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BY JOSEPH OWENS

PHOTOS BY JOSEPH OWENS

ARTIST OF THE WEEK: MISHA KAHN

When I arrived at Misha Kahn's studio, I was greeted at the door by a tall, kite sweater-wearing artist with sawdust in his hair, clogs on his feet, and a welcoming smile. We walked up to his second floor studio, where upon entering I was overtaken by the massive collection of objects, books, and tools of all shapes and sizes. Have you ever heard of a Nibbler? Me neither. The studio is a wonderland of textures, shapes, and colors. Miniature constructions of his past and future furniture creations strewn throughout the space, intermingled with bits and pieces of full size works that are soon to come. According to Misha, the space was much emptier than

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usual...but I couldn't imagine the space having anything more in it. Coming off of his most recent solo show, titled "Misha Kahn's Midden Heap", Kahn is redefining how we see and interpret the assembly of objects, big and small. Put simply, this designer from the Midwest is bridging the gap between fine art and furniture with his unconventional approach to functional objects.

So just for the people reading this who may not be as familiar with your work, can you just give me sort of an overall idea of what your work is, and sort of what you try to convey with it?

[Laughs] Um, that's a good question...what are they? It's mostly just very experimental furniture, super all over the map in terms of media, but usually taking kind of like an innovative but very low tech approach to coming up with processes that are a little bit more inventive. There's so much variety.



I mean I see a lot of this really unusual take on craft in a way, and it's kind of uncommon comparing that to the minimalist trend, or even modernist design, where clean lines and technical precision were really held in high regard. Do you feel like you are going for more of a rejection of that, or is it coming more from just your personal taste?

Probably a mix of both. I mean, part of it I think is like, we associate craft with this sort of rigidity, like a perfection, which is inherently very un-fun. And then frequently this is also applied to

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things that are formally very un-fun, and so I think I've tried to merge the two things to make an approach to making that is more enjoyable for everyone that is doing the making, more open. And then, in tandem with that, formally, the objects are fun.

So, you're 28 years old, you're already represented by a great gallery, Friedman Benda, and you've done two solo shows with them. Are you satisfied with how far you've come or do you see yourself going much further in the future?

[Laughs] Yeah, yeah, well I feel like there are so many days where I get here and in my head I'm like, "You have a creatively fulfilling life, you should be happy!"

Well, yeah I feel like all artists go through something like that, some days you can be totally in love with what you are doing and then other days you can be like "why am I doing this to myself?"

Yeah! I mean, I feel like I have only touched the tip of the iceberg in terms of the scope of my ambition and so I definitely want to keep pushing into some new territory. I mean, I feel like I get sort of pegged as a designer, and I think like New York is not that interested in design, and so there's like a funny thing about being a star in a place that you're not necessarily a star. Or something like that...

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[Laughs] I mean yeah, what about this idea that I keep seeing in other articles, you've been called "the ultimate millennial designer." I mean, do you like having that title or do you not really associate yourself with that at all?

It's so funny because I just feel so removed from mass culture, I think making things, especially in this—like we aren't using computers, we're just like just making weird crap with our hands. I feel like, so not a part of mass culture in a way that being called that seems so funny, but I do feel like I am very interested in the moment, and what is happening around us right now.

Right, I mean that's kind of what I was thinking about: does he even associate with this title or is it something that has just been manifested by all of these media channels?

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Yeah totally! Yeah, one person says something and then someone else kind of like defaults to that article. I mean I don't know...I feel like there is for sure a lot of flattery in there.

Yeah, of course.

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What about the road to get to where you are now, do you want to talk about some of the trials you had throughout that whole experience?

I mean I think that making stuff and being in New York is like a blessing and a curse. That's a huge one I guess. You know, making physical objects in what is essentially such tight, limited spaces is this constant challenge. Um, and I've moved studios like four times in this like short period. And now I have been here for like four years so it has been sort of stable. But that was a huge challenge to getting here. And you know I mean, coming up with ways to pay for things, like making physical, sculptural objects is expensive.

I mean probably like, the most expensive. [Laughs]

[Laughs] I mean yeah the most expensive, and the most difficult to figure out what to do with. Especially here. I mean there has been so many times where I'm like, "Why the fuck didn't I just paint?"

Well, what drew you to sculpture?

I mean this is so not the romantic answer, but the scale is so nice. I feel like architecture is like...slow and you need a whole team to realize it, and there's like years between coming up with an idea. And I feel like furniture is sort of this perfect—I like that it is human scale. And so, I can make a piece by myself within a week. It feels very immediate. And, I also like that it is like the trojan horse of the creative world. People just take a piece of furniture home and they think that they don't need to think about it, or like it's not going to affect them, it's not art so they're not supposed to consider it. And so you get to like, slide in all of your thoughts *under the radar*.

I mean, I'd say that you're subtly altering the subconscious, but your pieces are anything but subtle [Laughs]. So "Midden Heap" was your show most recently with Friedman Benda; can you talk about where you started with that and what your inspiration was?

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Yeah! I mean, I was telling one of my assistants yesterday, that I was like...tripping on mushrooms in Mexico and stumbled upon this beach with friends. And there were these three like...Mexican strippers wearing mermaid tails like...dancing in the water. And no one else in this whole deserted beach except for these three...mermaids.

