

Cassie Packard, "Review: Jessi Reaves", *Artforum*, November, 2022, p. 188-189

REVIEWS

ARTFORUM

Jessi Reaves

BRIDGET DONAHUE

Enlarging upon the commodity fetish in *Das Kapital* (1867), Karl Marx characterized a simple wooden table as an animate monstrosity. "So soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent," he wrote. "It not only stands with its feet on the ground . . . it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than 'table-turning' ever was." For Marx, who likely had the then-recent innovation of mass-producible bentwood furniture on his mind, the "table-turning"—a form of séance popularized during the nineteenth century—that summoned garrulous spirits seemed a rather unexceptional thing compared to the marvelously strange and transmogrifying "turn" of commodification.

The insistent animacy of Jessi Reaves's work in "At the well," her exhibition at Bridget Donahue, gestures to the presence of inspiring forces within her furniture-based bricolages: One sees labor relations and poltergeists, yes, but also affective projections, cultural baggage, and the social and material lives of the objects themselves. Reaves approaches furniture as raw material and subject matter, scrutinizing it as both referent and sign. The artist and former freelance reupholsterer appropriates, strips, and guts sundry appointments purchased from antique shops, salvaged from curbs, or gifted by friends. She then sculpturally reconstitutes the deconstructed fixtures using polyurethane foam, batting, pieces of plywood, car parts, metal tubing, fabric (flounced, draped, wrapped), wooden crockery, mesh lampshades, and more to produce chaotic hybrids that trouble the binary of art and design, which has been further irritated here by the inclusion of six flamboyantly refurbished "exhibition seating" booths from which one can observe the work.

Jessi Reaves, *Cubbard with Barrel Doors*, 2022, wood, metal, Plexiglas, paint, cedar, vinyl, sawdust, wood glue, 71 × 24 × 24".



In stark contrast to the sleek modernist furniture that her sculptures frequently absorb, Reaves's phagocytic creations flaunt the labor that produced them, piling on signs of toil as if they were diverting baubles. *Bad Apartment Shelf* (all works 2022), whose title alludes to the Kleinian notion of a "bad object," is a vertical wall-mounted rack crawling with biomorphic wicker outgrowths and wooden protuberances and accented by a Lilliputian cabinet clumsily inlaid with flowers. Masquerading as masking tape, strips of blue craft feathers encrusted with glue synthesize labor and ornament. Knobby brown excrescences of agglutinated sawdust and adhesive—a mixture typically used by woodworkers as discreet filler—act as joinery, repudiating subtlety as they yoke together disparate components with crude exuberance.

Essentially bereft of serviceable shelving, the DIY-style sculpture fails at functionality. As Reaves repeatedly voids, inverts, or displaces a piece of furniture's use value, familiar domestic trappings transform into unruly strangers. Take *An Unnatural Act* (*Slipper Chair*), a patched-up version of the titular object, originally designed to help put one's shoes on. It is lashed to the elaborate whorls of the base of a rocking chair by Michael Thonet (the originator of bentwood furniture) and a finely wrought headboard devised to support sleep. Characterized by helter-skelter layers that telegraph discord rather than comfort, this piece is riddled with stalemate-inducing contradictions: One can imagine the difficulty posed by the task of putting on shoes in a swaying chair or finding restorative slumber in a pint-sized seat. *Waste Basket with Exaggerated Flounce*, featuring a frothy semi-sheer fabric draped over a square trash bin, renders the receptacle unusable. It instead operates as a tableau in which the decorative tops the functional, laying gendered design hierarchies to waste. Cheap feminine ornament trounces utility once again in *Cubbard with Barrel Doors*, where obstructive wooden bows sprout from a barrel-chested cabinet like toadstools from a rotten log, impeding any use of the item's stripped shelving. An upturned wooden bowl affixed with another bowl caps the cupboard like a crown.

In *A sample of the truth*, a handsome Hans Wegner-style folding chair—meticulously and restrainedly constructed for elegance, comfort, and easy storage—is merged with curved metal appendages bearing bloated sawdust-and-glue agglomerations embedded with crumpled metal reflector domes, curling wires, and wooden beads and bowls. A landscape painted across the bowls spills across these heavy concretions, suggesting that this lowly gallimaufry has "high art" aspirations—or is perhaps executing a rather shoddy con job. "Things should do the job they are designed for," said Wegner in 1979. "I don't think that's asking too much." But Reaves's ungovernable furniture has other ideas—to quote the posthumanist thinker Karen Barad, it "feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns, and remembers." —Cassie Packard

Johanna Fateman, "Goings On About Town: Jessi Reaves", *The New Yorker*, October 15, 2022,
<https://www.newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town/art/jessi-reaves-2022>

THE NEW YORKER

ART

Jessi Reaves

This New York artist, originally from Portland, Oregon, continues to mine the rich gray area between furniture design and sculpture, presenting absurdist hybrid objects of debatable utility in her new show, “At the Well.” The seventeen sculptures on view—banquettes, cabinets, a table—share a sutured, cobbled-together look; wood glue, sawdust, and polyurethane foam are among the materials used to connect their disparate found elements. Collectively, the works achieve an appealing clamor. Regarded individually, however, their artful garbling of (usually modernist) aesthetics suggests distinct comments on gender, class, and taste. “An Unnatural Act (Slipper Chair)” combines a cracked and taped faux-leather seat—whose form recalls Mies van der Rohe’s iconic Barcelona chair—with the dissonantly feminine curlicues of what look like two headboards. Installed nearby is “Bad Apartment Shelf,” a coolly monstrous, wall-mounted amalgam of storage and display—at once a problem and a solution. The work’s dark jigsawed shapes and snaking wicker find Reaves revelling in grotesque ornamentation and a perversely inefficient use of space.

— *Johanna Fateman*

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JESSI REAVES Leaves it dirty

June 17, 2021

“Good design shouldn’t be noticed,” goes the cliché. Charles and Ray Eames’ aim with their designs, for example, was famously to shape how users act – without them being aware of it. In her early sculptures, artist Jessi Reaves took such modernist design icons as her raw materials. By reworking Eames and Isamu Noguchi “masterpieces,” she was challenging their design ethos – resulting in perfection besmirched, functionalism unusable, beauty (sometimes literally) turned inside out. The work left an impression less of destruction than of playfulness. Anti-functionalism veered into absurdism.

Reaves’ more recent work leaves her design ancestors behind, but finds the surreal in the quotidian in headboards without beds and “waterproof” shelves. Reaves refuses the distinction between art and craft, but doesn’t rely on visible mastery or technical prowess. Instead, she pursues the unrefined innocence and playful sensuality that craftwork can attain. Amid the mischief, there is an honesty to the materials used: almost everything is made of plywood, sawdust, and foam – supplies that, these days, are normally concealed within the furnishings that surround us. Peeling back the surface of the everyday, in other words, Reaves reveals the beauty of bare bones.

Interview: Octavia Bürgel



Jessi Reaves, *Idol of the Hares*, 2014. Oak, polyurethane foam, silk, cotton, aluminum, and ink, 38 × 28 × 48 inches. Collection Sam and Erin Falls, Los Angeles, California.

I've been thinking a lot about arts education and what it should look like. In general, institutions are interesting to discuss right now, because I think the experience of Covid has lifted the veil off of the systems we play into.

It certainly has. I'm still digesting what it has been to teach during Covid. I was teaching at Cornell University for the first time, and I didn't even get to go there. It was all through Zoom. It was a tough year to try to instill confidence in people about making art, but the pandemic also brought really cool parameters with it. The undergrad students have limited resources to begin with – money and other things that restrict what you're able to make. It was cool to see how much the students were into drawing and making digital work. Because of the format, I ended up showing them a bunch of video art. I feel like a reference is one of the best things you can share. When I was in college, everybody was obsessed with Neo Rauch, and then the reference went away and for the next 10 years nobody was thinking about or referencing him. I was terrified to show them this video art, thinking, "They've probably seen it all." It's out there on the internet – I've watched these things probably 10–15 times – but it was cool that a lot of them hadn't seen them before. You take for granted what you already know, and teaching forces you to get past that and reiterate things that, over time, have become second nature.

You studied at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) around the same time as Mike Eckhaus and Zoe Latta of Eckhaus Latta. I see strong material resonances with the fashion brand in your sculptural work, even though you're engaging really different functions.

Mike and Zoe are my really close friends – and part of my origin story. I wouldn't have moved to New York if it hadn't been for them. They got this big loft space near the Navy Yard – there were six bedrooms and they encouraged me to move in. I'd visited New York a bunch while I was in Rhode Island, but it's such a different experience visiting than it is making the decision to live here. I've been here 10 years now – shocking! – and I'm completely indebted to New York in every way, in terms of what I'm doing now.

When I moved in with them, Mike and Zoe hadn't started Eckhaus Latta yet. We were all doing dumb freelance stuff. I'm going to embarrass them, but their big break as a collaborative team was when they got to design this dress for Lady Gaga. They were so excited. They stayed up all night designing this thing and it obviously never happened. It was a lot of shit like that – weird antics, living with six people in this very messy place. When they did start the brand, it was motivating to me on another level. We had just been partying a lot, being low lives. There's this thing that happens when people around you start to get their shit together. You're like, "Wait – what am I going to do?" It was motivating and sad, in a way, because I wish there was some deeper drive that I could blame it on. But it was really just a late twenties panic. My other friend started this record label, White Material, and Mike and Zoe started Eckhaus Latta, and I just remember this existential dread of not doing anything. It all helped build towards my being more diligent.

Did you have jobs that allowed you to work in sculpture or in any tactile capacity during that time?

I always had physical jobs – doing window displays, working install for private events, installing custom sculptures for the Syfy Channel. The Syfy Channel job in particular was crazy. I made friends with the building manager, who was this hippie artist. For whatever reason he liked me, and he would have me make things for this crazy mansion in Soho that was owned by the guy who produced *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The house had these huge windows and I spent so much time there making six-story curtains. I made things for that house for almost a whole year. Anytime anything would break, I would just go work on it. But I also had dumb day jobs. The low point, really, was working at an architecture office.

It's fascinating that you were basically an on-call repairman. I feel like there's a way in which your work is almost mimicking the distinction between brokenness and repair. I remember experiencing your installation at the 57th Carnegie International. The room it was presented in was very dim, almost cavernous, and included this large, ottoman-like seating structure that dominated the center of the room. There was a comfort to the environment, but it was an uncanny familiarity. It felt like being a child again, asking, "How do I interact with this?"



Jessi Reaves, *Mantlepiece Sconce*, 2019. Metal, glass, fabric, sawdust & wood glue, lamp wiring & bulbs. 41 × 58 × 12 in. (104.14 × 147.32 × 30.48 cm)

Courtesy the artist, Herald St, London and Bridget Donahue NYC. Photo: Andy Keate

Jessi Reaves, *Blue heart shelf*, 2019. Wood and metal chairs, woven fabric, plexiglass, paint, plastic, sawdust, wood glue 96 × 21 × 30 in. (243.84 × 53.34 × 76.20 cm) Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC. Photo: Gregory Carideo

I got put in the weirdest part of the museum – what they call the Heinz Hall of Architecture. The Heinz Ketchup family paid all this money to build an architecture wing on the museum in the late 1980s-early 1990s. It sits in that period of time: the walls are yellow stucco and dark wood. There's a funky decorativeness to it. The museum bought Frank Lloyd Wright's last office, which was in San Francisco, and piece by piece they had it installed in the room that my work was in. The dimensions of the room are custom to that office. At some point they sold the office to a museum in Buffalo and

turned that room into a gallery where they display architectural renderings. It has linen walls where they pin up old blueprints, but they have to keep it dim because the blueprint paper is sensitive to light. Where I grew up, Starbucks was high design. Everybody aspired to have their kitchen look like Starbucks with those glass blown pendant lamps. I made an offhanded comment to the curator when we were walking through the space, like, “This is very Java House.” Somewhere between corporate and artsy, this weird Seattle synthesis. For a while, I regretted saying that, because she was like, “You have to be in the Java room.”

Museums are interesting because you need somewhere for people to sit. It’s part of the design of any museum. If you can do that in a way that’s interesting, you’re controlling where people linger, or what they linger on. I wanted to make that piece such that it sat perfectly between being repulsive – the surface is painted and crusty – but also looking so soft that you can tell you’re supposed to sit there. The more challenging part is how to explain that interaction to people. I don’t want the work to be instructive. I don’t want there to be signage that says, “Please sit.” It’s more about the encounter with the thing – about wondering *if* you can sit. There’s a certain person who’s willing to test that boundary.

I went to see the Bruce Nauman retrospective at PS1 a couple of years ago, and they showed that work called *Body Pressure*. It’s a pink poster that doubles as an instructional performance. I was there with a friend who was into modern dance, so this piece was right up her alley. She began following the instructions, and immediately the guard came over and was like, “Sorry, there’s a scheduled performance of the piece at these intervals.” It was a total interruption of a very pure interaction.

I’m surprised by that. It almost works better when you encounter that poster in somebody’s house or something. You’re waiting for them to make coffee and you just have a moment with it. I mean, I hate the idea of performing. How do I even say this? It’s the same way I feel about a music festival, where I’m so aware of the expectation to have fun. You’re looking left and right; you’re reassuring everyone around you that this *is* fun. I hate the idea of that in my work, but I’ve had the same moment where I’ve gone back to my own show when it’s open to the public and just sat down. Like, “Here I am, reassuring you that you can do this,” demonstrating the casualness, or the potential casualness of the object.

I don’t really think the institution is the best venue for my work for that reason. I much prefer the commercial gallery because you can do what you want. You still own the work most of the time, so you can be a bit more risky with it. One of the weirdest things about the recent show at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston is that I don’t own most of that work. They hardly let me touch it or move it around. That’s an experience I haven’t had before. I’m lucky to know that way of working with your own work, where it’s almost gone through a phase change. It’s not mine anymore. I would love for people to be able to sit on everything at that show, but I don’t get to make that decision. Hopefully the work of the sculpture, when it was in my hands, was done in a way that you still feel that you could sit. Hopefully it holds on to that. One of the chairs in the Texas show had come straight from this home in LA and was covered with hair. The museum was like, “We’re going to do a quick broom down.” I was like, “Just leave it dirty.”

I don't want someone to have to tell you to sit, because it's more about the encounter with the thing – wondering if you can sit. There's a certain person who's willing to test that boundary.



Jessi Reaves, *Vicious circle wall lamp*, 2019. Wicker, metal, paint, sawdust, woodglue, fabric, driftwood, lamp and wiring 50 × 16 × 23 in. (127.00 × 40.64 × 58.42 cm) Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC. Photo: Gregory Carideo

Jessi Reaves, *Everyday, I don't. Standing container*, 2019. Plexiglass, metal, wooden parts, wicker, sawdust, wood glue, paint 42 × 25 × 30 in. (106.68 × 63.50 × 76.20 cm) Image courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC.



Jessi Reaves, *Floral ottoman with trapped table*, 2017-2019. Plywood, foam, fabric, paint, hardware, glass and steel 30.3 × 145.7 × 102.4 in. (76.96 × 370.08 × 260.10 cm) Courtesy the artist, Herald St, London and Bridget Donahue NYC. Photo: Andy Keate.



Jessi Reaves, *More Personal Headboard*, 2017. Plywood, sawdust, wood glue, foam, silk, nylon cord, ink, wood putty 24 × 98 × 13 1/2 in. (60.96 × 248.92 × 34.29 cm)

I actually wanted to ask you about preciousness. I think there's a transformation that occurs when the art object actualizes as a commodity. But there's also a preciousness to the curatorial ideal of art. Whereas artists – at least in the conversations I've had – are like, "This is some shit that fell out of my brain."

Truly. It can be hard to take that stuff seriously, because I just see whatever I was trying to figure out at the time. I'm really into momentum in terms of working through ideas. I think the beauty of continuing to make art is that you can travel really far. You wind up somewhere completely different. Something you made three years ago almost looks foreign to you. Sometimes I've had regrets that maybe I should never have shown certain artworks. What if I hadn't shown them? What if I just threw them away? I just try to focus on whatever I'm working on next. Which is awkward about having a show with things from the past.

Is there a dissonance that happens in the meantime?

Yeah. And it's not that I can't stand to look at my old work, I just see something different in it now. I have a lot of friends with skeptical attitudes towards what it is to be an artist now. I don't want to do a virtual walkthrough of the show. I don't feel that I should have to do that, and it doesn't feel like it serves the art. I'm like, I did my work and now I'll back off. But you start to understand, through talking to people, that there are artists who maybe have regrets about not squeezing every opportunity for everything it's worth. I enjoy the kind of range of advice and experience you can get from people, because no two artists' careers are the same.

I've been into this artist Colette Lumiere. She was really good friends with Jeff Koons and Richard Prince and they made some collaborative work together, but her career went in a very different direction from theirs. It's so special to discover someone's work when it's not completely known, her website is an incredible archive.

I'm not interested in mastery at all. I'm really interested in the opposite – in what comes out of figuring out how to do something the wrong way, and feeling emboldened to take on building something without the right tool or maybe without even planning ahead of time, just cutting the thing in half.

I want to quickly return to what you were saying about getting away with more in a gallery setting. I was looking at an image of one of your headboards. It has this forward motion, jutting out of the gallery wall. It registered as a repellent gesture. There's a playfulness to the way it keeps the viewer at an arm's length. Can you speak to that?

Broadly, I'm into object hierarchies and how they inform how design and art interact. There are a lot of sculptures that deal with chairs, and it's easy to put a certain psychology onto a chair. You can draw the connections effortlessly: an empty chair has a certain sort of psychological weight. When I was working on my last show at Bridget Donahue, the idea of the bed was pestering me. I knew I didn't want to make a bed; it's too loaded. I already feel like there is a paradoxical sexual component to some of my work, where it's both crude and delicate at the same time. So I knew that I didn't want to make a bed, but I liked the idea of a headboard. It becomes a different type of object without the bed in front of it; it becomes a weird painting, and people were really confused by that. That was the one piece in the show where people asked, "What is it?" It wound up being my favorite for that reason. There is more territory, more tension to push into when there can be a more roundabout way of coming to understand what the object is. That piece also showed me that there is a potential interplay between whatever the headboard is associated with as a functional object, and how I can use the titling to talk about it. I think that was titled *Headboard for One*, or something that. I liked the idea that the headboard is always symmetrical, and can imply two people. So I made one side of it really small and ungenerous, and then the other side had all these little scooped out places where you could put things. I liked that it was an imbalanced object. My friends have it now, so I get to see it at their house.

How does it feel to visit your work in a domestic context? I feel like a lot of the time you are also are playing off of ideas of domesticity, or kind of fucking with it.

I really like my friends having my artwork, because I get to see this thing over time. It's never fully thrilling to me to get a photo from a stranger of the thing in their house. When I was struggling to make stuff during quarantine, I caught up on trades and made a bunch of stuff for friends, which felt better than doing nothing.



Jessi Reaves, *NY state cabinet*, 2019. Wood, plexiglass, paint, sawdust, wood glue, hardware. 97 × 42 × 32 in. (246.38 × 106.68 × 81.28 cm) Courtesy the artist, Herald St, London and Bridget Donahue NYC. Photo: Andy Keate.

Jessi Reaves, *Rules Around Here (Waterproof Shelf)*, 2016. Plywood, vinyl, zippers, marker 64 × 29 × 20 in. (162.56 × 73.66 × 50.80 cm) Courtesy the artist, Herald St, London and Bridget Donahue NYC. Photo: Andy Keate.

I feel the term “craft” is sometimes used as a pejorative, but I also think that there’s a lot of technical knowledge – which is valuable – assumed in the term. I also think “craft” is frequently associated with the activity of women, and I don’t necessarily see a direct link to femininity in your work. The way that I see it expressed is in its juxtaposition with these more coded-masculine things, like woodworking or the language of construction. That’s where I see a tension.

I like that. I’m from Oregon, where the arts are really intertwined with craft. We didn’t have a contemporary art museum, but there was a lot of craft to see. It’s omnipresent. The ideas of mastery and craft are really tied together, but I’m not interested in mastery at all. I’m really interested in the opposite – in what comes out of figuring out how to do something the wrong way, and feeling emboldened to take on building something without the right tool or maybe without even planning ahead of time, just cutting the thing in half. I incorporate a lot of ready-made objects into my

sculptures, and I am drawn to a kind of craft sensibility in those things. There's a detail, a sense of time that comes with a crafted object. You were talking about contrast, or two things coming up against each other. When I take these crafted

objects, they collide with my more crude way of putting things together or cutting things apart. They become the detail within the work, where you'll see this object that's very sensitively made within something else.

I find there's often an overgrowth to your handling of material.

I try really hard not to be precious, even if I find something I'm excited about. I'll let things sit in the studio for a while so that they get dusty and become like everything else. Earlier, if I found something like a couch, I was way more interested in taking it apart – in stripping the leather off until you just have the foam, the leather, the little wooden connections, the frame, these disparate but component parts. Maybe there's a cool curvature to the back of the couch that you wouldn't necessarily arrive at without taking it apart. That process was really thrilling to me because I felt like those smaller pieces still held onto some of the information about the source object. When they are redistributed into various artworks, it becomes, like, "This has the back of a Thonet chair." If you know about that chair – whether you know it to be an important piece in design history, or you just know it as a catering chair – there's some kind of association there. Inevitably, I still take things apart, and there's a material revision of these objects, but right now I'm more interested in leaving things whole, in creating a sense of accumulation.

There's also a dark sense of humor in a lot of the work. *Waterproof Shelf* comes to mind. I find it really delightful and also quite unsettling – like, under what circumstances does it make sense? That question triggers a whole train of thought about floods or natural disasters. But I mention it also in terms of its wholeness – rather than some of your other sculptures, it really retains the recognizability of the source object. And the slip cover over it becomes this humorous thing, like a banana peel.

I'm so glad that made you laugh. There is an absurdity to the idea of a waterproof shelf. The idea of a slip cover is so funny: it reduces a very complex object, like a car or a boat or a chair, into a very simple form. There is something sad about it. It's like putting a dog in a little outfit. And then there's a cool tension – the slip cover is meant to protect the object, but it also makes it more fragile because you can't see what's underneath. I think that narrative – even if it doesn't translate to the finished artwork in a straightforward way – is something that a lot of artists create about their work as they're working. It might even just be how you refer to something, like a studio shorthand. I'll be like, "Ugh, the crusty one." And then that becomes its own story. I could go on like that forever.

I'm also really into the sawdust and glue fixative that shows up in a lot of your work. It's kind of its own performance. If all you were looking for was a way to glue two pieces together, you could do it fairly discreetly. But instead you'll opt to use this material that functions as adhesive but also as ornament.

