

VICE

GARAGE



Step Inside Misha Kahn's Joyful, Anarchic Furniture Studio

At his Brooklyn studio, the designer talked about upholstery, how to stop yourself from killing a project, and why he loves "House Hunters."

Furniture designer Misha Kahn is trying out upholstery. When I visit his Brooklyn studio, his first sofa—as well as a set of bronze tables, chairs and cabinets, a material he says “sparks my inner goblin impulses”—is already making its way across the Atlantic, destined for the Nomad Monaco fair. A padded, unfinished ellipsoid piece lies on a high table in the studio’s de facto office, and slumped against the wall is a chair battled in white cotton with a short little tongue of a backrest, to be covered in loops of yarn to resemble a Komondor dog. He says he’s still deciding how he likes the technique. “To me, I don’t know why this is the case, but these huge cast bronze pieces I feel like are still—” he trails off. “Somehow, [upholstery] feels so real. Something upholstered is what I associate with real furniture.”

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Schwartz, Erin. “Step Inside Misha Kahn’s Joyful, Anarchic Furniture Studio,” *Garage*, April 2, 2018.

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The term “real furniture” is a bit of a cipher in Kahn’s work. The 28-year-old designer has gained renown in the art world—he’s shown at the Whitney and the Walker—as the ambassador for an influential, DIY-inflected style that Artsy uncharitably termed “ugly design.” He’s made 500-pound Gothic gates from beachside trash and blown glass bubbles; blobby concrete tables swabbed with fleshy peach, white, and amethyst; pendant lights hairy with wisps of glass. The pieces are anarchic and fanciful, but a rough-edged fidelity to their materials make them very *real*. They have the presence of a brooding animal more than that of a piece of furniture; at any moment, they might stretch, yawn, and rumble to life. “I feel like they’re not done until I get the sense that they’re about to go looking for snacks,” Kahn says. “You want the sense that if you left it at night, it might poke around in the fridge a little bit.”



Works in progress at the studio. Photo by Ashley Tyner for GARAGE.

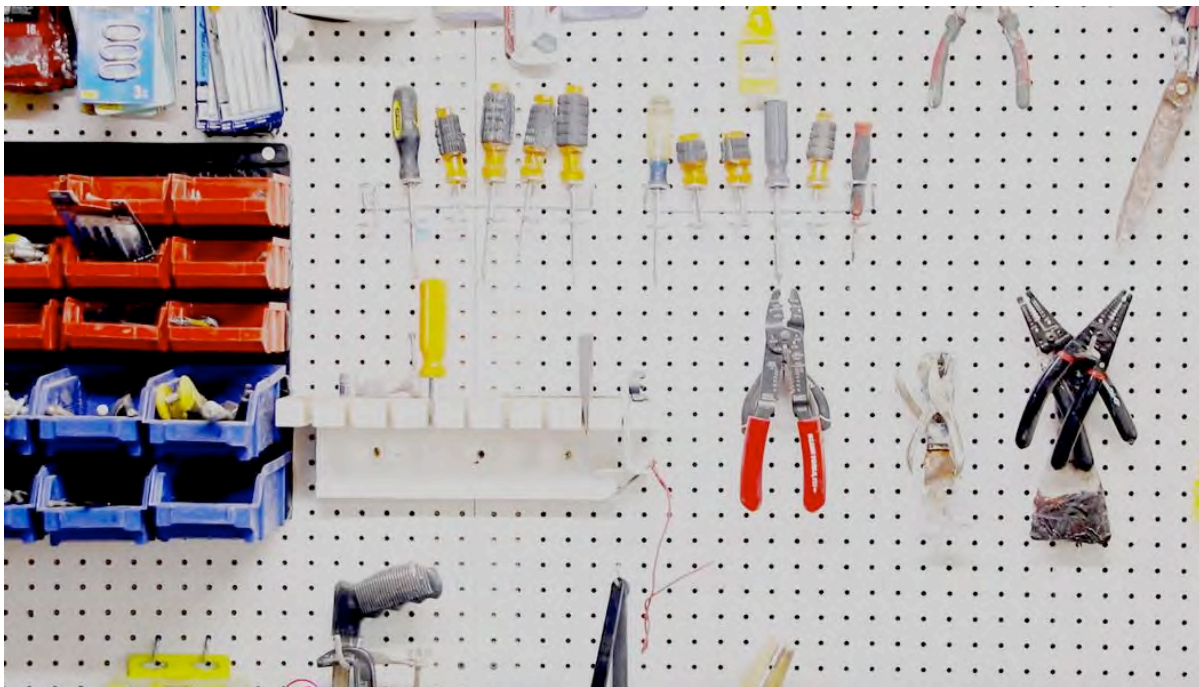
Growing up in Duluth, Minnesota, Kahn was a creative kid, experimenting in media from Claymation to apparel design, which led to one disastrous incident involving a billowing vinyl skirt full of live goldfish. At the Rhode Island School of Design, he “sort of haphazardly ended up studying furniture,” and, after winning a Fulbright to Israel, learned to make shoes from a cobbler in Ramallah. A move to New York, some odd jobs, and finding time to make work on the side, and Kahn found a receptive audience for his designs; he joined Friedman Benda’s roster in 2014.

