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Explore Misha Kahn's World

Trash becomes treasure in the fantastical work of Brooklyn-based designer Misha Kahn

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Jason Schmidt

Whatever could this have been?" asks Misha Kahn, plucking a contorted, seemingly plastic piece of garbage from a shelf at his Bushwick, Brooklyn, studio. "A man-made product went into the ocean and came out like this, totally mangled."

Martin, Hannah. "Explore Misha Kahn's World," *Architectural Digest*, October 9, 2017.

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Over the last year, Kahn has spent a lot of time contemplating trash as he combed Dead Horse Bay, a swath of littered sand near Rockaway Beach, in Queens, for treasures to incorporate into his furniture and lighting designs. “Sea begets sea,” he muses. “The ocean has this way of turning everything into languid, entangled forms.”

It’s an idea Kahn explores in “Midden Heap,” an immersive exhibition that opens at New York’s Friedman Benda gallery on October 26. Sorting through his bags of beach trash—along with cartloads of scrap metal from a nearby junkyard—he has combined everyday refuse with tack-welded steel, cast bronze, candy-colored glass, and woven natural fibers to create sculptural (if at times functionally ambiguous) pieces. Working with found objects is nothing new for Kahn, who, as a kid in Minnesota, fused old toys and foraged stones into a sofa using cement. He recalls with a laugh, “I remember saying, ‘Take this to New York and sell it for \$10,000.’ ”

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1 / 10



Kahn screws a blown-glass shade covered in ostrich feathers into a steel light fixture.

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Turns out, his adolescent craft projects were right on the money. Since graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2011, Kahn has quickly emerged as a leading talent in Brooklyn's growing scene of designers—including his friends and fellow RISD alums Katie Stout and Chris Wolston—who are challenging conventions of taste and functionality. His Saturday Morning series of balloon-like mirrors and lamps (made by pouring glossy resin into soft, sewn molds) landed him a coveted spot in the Museum of Arts and Design's 2014 NYC Makers biennial and later a place on the roster of Friedman Benda, where he mounted his first solo show in early 2016. Now the cult of Kahn is mushrooming, thanks to fans like Kelly Wearstler, Peter Marino, and even Barbie, who Instagrammed a studio visit with the designer back in June. (Kahn made her a fingernail-size resin iPhone case.) Admirer and Design Miami chief creative officer Rodman Primack recalls his first encounter with the pieces at FOG San Francisco in 2015: "These aggressively bright mirrors literally leaped off the walls. He was upending this decorator trope of the 'statement mirror' by making it something garish, almost ugly. I liked it immediately."

These days, though, Kahn's fantastical fixations have moved from Saturday-morning 'toons to science fiction, albeit with Art Nouveau riffs. "I keep having this recurring dream that everything is underwater and there's a carnivorous plant controlling us through fiber-optic roots," he says. Sounds a bit like what he is hatching for Friedman Benda, where the work will hover loosely between two aesthetics that Kahn describes as "earth becomes sea" and "sea becomes earth." In the former case, tack-welded steel bejeweled with colored-glass orbs ("it looks very homemade submarine") may have a gothic-meets-Mad Max vibe. In the latter, sticks and garbage will be woven with straw into cabinets by artisans in Swaziland, and bronze tabletops will perch on hulking boulders.

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Steel-and-glass liquor locker.

James Orlando/ Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Misha Kahn

Viewing the works in progress requires some imagination. “These all clip together to make a 100-foot snake,” Kahn says of silvery tubes that look vaguely like chopped-up air ducts. “Or I might just turn it into a chair.” A torpedo-shaped form of the same sheet metal will become a floor lamp, with a glass hand that lights up. Examining two large panels of twisted metal and trash, Kahn explains, “This is going to all get filled in with glass and more trash, and they’ll be these sumptuous trash princess doors that weigh, like, a thousand pounds.”

Surveying his studio, Kahn says of the chaos, “Isn’t it all lovely, in an apocalyptic, deteriorating kind of way?” And while he still accepts the occasional balloon-mirror commission, there’s a bit more cynicism in the new stuff—about both the design world and beyond. After all, Kahn explains, “functional things, even if you really have to squint, provide an interesting way into people’s subconscious. They’re sort of the Trojan horse of art.”

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