I'm weirdly addicted to that material. It's so easy to make. I haven't focused on the performative aspect of it, but you're right. It's a play on joinery. You can see that it's put on. You can feel that it's like a wood clay or something. It's similar to what you get from ceramics sometimes, where you really feel the additive process. It's a free material that I get from the woodshop up the street, and it has limitless potential. It can be a solid cast, it can be how I connect two pieces of metal or wood, or it can be how I cover something like a screw hole or an attachment. It functions so well for me. I love the color of it – it's putrid. My friend, Thomas Barger, who worked with me for years, got really good at sanding it to a smooth level. At that point I wanted you to be able to reach out and touch it and for it to feel soft. Now, I don't even worry about that. Half the time, I'll paint over it. I want it to feel more urgently applied than beautiful.



Jessi Reaves, *Twice Is Not Enough (Red to Green Chair)*, 2016. Wood, sawdust, steel, foam, silk, leather, cotton 39 × 28 × 32 in. (99.06 × 71.12 × 81.28 cm)
Image Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC.

There are a lot of sketches hanging on the wall behind you. Is that usually how you develop form, or is drawing its own process, separate from sculpture?

It's very separate. I tape the drawings up so that I don't spill coffee or water on them, but I also think it's cute. This is always where I Zoom. It's nicer than a blank wall. For me, it comes down to timing: logically, the drawing would come first. It would tell you all this information that would be helpful to know going into making something. But

there's an inversion of that as well. There are also pieces of an object that I could never draw – those have to be built in real-time. There's some weird interaction, and the drawing is a pause in the process. Like, are you going to finish one before the other? I'm also messing with framing – making a frame for the drawing before the drawing. How would you then do the drawings? I have a thing about artists' frames: I sometimes think they're overcompensating, like you make the funky frame for the thing because the thing can't hold up on its own.

A frame also acts as a repellent. It's a boundary, literally.

I hadn't considered that. It is a deterrent, like a slipcover, in a way.

I want to quickly return to the show at CAM Houston. There's a significant generational divide between yourself and Elizabeth Murray. Did the cultural situation of her work, and its juxtaposition with yours, create any new tensions or realizations?

To be honest, they didn't dwell much on Elizabeth Murray in my art historical education. It was something that I found through friends who were into painting and knew about her. One characteristic of her work, which I really admire, is the fact that it takes up so much space psychically. If you think about the economy of a painting, there's a logic to it. It's easy to store. It's easy to slide a bunch of paintings onto a rack. There's an obedience to painting that Murray really messes with. Even the flat paintings are a combination of multiple canvases. They're so hard to install because of how they correspond to one another and the negative space between them. It's not difficult to admire what she took on, just in terms of the ambition of the objects and their construction. Quite a few of them are actually paintings of furniture – views of tables from the top-down, where the legs spiral out in these weird ways. You do spend part of your life just staring down at the table. She explodes that sad, contemplative moment in a 15-foot, extremely bizarre painting. I think there's something deep in her work, in these quiet moments that are animated by it. I see the gesture in that, in the staring down at the table, in staring at a cup.

Sometimes I sit here and draw whatever is in the studio. It'll often be things that are halfway or somewhere in the process of being worked on. It's really just to do something different, or if I'm too lazy to work, I'll draw. I like that the association with drawing is that it's schematic or preparatory. But for me, it's nothing. It's a version of the sculpture that doesn't end up existing.

Jessi Reaves, Gaetano Pesce, “It’s Alive! The Amorphous Imaginary of Gaetano Pesce: The Pioneering Italian Designers Speaks with Artist Jessi Reaves About His Life-Spanning Career”, *SSENSE*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.ssense.com/en-us/editorial/art/its-alive-the-amorphous-imaginary-of-gaetano-pesce>

SSENSE

IT’S ALIVE! THE AMORPHOUS IMAGINARY OF GAETANO PESCE

The Pioneering Italian Designer Speaks With Artist Jessi Reaves About His Life-Spanning Career

Interview: Jessi Reaves
Photography: Daniel Dorsa



Gaetano Pesce was born in 1939 in La Spezia, Italy, but has lived and worked in New York for the last 50 years. His work across architecture, industrial, and furniture design can also be seen as an art of social commentary — which, for Mr. Pesce, is a continued search to contextualize his bold aesthetic within a broader timeline of socio-political concerns. His models and drawings are held in some of the most renowned collections in the world, like the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and the Centre Pompidou in Paris, among others. His designs are bright, joyful, sensual, and never predictable.

Although widely recognized as a pioneer of Italian design, his work has continuously reinvented itself over a 50-year career, dancing across mediums and delighting in a great range of subject-matter. An eccentric, ironic, anti-design attitude is captured in the seeming banality of his forms: a giant foot; an armchair made of resin-soaked rags; a small, wooden, rainbow choo-choo train with a cotton puff of smoke. He is remarkably calm, determined, and loving in all that he does. Here, the 80-year-old designer welcomes artist Jessi Reaves into his Brooklyn studio, for a conversation on taste, aging, metaphor, and of course, chairs.



Jessi Reaves
Gaetano Pesce

The last exhibition I saw of your work was centered around the Pratt chair—I was hoping you could talk a little bit about that chair. One thing I noticed were the many hidden images within it, like sculpted figures of people having sex, that acted like brackets to support the seat.

This chair is a statement that tries to communicate and to tell a story. It has to do with a certain type of work, it represents different ways of being and of thinking: believing in work is almost a religion, the structure is a technical knowledge, and almost mathematical, a calculation. Making is an act of love, it is a culture, a mystery like a labyrinth, a science, an embrace and above all, it is affection for what you do.



Do you feel that your work plays with traditional notions of “good taste”?
I don’t think good taste has anything to do with this.

This chair and many of your other works rely on molds, but you force them into different territory. Typically the mold is a tool by which to make exact copies, but you really play with the content of the moulded object, or serial modes of production in general.

Yes, I try to make molds that are elastic so that I can de-form the mold in a way, so that each time it gives the object a different shape. I say that it is very important to be incoherent. That is what allows you to be free. I'm not talking about freedom in general, I'm talking about freedom over yourself. If you repeat yourself then you are stuck.

What about the coherence of images? You have spoken repeatedly about your ideas regarding imagery versus abstraction. It seems central to your philosophy of design: you have said that you prefer to communicate with images versus abstract shapes, and that you find it is easier for people to understand images.

Abstraction is very close to superfluous decoration, and generally it is simply a tasteful composition. Without a doubt we are in an era where communication has dramatically grown to the point where it has become a characteristic of our times, and art needs to take this into account. I believe that in order to communicate we must use a language that is understandable for those who follow us, and the simplest one for this would be the recognizable figure. If I wish to say that the red flag and its successors draw blood, I must show it with figures representing what I'm saying. For example, my work on the Tehran library at the time of the Shah— which also is relevant for our times— spoke of torture, and this was visible in the architectural forms that I had designed. That dictatorship, and even the one of today, weighed heavily on the minorities which could not support the regime and it got to the point of crushing them. These concepts are difficult to represent in an abstract language. Another valid example is women as prisoner of the prejudices of men, who has suffered violence for centuries: it cannot be represented in abstract works.



When we look at your work we often see images of people, heads and bodies. But I feel like your work is also quite painterly—are you interested in painting? Do you follow any artists?

I find Mondrian was much more interesting when he was young, and that Duchamp is very deep. I think that Michelangelo's contradictions are exceptional, and naturally Leonardo's curiosity makes me envious. Goya for the political content in his work, Giotto for his interest in progress and evolution, Masaccio for his suffering, Bernini for his irony in the Barcaccia Fountain, and Borromini for his contrasts. With futurists, I discovered the importance of new languages.

When I first saw your work, it was in images in books, but it blew a lot of doors open for me as an artist, especially in terms of what was possible between art and design. I appreciate the confidence and sense of humor in your work. Do you feel like you are someone who pushes the boundaries of design?

For the past forty years, I have been trying to make people understand that art has always been functional: a portrait was for resemblance. Representations of hell were to create respect for religious dogma. Representations of sex were to excite those who were no longer able to do it etc. Things then changed with photography, when art hid away to just one dimension, that of culture. One of the hardest things to do is to change someone's mind about these distinctions. I consider my work a way to widen the boundaries of art. If to what we call design, we add a philosophical, religious, or political component, then automatically it becomes an artistic message. For the past three years I have been interested in making work that does not belong to me. I believe that being unrecognizable is the proper way to live in our times, and in fact provokes the market, and it transforms it into something more intelligent than its current narrow-mindedness. The unpredictable causes surprises, doubts, curiosities—I think it broadens the mind and in a way, that is a function of art.

"THE WORK OF JUDD DOES NOT INTEREST ME."

What do you think of someone like Donald Judd, who made both art and furniture, but kept them in separate categories? Mainly he emphasized the opposite argument, that the essence of what makes art more like itself is its purposeful purposelessness.

The work of Judd does not interest me. I think that in the art world today there are many superficialities, prejudices, static minds, cliché, and for this reason, inventiveness, progress, experimentation, and creativity have a difficult life.

In some ways I agree with you, but I also feel like this is a moment when we want to call every last thing art. I like to play with those distinctions as well, but I also feel slightly protective of a certain definition of art, because it is one of the few places where you can be incoherent.

One story is that during a very cold winter in Venice, Peggy Guggenheim invited me to her house, which was a museum by day and a mansion by night, a place where she hosted friends. When we arrived we had on some very heavy coats, and when the butler took them, he turned around and hung them on a Giacometti sculpture. I immediately thought that it might break, but instead it resisted. Therefore the Giacometti sculpture was a work of art during the day, during opening hours of the museum, and a coat rack for the home in the evening.



You seem to use metaphor often when describing your work, one example is when describing the time in which we live. You often say that time is liquid—what do you mean by that?

I say liquid because of the values that rise and fall, appear and disappear like waves in the ocean, and also are feminine because a woman's mind is elastic, with values that coexist and contradict each other, but are always very active. As a young man, I was expelled from the public schools and so I was sent to an all-female school where I began to understand the mentality of a woman, which consists of being multidisciplinary, being available, being useful, all this comes from being the most important protagonist in creation. In the world where we are heading, we must choose between crisis and rebirth, that is, between a male mentality, and female mentality.

Interesting. But sometimes the narrative metaphors you provide for your work are a bit darker. One of your best-known works takes an image of a woman's body with a ball and chain, which is transformed into a pop object. Or the faces of a man and a woman in a relationship become a cabinet—it opens and they turn away from each other, metaphorically they are not communicating. Am I getting this right?

I think you have understood them well, but in a negative sense. The image in the chair is to accuse men of his offences for the past few centuries that have imprisoned women, and made them slaves. This occurs in Arab countries, but also in Japan, in Africa, and even in the most evolved countries. In reality, the chair (UP5 and UP6) was extremely optimistic because its intention was to point out the problem. Maybe this will lead to a revolution and we will no longer abuse this creature that represents half of the population. As for the cabinet work "Do You Still Love Me?" it is a representation of two lovers, which had a dispute, and when the doors of the closet are shut, they reconcile. In fact, one asks the other, "Do you still love me?"



It seems the main content of your work is not design per se, it is a commentary. So how much is the metaphorical content a reflection of your own life? What about searching for something that feels right without knowing why?

Many of them represent my life. But mostly it is a comment on what I see in reality, so I know why I do it. Sometimes it is very personal.

Jessi Reaves is an artist currently residing in New York. Her work challenges conceptions of the “furniture object” by re-framing its ontology. She has been included in numerous exhibitions including the 2017 Whitney biennial & the Carnegie international. She is represented by Bridget Donahue in New York and Herald Street in London.

Interview: Jessi Reaves
Photography: Daniel Dorsa
Date: March 4, 2020

Eliza Barry, "Jessi Reaves: II," *Brooklyn Rail*, May 2019.



ArtSeen

Jessi Reaves: II

by [Eliza Barry](#)



Installation view: *Jessi Reaves: II*, Bridget Donahue, New York, 2019. Photo: Gregory Carideo. © Jessi Reaves. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.

The show announcement for Jessi Reaves's *II* features a screen grab from a chase scene in *Jack Reacher*, a 2012 blockbuster action film starring Tom Cruise, in which a vintage, Chamberlain-ed Chevelle tries to run an unbudging, silvery Audi off the road. The image, once removed from the context of the film, serves as a poetic visualization of both tension and collision between material and time, a perfect (and waggish) analog to the tenor of the show.

Half the gallery space is occupied by a platform entirely carpeted with a dense, chocolate-colored pile. The platform performs a clever play on the media pit customary of luxe, tricked-out homes of the 1970s (a suburban basement replete with underage drinkers comes to mind too). Reaves takes the lines and color of the retro decor and transforms them into a tiered and minimal

structure. The platform lends the social, repose-ready elements that have run through Reaves's sculptures which have persistently taken form as chimeric furniture. Viewers can lounge in the pit but must mount or even traverse the brown isle to access some of the work in the exhibition.

The sculptures fuse familiar materials in unlikely combinations—glass, sawdust, polyester, rubber, driftwood—and subsume ready-made (or made-to-look ready-made) furniture parts to form animate composites. Hanging above the pile carpet, Drive through the back of your eyes (2019) functions as an uncanny scone. The metal structure of interconnected fixtures sits on the wall like a cluster of hard-shelled insects. A muted glow is cast through shades made from stretched-out statement T-shirts. One shade reads, "I Can't Go Out I Have A Podcast To Listen To," another sports a Yayoi Kusama pumpkin.

While still employing, signifying, or comprising furniture shapes, these sculptures have partially shed their utilitarian skin. They persist in their meditation on use and disuse—or function and dysfunction—through interventions on modernist design's fixed formalisms and tropes. Reaves decorates and dislocates the once austere, practical forms with what translates to expressionistic action. (In one sculpture, Reaves has quite literally flipped and lodged Breuer's Wassily chair into a glass, phone booth-like structure). Instead of offering a place to sit, the sculptures take on the function of storage in the form of cabinets, racks, and coverings. Redemption Island Standing Table (2019) features a black, leather, mid-century lounge encased within a glass housing. The worn seat dons a sewn-on patch bearing the logo of reality show, Survivor. A compound of glue and sawdust hugs edges of the chair like a crust. A piece of driftwood serves as an arm. There is a sense that we've caught the chair mid-transition—decomposing, returning to earth, to natural form. Inside the glass encasement, the chair's transition is halted, time stopped. It is easy to picture a civilization on the brink, holding onto what it has, attempting to keep things whole. Waking up was getting into Discipline (2019) appears as an inaccessible shelter where a diaphanous yellow fabric, with vaginal slits and phallic juts, is fitted like a tent over a delicate, skeletal structure. Metal and wood move in gestural undulations.

ON VIEW
**BRIDGET
DONAHUE**
March 14 – May
12, 2019
New York



Installation view: *Jessi Reaves: II*, Bridget Donahue, New York, 2019. Photo: Gregory Carideo. © Jessi Reaves. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.

Reaves manipulates and riffs upon classic furniture pieces (*II* includes Breuer's Wassily Chair and Morgensen's Spanish Chair) and re-introduces old favorites like recurring characters on a veteran TV show. The Cesca chair, Marcel Breuer's 1928 design, has been a longstanding muse for Reaves. The Cesca (or its replica), a perennial presence in kitchens, offices, and municipal buildings alike is also often found lonely and discarded on a sidewalk or curb, the caning spent and punctured. This dichotomy makes the chair a fitting subject for Reaves. Her earlier interventions on the design include a sculpture in which the chair is slipcovered in a pink, gossamer fabric hugging the curves like the hips of an elegant gala-goer. In another, the Cesca is swallowed and integrated into an island-like upholstered structure. *Blue heart shelf* (2019) employs three Cescas which are stacked high into a tower formation bordered by a rectangular wooden frame serving as a scaffold. In the negative space between two 69-ing chairs, a blue plexiglass drawer is inserted. An orange, shellacked fabric runs the length of the sculpture like a great hunchback. The utilitarian function of the piece is relocated from seat to shelf. Instead of stacking the chairs to *be* stored, they become a vehicle *to* store.

Quilting these hard forms and materials (metal, wood, plastic), Reaves lends them an unexpected softness. She probes a shifty play between subject-hood and object-hood. The sculptures can feel like eccentric characters liable to talk your ear off. They tacitly answer questions of why we have deeper love for things that are "home-made" even if they don't function as well, or even at all. The sculptures are buoyed in an invisible, latent nostalgia which sits at the core and sneaks up

like a sucker punch triggering divergent sensory memories in concert. Reaves has an innate capacity to kickstart the imagination and make it hum.

Contributor

Eliza Barry

ELIZA BARRY is an artist, writer, and musician. She lives and works in New York City.

Holland Cotter, “Over 40 Art Shows to See Right Now - Spring Gallery Guide: Below and Above Canal Street”, *The New York Times*, April 26, 2019.

The New York Times



Jessi Reaves's "Drive through the back of your eyes," from 2019, made of metal, fabric, sawdust, wood glue, lamp and wiring.

Credit Jessi Reaves and Bridget Donahue NYC; Greg Carideo

SPRING GALLERY GUIDE

Over 40 Art Shows to See Right Now

Spring Guide: Below and Above Canal Street

5. Bridget Donahue, 'Jessi Reaves: II'

In her second solo show at Bridget Donahue, Jessi Reaves complicates the kind of work that made her a standout in the 2017 Whitney Biennial. Her medium is assemblage; her material is recycled furniture; her method is to puzzle that furniture together, intact or cut up, into sculptures. The joining is ingenious; the look bulky but agile. What's most distinctive, though, is the complex mood the work generates. There's nostalgia built into the domestic middlebrow furniture Ms. Reaves chooses; violence implied in the way she strips it of practical use; and something like solicitude in the way she gives trashed things a funky new purpose. **Through May 12 at 99 Bowery, second floor; 646-896-1368, bridgetdonahue.nyc.**

Johanna Fateman, “Jessi Reaves”, *The New Yorker*, March 28, 2019.

THE NEW YORKER

ART GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

Jessi Reaves

The artist’s ingeniously makeshift furniture-sculpture hybrids rely on scavenged materials. Deconstructed (disemboweled?) chairs, sofas, shelves, and cabinets are recombined into colorfully appealing monstrosities. In the past, the American sculptor’s pieces maintained some degree of functionality, but her new works tend to shrug off their utilitarian origins. “Redemption Island Standing Table” is composed of a worn black leather chair, its arms ossified with the help of a gluey substance; it’s placed behind Plexiglas, under a tall table, and wrapped with a long strip of black rubber. In “Blue Heart Shelf,” a stack of Breuer Cesca chairs is outfitted with a transparent blue drawer. Complicated, bricolaged sconces and a carpeted platform lend the installation a homey, strangely welcoming air.

—*Johanna Fateman*

Martha Schwendener, “Pittsburgh Report: Five Places for Healing Through Art”, *The New York Times*, January 2, 2019.

The New York Times

CRITIC’S NOTEBOOK

Pittsburgh Report: Five Places for Healing Through Art

A vibrant visual arts community offers museums and alternative spaces in which to commune and ponder how to move forward.



Alex Da Corte's “Rubber Pencil Devil,” from 2018, at the Carnegie International's 57th edition.

By Martha Schwendener

Jan. 2, 2019

Through March 25 at Carnegie Museum of Art; 412-622-3131, cmoa.org.

This edition of the Carnegie International, organized by [Ingrid Schaffner](#), includes 32 artists and artist collectives — and very few unfamiliar names. The upside of this approach is that many of the artists here are midcareer and know, from experience, how to operate within the potentially homogenizing context of a large exhibition and create exceptional displays. Several here are outstanding, activating the [Carnegie Museum of Art's](#) collection and making you think differently about art history.

On the outside of the museum, [El Anatsui](#), the Ghanaian sculptor who has become one of the most imitated artists in Africa, has draped the upper facade of the entrance with a work made from his signature found bottle caps and printing plates sourced from a Pittsburgh printing press. The work treats the museum like a kind of body to be dressed with a garment. Inside the galleries, [Ulrike Müller](#) and [Sarah Crowner](#) use bright tiles, enamel, weaving and canvases sewn together to test the line between art and craft. Nearby, a terrific presentation of portraits by [Lynette Yiadom-Boakye](#) with cryptic titles suggests painting as a portal into the everyday lives of her characters, while [Dayanita Singh's](#) installation with lush silver gelatin images bundled in cloth in India questions how history in the form of images is archived and stored.

The boundary between furniture and sculpture is playfully transgressed in [Jessi Reaves's](#) fantastic full-room installation, where art and design blend. You're encouraged to sit on the sculpture-furniture. If you make the pilgrimage out to [Fallingwater](#), Frank Lloyd Wright's "cabin" masterpiece designed for the family of Edgar J. Kaufmann, you can see [Ms. Reaves's sculpture](#) on the terrace, made during a residency there: a lanky homemade shelving unit with an iridescent burgundy zip-on mantle that looks like a sadomasochistic vampire's cape.

Back in the museum, [Josiah McElheny, working with the curators John Corbett and Jim Dempsey](#), shows his MacArthur-award mettle with an expertly researched display. Curious musical instruments and documents relate to maverick composers like Harry Partch, Pauline Oliveros

and [Lucia Dlugoszewski](#), who created sculptural wooden instruments that are one of the standouts of the installation.

Two artists who engage with the Carnegie's collection in innovative ways are [Karen Kilimnik](#) and [Jeremy Deller](#). Mr. Deller has installed tiny video screens in window-size cases in the museum, turning historical displays of upscale living rooms into updated everypersons' dollhouses. Ms. Kilimnik is exhibiting her effusively florid paintings alongside the Carnegie's decorative arts collection, as if to show how the salon-style hang, created to bring art (and intellectual discourse) to mass audiences in the French salons of the 18th and 19th centuries, could also be a form of aspirational kitsch.

One of the most ambitious presentations here is the terrific show-within-a-show, "[Dig Where You Stand](#)," organized by the Cameroon-born [Koyo Kouoh](#), with research contributed by graduate students at the University of Pittsburgh. Drawing from the collections of the Carnegie Museums for what she calls a "visual essay," she points out that changing language is the taproot of changing ideas. She wants us to rethink "coloniality" — different forms of colonialism and occupation — since Africa, she points out in the guide, is a continent with 54 very different countries; the one thing they all share is that they were colonized.