...and these were real people?

[Laughs] Yes, yes yes, this was real! There was a lot of iPhone pictures later to be like, "Yeah they were really there!" And then there were like drones circling everywhere—and then we found this like gurgling aquifer that was just like gurgling up trash like one piece of garbage after another. And I was collecting all of this trash, and there was something really profound about this experience. So I feel like that kind of started it, and then I've been collecting all of this like, garbage. And it's weird the way the narrative took, because like in what you were saying about articles being articulated in some way—to me, this stuff that was coming up from the ocean, it wasn't so much about *using* the trash, it was just like the aesthetics of these things, and this kind of formal language of something that's kind of like a little haphazard and apathetic and mangled. And so I was mostly just trying to like, apply that formal language more than being interested in up-cycling.

Right, so it's not so much about environmentalism, more kind of just like the form itself.

Yeah, and I feel like this will continue in the next show, but I am kind of interested in like how humans are like cockroaches, and we are just so malleable and adaptable. And so the situation keeps changing and we just seamlessly merge. And I feel like finding these man-made objects that had basically been adapted by this natural force was like the opposite, so that felt like a nice foil for thinking about humans shifting into weird, new circumstances.

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And what about the idea of the Pacific Octopus, sort of collecting his objects from the ocean floor to decorate? Is that something that was with the work from early on or was that something that kind of got developed into it later on?

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No, I mean I definitely pasted that idea on at the very end, and I liked it just because I felt like it introduced this element of the “solitary decorator” and I thought that was like a nice prompt for people.

Do you kind of associate yourself with that in a way?

No, but I mean like...it feels like an ideal. To go into an environment and just think about like—octopus’ don’t spend time with any other octopus’ ever, they’re totally solitary until they mate and then die. Like, in a very short period of time. And so just thinking about someone having like an aesthetic impetus that’s not shared with others was so cool. And trying to get people to come into the show and think that way rather than like, “Would my friends think this is cool if I brought it home?” or “Does this fit into things that I think I am supposed to like?”

Going back a bit to the environmentalism point we touched on earlier, aside from just building beautiful works from a visual standpoint, do you feel like it is also your role as an artist to incorporate ideas like that into your work?

Yeah, yeah, totally. And I also think like, artists as sensitive people, you’re just considering all of these things that are happening. And I feel like I have a lot of environmental concerns. And then some of the stuff that manifests now as environmental concerns I think are also like me having a pessimistic futurist outlook. Like, we are going to have to think about how to make things in such an ad hoc sort of way. Because most designers I think we assume that we are going to have like, the global market at our fingertips and always be able to just move around all of these man made parts and materials and I feel like I have been doing these things with almost nothing.

Do you feel like you’re conveying the messages you want to convey?

Yeah I mean this is also kind of like counterintuitive and I wish I was more articulate so I could actually share, like, anything. But, um, I think that art, and especially furniture, is not meant to convey something that can be conveyed with text, or said. So I think some of it is just intuitive. And so in that sense like...the way some people have like...”My work is about this.” I feel like I just can’t imagine having that sort of catchphrase approach because it feels so much more like...**makes constricting motion with hands**

Thinking back, what have you learned since you left school?

I think the biggest one is like...in school I feel like everyone feels like they need to know where their ideas are coming from. And so you use all of these references and I feel like traceability is considered important...and I have certainly lost all of that. I feel like now when I come in, if I am angry I make something angry and if I am happy I make something happy.

Does it flow more freely now that you’re taking it this way?

Yeah, definitely. And I think in school I felt like you needed so much endurance because it is just you, as one little semi-incapable student trying to manifest this physical object. And now, having this team of people to work with, and all of these other resources, the ideas just come to life so much quicker. It makes the intuitive part so much more fun and free, because you're watching ideas come alive.

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So what's coming next for you? I mean I don't know what this place looked like before, but you mentioned earlier that this is comparatively empty [Laughs]. Do you have plans for more shows coming up?

Yeah definitely! I mean we have a show opening next month in Monaco, but we finished all of that work also, its on a boat. I'm also making a big underwater sculpture park, so I'm doing that in May. You have to like, scuba down to go experience this sort of mosaic experience. That's in the Maldives. And then we are just kind of starting to work on the next show. It's like the first time in a while where I feel like I am starting from scratch, we get to invent some new situations, so it's more creative.

Midden heap, and now this underwater show, is this something that you are drawn to? Themes of water? Or is this just a thing that has just been happening lately?

I mean the show and this are interesting I think because, for one, I really like swimming and I do like water, but its also this ominous thing right now. Like I feel like if we check in with our feelings about the water it's like that it is encroaching on our territory. And so I like that it is something that we need and something we are afraid of. So it's good tension. It's so funny though how these things happen and you do one thing and people are like, "He loves water."

[Laughs] Okay well I will make sure everyone knows you don't love water.

No, no, no please! Say I love water. I mean, maybe this is a whole component where we build like, underwater things. I keep saying, maybe these underwater sculptures are going to be the only permanent thing in the Maldives. The next show I don't think is going to use any water visuals.

No water at all. Ever again.

[Laughs] Well.

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