly line of death that both Hesse and Szapocznikow barely escaped, the industrial poisons that eventually took them. And though the issues are maybe not so stark, we still somewhat blindly rush forward into futures without thinking of the whiplash of progress, worked to death and always complaining of being "busy," as the old John Lennon song goes, by giving us no time instead of it all. And here in the work of Nevine I find both the promise of play and the material reveal of the suppression of labor, all seen the perspective of an intelligence in full possession of a body aware of the potential casualties of our most modern desires.