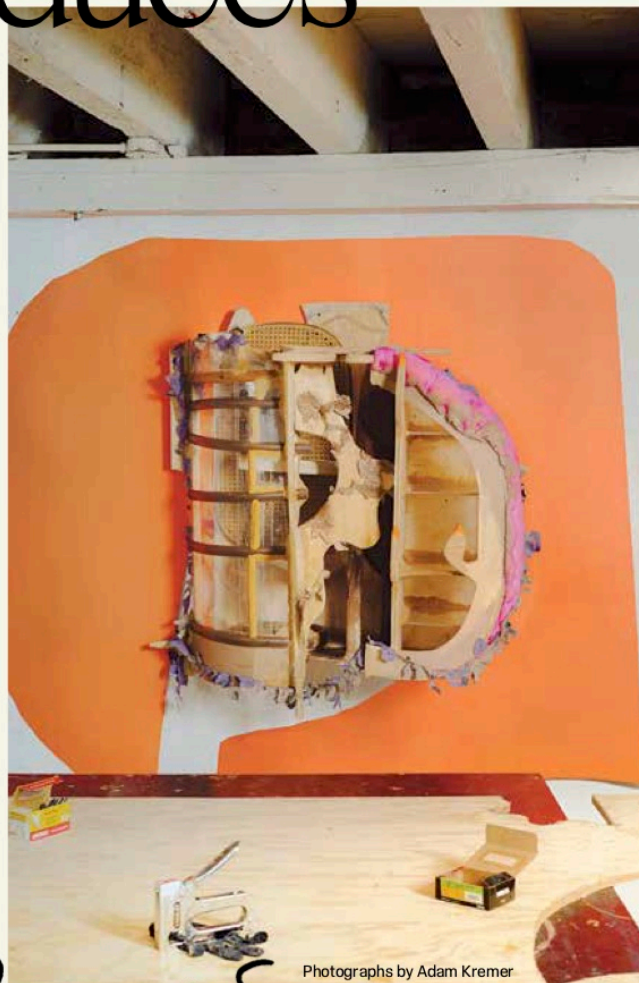
Throughout the ocher-colored space she has paired objects and images to make you question their origins and messages. African sculptures sit near Mickalene Thomas's photograph of black women assuming the pose from a famous Manet painting. Screenprints by Kara Walker are juxtaposed with a cutout silhouette of an "honorable" gentleman holding a whip.

Ms. Kouoh throws all categories into a quandary. Bernd and Hilla Becher's black-and-white photographs of outdated industrial structures in Germany — considered landmarks of conceptual art — are shown next to Teenie Harris's photographs of a 1950s home-appliance fair for African-Americans in Pittsburgh. What defines art history and constitutes a survey museum? What's included, championed and omitted — and how do those decisions reflect colonial and racist history? The implication is that every encyclopedic museum is probably sitting on a trove of exceptional objects that could be artfully rearranged to promote diversity, inclusion and tolerance, rather than acquisition and power. (Unless, of course, all the art should be "repatriated" and sent back to where it was made, though "home" may no longer exist.)

Alix Browne, "T Introduces Jessi Reaves", *T Magazine - The New York Times*, September 9, 2018, 47-48.

T

T Introduces



Photographs by Adam Kremer

Jessi Reaves

Looking at art can be tiring business, and resting spots in museums tend to be rare, crowded and generally uninviting. But at last year's Whitney Biennial, where visitors of course knew not to touch the art, they came to an awkward consensus regarding the work of Jessi Reaves: They sat on it. In their defense, the New York artist makes sculptures with reassuring references to everyday chairs, tables and lamps — though rather than broadcast their functionality, her pieces challenge us to question the very concept of furniture. One of the pieces on view, "Basket Chair With Brown Pillow," resembles a head-on collision between the 19th-century German cabinetmaker Michael Thonet's classic bentwood Chair No. 14 and the sort of metal butterfly one finds in college dorms. "I didn't anticipate the sheer number of people and the damage they could do," says Reaves. "But you can't create a nuanced instruction for interaction — it can't be, Sit gently. It's either all on or all off."

The 31-year-old Reaves, who studied painting at the Rhode Island School of Design, arrived at these more workaday forms when she started taking freelance jobs as an upholsterer after graduating. "It was amazing because I had all of these materials accumulating around me, and I liked the sensation of peeling things back and getting familiar with pieces in their unfinished state," she says. She embarked on a series of chair sculptures, dressing a Thonet chair in a diaphanous pink slipcover so that it appeared to be wearing lingerie and covering a cheap plastic chair in jacket fleece in an approximation (or abomination) of an expensive Scandinavian model she'd

Left: a new, not-yet-titled standing shelf by Reaves that will appear in the Carnegie International, opening Oct. 13. Right: a hanging work-in-progress incorporating plywood, Plexiglas, fabric and foam.

continued from page 47

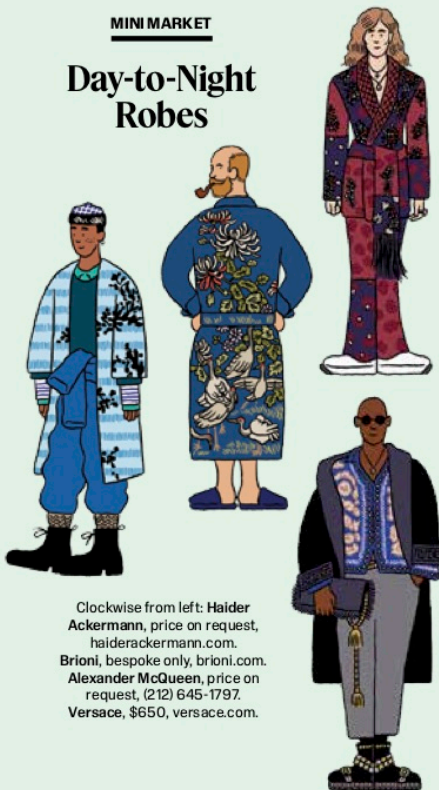
seen at high-end furniture stores. "In design, there is a lot of theft of ideas, even as people aspire to make something new and iconic," she says, adding, "which strikes me as really funny and bro-y."

Reaves isn't striving for the glory of invention but for nuanced riffs that play with ideas of both usefulness and beauty. Aesthetically, her pieces — erotically misshapen, with more than the edges left raw — have as much in common with the paintings of Jenny Saville than anything produced by Charles and Ray Eames. Earlier this year, she was selected for the Carnegie International, opening on Oct. 13 in Pittsburgh, where she'll show curvaceous multimedia "recliners," as well as a baroque chaos of plywood, caning and even a purse that, for lack of a better word, could be described as a shelf. There, her work will literally occupy the no man's land between art and design, in a space bridging Carnegie Museum's Hall of Architecture and its main galleries that was originally constructed to house the last office of Frank Lloyd Wright.

But while her body of work is sweepingly subversive, Reaves remains fascinated by the materiality and perceived purpose behind each piece. On the day I visit her studio, in the basement of a former carriage house in Chelsea, she shows me a large electric fan that she's working on for her friends Mike Eckhaus and Zoe Latta, fashion designers whose own Whitney installation is now on display. "I love the fan because, unlike a chair, you don't have to use it to activate it. It just acts on you," she says. Still, she's built a decorative wire cage and placed it atop a pedestal of scrap wicker, giving it, in effect, a special chair of its own. — Alix Browne

PEOPLE, PLACES & THINGS

MINI MARKET

Day-to-Night
Robes

Clockwise from left: Haider Ackermann, price on request, haiderackermann.com.
Brioni, bespoke only, brioni.com.
Alexander McQueen, price on request, (212) 645-1797.
Versace, \$650, versace.com.

PALACE
WALK

CANTILEVERED INTO THE wall on one side and glassed in on the other, there is a staircase at the University of Padua that seems to float in space. In

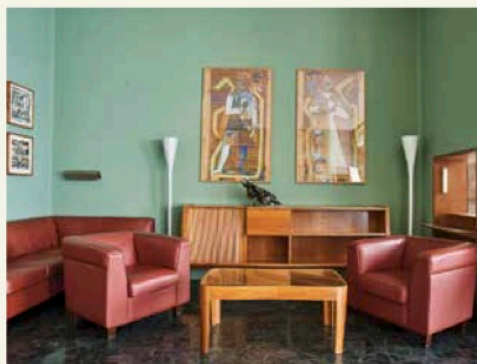
fact, it leads to the school's historic women's library and is one of many poetic details dating from a nine-year (1932-41) building project overseen by the 20th-century polymath Gio Ponti.

Then an up-and-coming Milanese architect, Ponti was 43 when he was commissioned to update the interiors of the school's 16th-century Palazzo del Bo as well as design an entirely new building, the nearby Palazzo Liviano. Both feature sumptuous frescoes, the most notable of which may be a 26-foot-tall scene in the Palazzo Liviano that depicts man's pursuit of knowledge, which Ponti painted with his daughter Lisa and artist friends Fulvio Pendini and Giovanni

Left: Ponti's "Staircase of Knowledge" in the Palazzo Liviano. Below: a ground-floor teachers' lounge in Palazzo del Bo.

Dandolo. It's a lesser-known chapter of a storied career that will be a focal point of the first major retrospective of Ponti's work, opening Oct. 19 at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

The museum's director, Olivier Gabet, and his co-curator Sophie Dumas knew it would be difficult to sum up the work of someone so prolific, and so they looked for highlights in an oeuvre that includes the needly Pirelli Tower in Milan (1958) and a glass-tiled building for the Denver Art Museum (1971). But it's the Padua project that, as Dumas says, is "the epitome of Ponti." The palaces were "conceived as a unified, clear expression of his unique style and ability to marry Italian tradition with a keen sense of modernity." She points to the floor of a lounge in the Palazzo del Bo: green-and-white terrazzo divided by thin black lines like the stripes on a men's shirt. Almost a century later, professors still gather here, sitting on slim chairs that anticipated Ponti's famous 1957 Superleggera model and browsing magazines at one of his glass-plated tables. For another fanciful staircase, this one running alongside the pursuit-of-knowledge fresco, Ponti made risers out of green and rose marble and treads out of beige, so that one ascends seeing color and descends with a starker view. Charles Eames once observed that Ponti was the rare designer who saw each element of his work as architecture. Here, he's in every step. — Rosalind Parry



NOW BOOKING

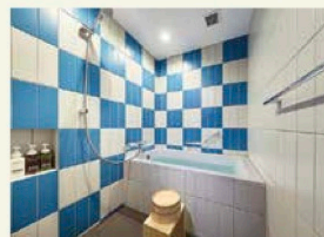
Tokyo
Moderne

TOKYO IS IN the midst of a tourism boom, but despite this fact (or perhaps because of it), the city remains notoriously cloistered: Secret bars hide on the fifth floors of commercial buildings; eight-seat sushi

counters require a regular's introduction. Hotels, too, have typically remained off limits to all but their guests, even as the global trend has shifted toward lobbies and restaurants that double as neighborhood clubhouses.

But as the city prepares to host the Olympics in 2020, the predilection for privacy is changing. All are welcome at Shibuya's 10-room glass-and-steel Hotel Koé (built by the Japanese architecture firm Suppose Design Office), where the lobby bar serves kiwi yogurt smoothies, D.J.s spin dance music and, upstairs, an atrium boutique sells an exclusive (and inexpensive) diffusion line of Thom Browne.

Farther north, in the more residential area of Otsuka, visitors can browse the new OMO hotel's second-floor library, perhaps while snacking on flaky vol-au-vent pastries from the on-site cafe. OMO is the fourth hotel brand created by Hoshino Resorts, the Japanese company best known for its Hoshinoya collection of upscale ryokan hotels, and, while more affordable, this property also nods to traditional Japanese luxury. Inspired by *hatago* (17th-century lodgings), the architect Tatsuhiro Sasaki outfitted its 125 compact rooms with cedar-framed walls and lofted beds, soaking bathtubs (pictured) and Edo period-style staircase-cabinets. As at conventional Japanese business hotels, there are also rentable cotton pajamas, but the idea is that, beyond sleeping, guests won't spend much time in their rooms. — Kurt Soller



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: TOM MANNION (2); HOSHINO RESORTS. ILLUSTRATIONS: ILVA MILSTEIN

Glenn Adamson, "Sculpture To Dwell On", *Art in America*, September 2018, 71 - 77.

Art in America

SCULPTURE TO DWELL ON

Playfully disregarding stale distinctions between art and design, Jessi Reaves crafts sculptures that imbue familiar furniture pieces with sensual richness and emotional complexity.

by Glenn Adamson

Jessi Reaves: *Drift Wood Chair*, 2016, teak, driftwood, studio dust, wood glue, plexiglass, and hardware, 38 by 47 by 29 inches.

All images this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Bridget Donahue, New York.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
"Jessi Reaves: Kitchen Arrangement," at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Conn., through Jan. 13, 2019.

GLENN ADAMSON
is a critic based in New York.

YOU CAN TELL a lot about furniture by its joints. Eighteenth-century Rococo pieces have carefully concealed mortises, so as not to interrupt their continuously carved lines. Arts and Crafts tables and chairs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by contrast, have prominent through-tenons, which draw attention to their earnest craftsmanship. Marcel Breuer's designs in tubular steel are fastened with machined bolts set into predrilled holes: a precise solution well suited to his modernist vision.

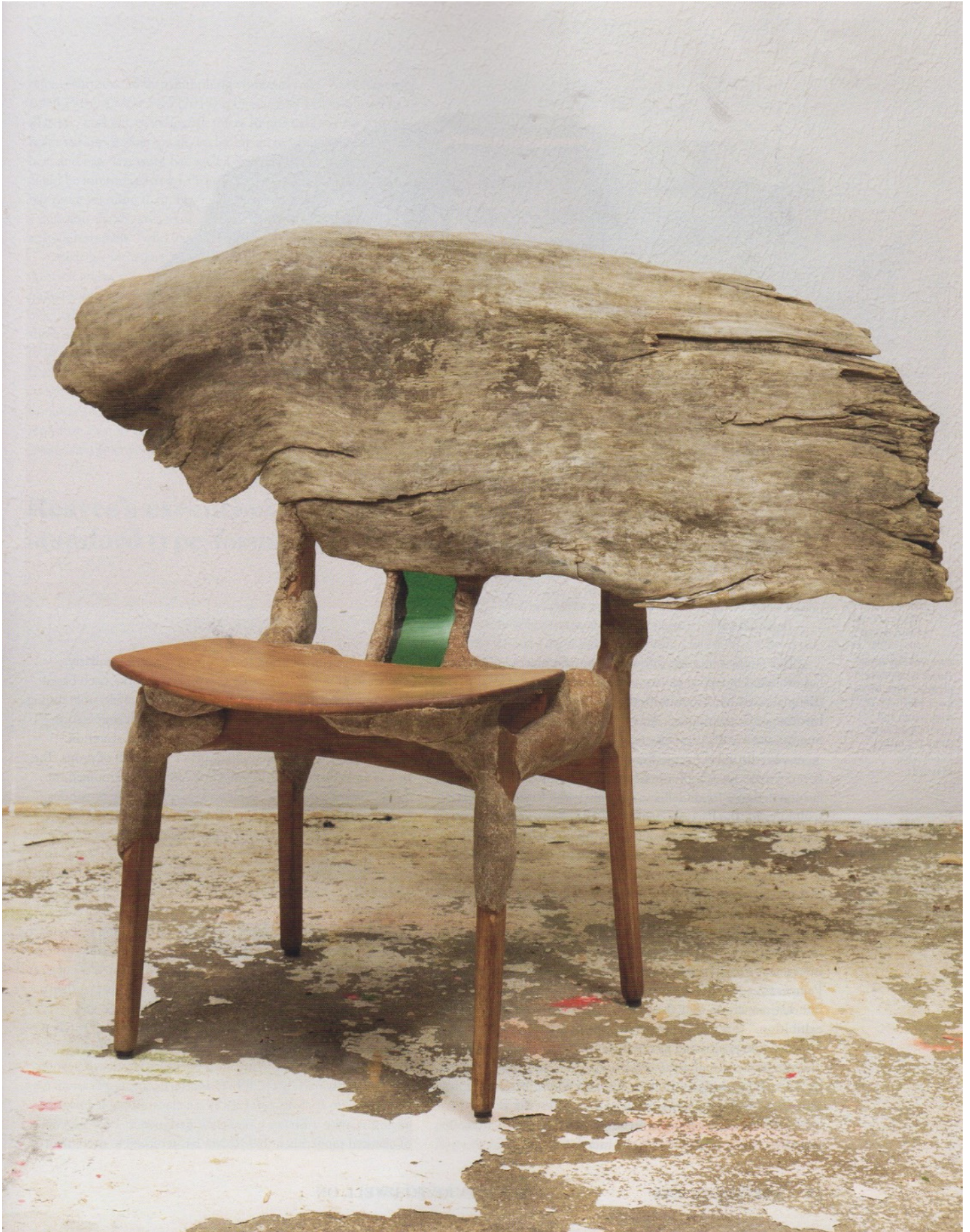
Here's how Jessi Reaves builds a shelf: she screws together a bunch of parts, then slathers the seams with a brown paste compounded of sawdust and glue. That's it: nice and easy. This wood gunk can be found all over Reaves's work, in fact, particularly in the corners and crevices, where a leg meets a seat, or around perimeter seams. It's an all-purpose way for Reaves to get from here to there in creating sculptures that employ the formal language of furniture design.

The wood paste is just a detail of construction, of course. And it's actually not all *that* easy to apply. Reaves mixes the paste herself and adds it in layers to build up a volume, eventually filing it smooth. Even so, the relative expediency of the process reveals much about Reaves's approach: a complete disregard for "proper" construction technique; an enthusiasm

for speed, mess, and mayhem; and a generous, Rauschenbergian embrace of the world. Useless junk and design icons, decoration and structure, slapstick and grotesquerie, and, occasionally, elegance all find a place.

Now and then she goes for contrast, as in *Drift Wood Chair* (2016), in which a raw slab of timber is slammed headlong into the seat and legs of a midcentury modern specimen. ("I've always hated Danish Modern," she explains, "because it feels so slow in its deliberate proportionality. It's very beautiful because of that, and that's exactly why I wanted to mess with it.") Normally though, Reaves doesn't bring that kind of antipathy to the found objects that often serve as her points of departure. Her way of working with existing furniture is more organic, like a tree gradually enfolding a picket fence.

While Reaves's sensibility is omnivorous, it is not indiscriminate. Currently thirty-one years old, Reaves has her generation's knack of caring deeply about things alighted upon at random. This attitude surely reflects the hop-skip-jump experiences of our internet era; there is more than a little of the search engine in her way of making. Once she claims an element as her own, though, she invests in it wholly, bestowing upon it a sensuous physicality at odds with the frictionless glide of digital culture.





Cock Ottoman with Parked Chair, 2018, plywood, upholstery foam, vinyl, fabric, trim, paint, and Cesca chair, 32 by 83 by 112 inches. Photo Jason Mandella.

This multivalence has informed Reaves's career choices. She has exhibited in typical gallery settings, including the Whitney Biennial and a joint show with the painter Ginny Casey at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, both in 2017. She has also created site-specific work for domestic environments, as with a 2017 project conceived with the artist Bradley Kronz for the Dorich House Museum in London. In addition, fashion designer John Galliano commissioned Reaves to create sculptures for the Paris show of his 2018 collection for Maison Margiela, which he said was aimed at "neo-digital natives."² The range of these projects is consistent with Reaves's declared strategy of keeping her works "as openly defined as possible, so that they can lay to waste the predictable binaries of art/design."³

Reaves's work can currently be seen to particular advantage in "Jessi Reaves: Kitchen Assignment" at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut. The interactive installation is part of "The Domestic Plane: New Perspectives on Tabletop Art Objects," a suite of five related but distinct shows that the museum bills as a "meta-group exhibition." This context provides a perfect platform for the artist's work, positioned at the intersection of the white cube and the home. Among the other shows is "On Edge," curated by Aldrich exhibitions director Richard Klein. Taking inspiration from Anthony Caro's tabletop sculptures, the works exhibited here cross the perimeters of their tables in interesting ways, like actors breaking the fourth wall.

Reaves's contribution to the proceedings, is similarly Brechtian in mood. The gallery features six works, each based on a conventional furniture template: cabinet, shelf, sink, dining table, sectional sofa, and rotating fan. Though recognizably functional, the objects are dense with theatrical accretion: entering the show is like walking into a stage full of props. The sink is embellished with found bentwood parts, arranged into roller-coaster curves. The cabinet features prominent volutes, and has bamboo beading lashed around its girth.

Reaves's execution is remarkably free, more like sketching than building, yet she seems to require standard type-forms as an armature for her creativity. Until recently, that would have been counted against her. Furniture that entered the twilight zone between art and utility (often generated in the context of the post-WWII studio craft movement) tended to get mired in questions about art status. Fortunately, we now seem to be coming to an enlightened consensus, in which all genres and materials are treated as equal. A rectangular canvas is a no more inherently creative format than a chair, and the art world seems to have finally accepted that.

This permissive attitude is abundantly evident in "Kitchen Arrangement" and so, too, is the psychological register of furniture, with its entrenchment in the everyday. Reaves's works are not exactly narrative, but they are thick with implication. *Cock Ottoman with Parked Chair* (2018) is a claustrophobic image of enclosure, with a Breuer Cesca chair designed in 1928—a cliché of elevated modernism that Reaves has returned to more than

once—surrounded by galumphing vinyl cushions. The deliciously titled *Pearly Slobber Shelf* (2018) is bisected by a ribbon reading KISS ME, KISS ME, with lipstick traces imprinted over the text. It holds various leather goods, including an unidentifiable garment, belt, and bag. The work has such a distinct personality that it could be interpreted as an allegorical portrait—of someone who has more yearning than they know what to do with, perhaps. It's a question that Reaves likes to leave floating above her work, like a thought bubble: "who in their right mind would use this?"

Reaves's industrially scaled fans, one of which is in the Aldrich show, are another good example of the way she quarries content from utilitarian form. She told me that she originally became interested in this prosaic appliance because she had one in her studio. In the summertime, it was essential to keep the space cool. In the winter, it was just in the way. It struck her that this was a decent metaphor for what she sought in her work. She is not interested in contesting functionality per se—the trivial act of making a chair that is also a sculpture—but in exploring the tonal range of furniture that is "purposefully purposeless."



Reaves's execution is remarkably free yet she seems to require standard type-forms as an armature for her creativity.

THE FORMAL AND conceptual pliability of Reaves's work is the result of her unusual career trajectory. She graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2009, not from the college's renowned furniture design department—she felt little affinity there—but with a degree in painting. After a stint working as an upholsterer for a Brooklyn designer, she struck out on her own, finding a like-minded community of emerging artists in Bushwick, anchored by startup galleries such as Shoot the Lobster and Bed Stuy Love Affair. This was in 2014. Two years later, she had her first show with her current dealer, Bridget Donahue, a relationship that began when Reaves made some furniture for the back room of Donahue's gallery.

This first solo exhibition was chock-full of memorable pieces. In *Mind at the Rodeo* (2016), a reinterpretation of Isamu Noguchi's well-known biomorphic coffee table (designed in 1944), she replaced the two asymmetrical supports of the original with fenders from a Jeep Cherokee, limning them with her signature wood paste. *Foam Couch with Straps* (2016) suggested the projects she had been upholstering in her day job, eviscerated and coverless, or perhaps still in protective packing materials. The show was also distinguished by its sense of humor: there were reliquaries for found logs and "waterproof" bookshelves shrouded in vinyl.

Yet as Eric Sutphin astutely observed in these pages, there was also "something subtly apocalyptic about Reaves's work: the way every scrap and shred of refuse is somehow incorporated into the making of another piece suggests a diminishing supply."⁴ This was perhaps best exemplified by a majestic all-white piece titled *Engine Room Shelving (Recollection Wedding Edition)*, 2015, a bow-topped

Above, *Quick-To-Sew Jester's Hat (Noguchi Knockoff #1)*, 2016, cedar chips, sawdust, wood, glass, and pewter paint, 15 by 40 by 40 inches.

