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NEVINE MAHMOUD | SECOND BASE IN A WHITE CUBE OR: A DIALECTIC HOMECOMING

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When Nevine Mahmoud first began making art, she mainly cast sculptures in plaster and metal. However, upon arriving in California in 2012 for her graduate studies at the University of Southern California, she became fascinated by the idea of working with the abundant regional stone, including bright orange honeycomb calcite and red and orange alabaster from Utah. Inspired by the area's offerings, Mahmoud quickly shifted from casting to carving, eager to explore a traditional process in more contemporary ways. "I choose materials that require extreme problem solving," she shares, drawn to producing objects that belie the strenuous means by which they were achieved. The tension between Mahmoud's taxing labor and the soft and sensual forms she creates imbues each stone sculpture with a poetic delicacy that defies the inherent bounds of its hard material.

After years of hollowing out stone to create her sculptures, Mahmoud wanted to investigate means of achieving hollowness without intensely extracting material. Working with glass offers this possibility, as the glass-blowing process involves a hollowing out of its hot, supple form without any chiseling required. Its intimate molding technique has been regarded as a sensual act since ancient times, making glass an especially fitting medium for Mahmoud to deploy in her erotically-charged work. "Casting and carving are both subtractive but operate totally differently, so I like working between those two," says Mahmoud, connecting her engagement with both materials. She collaborates with glass-blowing specialists to create her glass pieces, but carves all of the stone

works herself. While her sculptures are indebted to outsourced labor and to a community of stone carvers who taught her much of what she knows, everything is ultimately channeled through her.

Mahmoud's recently-opened show at Nina Johnson Gallery in Miami marks a new milestone in her continually evolving practice. *Bella Donna* is a further development of the glasswork the artist exhibited at NADA Miami in 2018, and displays an entirely new set of stone and glass sculptures that effectively sum up her past two years of work. Mahmoud sees each exhibition as "a different articulation of these objects interacting with each other." Their unique communication within each distinct exhibition space collectively reveals what lies at the heart of Mahmoud's practice: sensuality, juxtaposition, and playfulness.



While Mahmoud originally resisted the allure of producing erotic objects, she eventually succumbed, simultaneously underscoring a desire to touch sculptures in a traditionally untouchable space. Immediately drawn to the peach form, blatant and obvious in its vaginal assimilation, Mahmoud was thrilled when considering how people would respond to it. Her sensual forms, such as "breast (sailor Venus)" and "Bust (Babette)," respectively, and single legs in "Flute limb (1)," are always elegant and occupy a delicate balance between the scandalous and the sophisticated. She has carefully cultivated her own vocabulary outside of societal boundaries, which allows her to render seductive sculptures that exist within a space unique to her vision.

Her vocabulary, however, fits almost perfectly into that of erotic sculpture of the 1960s. "I am so indebted to sculptors of the '60s and '70s, because their experimentation was rooted in basic, traditional ideas of what it means to split something up, of weight, fragments, plasticity," she notes. She considers sculptures from the 1960s to be some of the "most compelling objects to be around." Working towards her Bachelor's degree in London, Mahmoud was presented with a canon of twentieth century sculpture that largely prioritized white, male artists. She immediately noticed that sculpture made by women was incredibly overlooked. Polish sculptor and Holocaust survivor, Alina Szapocznikow, for example, is an artist whose history, Mahmoud says, "missed out on while they were

looking at artists such as Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois." Szapocznikow serves as a great inspiration for Mahmoud, whose forms reinterpret Szapocznikow's sensual, tactile sculptures from the 1960s. "There is a direct relationship between what I've been doing for the past five years and Szapocznikow's practice," attests Mahmoud.

Mahmoud is excited about the resurfacing of Szapocznikow and other women sculptors of that decade. This newfound belief in and respect for their work allows Mahmoud to continue feeling confident in the way she approaches her own practice today. She is aware of the immediate connection her work draws to the erotic sculptures of this time period, and for this reason, is always trying to understand where exactly her work fits into our contemporary moment. However, this lasting legacy of the sixties might demonstrate the endurance of issues from that time period—now, of course, experienced in different forms and articulations. This historical moment is marked by the concerns of the Civil Rights, Women's, Gay, and Anti-war Movements, all of which persist in evolved manners today. Mahmoud's artistic identification with this decade demonstrates its continued relevance in our current time as well as an ongoing need to fight these battles as they endure in our world now.

Mahmoud says, “I consider all of my work feminist in the adjective sense. I am a confident, self-empowered woman making work, and my work is a direct expression of that,” she asserts. Mahmoud is constantly figuring the female body and confronts people with forms that are erotic and sensual, feminized or feminizing. Her sculptures exist in a state of precarious yet perfect balance between the provocative, scandalous, and tantalizing. She cleverly destabilizes the power of the male greats who have gained their prestige by casting women into bust form or by subjugating the female figure to a perpetual existence on a pedestal. Unlike men such as Allen Jones, whose sculptures of the late 1960s quite literally turn women into objects of the male gaze and confiscate any and all of their bodily autonomy, Mahmoud introduces her own female subjectivity and sensibility to her work. In doing so, she subverts the fetishistic male mode of viewing and opens up an entirely new set of possibilities for her sculptures.

These works play with our perception, almost asking us to reach out and touch due to their allure and tactility, while their materiality simultaneously introduces a sense of danger to our encounters. While her stone works have the potential to injure us if unhinged, we simultaneously assume a great responsibility when interacting with her delicate glass pieces. This layered experience also makes a powerful statement about consent, especially when considering the intimate, female form in her work. What exactly is an appropriate way to interact with these objects? Mahmoud, of course, thinks deeply about how to place her works in the gallery. With some propped on pedestals, others the ground, and a number mounted on the wall, each sculpture asks to be approached and observed in a unique way. For Mahmoud, there is always a delicate harmony between sculptural form and installation. For example, “Cherry Viçosa (lush cherry)” —a 300-pound cherry, made of hand-polished Portuguese marble—sits in perfect balance in the outside courtyard. While it is precarious as a round form resting on a flat, horizontal surface, it is also entirely self-sufficient, appearing strong, sturdy, and rooted in place.

Mahmoud’s titles also factor into how we should perceive these objects. From “breast (jamón jamón)” to “Bust (Genie),” Mahmoud is deliberately lighthearted rather than prescriptive. “I prefer the title of the works to play with the object in question instead of define its boundaries,” she clarifies. “So word play, mimetic sounds, and pop cultural references are ways that I might confuse, subvert, or exaggerate qualities of the sculpture. With much of the newer work being figurative and feminized, I have found many titles in names and characters. Often with recurring shapes, I use an umbrella term to communicate its persistence.” Of course, the exhibition’s title, *Bella Donna*, similarly embodies Mahmoud’s cheeky approach to her erotic sculpture. Translating to “beautiful woman,” it ironically refers to a whole while Mahmoud’s work segments the woman’s body into breasts and legs, distinct components of a full entity.

Underneath their playful exteriors, Mahmoud’s sensual sculptures are embedded with deep meaning, and, thereby, occupy a vital place within the art world today. While women’s bodies continue to be heavily censored in both physical and virtual spaces, Mahmoud’s sultry sculptures ask the radical question of why female sexuality is still deemed negative and even obscene within contemporary societal standards. Through the act of embracing and harnessing its sensual power through her sculptures, Mahmoud frees the female form in her work and dreams of a world in which women can experience that same freedom in their everyday lives.