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"I feel like some people are really precise and they're like, 'I'm opening a studio and I'm going to make these things and people are gonna want them,'" he says. "I don't know what I was thinking, because it was so much more delusional than that. The early things that I was making were these really lumpy concrete monstrosities poured into bags.... I think they were so misguided that people were really fascinated." Against the hegemony of Scandinavian minimalism, perhaps the off-kilter works felt thrillingly alive.

In the studio's workshop, Kahn shows me what he's working on next: a slab of steel studded with raised ribbon-loops of metal, similar to the casing of a bezel-set gemstone. As we talk, he slots plywood and carpet scraps into place, and I realize that each empty steel shell corresponds to a lump of material; when the piece is filled out, colored glass, gems, textiles and wood will be dispersed across its surface like dollops of paint on palette. "I feel like we've made so many things where it's like, 'Okay, we're going to take all of the scraps in the studio and glue them together.' And it's always been this really messy thing that's kind of about chaos and naïveté," he explains. "This is the same premise, but super refined, and a little more focused or precise."



Studio tools. Photo by Ashley Tyner for GARAGE.

Another work in progress is not exactly restrained: Kahn is transforming his gallerist Mark Benda's bathroom into a stainless-steel grotto, a sardonic riff on a trope he's noticed in the reality show *House Hunters*. "In the show, [the couple] walk in and it's a totally fine house, and the guy is like, 'It doesn't have the stainless steel appliances I was hoping for.'" Kahn mimics the guy's disappointed sigh, and continues, "Just go to Home Depot and buy a new sink! It's like, the easiest thing to swap out." So the bathroom will take the misguided fantasy of the men of *House Hunters* to its extreme, and the room

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will appear touched by a stainless steel King Midas, doomed by his desire for slick appliance finishes. “You walk in and everything’s stainless steel,” he says, “but in the most fucked way possible.”

The bathroom will also feature a gigantic magenta glass hand, which Kahn explains is a soap dish, meant to be filled with the bubble-gum pink liquid soap found in gyms and public restrooms. “I want it to just be filled with that so you just dip your fingers into this bowl of soft soap. It feels a little ritualistic, to dip your fingers into this big hand.”



The glass soap dish hand. Photo by Ashley Tyner for GARAGE.

It’s funny and has its own strange beauty, but the way it weaves a counterintuitive network of associations—gym soap *and* treasure grottos *and* *House Hunters*, all in one room—is the quality that makes Kahn’s work so distinctive. He has a knack for recontextualization, and letting the pieces that make up the work continue to be themselves. “I love using recycled objects and scraps, and things like that, because it’s much more intuitive,” he tells me. “I think all of these things come with their own

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history and energy. If it's trash, it has crazy marks all over it, and you get this weird assortment of colors that you'd never otherwise be able to fabricate or select.”

This way of designing requires willingness to cede aesthetic control to the quirks of the materials, which can cause some ambivalence. Kahn admits he goes through a period of hating a lot of his pieces, or finding them discomfiting. “I feel like we make a lot of stuff that is garishly playful, and I kind of feel that way about it. Like, this is so immature. And there’s tension there... it’s useful. Whereas once you abandon those things, you just end up with something generic.”

“I go back and forth with things all the time. We’ll get one week into a project and I’ll be like, this is the worst idea. I always have to pull the trigger so fast before I have time to decide that I hate it,” he adds. “And then they’re alive, and they’ve gone too far.”

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