Shop Fan, 2017, fan, wood, sawdust, wood glue, wire, caning, wicker, bamboo, plastic beads, driftwood, fabric, and lacquer, 38 by 41 by 27 inches.



Engine Room Shelving (Recollection Wedding Edition), 2015, pine, polyurethane foam, vinyl, and linen, 70 by 50 by 21 inches.

View of Reaves's installation in the Whitney Biennial, 2017, showing (left to right) *Modified Wall Shelf with Racing Purse*, *Watertight Shelf with Zippers*, *Body Sized Shelf with Zippers*, and *Herman's Dress*, all 2017. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo Ron Amstutz.

construction that implied gender critique while remaining resolutely absurdist. Reaves says that she viewed this latter work in terms of its own eventual decrepitude: "how [it] would age, how the foam would eventually crumble and fall apart and in the meantime get dirty, and then you would have the frame exposed underneath."⁵ It's as if she were decorating for Miss Havisham.

The Bridget Donahue show won Reaves her spot in the Whitney Biennial, whose curators were sufficiently enthusiastic about the work that they liberally populated the museum with it—not only the galleries, but also staff conference rooms, a move that was consistent with Reaves's interest in the contingency of furniture, the way it accrues meaning through use. So, too, was her contribution of a large ottoman-style seating sculpture to the show, located in a gallery devoted to paintings by Frances Stark. In a curiously literal manifestation of the supposed conflict between functionality and aesthetics, the seat was often obscured by the viewers who sprawled across it. Reaves told me that she had not quite anticipated this—she thought she was making an "unmissable monolith," and simply had not expected the sheer volume of visitors the Biennial would attract (a nice problem to have). In a way, though, the disappearance of the seating sculpture under its own audience had a beguiling ambiguity: the work was both in the show, and supplementary to it.





At the Whitney Reaves also showed a Herman Miller sofa with a translucent hot-pink slipcover, repeating a motif also seen in *Sports Chair* (2016) and *Cesca Leaves the Stack* (2016), another of her Breuer *détournements*. As the art historian and critic Julia Bryan-Wilson writes, Reaves's use of the slipcover is a "cheekily feminizing" gesture that reflects an "imperative to make visible the lower registers of furniture, including those affiliated with the 'women's work' of craft and textile components."⁶ The slipcovers do effective formal work, too. Like her wood paste, they serve as compositional passe-partouts that bring unity to disparate underlying components. And like the foam in her deconstructed upholsteries, they establish a sense that the works are in transition from one state to another. They are permanently liminal.

That paradoxical condition raises the concept of the baroque, a notion that is often applied to Reaves's work in recognition of its restless internal dynamism. One could say it's an ill-fitting descriptor. The artist has no real interest in classicism, which served as the syllabary for baroque architecture. And her studio is as far as one could get from the intricate organization of a seventeenth-century cabinetmaking shop, with its team of expert specialist craftsmen. Yet Reaves does respond to the ornamental impulse of the baroque, and likewise its extravagant theatricality:

"the drama and tension it creates."⁷ She perhaps finds in it the same potential that Robert Venturi did, when he wrote in his "gentle manifesto" *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966) of the baroque's capacious "both-and" approach to form.

That book, of course, became an early rallying point for postmodernism. Perhaps the best way to understand Reaves is as an inheritor and extender of such ideas. This helps explain her treatment of Breuer and Noguchi; she has the postmodernist's instinct to toy with the canon, as a cat plays with a ball of string. Yet she doesn't stop there—at both-and. Like that of most exciting artists today, her work transcends dialectical frameworks and restrictive "critical" positions, instead opening up into generative, associative, and potentially endless chains of thought. Let's see what this looks like, she says: *and, and, and . . .* ○

Foam Couch with Straps, 2016, upholstery foam, fiberglass, wood, and webbing, 29 by 77 by 35 inches.

1. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Jessi Reaves are from an interview conducted by the author in New York on June 6, 2018.

2. John Galliano, quoted in Natashah Hitti, "Maison Margiela's Artisanal Couture Collection Is Designed for 'Neo-Digital Natives,'" July 11, 2018, *dezeen.com*.

3. Reaves, email to the author, July 16, 2018.

4. Eric Sutphin, "Jessi Reaves," *Art in America*, September 2016, p. 144.

5. Reaves quoted in Josephine Graf, "An Ideological Revision of Furniture Design: Jessi Reaves," *Mousse* 52, February–March 2016, *mousse magazine.it*.

6. Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Take a Seat: Ginny Casey and Jessi Reaves," in *Ginny Casey & Jessi Reaves*, Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, forthcoming.

7. Reaves quoted in Graf, "An Ideological Revision of Furniture Design."

Amy Serafin, "Ottoman Empire", *Wallpaper*, May 2018, 147-153.

Wallpaper*

Portfolio

OTTOMAN EMPIRE

The young American artist Jessi Reaves is generating serious momentum with her mutant deformations of classic modernist furniture. We probably shouldn't like them but we really do. So does John Galliano, who tasked Reaves with creating site-specific, and slightly sinister, oozing ottomans for the Maison Margiela S/S18 couture show in Paris. On the next six pages we present Reaves' exclusive photomontage portfolio of her scenery-chewing show stealers



Jessi Reaves, *Rules Around Here* (Waterproof Shelf), 2016



Jessi Reaves, *Brown Cabinet*, 2017

Moments after the Maison Margiela Artisanal show in January, artist Jessi Reaves stood shyly to one side of the crowd. Tall with fine features and an American freshness reflecting her Oregon roots, she was the last person one expected to find behind the raw, hulking installation in the centre of the room.

Reaves is the first artist that Margiela's creative director, John Galliano, has ever asked to present a new work as a backdrop to a collection. Discovering her artwork in New York late last year, he was stunned. 'There is an uncanny similarity to our creative process,' he says. 'A connection, a vibration that drew me instinctively to her world.'

Originally an upholsterer, Reaves is gaining attention for her deconstructed, furniture-inspired sculptures, some of which appeared at the 2017 Whitney Biennale. She is also an admirer of Galliano's work, which she referenced with a chair at London gallery Herald St, upholstered in a newsprint fabric copied from a dress he designed for Dior.

The amorphous, even disturbing elements of Reaves' creations for Margiela served as an intriguing counterpoint to Galliano's pieces, which were conceived to morph into dazzling colour when photographed with a flash and viewed through a mobile phone screen. For each of the two rooms where the show was held, Reaves created a low central element – an ottoman grown monstrous and out of control, wending its way around pillars and behind chairs where magazine editors and fashion buyers were seated. It glowed

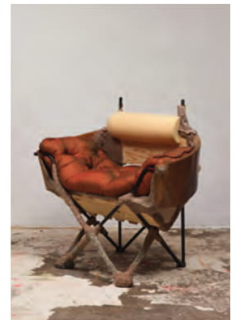
menacingly in the dim pre-show light, before turning shades of brown, murky yellow or intestinal pink when the lights came up.

Reaves' technique was simple: fabric stapled over foam onto a wooden frame. Elements typically hidden in upholstery, such as staples or stitches, were mutated to the surface as decoration. Brushstrokes were visible, as were the odd stain or rip. After testing paint on a variety of low-tech fabrics, mostly vinyl, she stitched them together into a chaotic patchwork. 'Painting a piece of furniture is the simplest way of transforming it; it's kind of a cheap home trick,' she says.

Reaves gave the ottoman top billing, engulfing classic pieces such as a Marcel Breuer 'Cesca' chair. 'I find the iconic nature of the chair kind of boring. These ottomans are overgrown blobby forms that have swallowed other pieces of furniture.'

At places, the artwork juttured out to become seating for the show. Among those chosen to sit on it were three of Reaves' colleagues from New York, artists Kevin Beasley, Toyin Ojih Odutola and Susan Cianciolo. Odutola admitted that she felt nervous about sitting on a work of art. The photographers on the riser had no such hesitation – as soon as the show ended they unceremoniously packed up their gear on it.

Which is fine with Reaves. She doesn't consider her creations overly precious. 'I feel indifferent about whether or not people sit. They aren't missing the work if they don't use it. Knowing they can is the same thing.'



Jessi Reaves, *Crust Bucket Comes to Town* (Slipper Chair), 2016



Jessi Reaves, *Walking and Looking for You*, 2017

Photography: top left and right, © Jessi Reaves, courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC. Bottom left and right, © Jessi Reaves, courtesy of Herald St, London and Bridget Donahue, NYC. Photography Andy Keate. Runway photography courtesy of Maison Margiela



Portfolio

Photography: Will Perkins
and Jessi Reaves
Art direction: Eric Wrenn
Reaves' portfolio of three
works for Wallpaper*
centres on her ottoman
installations for the
Maison Margiela Artisanal
show in Paris in January



Portfolio

Brushstrokes and stains were visible on Reeves' chaotic patchwork of different fabrics

Portfolio

The installations engulfed existing pieces of furniture and put stitching and staples on display



Elizabeth Paton, “At Maison Margiela, a Sculptor and a Designer Unite”, *The New York Times*, January 24, 2018.

The New York Times

At Maison Margiela, a Sculptor and a Designer Unite



Jessi Reaves's installation for Maison Margiela at the offices in Paris. Credit Agnes Dherbeys for The New York Times

By Elizabeth Paton

Jan. 24, 2018

PARIS — It was less than 48 hours before the Maison Margiela show, scheduled for early Wednesday, and the American artist Jessi Reaves was crouched in her studio in the 11th Arrondissement, putting finishing touches on her latest work. The project comprises four site-specific sculptures, formed from 10 upholstered pieces, and was commissioned by John Galliano, the fashion house's creative director, as a backdrop to — and, for some, seating at — his spring couture collection.

Ms. Reaves, 31, a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design whose work was shown at the Whitney Biennial last year, has made a name for herself with raw, deconstructed artworks that can also function as furniture. The commission is the first time that Mr. Galliano has asked an artist to present new work alongside a Margiela collection.

“I think what drew us to one another was a similarity in our approach to technique, and an interest in making the ordinary somehow extraordinary,” Ms. Reaves said. “To find a shared understanding between artists is quite rare. But in John’s work, I see the identity of Margiela constantly coming together with his own. There is this interplay between deconstruction and embellishment, which is something I see in my own work, too.”

Mr. Galliano called her “a soul sister,” with an “exhilarating” energy and approach as well as a creative process “uncannily” like his own, particularly when it came to subverting notions of the familiar.



“I wanted these to feel more industrial, and almost illogical. Some people will sit on them during the show, but the majority of the sculpture won’t be sat on — even parts that look like parts of a seat,” Jessi Reaves told The New York Times.
Credit Agnes Dherbeys for The New York Times

“The world went into slow motion when I first saw Jessi’s pieces,” Mr. Galliano said, as the sculptures were being installed in two rooms at the maison. “I said, ‘I have to meet her.’ My clothes need to be seen amongst these works of art.”



Silvia Sgualdini, “Jessi Reaves and Bradley Kronz *Dorich House Museum/ London*”, *Flash Art*, no. 50, November 27, 2017.

Flash Art



Jessi Reaves feat. Bradley Kronz and Jessi Reaves (Waiting for Boots), “31 Candles” (2017), installation view, Dorich House Museum. Courtesy the artists. Photography Plastiques

Jessi Reaves and Bradley Kronz *Dorich House Museum / London*

For “31 Candles,” American artists Jessi Reaves and Bradley Kronz have created sculptural compositions that introduce an informal and vibrant presence to the elegantly austere rooms of former studio and home of Russian sculptor and designer Dora Gordine.

In the bright north-facing modeling studio, a large three-part seating arrangement takes center stage, inviting one to sprawl on its painted leather and fabric upholstery. To the side, on the original modeling platform, a line of bronze heads by Gordine is placed right against the edge looking onto the room. *Padded Cabinet* (2017) confronts a bespoke twentieth-century modular shelving unit, whose shape it echoes. Proportions and details have been noticeably altered, layering the classic form with assonant yet disquieting elements. The surface is painted an unrealistic felt-tip shade of brown, and bulging padded areas covered in fabric challenge its functional purpose. The first-floor gallery houses collaborative sculptures by Reaves and Kronz. “Boots,” configured from pairs of vintage fur boots held in corsets, eerily resemble female torsos. Placed on stacked flight cases, these softly slumped anthropomorphic configurations mingle tongue in cheek amid elegant trapezoid plinths holding figurative bronzes by Gordine.

The unsettling cry of a baby draws viewers to the private spaces of the top-floor apartment shared by Gordine and her husband. The looped-sound piece gives voice to Gordine’s *Seated Baby* (1937–38), an early public commission. The sculpture, dissonant in scale and posture, sits upright directly facing *Mother Figure* (2017), which is placed on a luggage stand atop a long table in the dining room opposite. The curtained round windows and low lighting create an intimate and withdrawn atmosphere, strengthening the visual connection between the two works. Through the interplay in scale and the playful involvement of items from the museum collection as active elements in their displays, Reaves and Kronz invite a subtle subversion in the dynamic between the house as exhibition space and its domestic dimension, opening moments of spontaneous dialogue between its present and its past.

by Silvia Sgualdini

Eliza Barry, "A Chair Is A Chair Is A Sculpture: On Jessi Reaves and the Decorative Unconscious", Columbia University, May 24, 2017.

***A CHAIR IS A CHAIR IS A SCULPTURE:
On Jessi Reaves
and the Decorative Unconscious***



ELIZA BARRY



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
SPRING 2017

In his 1986 essay *On Furniture*, which reads rather like a defense, Donald Judd lays unwavering claim that “the art of a chair is not its resemblance to art, but is partly its reasonableness, usefulness, and scale as a chair [...] a work of art exists as itself; A chair exists as a chair itself. And the idea of a chair isn’t a chair.”¹ Jessi Reaves creates work that could perhaps be understood as the antidote to Judd’s stringent understanding of what a chair is, of what comprises chair-ness. Reaves both complicates and challenges the chair’s status by re-framing its ontology. At first glance, Jessi Reaves’s *Bucket Chair with Covers*, (2017), currently on view at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, appears akin to the way an abandoned chair might as it sits in the back of an upholstery shop waiting to be reupholstered: out of order, naked, innards outwards, tattered. A closer look reveals that what might have appeared haphazard is actually a careful arrangement of fabrics and materials, quilted and bound together according to an idiosyncratic, coded logic.

The chair’s upper half has lines and a silhouette that bring mid-century design to mind. While Reaves’s pieces often reference or directly knock-off household names such as Philip Johnson, Noguchi, or Eames, the body of this chair seems to make reference to the once ubiquitous 1960s Scandinavian Overman Pod swivel chair. The chair’s legs on the other hand, could appear to be from an entirely different lexicon of furniture design. The spartan, metal legs resemble those of a folding quad chair that one might bring camping or set up at the side lines of a local sporting event. Effectively, the chair as sculpture becomes something that while familiar in its pieces, as a whole evades the familiar and appears as a perverse, hybrid creature.

The disparate, unlikely melange of materials— foam, coated woven sisal, leather, silk, polyester— lends a sense that the chair’s components could have been scavenged. There is an underlying make-do-with-what-you-have punk attitude that buzzes about it. The multiple fabrics and material that collide bring to mind a peeling wall which reveals its past lives through its different layers of wallpaper, however, in the case of this chair all of the layers sit resting on its surface. There are contradictions of approaches in its assemblage; delicately sewn, casually draped, practically bound or simply glued. It is also this element of the work that gives the piece an endearing quality. The pity that the chair evokes at first glance shifts to something of a magnetic respect for this *thing* that has been imbued with an almost erotic, corporeal presence. The chair encapsulates a wavering status, treading lines between art and design, art and craft, functional object and representation of functional object.

Reaves, who is only thirty-one and whose appearance at the Whitney Biennial this year marks her museum debut, enters an almost-entirely male dominated lineage of artists who have worked with furniture as a medium and engaged with design in a way that approaches, complicates and crosses the boundary into fine art. In the first half of the 20th century there was Gerrit Rietveld and the De Stijl movement; there was Vladimir Tatlin and the Constructivists who wanted to bring art to the service of the quotidian; there was Bauhaus’s strain of Modernism which envisioned an idealistic future of unity between art and design; there was Brancusi and his furniture sculptures which complicated divisions between the two then opposing practices. These artists, architects and designers all set the stage for what was eventually denominated Minimalism. In 1973, following his

1 Judd, Donald. “On Furniture (1986).” Donald Judd Writings. Ed Flavin Judd, Caitlin Murray. Judd Foundations and David Zwirner Books. 2016.

move from New York City to Marfa, Texas, Donald Judd arrived at furniture design born from his minimal sculpture practice but went through great, often paradoxical pains, to promote the distinction between his art and design/furniture. Judd in some regards paved the way for artists like Scott Burton in the 1980s, who arrived at furniture making through performance and who integrated his functioning furniture entirely into his art practice. Though Burton's forms were, more often than not, minimal and aesthetically distant from the work of Reaves, conceptually Burton perhaps serves as Reaves's closest kin in the furniture/art lineage.

More recent contributors to this realm of art making include Mary Heilmann and Sarah Lucas. Since the early 2000s, Heilmann, who is known primarily as a painter, has made chairs that appear as extensions of her minimal Pop paintings. They live as sculptural objects, functional furniture and as sites from which to view her paintings (she has often situated the chairs at the center of the gallery space that displays her paintings). Sitting on one of Heilmann's Club Chairs feels as though you are sitting upon, in or have become a part of one of her paintings. The back of a Heilmann chair's frame mimics the stretchers of a canvas. The back-support's cross-hatched nylon webbing mimic the minimal but often brightly colored forms that appear in her paintings, and the body of the chair itself takes cues from minimal, Judd-like structures made of plywood and like Judd, her furniture is sold for far less than her work in other mediums.

In 2013, Sarah Lucas created furniture, some of which is currently on view at Lever House, out of materials that had previously served as plinths and platforms for her artworks which she then repurposed into stand-alone pieces including tables, chairs, benches, a desk, and a freestanding partition wall. These pieces, like Heilmann's Club Chairs and many of Burton's furniture-sculptures, formally employ and recall facets of Minimalism. In Lucas's ongoing Bunny series (1997-wards), she uses

chairs (non-functional ones) as stand-ins for the human body which, as in Reaves's furniture, becomes an anthropomorphic sculptural structure.[2] In the case of Burton, Heilmann, Lucas, and Reaves, the furniture, in its functional value, approaches the avant-garde lineage of the art life paradigm. It becomes unclear as to whether the thing inhabits the realm of art in its "purposeful purposeless" or the realm of life in its air of utilitarian usefulness.[3]

However, unlike that of Burton, Heilmann, and Lucas, Reaves's work is visually distinct and divorced from the Minimalist tendencies that are often riffed upon in their furniture pieces. Perhaps this has to do with the way in which Reaves arrived at furniture as the medium that comprises her practice. Unlike Judd who arrived at furniture through formal sculpture, Burton through performance, or Heilmann through painting, Reaves arrived at furniture through what one might consider entirely divorced from fine art. Reaves can perhaps be understood as having arrived at furniture as medium through craft (and a decorative one at that). After receiving her BFA from Rhode Island School of Design in 2009, Reaves worked part time as an upholsterer. After showing at a Portland gallery in 2011, she showed her work in both 2012 and 2013 at the International Furniture Fair which suggests the flexible nature of her practice. Since 2013, Reaves has shown in fine art gallery settings. In a recent interview with Gaetano Pesce, Reaves said, "People ask me, 'Will you always make furniture?' And it feels like such an irrelevant question because I feel like I'm following the ideas more than a particular form." [4] This notion that the furniture transforms into the notion of furniture while still being furniture comes alive in the work though its hyperbolic presence as furniture, so hyperbolic that the furniture feels as though it is living and might move. In her sculpture, *Idol of the Hares* (2014), Reaves has

2 Press Release for Sarah Lucas Furniture via Sadie Coles Gallery

3 Branden Joseph, Neo Dada and Pop Art Lecture on Fluxus, Columbia University. Fall 2015

4 Conversation with Jessi Reaves and Gaetano Pesce. The Museum of Contemporary Art Online. Ed. Karly Wildenhaus. <https://www.moca.org/stream/post/introducing-gaetano-pesce-and-jessi-reaves>

created a chair and foot rest which has an exterior made of bright bulbous yellow foams of varying shades. The staples holding down the voluptuous foam appear as though they could burst.

Reaves's use of high Modernist design pieces as her canvases both complicates and undercuts the austerity and autonomy claimed by such forms. In her sculpture, *Cesca Leaves the Stack (Modified Chair)* (2016), Reaves takes a Marcel Breuer Cesca chair and outfits it with a foam padded siding and back-support, over which she has created a form fitting translucent pink rayon cover that fits over the chair's entire structure. She puts an outfit on the chair which effectively lends the chair subjecthood and pulls it away from its status as object. The chair which remains visible through the sheer pink fabric becomes feminized. It reveals the craft of the hand and the delicately sewn fabric softens the Cesca chair which it veils, transforming it into a non-industrial, personal object. There is a paradoxical nature that lies within Reave's additions which are at once delicate and crude as well as a gestural aspect present in the chair which lends the sense that the chair could have been constructed rapidly through expressionistic, un-calculated action or perhaps by a novice. Still written on the foam roller that replaces the original back-support of the chair are mysterious dimensions (6 x 54). By adding upholstery to the chair, Reaves gives it flesh. Without using any overtly human forms, the natural forms of her work still manage to suggest the body and at times hint at representations of abject femininity in ways that recall the work of Louise Bourgeois or Lucas.

Made visible in Reaves work is the perceptible distinction between craft and design which are then conflated in many of her sculptures. Craft, of course, connotes something made by hand, something artisanal. It also evokes notions of

domestic crafts which have long been associated with feminine pastimes, later appropriated and used in feminist art-making practices, while design suggests something of high quality assembly-line mass production. It is in Reaves's references to and use of high-Modern design that her work can be read as veiled, disguised Pop, maintaining a high-brow kitsch. In its replica form, what was once avant-garde becomes kitsch. In *Mind at the Rodeo, (XJ Fender Table Noguchi Knockoff #2)* (2016), Reaves creates a satirical replica of Isamu Noguchi's iconic table which he designed for Herman Miller in 1947. Noguchi's table had been developed from a previous table that he had designed in 1939 for MoMA's founding president, A. Conger Goodyear. Herman Miller's design team then hired Noguchi to design an iteration of the biomorphic table which in their catalog they described as "sculpture- for-use" and "design for production." [5] Reaves's take on the table is comprised of the same biomorphic glass table top, however, instead of the glass resting upon two identical curved wooden bases, the glass is situated atop two Jeep Cherokee fenders. Her use of high Modernist design form, as in the case of *Mind at the Rodeo*, have an effect that is, in a sense, akin to the effect that is created by the work of Pictures artists who took pictures of pictures. Her knock offs and replicas of forms come to function in a way as representations. As Rosalyn Deutsch has said about the Pictures artists, if we treat art as representation we no longer can think of it as pure form or autonomous because representation is tied up with power. [6]

The second chapter of Douglas Crimp's recently published memoir *Before*

5 Pina, Leslie (1998). *Classic Herman Miller*. Atglen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing

6 Deutsche, Rosalyn. "Feminism Postmodernism." Columbia University. Lecture. Spring 2015.

Pictures oddly ties into Reave's practice, dedicated to ideas surrounding design and his personal relationship to decoration's tumultuous relationship with fine art. Crimp discusses Daniel Buren's "open embrace" of his work being cast as decoration and the controversy surrounding his piece *Painting-Sculpture*.^[7] In a letter penned by Dan Flavin to *Studio International* magazine regarding the mysterious removal of Buren's *Painting-Sculpture* (which Flavin himself is rumored to have instigated) on the day before the opening of the Guggenheim's *Studio International* (1971), he dismissively refers to Buren's piece as "French Drapery." Years later, in 2005, Crimp notes curator Allison Gingeras's reference to Buren's work again as being "merely decorative" which Crimp argues fails to recognize an "on-going decorative strategy in Buren's work." Crimp later refers to such "vocabulary of scorn for the decorative" as a vocabulary that continues to be employed in the present.^[8] Crimp then uses the thread of the decorative to talk about his first job in New York City, assisting Charles James, a designer and cult figure in the fashion world whom Crimp refers to as "America's greatest—perhaps only—couturier."^[9] What set James apart, aside from his great talent as designer, was the circles in which he was so well regarded. The art world had recognized him not only as a fashion designer but also as an artist, as Crimp calls him, "a sculptor in cloth." Alfred Barr had given him a solo show at the Brooklyn Museum and Dominique de Menil hired him not only to make her clothing but also to decorate the interior of her home in Houston which had been designed by Phillip Johnson. He was known to have draped the fabric of his constructions directly onto the bodies of his clients during the early fabrication process making "monumental sculptures in fabric."^[10] Crimp quotes James Martin, the director of the Met's Costume Institute, as saying that a James dress "could very nearly stand on its own, so filled was it with material."^[11] This passage brought Reaves to mind as she not only also

makes furniture but also makes costumes for furniture via her uncanny upholstery, fitting, and drapery techniques.

In Reaves's *Rules Around Here* (waterproof shelf) (2016), a barely visible shelf is outfitted in a form-fitting vinyl getup with a zipper right down the middle. The nylon outfit visually translates to sexy attire that both eroticizes and anthropomorphizes the shelf. And like a James, the piece appears to be a monumental sculpture out of fabric. Crimp offers a quote from a client of James's who says that "[James] was sometimes so entranced by the shape he was 'sculpting' over one's own shape that when the dress arrived finished it was impossible to get into it. It existed on its own. Much time was spent discerning the proper relationship between shapes." As Crimp notes, the client's description can be read as an inadvertent parody of the notion of Modernist autonomy in its "description of the subject-object relation between dress and owner," which parallels the ways in which Reaves's work functions as parody of modernist autonomy through the simultaneous, confused status of the work as both subject and object.^[12]

In Crimp's close reading of Hiroshi Sugimoto's photograph of the Guggenheim, which is so soft in focus that that building is reduced to seemingly abstract forms, Crimp lays claim that "our images of modern architecture are by now mnemonic, even dreamlike and, in so doing hints at modernist architecture's own unconscious. Dare we call it the decorative unconscious?" He continues with what feels like a half-serious, Freudian lilt, "and could this unconscious, produced through a repression of modern architecture's affinity with fashion be what Charles James wished to expose when he undertook the interior decoration of Philip Johnson's residence for the DeMenils in 1950?" In its bombast and perversity, in its appropriation and re-contextualization of high modern forms into surreal yet familiar structures, there is an aspect of Reaves's work that feels very much like the literalization of this decorative unconscious about which Crimp speaks.

7 Crimp, Douglas. *Before Pictures*. University of Chicago Press. 2016. pp 22

8 Ibid [23]

9 Ibid [29]

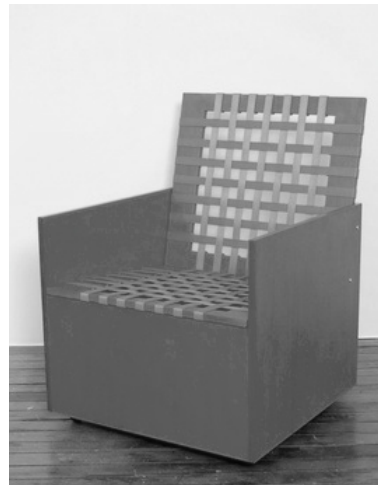
10 Ibid

11 Ibid [29]

Donald Judd's work, as previously mentioned, can be seen as a road paver and foil for that of Reaves's. In *On Furniture*, Judd recalls his first foray into furniture making, which seems to be an experience that was later reflected in his draconian parameters:

"Eighteen years ago someone asked me to design a coffee table. I thought that a work of mine which was essentially a rectangular volume with the upper surface recessed could be altered. This debased the work and produced a bad table, which I later threw away. The configuration and scale of art cannot be transposed into furniture and architecture. The intent of art is different from that of the latter, which must be functional [...] Due to the inability of art to become furniture, I didn't try again for several years"[13]

Paradoxically, Judd's fabricators recall that in the 1990s, they approached Judd's art and furniture fabrication process in both the same location and using the same methods because the basic layouts were very similar. [14] However, desperate to distinguish between his practices, different galleries were responsible for showing his furniture and his artwork (though his furniture was being shown at galleries that only represented artists not furniture designers). His furniture and artwork were never allowed to be shown in the same setting with a few noted exceptions; one being his 1988 Whitney retrospective in which two benches designed by Judd were displayed alongside his art (much to the shock of the fabricators). [15] While Judd's furniture was strictly furniture not art, in the gallery setting it caused valid confusion. Viewers have of course been socially conditioned to view and not use art encountered at a show or anywhere for that matter. However, at Judd's furniture exhibitions, shows that were explicitly distinct



12 Ibid [29]

13 Judd, Donald. "On Furniture (1986)." Donald Judd Writings. Ed Flavin Judd, Caitlin Murray. Judd Foundations and David Zwirner Books. 2016.

14 Murayama, Nina. "Furniture and Artwork as Paradoxical Counterparts in the Work of Donald Judd." Design Issues, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Summer 2011), pp. 47-59. MIT Press. pp. 48

from those displaying his artwork, the furniture, like the art, was also not meant to be sat on or used in the context of the exhibition (which casts a shadow of doubt upon the furniture's identity as a utilitarian object). Reaves's works, on the other hand, are sculptures that one can sit on in the gallery space. In a different, but similarly paradoxical fashion, Reaves's works, which she calls sculptures, are often titled in a way that literally suggest that the sculpture is indeed furniture (Bucket Chair with Covers) or a shelf (Waterproof shelf). Contradiction is subsumed into the practice. As Nina Murayama succinctly notes in her essay, *Furniture and Artwork as Paradoxical Counterparts in the Work of Donald Judd*, "Judd's art pieces deny the practice of 'composition' in art and look like design object, whereas his geometrical, hard-edged chairs appear too rigid and his oversized benches too large—they are at odds with ordinary furniture." [16] They reject the Modernist "idealistic unity between art and design" and instead, "pose a matter of fact inquiry into the discourse of art and the everyday perspectives of their users and participants at the mundane level of practice." While Judd arguably made no moves to provoke or challenge the presumptions that fine art is superior and should be held in higher regard than decorative art, he did both "challenge and subvert the stringent socio-cultural hierarchy at the levels of production, marketing, and public display" which paved the way for artists like Scott Burton and now Reaves. [17].

While a blemish alone, a nick in the material, a buckle in the wood that would not even be visible to a viewer, notoriously disqualified a Judd from being a Judd, Reaves's work capitalizes on the very notion blemish. The coolness of perfection in both modern and minimal forms is undone by the warmth of imperfection. It was Judd's fear of such "blemish" that led to his turn to serial schemes and fabrication which brought him more directly in line with Bauhaus and his predecessors. Judd cites his reliance on a team of assistants that worked to oversee every aspect of the fabrication of his work. Reaves, in contrast, works alone out of her basement studio that sits underneath an old carriage house in Chelsea where she shares a space with another artist and calls in an assistant only if she can't physically do it alone. [18]

"I've gotten pretty good at moving things around, a four-by-eight sheet [of plywood]—I can swing that around by myself," she says in her interview with Pesce, who like Judd, relies on a team for the fabrication of his work, whose process is like a small factory. In 2017, Reaves revives the "old assumption" of Renaissance *disegno*—the supposition that a work's quality and integrity lie within the artist's manual abilities and skill—which Judd's technique had reversed although, Reaves's pieces often appear de-skilled in their wonky assemblage. [19]

One of the many contradictions that rests within Judd's practice is his desire to have his work be both specific and serial at once. In Reaves's conversation with Pesce, Pesce muses, "I thought it was interesting that someone like you—a young person called an artist—is interacting with furniture." [20] He goes on to answer his own question, giving the reason why it is he thinks that Reaves engages with furniture as a medium. "Furniture has a kind of magnetic force because it comes from production, and that is something that is very present in our life because everything comes from the production." [21] Though Reaves retorts:

"That's part of where the interest comes from. What you said before about time and values being liquid and coming in and out of style—I think production has been the same way. In the sixties and seventies, there was this idea that we would revert to the homemade, that the promises of production weren't giving us everything we wanted from our objects or our lifestyle. I take a lot of inspiration from those periods where everyone had a craft hobby and people wanted to teach each other how to make their own furnishings. That failed, and now if a person is building their own bed that's a very specialized skill. We don't expect that from the average citizen at all." [22]

This DIY approach is a challenge to practicality, a rejection of capitalistic tendency, a rejection of seriality, and of mass production. The notion of functional often implies the notion of practical but in the case of Reaves work, the relationship between the two concepts is fraught. Later in the same interview, Reaves states that when working on a piece, she tries to "almost take all of the practicality out of an object and then tries to put it back in. Even if the function isn't as generous, there's something else that's happened." Again there is yet another counter-intuitive aspect present at the crux of the

15 Ibid.

16 "Judd's art pieces deny the practice of 'composition' in art and look like design object, whereas his geometrical, hard-edged chairs appear too rigid and his oversized benches too large—they are at odds with ordinary furniture" - Murayama

17 Murayama, Nina. "Furniture and Artwork as Paradoxical Counterparts in the Work of Donald Judd." *Design Issues*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Summer 2011), pp. 47-59. MIT Press. pp. 48

work, in which functional capacity is present but dialled back which in effect calls attention to what about the object “works” and what doesn’t “work.” The making- something-less-functional than it can be becomes part of what makes it art.

Scott Burton, whose work reveals aesthetic continuity with that of Judd’s in its minimalistic appearance, shifted the discourse surrounding art and furniture/design from one concerned with ranking among the two disciplines to what Murayama refers to as a “closer examination of the social nature of participatory observers and users of functional objects.”[23] However, Burton conceptually departs from Minimalism while still employing the minimal form. He manages to reverse its muteness and lack of agency as object and as Roberta Smith says in the opening line of a 1978 feature on Burton for *Art In America*, “makes it talk.”[24] It is in this same piece that Smith notes the subjective, emotional presence within the works. Burton she says, “wants his objects to have charisma—a physical, quasi-erotic magnetism that is both fascinating and a little repellent[...]Unoccupied, they do not seem empty. They almost seem to be their own people.”[25] The name Burton could be switched out for Reaves and the statement would still be bona fide. While Burton’s furniture work lacks the craft element, the softness, the hand, and the sense of bounty that is present in Reaves’s, resting within the furniture sculptures of both artists, though manifest in different ways, is a latent humanness, a “charisma” and “quasi-erotic magnetism,” a slightly repulsive, abject quality. Burton’s writing on Brancusi’s work is also applicable to that of Reaves’s. In an essay Burton wrote on Brancusi that accompanied a show of Brancusi’s work at MoMA in 1989, he cites Brancusi not only as an artist who highly influenced his work, but also as the first Minimalist and the first furniture artist.[26] He understands Brancusi’s furniture work as a “usable meditation on utilitarian form,” stating that the best pieces of [his] furniture [work] are not only functional objects but also representations of functional objects.”[27] Burton also cites Gerrit Rietveld as a figure who advanced the blurring of boundary between art and furniture, saying that Rietveld’s chairs and tables serve as “sculpture conceptually as well as visually by calling attention to structural elements that are usually concealed.”[28].

This is a comment that perpetually appears in relation to the work of Reaves as her upholstery often appears to be de-upholstery, and which serves as a key element of the anthropomorphic quality of the work. (Though while Rietveld shows the skeleton, Reaves shows the flesh).

In an interview in 1987, Burton made the following statement: “all my work is a rebuke to the art world.” Both Burton’s and Reaves’s work can be seen as quietly conjuring an aura of Institutional Critique defined by Andrea Fraser as exposing “the structures and logic of museums and art galleries.”[29] Not only do these artists push the institution of art to expand its frame, they also reveal and challenge the hierarchies and limits at play within our conceptions of what comprises the art/life boundary. In making art that is functional, and in Burton’s case both public and functional, they make art that in its use-value is not entirely distinct from the “real world” and consequently works to debunk the false sense of autonomy and self-contained wholeness that the “art world” claims.

At the Whitney, situated at the center of a gallery space, *Bucket Chair with Covers* both plays on and complicates the role of the traditional gallery seat or bench, which tends to be slick and metallic, to be monotone, to claim neutrality and are not known for their comfort. Gallery seating is almost always made to disappear into the aesthetic framework of institution. Contrarily, Reaves’s piece does the opposite of disappear and instead works to domesticate and destabilize the sterile, autonomous viewing space. In the Biennial, *Bucket Chair*, is situated directly facing a large painting by Carrie Moyer. The chair comes to function as art object, as art experience, and as a vehicle for viewing other art. There is no sign or wall text notifying the viewer as to whether they are permitted to physically interact with or occupy the piece, which leads to a certain dance between viewer and the sculpture. When sitting in the piece there is a momentary dis-ease and feeling of transgression of boundary. The work is not precious but it is also by no means durable or sturdy enough to maintain the thousands of Biennial visitors without its appearance being altered. After returning a few times to see the work, I noticed another one of Reaves’s pieces had ripped and looked nothing like it had the week of the Biennial’s opening. In this sense,

18 Conversation with Jessi Reaves and Gaetano Pesce. The Museum of Contemporary Art Online. Ed. Karly Wildenhaus. <https://www.moca.org/stream/post/introducing-gaetano-pesce-and-jessi-reaves>

19 Meyer, James. “A Minimal Unconscious.” *October*, Vol 130 (Fall, 2009), pp. 141-176. MIT Press., pp 143

20 Conversation with Jessi Reaves and Gaetano Pesce. The Museum of Contemporary Art Online. Ed. Karly Wildenhaus. <https://www.moca.org/stream/post/introducing-gaetano-pesce-and-jessi-reaves>



the pieces also have a sort of time limit just as things we use in everyday life do, things with function, objects with purpose.

I suppose an apt and final question would be what makes Bucket Chair with Covers contemporary? Of course there is the fact that it was made in 2017, but its inclusion in this year's Whitney Biennial signals recognition of its relevance to the now beyond its fabrication date. The brief descriptor of the exhibition on Whitney Biennial's website self-describes the seventy-eighth installment of the survey of American art as "arriving at a time rife with racial tensions, economic inequities, and polarizing politics." [30] It continues, "Throughout the exhibition, artists challenge us to consider how these realities affect our senses of self and community." [31] And so, how does a chair called a sculpture that can actually be used as chair fit into this paradigm? In an age of rapidly advancing technologies, depersonalization, and ecological entropy, Reaves offers a human respite from the cold, impersonal sheen that our 2017 world reflects. Her work has a genuineness and even in its at-times-almost-grotesque presence, a warmth that has dwindled and is craved. It suggests perhaps to slow things down, to work with, riff on, and adapt, to make due with what we have. Not only are her materials largely scavenged but so are the forms. I again returned to thinking of and drawing a parallel to the work of the Pictures artists, who treat representation not as representation of something that already exists but rather they treat it as a site where meaning is produced.

Reaves's work and practice more generally raise a question that rests at the crux of contemporary art: why do we allow art not to be useful? Not practical, but useful. I have one remaining knot of questions to leave you with but which I'm afraid can only be answered by the passage of time. Does a collector of a Reaves chair, be it a museum or private collector, get the chair refurbished after it has been sat upon or used so many times that the seat wears through to the point where there is a gaping hole? What if a leg gives way? Do you take it to an upholsterer? (No). Do you take it back to Reaves herself? Will it be re-de-upholstered, transformed? Or over time will Reaves's sculptures entirely lose their functionality, and become non-functioning, autonomous objects, contradictions of their original selves? ■

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid

23 Murayama, Nina. "Furniture and Artwork as Paradoxical Counterparts in the Work of Donald Judd." *Design Issues*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Summer 2011), pp. 55. MIT Press.

24 Princenthal, Nancy. "High Style, Clear Form, Sharp Edge." *Art In America*. March 2013.

25 Ibid.

26 Burton, Scott. "Burton on Brancusi: April 7th - June 28th, 1989." *The Museum of Modern Art*. 1989. pp 3

27 Burton, Scott. "Burton on Brancusi: April 7th - June 28th, 1989." *The Museum of Modern Art*. 1989.

28 Princenthal, Nancy. "High Style, Clear Form.

29 Fraser, Andrea. "From the Critique of Institutions to An Institution of Critique." *Art Forum*. September 2005.

30 From The Whitney Museum Website's Whitney Biennial 2017 homepage <http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2017Biennial>

31 Ibid.

Sharp Edge." *Art In America*. March 2013.

Images in order of appearance:

Jessi Reaves, Kragel's Nap Chair, 201

Jessi Reaves, Cesca Leaves the Stack (Modified Chair) (2016)

Sarah Lucas furniture, 2013

Mary Heilmann, Club Chair

Donald Judd, Side Chairs

Scott Burton, Two Chairs.

Jessi Reaves, Idol of the Hairs. 2014

Scott Burtton. Chaise Lounge Rosa Baveno Granite

Johanna Fateman, “Rights and Privileges: Johanna Fateman on the 2017 Whitney Biennial”, *Artforum*, May, 2017, 296-302.

ARTFORUM

May 2017

RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES

Johanna Fateman on the 2017
Whitney Biennial



“

Jessi Reaves’s sometimes functional, one-of-a kind furniture pieces provide a kind of unruly connective tissue linking disjunctive works. Her sculptures are revealed as chameleonic decor elements, easy to pair with other artworks despite their big, vaguely dystopian personalities. But Reaves’s repurposed, in-process aesthetic, that of a discerning landfill scavenger and couture upholsterer, finds its best companion in the queer hedonism of Carrie Moyer’s trickily layered, biomorphic compositions. The painter’s loud, seductive

... ”

Cat Kron, “Ginny Casey and Jessi Reaves”, *Artforum*, May, 2017.

ARTFORUM

GINNY CASEY AND JESSI REAVES

ICA - INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, PHILADELPHIA
PHILADELPHIA

Through August 6

Curated by Charlotte Ickes



Left: Ginny Casey, *Moody Blue Studio*, 2017, oil on canvas, 70 x 75 inches. Courtesy Half Gallery, New York. Right: Jessi Reaves, *Night Cabinet (Little Miss Attitude)*, 2016, plywood, wood, steel, silk, zippers, 72 x 32 x 26 inches. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.

A bulbous, raunchy anthropomorphism runs through the paintings of Ginny Casey and the sculptures of Jessi Reaves. Casey's paintings, featuring cool-toned, swollen hands and vases, and Reaves's furniture-based constructions both confront the life of the decorative object. While these emerging artists clearly share a fascination with the everyday, the most striking common aspect of their practices is an uncanny, subtly grotesque emphasis on the body as it assumes the forms of (or interacts with) household objects. This two-person show features more than thirty recent works, several made for the occasion, and comes on the heels of Reaves's critically heralded interventions at this year's Whitney Biennial. Accompanied by a catalogue featuring essays by Ickes and art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson, the show pushes beyond the rote feminist strategy of the appropriation and inversion of the domestic to explore something far creepier.

— Cat Kron

Robin Pogrebin, “Here Comes the Whitney Biennial, Reflecting the Tumult of the Times”, *The New York Times*, November 17, 2016.

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

Here Comes the Whitney Biennial, Reflecting the Tumult of the Times

By **ROBIN POGREBIN** NOV. 17, 2016



The artist Henry Taylor in his downtown Los Angeles studio. Some of his recent portraits will be exhibited at the Whitney Biennial. Credit Monica Almeida for *The New York Times*

FOR the first time in 20 years, the lead-up to the Whitney Biennial coincided with the presidential election, a background that could not help but inform the selection of artists and artwork that will be on view when the biennial opens on March 17, the first in the museum's new downtown building.

"An election year prompts that questioning," said Scott Rothkopf, the Whitney's chief curator and deputy director for programs. "The discourse turns to who we are as a nation."

On Thursday, the Whitney revealed the 63 participants in its sprawling survey of what's happening now in contemporary art — the new, the influential and the potentially provocative.

After visiting artists' studios, dealers and curators in 40 cities during the past year, the biennial's curators — Christopher Y. Lew, an associate curator at the Whitney, and Mia Locks, an independent curator — were struck by themes that resonated with the contentious election: personal identity, social struggle, connection to place.

So much of the artwork "is about the artist or a self in relation to the tumultuous world that we're in," Mr. Lew said.

The featured artists vary in their race, gender, sexual orientation and geographic locations. There are nearly as many women as men; a large delegation from California; and several from outside the continental United States. They work in various media, including technology. (The museum announced in 2015 that the next biennial would be in 2017 rather than this year so curators could adjust to the new building.)

Since moving downtown, the Whitney has tried to better integrate the spirit of the biennial into its year-round activities, by re-energizing its emerging artists program. "A little bit more in the trenches," Mr. Rothkopf said, "a little closer to the ground."

While the biennial includes established artists like Jo Baer, William Pope.L, Dana Schutz and Jordan Wolfson, many are largely unknown.

The curators worked closely with a team of advisers: Negar Azimi of the Middle East publication Bidoun; Gean Moreno of the Institute of Contemporary Art Miami; Wendy Yao of the exhibition space 356 South Mission Road and the art shop Ooga Booga in Los Angeles; and Aily Nash, a curator with the New York Film Festival, who is helping organize the biennial's film program.

"We wanted them to be an invested part of the process from the beginning," Ms. Locks said.

Below is a sampling of some of the lesser-known names in the show.

RAFA ESPARZA (Born 1981 in Los Angeles; lives in Los Angeles) He builds structures from adobe bricks that he makes with his family and friends out of dirt, hay and horse manure mixed with water from the Los Angeles River. Mr. Esparza learned this technique from his father — who built his own home in Durango, Mexico — just after the artist came out as gay. For the Whitney, he will create a room made of adobe that will also display works by other artists.

SUSAN CIANCIOLO (Born 1969 in Providence, R.I.; lives in Brooklyn) Her fashions of recycled or found textiles have been featured in Barneys and Vogue, and in 2001 she transformed a gallery in the meatpacking district of Manhattan into a pop-up Japanese-inspired tearoom, serving lunch to the installation's visitors. For the biennial, she will reprise the tearoom in the museum's restaurant, Untitled, in collaboration with the chef Michael Anthony.

ALIZA NISENBAUM (Born 1977 in Mexico City; lives in Brooklyn) Calling her work "political witnessing," Ms. Nisenbaum makes portraits of immigrants, many of whom she meets through her art classes at the Cuban-born artist Tania Bruguera's community space in Queens. At the Whitney, she will show new large-scale paintings, including one of a Latino runner's club and another of the women's cabinet to the New York City mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, where she was part of the 2015 fellowship program.



Susan Cianciolo Credit Zoe Latta, Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC



Susan Cianciolo's "Untitled" (2000), watercolor on paper.
Credit Courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York, Collection of the artist

POSTCOMMODITY (Founded 2007) This collective — comprising Raven Chacon, Cristóbal Martínez and Kade L. Twist — for four days in October 2015 installed a two-mile “Repellent Fence” of 26 balloons that intersected the United States-Mexico border near Douglas, Ariz., and Agua Prieta, Sonora. The Whitney will feature the collective’s 2016 video installation, “A Very Long Line,” in which the camera rapidly moves laterally along the border to a discordant soundtrack, as if from the perspective of a passenger in a car.

HENRY TAYLOR (Born 1958 in Oxnard, Calif.; lives in Los Angeles) His early portraits of patients at Camarillo State Mental Hospital in California, where he worked as a psychiatric technician from 1984 to 1994, were featured in his solo shows at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2007 and at MoMA PS1 in 2012. His 2008 piece “He’s Hear, and He’s Thair” — depicting a homeless man named Emory who became his friend — sold at Phillips auction house on Wednesday for \$60,000. Mr. Taylor’s recent portraits, some of which will be at the Whitney, feature subjects including friends and family.

JESSI REAVES (Born 1986 in Portland, Ore.; lives in Brooklyn) Having worked part-time as an upholsterer, she makes sculptures that function as furniture: chairs, tables and sofas created from startling blends of foam, sawdust, plywood, plexiglass and auto parts. Examples will be at the Whitney. “She will take polar fleece and use it as a slipcover,” Mr. Lew said, “applying materials you don’t expect, but will recognize.”

MAYA STOVALL (Born 1982 in Detroit; lives in Detroit) Ms. Stovall, who describes herself as a “radical ballerina,” dances in front of liquor stores in her Detroit neighborhood, McDougall-Hunt. She then interviews patrons about her performance and records these events on video, editing the footage and adding a soundtrack. Episodes from this “Liquor Store Theater” will be on exhibition for the first time at the Whitney.

SKY HOPINKA (Born 1984 in Bellingham, Wash.; lives in Milwaukee) In “Jáaji Approx.” (2015), Mr. Hopinka, a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation, films his journey through the territory once traveled by his father. Mr. Hopinka pairs the sights through his windshield with stories, songs and conversation from informal recordings he made over a decade. The biennial will feature his new video, shot on St. Paul Island in the Bering Sea, home to one of the largest Aleut populations in the United States.

OCCUPY MUSEUMS (Founded 2011) Emerging from Occupy Wall Street, Occupy Museums is a largely New York-based group that focuses on the relationship between art institutions and capitalism. The collective’s Debtfair project, coming to the Whitney, packages works by United States artists who are in debt



The artist Jessi Reaves at work. Credit Oto Gillen, Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York

into “bundles” that can be purchased for the cost of the artists’ monthly loan payments.

CHEMI ROSADO-SEIJO (Born 1973 in Vega Alta, P.R.; lives in San Juan and Naranjito, P.R.) In 2014, Mr. Rosado-Seijo transformed a museum gallery in San Juan into a classroom, inviting students from a school to the museum for daily Spanish class, and exhibiting works from the museum at the school. At the Whitney, he will bring this project to the Lower Manhattan Arts Academy on Grand Street, the biennial’s only off-site installation.



“Idol of the Hares” by Jessi Reaves. Credit Courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York

Gaetano Pesce and Jessi Reaves, edited by Marco Braunschweiler, “Introducing: Conversations Between Two Artists Who Have Never Met Before”, *Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles: Stream*, November 11, 2016, <http://www.moca.org/stream/post/introducing-gaetano-pesce-and-jessi-reaves>



Introducing: Jessi Reaves and Gaetano Pesce



A conversation between artist Jessi Reaves and artist, designer, and architect Gaetano Pesce. The dialogue took place in person at Pesce's studio in Brooklyn, New York. This is the first time the two have spoken.

Gaetano Pesce: So how will we start, Marco?

Marco Kane Braunschweiler: For me, both of your work deals with the plasticity of form and a kind of anthropomorphism. In your case very overt and in Jessi's case a bit more subtle. So I'm curious to discuss your approaches,

I see them as a decomposition of material that's then recomposed into iterative forms. I think of both of your work as an ontology—an ontological study of architecture and domestic objects—a study in what a building, a chair, a vase, can be.

Since we're here in the studio I'm curious a bit about your process. Do you come to the studio early? Do you stay late? Is this typical?

GP: Not me, I came maybe half an hour ago. I work only in the morning. Then when I need to come here, I come here. Otherwise, I go to the office on Broadway. There we do what we call "clean work." Like project drawings, relations with museums, exhibitions. That is the way I work when I am in New York, because fortunately or unfortunately, I travel a lot. Every month for a week, if it's not more. And you, Jessi?

Jessi Reaves: I do the reverse, wake up and try to get to the studio as quickly as I can, I don't do a lot of "clean work" or office work besides sending emails.

GP: So where do you have your office—your workplace?

JR: My studio is in Chelsea in the basement of an old carriage house. They used to keep horses down there.

GP: And you work alone there?

JR: I share the space with another artist. She's there three days a week.

GP: But is there is someone helping you, or no?

JR: No, every once in awhile I have an assistant, but usually it's just me alone down there.

GP: And can you do all this alone?

JR: For now I can do it alone. If I have trouble physically doing something alone, I'll wait until my assistant can come. But I've gotten pretty good at moving things around, a four-by-eight sheet [of plywood]—I can swing that around by myself.

GP: Yeah, we have this problem too here. But we are...how many do we have here? We are four. And five with me, so...

JR: Have you always had people assisting you?

GP: I always work in the way I said. There is one office where they do a certain work and a workshop where we research and test material. Yesterday we did a test in something, and we didn't succeed. So today I was thinking that we threw out a thousand dollars. Just like that, boom.

JR: Wow.

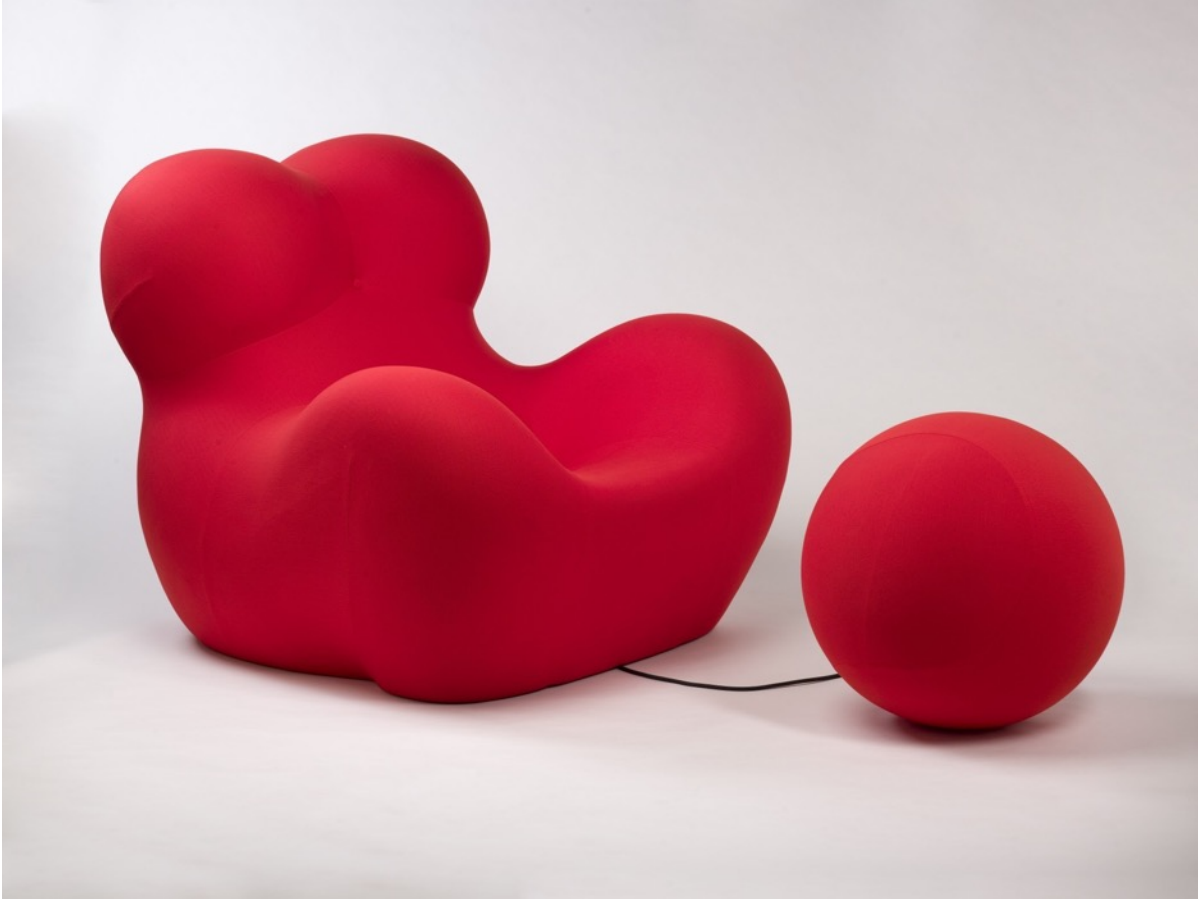
GP: Because, well—I don't know why. So that happens, when you do research you never know where...you know where you start, but you don't know if you'll succeed.

JR: Right.

GP: But Marco said something about the anthropomorphic image, that came to me not out of any kind of will but because when I was young, like you, I thought that the geometry that people were using at that time—and some are still using—was too abstract, too neutral, and I thought it was good to introduce a certain figure and images in general. The images at the beginning were parts of the human body. And for that time, now I talk about the year '72, '74, so it's almost what? Forty-two, forty-four years ago? I realized that if you want to communicate with people, it's good to use images because then they can understand what you do much better.

JR: Interesting.

GP: And so from human bodies to images, the step was very short.



GAETANO PESCE, UP 5 LOUNGE CHAIR WITH UP 6 OTTOMAN , 1969, POLYURETHANE FOAM COVERED IN STRETCH FABRIC, (CHAIR): 40 X 43 1/2 X 45 INCHES (101.6 X 110.5 X 114.3 CM) (OTTOMAN): DIAM. 22 1/2 INCHES (57.2 CM)

JR: I have a similar feeling about geometry in design. I've always felt there was this supposedly "scientific" approach to design that typically used geometry as a starting point. Like they were zooming in on nature and finding these tessellating patterns or molecular structures. And that justified their use of geometry somehow or made the geometry more intelligent—that type of interest in geometry feels so shallow. I don't use images of bodies in the same way that you do, but I do tend to use organic shapes because they refer to the body automatically. So in that way you get a different type of image of nature than you do with hard geometry.

GP: The organic is already an image and is very strong if you compare it to a triangle, circle, or rectangular shape. The organic is much more rich.

JR: Right, because you see yourself.

GP: You can have more or less everything in the organic. They say that I use a lot of organic elements in my representations. But one interesting thing that is good to talk about today is...when I was twenty-four, such a long time ago, almost half a century, I started to think that the best freedom is the one from yourself. At that time the artist was expected to express a certain language and be recognizable through that language.

JR: Right—having a recognizable style.

GP: And I was saying, "No, that is not what I would like to do for myself." Because we have the right to be incoherent. And why? It's because time is incoherent. And if we follow time we cannot be always the same. Today I more or less follow that idea of incoherence. And usually I judge an artist—if it happens to be that I need to judge someone—through

whether it's recognizable or it's not. Traditionally they start at the beginning and until the end of their life, they more or less they do the same thing. Time is a very serious partner. It changes all day, every day, every hour.

JR: You know it's so interesting because lately, I've been thinking about that instinct to change. Something I admire when I look at other artists is whether the work has evolved or changed over time. But on the other hand, I know the feeling of obligation to see an idea or material experiment through—to stick with something until there's really nothing left. It's hard to know when you've gotten to a place with a certain idea, when it's time to move on. I'm always afraid of not squeezing everything out of an idea or material, you know? Not seeing everything that's there to be seen...

GP: You said material, material is incoherent. For example: one day someone discovers materials that are very heavy and very strong, and the day after someone else discovers another material that is completely different, very light and soft, but when you have it on your end you don't feel it...

JR: But it seems like with your career you've found certain materials that you wouldn't abandon even if something new came along. Like there's something about that one material that lets you have versatility, and even if the material doesn't change itself, there's liquidity and space...

GP: If I discover myself working with materials that are liquid then I observe that the time in which I am living has liquid values.

JR: People ask me, "Will you always make furniture?" And it feels like such an irrelevant question because I feel like I'm following the ideas more than a particular form.

GP: When I saw this [pointing to an image of Reaves' work], I thought it was interesting that someone like you—a young person called an artist—is interacting with furniture. Why? Furniture has a kind of magnetic force because it comes from production, and that is something that is very present in our life because everything comes from the production.

JR: That's part of where the interest comes from. What you said before about time and values being liquid and coming in and out of style—I think production has been the same way. In the sixties and seventies, there was this idea that we would revert to the homemade, that the promises of production weren't giving us everything we wanted from our objects or our lifestyle. I take a lot of inspiration from those periods where everyone had a craft hobby and people wanted to teach each other how to make their own furnishings. That failed, and now if a person is building their own bed that's a very specialized skill. We don't expect that from the average citizen at all.

GP: When you were explaining why you work with furniture I thought of how I came to what we call design. I discovered design because a woman who was staying with me, we were eighteen, nineteen years old, and she was studying sculpture, I was studying architecture. We were in a school in Venice, and one day she said, "You know they opened a new school called the industrial design school?" I didn't know what that was, and then she said, "Do you want to come with me and go to this school?" And I said, "No, I am in the school of architecture." So she became a student of this school and through her, I understood what design was, I realized that she was talking to me about a kind of art that was practical. And then years later I realized that art, what we call art, was always practical.

JR: Right, but if something is functional it's not always practical. Sometimes when I'm working I like to...to almost take all of the practicality out of an object and then try to put it back in. Even if the function isn't as generous, there's something else that's happened.

GP: In your work, we have two dimensions, no? There is a chair and then there is something you add to that. A kind of second expression and the second expression is the culture of the object, no? The story of it, and that is why it is interesting...

JR: You've talked about liquidity and how it's a metaphor for time. But I also think there's a sense of making something permanent look like it happened very quickly, the idea of a pour...it just feels very fast...I know this wasn't fast [pointing to an in-progress lamp] but it has that energy.

GP: At this certain moment in my life I understood that it was much better for me to allow the material to decide itself, and I could decide how to move, how to fix, how to cure. Because I understood it was much richer than what I was able to do.



JESSI REAVES, SHELF FOR A LOG, 2016 PLYWOOD, SAWDUST, CANE CHAIR SEAT, INK, 34 X 68 X 13 INCHES
(86.36 X 172.72 X 33.02 CM), COURTESY BRIDGET DONAHUE, NYC

JR: My experience with that is more in terms of being attached to the things in their imperfect state—when the upholstery on a piece of furniture has faded from sitting in the same place for years. It’s frustrating when people are so attached to perfection and to things looking new.

GP: Yeah, you said it—imperfection is super important.

JR: When you started working with plastic...there must have been a period of time where plastic was both innovative and exciting but also considered cheap? Or considered to be a lesser material than glass-ceramic? I feel that you elevate plastics to a place where it’s beyond those things. There was a time when...when it was both. It was exciting and new but also kind of trashy.

GP: There was a time when people were not buying my things because they were considering plastic something that was going to disappear. But slowly also museums now collect plastic objects.

JR: Of course!

GP: It’s not called plastic because that’s very negative, it’s called synthetic material. Some of the synthetic materials are better than the traditional material.

JR: I work with plywood because it’s the cheapest way to work with wood. You could call it “engineered wood.” It has fragility, it’s not pristine and durable like maple or walnut. And it changes, its color fades over time. I really like those qualities, and I like how you use synthetic materials for that same reason.

GP: Yeah, but the fade...a piece of wood, if it’s very old you see that it’s very dark.

JR: Yes, it gets darker brown as the light hits it. Or silver if it sits outside in the elements.

GP: But then if you sand it, it could become very light again. So everything changes as I said before. The aging process attacks everything—marble, stone, metal, everything. You mentioned glass...I work with glass. But compared to the synthetics I use, glass is a poor material.

JR: Right, I imagine working with synthetic materials you can change your mind, too, in a way you can't with glass. I'm kind of intimidated by any material or process where I can't change my mind in an instant.

GP: So I saw you work also with foam, no?

JR: Oh yes. You know, people always give me a hard time about its longevity. And I feel like people aren't aware that there's foam in everything, you know? We don't show it naturally without a covering, without any fabric over it. People are so repulsed by it. But you're always sitting on foam.

How do you choose your projects? Is it by the location or the feeling from the people who reach out to you?

GP: By curiosity. Usually, we work here following ideas or curiosities. And it's very rare that we do something because someone asked. For instance, these chairs we are sitting on—we did them last year but we did them for ourselves and now maybe there is a company in Belgium that is interested to produce them. So it depends on ideas.

JR: I'm fortunate to have a schedule of projects coming up, but when I'm in the studio I'm trying to pretend there's no deadline. And trying to do what you're talking about, following ideas and making things for myself without thinking, "this has to be finished by this time."

GP: We have deadlines more related to exhibitions but not deadlines for what we do. So there is no carrier work. It's jumping from one subject to another.

JR: I can't imagine having a creative practice that wouldn't let you digest that way...like your mood could change...

GP: One day you read the paper and you have an idea, and the day after you see a movie and you had another idea. I am not recognizable. I am not doing a bottle, always the bottle, big bottle...

JR: [laughs] In one of the first studio visits I ever had someone asked me, "Do you want to have a recognizable style?" I was just so thrown by that question. It wasn't something I had genuinely considered. It's an idea from the outside that enters and once you hear it it's hard to forget. Like, "Oh, a recognizable style?"

GP: In 1972, I did an exhibition with others at the Museum of Modern Art, it was a very famous exhibition called Italy: The New Domestic Landscape.

JR: Oh, yes. I have the book.

GP: And then, who approached me was a very famous gallerist, Leo Castelli. Leo Castelli said, "I would like to see your work." At that time it was very close to the summer, and I was going to Venice. So he said, "I'll come for the Biennale, and we will see each other in two months."

We had an appointment in Piazza San Marco. I did not believe the guy was coming, I arrived late, and he was there waiting. We went to my atelier, and he was interested and said, "What I see—are you able to keep doing this all the time?" And I said, "No." He explained to me, "If you change, I have to always do the work to make you recognizable." He said, "I cannot work with someone who changes all the time." I said, "Okay, I cannot promise to be always the same."

Eric Sutphin, “Jessi Reaves”, *Art in America*, September 2016, p. 144.

Art in America

JESSI REAVES

BRIDGET DONAHUE



For this debut solo exhibition, Oregon-born, New York-based artist Jessi Reaves demonstrated her omnivorous approach to making sculptural furniture, offering viewers an assortment of pieces that incorporate materials ranging from plywood to car parts to yellow upholstery foam to driftwood. Reaves treats furniture making as her primary expression, creating pieces that are, as the late artist Scott Burton once wrote of Brancusi's furniture, “not only functional objects but also representations of functional objects.” There is something subtly apocalyptic about Reaves's work: the way every scrap and shred of refuse is somehow incorporated into the making of another piece suggests a diminishing supply. Dried accretions of wood glue and sawdust that had been mixed together to create a molding paste cling to many of the furniture's surfaces like wasps' nests.

Most of the pieces on view had clear functions (sitting, displaying, lighting), but some were more ambiguous. The six-foot tall *Night Cabinet (Little Miss Attitude)*, 2016, for instance, is a jagged, roughly leaf-shaped structure that has been sheathed in shimmering black silk, rendering its interior shelves largely inaccessible. Hand-sewn details include an embroidered rosette and several zippers left unzipped to reveal the plywood construction inside. Various iterations of wrapping, binding, and leatherwork in the show suggested a fetish sensibility. In *Bad House Shelf* (2016) — one of the most overtly sculptural works presented — a cylindrical tube is wrapped in black leather and pinned behind a series of tiered plywood shelves. Additional components include a gnarled driftwood branch twisting upward from the bottom portion of the unit, and a roughly cut plywood backing, with red marker lines showing the places where incisions were meant to be made.

Jessi Reaves: *Night Cabinet (Little Miss Attitude)*, 2016, plywood, wood, steel, silk, and zippers, approx. 6 by 2.75 x 2.24 feet; at Bridget Donahue

Engine Room Shelving (Recollection Wedding Edition), 2015, is a knobby freestanding O-shaped structure with three shelves running across it with a large bowl-like finial on top. The wood and foam framework is wrapped in pearlescent vinyl-mesh cloth that has been aggressively stapled in place. *Dog's Stick Lamp* (2016) is a towering mantid form. Its body is a nearly eight-foot long piece of driftwood, around which the lamp's electrical cord winds, entering and exiting several bored holes. The head/lampshade is made from a steel armature over which green-and-black harlequin-patterned fabric is stretched.

Though Reaves references mid-twentieth-century masters like Charles and Ray Eames, Isamu Noguchi, and Philip Johnson, she rejects the elegant finish of their work in favor of a more provisional approach, nodding to tradition but playfully transgressing it. When I visited the show, the gallery was filled with the scent of incense and cannabis, which had wafted in from a nearby apartment. The heady aroma was a perfect olfactory complement to Reaves's gnarly, tactile creations.

— Eric Sutphin

“Jessi Reaves at Bridget Donahue”, Contemporary Art Writing Daily, June 8, 2016, <http://www.artwritingdaily.com/2016/06/jessi-reaves-at-bridget-donahue.html?m=1>.

Contemporary Art Writing Daily

Wednesday, June 8, 2016

Jessi Reaves at Bridget Donahue



Foam Couch with Straps, 2016, Upholstery foam, fiberglass, wood, webbing, 29 x 77 x 35 inches (73.66 x 195.58 x 88.90 cm)

Like Rembrandt's Flayed Ox tinged with new meaning against the repetition of his auto-erotic visage, Reaves doubling-down on material entrails in the age of avatars could seem perversely obstinate memento mori; a reminder that, like all that stolen Ikea elegance whose eventual blown out corners reveal its making of all but compressed trash, underneath everything we desire to be is an intestinal makeup of sponge replacing its weight with rumors of dead-cells and dust-mites of a body threatening to turn fungal even while its pubescent biology meets identity, becoming gendered but threatening death makes them erotic like the ox meat.

Christie Chu, “10 Millennial Artists to Watch in 2016: Jessi Reaves”, *Artnet News*, June 6, 2016, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/10-millennial-artists-watch-2016-511961>.

artnet® news

Art World

10 Millennial Artists to Watch in 2016

See who made the cut.

Christie Chu, June 6, 2016



Jessi Reaves (b. 1986)

The symbiosis of art and design culminates in Jessi Reave's work which hovers between furniture and art object. Reaves' creates conventional (and functioning) items you would find in any furniture shop: chairs, a couch, lamps, several shelving units. However, the artist assembles materials unconventionally to create an entirely unique aesthetic.; what is normally kept hidden inside furniture is turned out.

Reaves recently had a solo show at New York's Bridget Donahue gallery.

Kavior Moon, “Jessi Reaves and Sophie Stone”, *Artforum*, Summer 2016, 405.

ARTFORUM

Jessi Reaves and Sophie Stone

DEL VAZ PROJECTS

For their first exhibition in Los Angeles, New York-based artists Jessi Reaves and Sophie Stone furnished Del Vaz Projects with works that slyly confused the boundary between the so-called “fine” and “applied” arts. Slouching against walls and scattered across the floor were large, irregularly woven textiles and idiosyncratic furniture pieces that served an aesthetic purpose and much as a utilitarian one. The works fit seamlessly into the exhibition space, given that the gallery is also a lived-in apartment. (The venue housed the artists while they created, in the building’s garage, most of the displayed works during an informal three-week residency.) Recalling neither the artisanal luxury items of the Arts and Crafts movement nor the rationalized, reductive forms of modernist designs, Reaves’s and Stone’s functional objects that often bore traces of previous uses.

In the main gallery - a living room - Reaves exhibited a series of quasi-anthropomorphic chairs and shelving units. *His and Hers Ferraris*, 2014, comprised a pair of steel chair frames padded with wide strips of polyurethane foam, sexily sheathed in sheer dark-rose slipcovers with revealing cutouts edged in bright red silk. A far cry from the disciplined elegance of curvilinear chair designs of Giò Ponti or Carlo Mollino (which seem emaciated in comparison), these paired chairs nonetheless radiated their own ungainly charm. Puckered ribbons of foam were wrapped around a large chair frame covered with a hardened mixture of glue and sawdust in *Life Is Getting Longer/ Baguette Chair*, 2016. One sank down comfortably into the squishy, cellulite-like folds of this armchair, cushioned with foam pieces unevenly colored from varying amounts of light exposure, dust and dirt left by previous visitors. A trio of sculptural shelving units, one freestanding and two attached to walls, all made from biomorphic, Noguchiesque shapes cut from plywood (a very un-Noguchiesque material), completed the furniture set.



View of “Jessi Reaves and Sophie Stone”, 2016. On floor: Sophie Stone, *Untitled (in-reverse #1)*, 2014/2016. Chairs: Jessi Reaves, *His and Her Ferraris*, 2014.

Underneath and alongside Reaves's furniture pieces, hanging on one wall of the gallery's main room and sprawling on the floors of its kitchen, dining area, hallway, and outdoor patio, lay colorful rug-size works by Stone. These textiles were made from new and used cotton, sisal, plastic, and acrylic rugs and mats, cut up and rewoven, thus producing a mixture of colors, patterns, textures and styles. In some, house paint was subtly applied to emphasize the flatness of the picture plane, as in *Untitled (carpet with vine)*, or to further the pictorial push and pull carried out literally in *Untitled (carpeted with pink border)* and *Untitled (carpet with silk edge)*, all 2016. Stone's pieces bring to mind the mediums of painting and collage, yet some of her works can be turned around, such as *Untitled (in-reverse #1)* and *Untitled (in-reverse #2)*, both 2014/2016. Not only are Stone's works easily portable (and sometimes flippable), they are also semantically flexible. All of her textiles can be displayed on the floor, where they are used as rugs as well as on the wall, where they read as paintings or wall decorations. The slippery nature of these works is evident in *Untitled (carpet with pieces)*, 2016, which is composed of two strips of sisal tightly (and suggestively) bound together by cords; hung so that its bottom rests on the floor, the work appears to be either sliding off the wall or creeping its way up.

What Roberta Smith once remarked of Scott Burton's furniture objects can also be said of Reaves's and Stone's works: They emit a "physical, quasi-erotic magnetism that is both fascinating and a little repellent." But unlike Burton's concrete, metal, and stone forms, which are seemingly timeless, Reaves's and Stone's works evoke a cyclical temporality: New materials become old and old materials are repurposed to become new. Eschewing the coldly polished surfaces of Burton's furniture, the artists have given their works absorptive skins that receive and retain incidental marks of touch and use - ongoing records of the objects' biographies. In these pieces, "stains" have been "removed" through a conceptual reframing, allowing seeming imperfections to resonate instead with significance.

- Kavior Moore

David Ebony, “David Ebony’s Top 10 New York Gallery Shows for May”, *Artnet News*, May 25, 2016.

artnet®news

ART WORLD

David Ebony's Top 10 New York Gallery Shows for May

David Ebony, Wednesday, May 25, 2016



Installation view, Jessi Reaves, 2016. Photo Courtesy Bridget Donahue.

Jessi Reaves at Bridget Donahue, through June 5.

Wacky and irreverent, but made with obvious conviction, Jessi Reaves's furniture-like sculptures and objects constitute an impressive solo debut. Stepping into the gallery space conjures a visit to a modern furniture showroom. But on closer inspection, it might be a place where the Flintstones shopped. The archaic-looking, rough-hewn details and makeshift components of the would-be couches, coffee tables, armoires, and light fixtures are bizarre in the extreme. After spending some time in the show, however, the funky charm and humor of the work gives way to a keen intelligence, and even moments of beauty.

The Oregon-born New York artist makes puns on modern and contemporary art and design in a number of pieces. Mind at the Rodeo (XJ Fender Table Noguchi Knockoff #2), 2016, for example, mimics a Noguchi kidney-shaped glass-top coffee table, except that the base is made of a cut-up bumper from a Jeep Cherokee. One of my favorite works, Foam Couch with Straps (2016), echoes John Chamberlain's foam rubber couches from the 1960s. Reaves's nod to Chamberlain is certainly witty, but would anyone ever want to sit on this thing?

Claire Voon, “The Visual Indulgences of Furniture Made From Scraps”, *Hyperallergic*, May 18, 2016.

HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES

The Visual Indulgences of Furniture Made from Scraps

by Claire Voon on May 18, 2016



Installation view of Jessi Reaves at Bridget Donahue (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Stepping into Jessi Reaves's show at Bridget Donahue gallery, I was at once slightly thrown by the sense of having entered a showroom display. For the New York-based artist's first solo exhibition at the gallery, she has filled the room with an assortment of furniture: seemingly scattered arbitrarily in the expansive space are chairs, tables, shelves, and other furnishings.

Sculpted from plywood, foam, oriental strand board, sawdust, and other raw materials, these pieces strip bare what we usually see as upholstered, painted, and polished. Rather than coming off as uniform, manufactured objects, however, they maintain an air of whimsy, with undulating forms and an array of textures that tickle the senses. You feel that each of these has a personality, making for something both functional and visually indulging.

One of my favorite pieces is “Trunk Bed Box (Weather)” (2016), a trunk that resembles a small coffin. Its sterling board walls, with their variegated surface of fragmented wood, has an off-putting roughness that threatens to give you a splinter or two; but lined with milky-hued ruffles of foam, it also tempts you to enter — or at least prod its plushness. The cushioning even appears to spill out from the chest, like whipped cream gratuitously smeared on a dessert, ready to dribble at any moment.

It’s this blending of the seemingly sumptuous with stiff, uncomfortable material that make Reaves’s pieces particularly alluring. A chair titled “Bitches Bonnet Seat” (2016) veils a foam-based core in nylon that Reaves has embroidered with ornate floral patterns. While the foam here seems like it would feel itchy, the delicate, lace-like cover softens it. The fabric also imparts a past elegance that lends the whole piece a touch of romance — this is the sort of chair I imagine would be at home in the once-glorious mansion of Miss Havisham. Also consider “Bad House Shelf,” a twisted wooden wall rack pierced by a bolster-like structure made of black leather. The sleek and smooth column, restrained by the wooden shelves, offers a BDSM aesthetic (also alluded to by the work’s title) that satisfies through its hint of provocative pleasure.

Evident throughout all the works is Reaves’s handiwork that adds an additional ruggedness to each of her objects. She has made little effort to cover up some of the details that suggest her process, from lines of ink on wood — meant to guide her cutting — to dried nuggets of glue, to the puckers on soft surfaces made from fastened staples. Such a revealing of the furniture’s anatomy celebrates individual craftsmanship over mass manufactured objects. Two pieces on view particularly express this: labeled “Noguchi Knockoffs,” a pair of glass-top tables mimic the widely produced modernist design by Isamu Noguchi, except one replaces the traditional hardwood legs with detached Jeep Cherokee fenders; the other, cedar chips and sawdust. Reaves’s playful updates are desirous of furniture with more character and presence, urging that the objects with which we choose to surround ourselves should not have to forgo charisma for functionality.

Leigh Anne Miller, “Lookout: Jessi Reaves”, *Art in America*, April 29, 2016.

Art in America

EXHIBITIONS THE LOOKOUT



Jessi Reaves

at Bridget Donahue,
through Jun. 5
99 Bowery

It may feel illicit to do so in an art gallery, but you can touch—and sit on—Jessi Reaves’s new furniture sculptures. Some appear to have been turned inside out—take, for example, the couch made of dull yellow upholstery foam strapped to a wood armature—while others are more playful renditions of familiar design objects. A narrow plywood shelf is the “functional” part of *Rules Around Here* (*Waterproof Shelf*), zipped inside a vinyl sheath; the way the fabric tapers at the top, near the sculpture’s “neck,” and a piece of wood pokes out where shoulders would be, makes the piece look like a headless witchy figure. Also irresistible are *Bitches Bonnet Seat*, a low-slung chair upholstered in sheer embroidered lace, and two sly Noguchi knockoffs incorporating decidedly un-Noguchi materials like sawdust, cedar chips and Jeep Cherokee fenders.

—Leigh Anne Miller

Pictured: View of Jessi Reaves’s 2016 exhibition at Bridget Donahue, New York.

“Jessi Reaves”, *The New Yorker*, April 27, 2016.



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Art

JESSI REAVES

April 10 2016 – June 5 2016

“Meaning is use,” Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote. This young American artist clearly agrees, as she dissolves the distinction between sculpture and furniture. (Imagine Matthew Barney and Mika Rottenberg collaborating on a project for Design Within Reach.) A plywood shelf is sheathed in a vinyl wetsuit; rolls of yellowed upholstery foam are bolted together into a makeshift couch. Isamu Noguchi’s signature table, with its ovoid glass top and curved wood base, is reimagined with two doors of a Jeep Grand Cherokee, and to make the surface level Reaves has shimmed one with glue and sawdust. The coldness of modernism takes on the warmth of bodies, and quotation becomes, in Reaves’s formation, not just sincere but erotic.

Bridget Donahue

99 Bowery

New York, NY 10002

<http://www.bridgetdonahue.nyc>

646-896-1368

Sam Korman, “Jessi Reaves”, *Flash Art*, April 26, 2016, Issue 307.

Flash Art

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1 / 7 Jessi Reaves, “Foam Couch with Straps” (2016). Courtesy the Artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.

Review / April 26, 2016

Jessi Reaves *Bridget Donahue / New York*

Anyone Knows How It Happened (Headboard for One) (2016), is the most formally straightforward work in Jessi Reaves’s solo exhibition at Bridget Donahue: two shelves flank a large sheet of plywood with a piece of raw foam stapled bottom-center.

In spite of the candor of the presentation and plainspoken materials, *Anyone Knows...* absorbs a full *abécédaire* of art, design, and other vocabularies. The shelves are surreal, biomorphic protuberances; the headboard distorts International Style’s industrial planarity; the staples inscribe medieval crenellations; and a crafty faux-marble swirl decorates the foam. Or it’s trussed dolphin fins, John Chamberlain’s foam contortions, oyster lips, and a bad reaction to an oil spill. The title’s bare-all

evocation (and possibly exaltation) embodies the spirit of Reaves's furniture-sculptures. With basic, short-shelf-life materials, she imbues her Frankenstein-forms with a life-span, and like the monster, they reveal the inscrutable desires—exotic, romantic, abject and ecstatic—behind the dual acts of classification and use.

The remainder of the exhibition is a showroom display of shelves, chairs, couches, cocktail tables, a lamp and an armoire. Viewers are invited to sit on a few of the pieces, which affects the try-it-out comforts of furniture retail, but the experience of any individual work playfully warps the scenario. From its exterior, the use of *Night Cabinet (Little Miss Attitude)* (2016), is not immediately apparent. But, if one unzips the semitransparent silk bodysock, keys and other valuables can be safely stored on the shelves that comprise its spikey internal skeleton. *Night Cabinet* undresses intention, its purpose performing a burlesque between object and observer.

Twice Is Not Enough (Red to Green Chair) (2016), is upholstered in iridescent silk, which fluctuates along a chemical-bath gradient of red, green and orange. A square edge suggests it was cut from a loveseat, and its overstuffed plush renders its ad-hoc and unnaturally tumescent appearance pregnant with further upcycling reinterpretations. It is tempting to relegate Reaves's furniture-sculptures to art's systems of critique and value, but their generosity, as well as their ironies, traffic just as potently (and perversely) in other function-oriented contexts. Within Reave's punk theatricality, there is no passive service; her furniture-sculptures free the desire to define, and let it run its course.

by Sam Korman

Josephine Graf, "An Ideological Revision of Furniture Design: Josephine Graf in Conversation with Jessi Reaves", *Mousse Magazine*, February 17, 2016, 230 - 237.

MOUSSE

MOUSSE 52
J. REAVES

230

JESSI REAVES BUILDS SCULPTURES THAT ARE CHAIRS, SOFAS, SHELVES, AND TABLES – AND VICE VERSA. THESE WORKS DISREGARD DIVISIONS BETWEEN THE FUNCTIONAL AND THE AESTHETIC, WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY STARING DOWN THE HISTORY OF THAT BINARY. IN SOME, REAVES ENLISTS MODERNIST DESIGNS AS SUBSTRATES, BUNDLING THEM IN UPHOLSTERY FOAM OR SHROUDING THEM IN SILK. IN OTHERS, CLASSIC FABRICATION TECHNIQUES ARE BENT TOWARDS THE STRANGE, OR TURNED INSIDE OUT. ANY EQUATION BETWEEN FUNCTIONALITY AND RATIONALITY IS DISLODGED THROUGH A HEAVY DOSE OF THE ABJECT AND EXCESSIVE. JESSI SPOKE TO ME ON THE PHONE FROM LOS ANGELES, WHERE SHE WAS PREPARING FOR A TWO-PERSON SHOW AT DEL VAZ PROJECTS.

Josephine Graf is a writer and curator living in Brooklyn, NY. She is currently a 2016 M.A. candidate at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College.

Jessi Reaves (born 1986 in Oregon) has been included in group exhibitions such as "Natural Flavor" at Ludlow 38, New York (2015); "Pavillon de L'Esprit Nouveau: A 21st Century Show Home" at Swiss Institute, New York (2015); and "American Basketry" at Bed Stuy Love Affair, New York (2014). She recently presented a solo project at SculptureCenter, Long Island City, NY (2016) and will hold a solo exhibition at Bridget Donahue, New York in April 2016.

Opposite - *Butter-egg-chair*, 2015. © Jessi Reaves. Courtesy: the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York. Photo: Marc Brems Tatti

JOSEPHINE GRAF
I want to start off with a broad question about how you came to work at the intersection of sculpture and furniture?

JESSI REAVES
It came out of working professionally doing upholstery, and having those materials and the process of regenerating these older pieces around all the time. People would bring me furniture that had been sitting in the same corner for 30 years, so they were stained by the architecture or daily use. I got so attached to them in their kind of undone-ness, and then it would be this painful process of ripping them apart to make them look new again. Literally turning them inside out.

JG
The process of reworking pre-existing forms obviously carries through to what you are doing today. Can you talk specifically to the modernist designs that you intervene in, and the ideological revision that comes along with changing them materially?

JR
That's kind of to the heart of the whole idea, an ideological revision. In some works, there's a frame that remains unaltered. I'm thinking of those chrome chairs (*Butter Egg Chair*, 2014), for example. In certain instances I'm more concerned with the ideology surrounding the history of a specific piece, the designer, the time period. In others, I'm more focused on how a particular piece has been absorbed culturally. With that work and certain others I'm interested in a particular aesthetic, how it seems trapped between modernism and a kind of failed biomorphism. I'm looking for pieces that attempt to interact with classic modernist design, that aim for that type of elegance, and then miss. So with that chair in particular, it's somewhere between a creature and a chair, it's like the shell of a bug. There's something psychological about that mistake, about aiming for something and then just missing.

JG
Can you talk a little about your ongoing show titled "Office Furniture" in the back room at Bridget Donahue Gallery, which extends until 2024?

JR
The idea to use that space as a revolving showroom was really Bridget's. Everyone kept telling her: what you have to do is to get two sawhorses and a piece of plywood. I'm just very grateful that she was willing to do something beyond that, because there are so many ways in the art world where you're presented with these two decisions – either you go fancy, or you go low class. And they kind of mean the same thing. It's also been interesting to give those pieces a second context to be used and seen after they were shown initially. In the case of the current table (*I Can Dissolve*, 2015), knowing the type of constant use it would have really pushed me to focus on durability, which I often deal with as a secondary consideration.

JG
We've touched on the ways you disrupt the modernist design object. But, I was also considering how your work might be, in a slightly perverse way, the apotheosis of the modernist dream of merging artist and designer?

JR
When I think about the tension between modernism and craft, I often wind up thinking about the Studio Furniture movement. I'm thinking here about Nakashima or Wendell Castle - 1960 through the 1980s. I usually consider those people to be more of the apotheosis of Bauhaus, since in many cases those pieces are such successful mergings of sculpture and craft. With my work I end up so far away from traditional craftsmanship, but I really respect that work and look at it constantly.

JG
How do ideas of irrationality or imperfection play out in relation to this notion of craft?

JR
It seems for most people craft implies some level of mastery. Especially with woodworking, you're held to some standard of perfection and durability. But there's also the flip side, craft can be crude and primitive or childlike. I kind of love the split expectation within the idea of craft. Working with sawdust comes directly out of those ideas, because the technique of mixing sawdust with glue to fix an imperfection in wood is a "woodworker's trick" so to speak, but I've turned it into this crude and irrational decorative gesture.

231

AN IDEOLOGICAL REVISION OF FURNITURE DESIGN
J. GRAF



AN IDEOLOGICAL REVISION OF FURNITURE DESIGN

JOSEPHINE GRAF IN CONVERSATION WITH JESSI REAVES



JG Can you elaborate on the role of the decorative? Or what seems like a general tendency towards the baroque?

JR When I think of the baroque I'm really thinking about ornate detail and ornamentation, but also the drama and tension it creates. There is a stark contrast to the reductive tendencies of modernist design. There you have this stripping away, all you're left with is the metal and the upholstery, just very simple elements interacting. I like conflating the two, so that the way of creating the detail is through the construction. So a lot of times, as with the shelves for instance (*Bunny's Face, Aliveness Shelf*, 2016), the marker lines that come from drawing out and planning the piece remain and wind up taking the place of other types of ornamentation. It's kind of the same idea with my use of sawdust. Over the summer I was researching the history of engineered woods, and particleboard in particular. I learned that in the early 20th century the first sheets of particleboard were completely handmade. There was a lumber shortage in Germany, and they forged the first pieces using floor sweepings pressed with glue. It was coincidental and obviously interesting to me that I had already been doing that with sawdust from my own floor sweepings. I liked the circularity of that, a material that ends precisely where it began.

JG To the eye, plywood appears to be such an unassuming material, but you're deconstructing and reconstructing it into something almost surreal. Maybe this is so off, but when I saw your plywood works at Essex Flowers, I couldn't help thinking about *Lord of the Rings* or something along those lines. Like, what kind of house would this be in?

JR Yeah, I love the idea of hobbit furniture. There's something very art deco about hobbit interiors, I need to look into that more.

JG So the form/function and art/design binaries that seem to run latent through your practice - are they important to you, or is it more critical to surpass them?

JR It's both. A while ago, I was actually looking into why it is phrased as form *versus* function. That phrasing comes from the expression form follows function. So you have this directive statement that gets turned on its head almost immediately. Sculpture has been dealing with this idea for so long, but there's still something that feels mutually exclusive. I'm always looking for little ways to further irritate that, sometimes by using details like beading, or fragile clothing fabrics instead of durable upholstery fabric. With the transparent fabrics, I'm interested in the way they kind of trap the stain. If you spill something on the chair, the stain soaks in, but you can still see it through the fabric, it's encapsulated.

JG There seems to be a double approach to transparency, where on the one hand, with your use of foam and plywood, you're making it transparent in the sense of laying it bare. On the other hand, there's a literal transparency to the sheer fabrics with which you're swathing or wrapping the works. I'm thinking of *Maraschino Fairy* (2014) where you've draped a Josef Hoffmann chair in gauzy pink

silk, and what the implications, perhaps even feminist undertones, of that gesture might be.

JR It looks like it's wearing lingerie or something.

JG There's something sort of erotic to it, which brings you into an anthropomorphic territory.

JR With that piece, it really did become as if the chair had slipped into something more comfortable, which was my intention, but it did lead me into this whole idea that I'm dealing with a masculine/feminine binary, which I hadn't expected. The design world is undeniably, throughout history, a male dominated field. So by incorporating those kinds of feminine coded materials, it definitely forces me into that territory, and I feel like that's what made me want to also build the frames myself. If I'm going to own the 'feminizing' of these objects then I also want to go to the other side and cut things up and engage with this very masculine tradition of making furniture.

JG I feel like you've been increasingly taking the creation of the underlying structure into your own hands. I'm thinking about the works you showed at Old Room, like *Engine Room Shelving* (2015).

JR Those were the first works I made where I really built the whole piece from inside out, I wanted to get inside the kind of masculine process of building and see what I could find. With those works, I was also focused on how they would age, how the foam would eventually crumble and fall apart and in the meantime get dirty, and then you would have the frame exposed underneath. I wanted them to imply a certain type of attitude towards the domestic - this rude upheaval or something.

JG The idea of narrative seems to subtend a lot of your works. They almost speak to each other as characters, which might be the antithesis of the modernist desire for autonomy or purity.

JR I'm definitely conflating those ideas in the pieces I'm working on now for my upcoming show at Bridget Donahue, which are variations of the Noguchi table. I was thinking about him as this character who is both artist and designer, but who fits seamlessly into both worlds and reinforces all of these modernist ideals, especially with that table. It's fetishized as an art object as well as a piece of design history. So I've taken the basic construction and function and turned it into these crude, even brutal reimaginings of that work.

JG So much of what Noguchi stands for now, and this could be broadened to include many of the modernist designs we've mentioned, is a sort of silent elegance. It's passé to talk about elegance. It's just supposed to be embodied, disappear tastefully into the background.

JR Yeah, it's like good elegance isn't supposed to really present itself as such. I've definitely stripped away all of the elegance from that table in my new version. Nothing elegant left.

Josephine Graf in conversazione
con Jessi Reaves

Jessi Reaves realizza sculture che fungono da sedie, divani, scaffali, tavoli e viceversa. Opere che non osservano le divisioni tra il funzionale e l'estetico, benché al tempo stesso rivolgono lo sguardo su tale dicotomia. In alcune di esse Reaves si serve di elementi modernisti come substrati, avvolgendoli con della gommapiuma o ricoprendoli di seta. In altre opere le tecniche di fabbricazione classiche sono virate verso la stranezza. Qualsiasi equazione tra funzionalità e razionalità è rimossa servendosi di una dose massiccia di abiezione ed eccesso. Jessi mi ha rilasciato un'intervista telefonica da Los Angeles, dove sta preparandosi per una mostra bipersonale alla galleria Del Vaz Projects.

JOSEPHINE GRAF Vorrei iniziare con una domanda generale. Come sei arrivata a lavorare all'intersezione tra scultura e arredamento?

JESSI REAVES Tutto è nato dal fatto che mi occupavo professionalmente di rivestimenti e perciò ero sempre circondata da quel genere di materiali e impegnata a rigenerare quei vecchi pezzi. Le persone mi portavano mobili che erano rimasti per trent'anni sempre nello stesso angolo, motivo per cui erano segnati dall'architettura o dall'uso quotidiano. Mi affezionavo a essi e al loro essere rovinati e poi iniziava il doloroso processo che portava a smembrarli per poi conferire loro un nuovo aspetto. Si trattava letteralmente di rovesciarli.

JG Il processo di rielaborazione di forme preesistenti ovviamente viene portato a compimento in quello che fai oggi. Puoi parlare nello specifico degli oggetti di design modernisti su cui intervieni e della revisione ideologica sottesa alla loro trasformazione materiale?

JR Al centro di tutta quest'idea c'è proprio una revisione ideologica. In alcune opere troviamo una cornice che rimane inalterata. Penso, ad esempio, a quelle sedie cromate (*Butter Egg Chair*, 2014). In alcuni casi mi interessa di più l'ideologia che sta intorno alla storia di un pezzo specifico, del progettista, dell'epoca, ecc. In altre mi concentro maggiormente sul modo in cui un pezzo specifico è stato assorbito dal punto di vista culturale. In quel lavoro

233

AN IDEOLOGICAL REVISION OF FURNITURE DESIGN
J. GRAF

Olivia Erlanger and Jessi Reaves, *City Animals*, 2015, "Natural Flavor" installation view at Ludlow 38, New York.
Courtesy: Jessi Reaves and Bridget Donahue, New York



Above - *I just live here*, 2015. © Jessi Reaves.
Courtesy: the artist and Bridget Donahue,
New York. Photo: Marc Brems Tatti



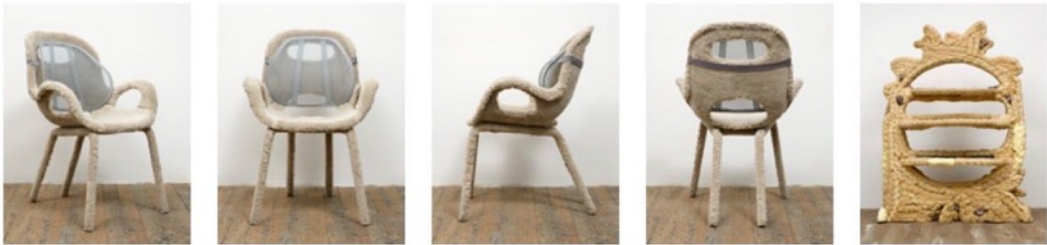
Right - *Kragel's Nap Chair*, 2015. © Jessi Reaves.
Courtesy: the artist and Bridget Donahue,
New York. Photo: Marc Brems Tatti

MOUSSE 52
J. REAVES

234



No Reason Work Table, 2015



Keeper's Glove Chair, 2015

Engine Room Shelving Unit, 2015

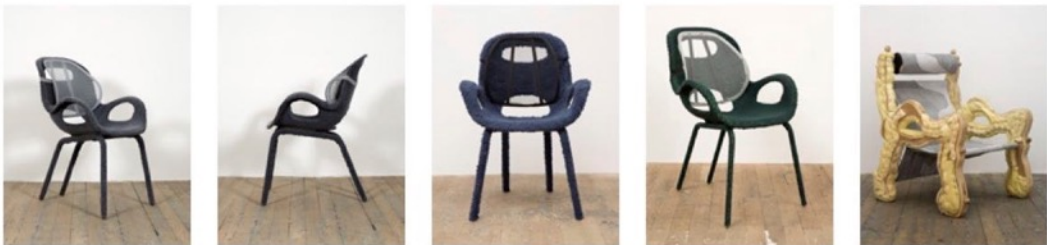


His and Hers Ferraris (Ignazio Giunti), 2014



pro-tour lounge, 2015

sexy hazard ladder, 2015



At Last Night Glove Chair, 2015

Desert Sling, 2015



Idol of the Hares, 2014

235

AN IDEOLOGICAL REVISION OF FURNITURE DESIGN
J. GRAF



if you want to know what will bring you back to life, it's nothing, 2014



Keeper's Glove Chair, 2015

Shoe Rack Bench, 2015



Rodeo Chair, 2014



I Can Dissolve Table, 2015

New Life Shelving Unit - Part C, 2015



Stained Glass, 2015



Dog's Toy Coat Rack, 2015

MOUSSE 52
J. REAVES

236



237 e in certi altri il mio interesse è rivolto a un'estetica particolare, al modo in cui essa sembra intrappolata tra il modernismo e una sorta di biomorfismo mancato. Sto cercando dei pezzi che provino a interagire con il design modernista classico, che aspirino a quel tipo di eleganza senza riuscire a raggiungerla. Per cui quella sedia, in particolare, è a metà strada tra una creatura e una sedia, è come la corazzata di un insetto. C'è qualcosa di psicologico in quell'errore, nel puntare a qualcosa e poi mancarla.

JG Puoi parlare della tua mostra intitolata "Office Furniture", attualmente in corso nel retro della galleria Bridget Donahue, che durerà fino al 2024?

JR L'idea di usare quello spazio come sala espositiva a rotazione è stata di Bridget. Tutti continuavano a dirle: "Quel che devi fare è prendere due cavalletti e un pezzo di compensato". Le sono molto grata per essere stata disposta ad andare oltre quello, perché ci sono molte situazioni nel mondo dell'arte in cui ci si trova a dover decidere tra due possibilità: usare l'immaginazione o scendere nel cattivo gusto. E in un certo senso significano la stessa cosa. È stato anche interessante offrire a quei pezzi un altro contesto d'uso dopo che erano stati inizialmente esposti. Nel caso del tavolo attuale [*I Can Dissolve*, 2015], il fatto di sapere il tipo di uso costante che se ne sarebbe fatto mi ha costretto a concentrarmi sulla durevolezza, un aspetto che spesso per me è di secondaria importanza.

JG Abbiamo accennato ai modi in cui decostruisci l'oggetto di design modernista. Ma stavo riflettendo anche sul fatto che il tuo lavoro potrebbe essere, in un modo leggermente perverso, l'apoteosi del sogno modernista della fusione tra artista e designer.

JR Quando penso alla tensione tra modernismo e tecnica artigianale, finisco spesso per pensare al movimento Studio Furniture. Penso a Nakashima o Wendell Castle, tra gli anni Sessanta e gli anni Ottanta del Novecento. Probabilmente di solito considero quelle persone più una apoteosi del Bauhaus, poiché in molti casi quei pezzi sono una riuscita fusione di scultura e artigianato. Nel caso del mio lavoro vi è un notevole scostamento dall'artigianato tradizionale, ma rispetto davvero quel lavoro e guardo costantemente ad esso.

JG Che ruolo svolgono le idee di irrazionalità o imperfezione in rapporto con questa concezione di artigianalità?

JR Sembra che per la maggior parte delle persone l'artigianato implichi qualche grado di maestria. Specialmente nella lavorazione del legno sono tenuti a un certo standard di perfezione o di durevolezza. Ma c'è anche il rovescio della medaglia: l'artigianato può essere crudo e primitivo o infantile. In un certo senso mi piace questa scissione delle aspettative insita nell'idea di artigianato. Il lavoro con la segatura nasce direttamente da quelle idee, perché la tecnica di mescolare la segatura con la colla per aggiustare un'imperfezione nel legno è un "trucco da falegname", per così dire, ma l'ho trasformato in un gesto decorativo crudo e irrazionale.

JG Puoi spiegare meglio il ruolo della decoratività? O di quella che sembra essere una tendenza generale verso il barocco?

JR Quando penso al barocco penso davvero a particolari decorati e a ornamentazioni, ma anche al dramma e alla tensione che esso crea. C'è un contrasto netto rispetto alle tendenze riduzioniste del design modernista. Lì si procede rimuovendo e rimanendo solamente con il metallo e il rivestimento, elementi semplicissimi che interagiscono tra loro. Mi piace mescolare

le due cose, facendo in modo che il dettaglio sia creato attraverso la costruzione. Così molte volte, come con gli scaffali per esempio [*"Bunny's Face, Aliveness Shelf"*, 2016], le linee tracciate a pennarello che derivano dal disegno e dalla progettazione del pezzo rimangono e finiscono per prendere il posto di altri tipi di ornamentazione. È più o meno la stessa cosa dell'uso che faccio della segatura. Nel corso dell'estate stavo conducendo delle ricerche sui legni multistrati, in particolare il truciolo. Ho scoperto che agli inizi del Novecento i primi fogli di truciolo erano completamente fatti a mano. Vi era una carenza di legname in Germania e costruirono i primi pezzi di truciolo usando i residui sul pavimento mescolati a colla e pressati. È stata una coincidenza, ovviamente interessante per me, che io stessi già facendo la stessa cosa con la segatura raccolta dal mio pavimento. Mi ha colpito la circolarità del processo: un materiale che finisce esattamente là da dove era partito.

JG Allo sguardo il compensato si presenta come un materiale così privo di pretese, ma tu lo decostruisci e lo ricostruisci fino a trasformarlo in qualcosa di quasi surreale. Forse sono totalmente fuori strada, ma quando ho visto i tuoi lavori in compensato da Essex Flowers non ho potuto fare a meno di pensare al Signore degli anelli o a qualcosa su quella linea. In che genere di casa potremmo trovare una cosa del genere?



"Now Showing: Jessi Reaves" installation view at SculptureCenter, New York, 2016. © Jessi Reaves. Courtesy: the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York. Photo: Kyle Knodell

JR Sì, mi piace l'idea dell'arredamento da hobbit. C'è qualcosa di molto art déco negli interni degli hobbit. Devo analizzare di più quest'aspetto.

JG Per quanto riguarda le dicotomie forma/funzione e arte/design, che sembrano latenti in tutta la tua pratica artistica, sono importanti per te o è più importante superarle?

JR Entrambe le cose. Un po' di tempo fa stavo analizzando il perché si dica forma contro funzione. Questo modo di dire deriva dall'espressione secondo cui la forma segue la funzione. Per cui si è in presenza di questa affermazione direttiva che viene stravolta quasi immediatamente. La scultura si occupa di tale idea da molto tempo, ma c'è ancora qualcosa che appare come reciprocamente esclusivo. Sono sempre alla ricerca di piccoli modi per andare a toccare provocatoriamente questo aspetto, a volte usando dettagli come delle perline, oppure dei fragili tessuti da abbigliamento al posto dei resistenti tessuti per tappezzeria, perché mi interessa il modo in cui quasi intrappolano le macchie. Se versi qualcosa sulla sedia la macchia si assorbe, ma si può ancora vederla attraverso il tessuto. È racchiusa in esso.

JG Sembra esservi un approccio duplice alla trasparenza, per cui, da un lato, attraverso l'uso della gommapiuma e del compensato, ottieni una forma di trasparenza intesa come messa a nudo; dall'altro lato, vi è la trasparenza letterale dei tessuti con cui fasci o avvolgi le opere. Penso a *Maraschino Fairy* (2014), in cui hai ricoperto una sedia di Josef Hoffmann di trasparente seta rosa. Quali implicazioni, forse perfino quali venature femministe, vi possono essere in tale gesto?

JR Sembra che indossi della lingerie.

JG Vi è un che di vagamento erotico in quest'opera, che ti conduce in un territorio antropomorfo.

JR Con quel lavoro è davvero come se la sedia si fosse trasformata in qualcosa di più comodo, che era la mia intenzione, ma questo mi ha portato all'idea di confrontarmi con la dicotomia tra maschile e femminile, che è una cosa che non mi aspettavo. Il mondo del design è stato innegabilmente dominato, durante tutto il corso della storia, dagli uomini. Per cui il fatto di incorporare quei generi di materiali codificati come femminili mi obbliga ad addentrarmi in quel territorio e penso che questo sia ciò che mi ha spinto a desiderare di costruire da me anche le strutture. Se voglio davvero far mia la "femminizzazione" di questi oggetti, allora voglio anche andare dall'altra parte, tagliare le cose e confrontarmi con questa tradizione molto maschile della costruzione di mobili.

JG Mi sembra che tu stia assumendo sempre più il controllo del processo di creazione della struttura sottostante. Penso alle opere esposte all'Old Room, come *Engine Room Shelving* (2015).

JR Quelle sono le prime opere che ho realizzato in cui ho davvero costruito l'intero pezzo dall'interno all'esterno. Volevo addentrarmi in questo processo maschile di costruzione e vedere che cosa riuscivo a trovare. Con quelle opere mi sono anche concentrata sul loro invecchiamento, su come la gommapiuma alla fine si sbriciolerà e si sfalderà e, nel frattempo, si sporcherà. A quel punto la struttura sottostante sarà esposta. Volevo che indicassero un certo tipo di atteggiamento nei confronti della domesticità, un drammatico capovolgimento o qualcosa d'altro.

JG L'idea della narrazione sembra sottesa a molte delle tue opere. Sembra quasi che si parlino l'un l'altra come se fossero personaggi, il che potrebbe essere l'antitesi del desiderio modernista di autonomia o purezza.

JR Sto certamente fondendo tali idee nei pezzi su cui sto lavorando per la mia imminente mostra alla galleria Bridget Donahue e che sono variazioni sul tema del tavolo Noguchi. Stavo pensando ad esso come a un personaggio che è al tempo stesso artista e designer, ma che si inserisce senza soluzione di continuità in entrambi i mondi e rafforza tutti questi ideali modernisti, soprattutto con quel tavolo. È feticizzato come oggetto d'arte e anche come un pezzo della storia del design. Per cui sono partita dai suoi fondamenti costruttivi e funzionali e li ho trasformati in rielaborazioni crude, persino brutali, di quell'opera.

JG Il Noguchi oggi giorno simboleggia, e questo discorso potrebbe essere esteso a molti degli oggetti di design modernisti di cui abbiamo parlato, una sorta di silenziosa eleganza. È fuori moda parlare di eleganza. Ci si aspetta semplicemente che essa venga incarnata, che scompaia, con gusto, sullo sfondo.

JR Sì, è come se la vera eleganza non dovesse realmente presentarsi come tale. Nella mia nuova versione ho privato del tutto il tavolo di tutta la sua eleganza. Non c'è rimasto niente di elegante.

Roberta Smith, “Lower East Side As Petri Dish”, *The New York Times*, April 22, 2016, C29.

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN | GALLERY GUIDE

The Lower East Side as Petri Dish

By ROBERTA SMITH

APRIL 21, 2016



The patron Bridget Finn passes the Jessi Reaves sculpture “Bad Houses Shelf” at Bridget Donahue.
Byron Smith for The New York Times

OVER the past 18 months or so, the Lower East Side has become gallery central for New York City. You can’t throw a cellphone without hitting a gallery, and quite a few are moving targets. Biggish Chelsea galleries are opening outposts here. Freshman dealers are setting up starter spaces, sometimes while still learning the trade at established galleries, and starters have graduated to larger or more accessible places. And as always, artists continue to take the initiative, opening exhibition spaces of their own. A few art dealers have joined forces to make ends meet.

The neighborhood is like a busy petri dish displaying many stages of the gallery life cycle. Building one of these things and making it last is consuming and risky. It is impressive and also moving to walk the streets of this neighborhood and realize how many people want to take that risk.

Where the Art Is: A Spring Gallery Guide

Among the new arrivals are smaller Chelsea galleries like Foxy Production, which relocated to a sunny space on Chatham Square and opened with a show of gallery artists. Another transplant, Andrew Edlin, specializing in outsider art, is now ensconced on the Bowery and has mounted an impressive survey of the multi-mediums genius Eugene Von Bruenchenhein. Chelsea's Derek Eller will open on Broome Street on May 6 with the artist Peter Linde Busk. The artist-run Essex Flowers has graduated from the basement of a flower shop to ground-floor quarters on Ludlow Street and now has Saturday as well as Sunday hours. And a few local galleries already have annexes here, most notably Miguel Abreu, among the most esoteric brands in the neighborhood. Starting on Sunday that gallery's large Eldridge Street space will show the videos, film stills and annotated scripts of the uncompromising French independent filmmakers Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, coinciding with their retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art.

Here are several standout shows.

BRIDGET DONAHUE Another strong show is Jessi Reaves's debut at the gallery established on the Bowery last year by Bridget Donahue, formerly a director at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, which also now has a space in the neighborhood. Ms. Reaves makes sculpture that is also furniture, not so much by blurring their shared border as by laying waste to it. Endowed with an aggressive and unsettling wit, her mutant chairs, tables and cabinets take bricolage to a new level, cobbling together found materials, objects large and small, and furniture scraps and innards. A sawdustlike glue is big, as are exposed foam, hand-carved woods, creative upholstery and startling contrasts of materials. Homages abound: Noguchi's classic 1947 coffee table is redone using sliced car doors for the mirroring forms of its base, conjuring Richard Prince. A butterfly chair is rendered in lavender suede and heavy wood, not canvas and tensile metal. I'm not sure how genuinely comfortable some of these pieces are, but they speak in tongues design-wise, turning the language inside out and making a wonderful noise.

Katherine Cusumano, “Domestic Ills: Sculptor Jessi Reaves Elevates Furniture By Making It Weirder”, *W Magazine*, April 21, 2016.

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CULTURE » ART & DESIGN » DOMESTIC ILLS: SCULPTOR JESSI REAVES ELEVATES FURNITURE BY MAKING IT WEIRDER



1/12 >

Installation view of Jessi Reaves's solo exhibition at Bridget Donahue Gallery. Photo copyright Jessi Reaves, image courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.

Domestic Ills: Sculptor Jessi Reaves Elevates Furniture By Making It Weirder In her debut solo gallery show, the emerging artist Jessi Reaves embraces the misshapen, the uncovered, and the rickety. Climb onboard!

April 21, 2016 5:29 PM | by Katherine Cusumano

Early last fall, the artist Jessi Reaves began work on her first solo gallery exhibition, at Bridget Donahue Gallery in Manhattan's Lower East Side. At first, the process started slow, but ramped up in the three months immediately prior to the opening about a week ago, on April 10.

First came two “knockoffs” of the iconic table by the sculptor Isamu Noguchi: one small, like a coffee table, and a larger piece that incorporates fenders from a car. Reaves works with furniture as sculpture, exploring gender, the dynamic between art and design, and nostalgia in an armchair, a narrow shelving unit, or, say, a Noguchian table.

“Those were exciting pieces to start on,” Reaves said of the knockoffs. “They gave me so many other ideas; it was really easy to move forward from there.”

Over that time, Reaves has gradually accumulated enough pieces to occupy Donahue’s 2,700-square foot gallery. Up until now, the 29-year old artist’s work has mostly been seen in group exhibits. “The pieces have held up well in a group show context because they function in an interesting way next to more ‘traditional’ sculpture,” she explained. “It uses the same basic principles—our main scale reference is still the human body.” She paused, thinking. “I actually don’t think it’s that different.”

What is immediately different, though, is the way that Reaves’s sculptures collapse the distance between the viewer and the art. Her work is meant to be used, sat on, worn in. “Comfort is actually very important to me,” she said. “Sometimes I’ll sacrifice certain materials or I’ll make changes to how something looks visually just so it can be more comfortable.” At the opening, children, their parents, and their pets alike pored over the work, perching on the chairs and couches placed around the gallery alongside shelves and tables. Unexpected combinations abound: A plywood shelf gets a makeover with a vinyl coat (the piece is called “Rules Around Here (Waterproof Shelf)”), while a rich, rust-colored armchair droops and sags in a glamorous, strategically careworn fashion.

Yet, it’s hard to get too comfortable. Reaves worked as an upholsterer after graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design, where she studied painting. That is why she is so at ease producing work that, in many cases, looks not quite right or incomplete. Some pieces haven’t been upholstered; others teeter on the edge of structural integrity. And they exploit a certain kind of nostalgia, memories of furniture that once occupied childhood homes—or maybe, in their misshapen, stripped-bare construction, the curbsides of childhood homes, waiting to be towed away.

But they are still sculptures rather than functional, manufactured design objects. Reaves bristles when the two are conflated. “I actually find design pretty limiting,” she said. “I’m looking to people who aren’t really in the design tradition, even if they’re making functional objects.”

The exhibit follows on the heels of what might more properly be called Reaves’s solo debut, a project with four pieces at SculptureCenter in Long Island City. Two of those pieces are en route to Herald Street Gallery in London, where Reaves will show at the end of the month.

Although the pieces are meant to be interactive, letting them out into the world has required an adjustment. She spent the last two months before the opening at Bridget Donahue working in total solitude at a residency in upstate New York. “Six o’clock would roll around on Thursday and I’d kind of look around and, be like, this is what I’m doing,” she recalled. “I got into it,” she said. “By the end, I didn’t want to leave.”

Eckhaus Latta, "Sightlines", *Art in America*, April 2016, 37.

Art in America



ECKHAUS LATTA

The bicoastal design duo shares five recent insights with Ross Simonini



ART > FASHION

Jessi Reaves is a very good friend who has a show in April at Bridget Donahue's gallery in New York. She makes these deranged, really raw furniture objects. We definitely relate more to contemporary art than to fashion. All our RISD friends have studio practices now, and we feel more in tune with people who are making painting or sculpture or performance-based work than other designers making clothing.