

Misha Kahn's Octopus's Garden



To describe style of furniture design Misha Kahn makes, I can freely use the term “trashy memphis” without fear of causing offense. At Chelsea’s Friedman Benda, walking into the world of Misha’s installation, the experience is eccentric, playful, though in a tactile manner that translates more to peewee herman than Ettore Sottsass.

Interview by Anna Zanes

Photos by Dan Kukla, courtesy of Friedman Benda and Misha Kahn

But Misha’s work maintains maturity, and functionality. Although the exhibition theme is octopus trash, he somehow balances odd abstraction, avoids overt trippiness in artful furniture.

"The Giant Pacific Octopus can camouflage itself, get rid of predators by spraying them with black ink, regrow a limb and—most insane of all—decorate its front yard. Incorporating aquatic treasures, as well as the carcasses of their prey, they create scrappy underwater facades known as ‘midden heaps.’"

Zanes, Anna. “Misha Kahn’s Octopus’s Garden,” *office magazine*, November 21, 2017.

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This is quite a lot of work. Do you ever reuse a piece for other shows?

I haven't before. There are some hidden things, the mirror is a cast from the mirror in the last show, but not exactly a replica. Sometimes pieces of one thing feed into the next.

Do you have a lot of assistants?

I have about three right now. But it also depends on what we're working on. ...It feels very schizophrenic in the studio, because there are so many materials, tools, and situations...

I feel like it would be hard to find help, in a way. You must have to give people tasks, figure out their strengths.

Yeah, totally. In terms of different assistants, things veer according to what work they are better at. You're like, "You're really good at this, so why don't we move you over here."

What was your major at school? You went to RISD, right?

I studied furniture design, so this is weirdly on the nose. Except obviously the program is geared more towards 'normative' objects, or small production.

Did you like art school, and would you recommend it for young artists?

Yes, and yes, but for weird reasons. I feed off of being a little contrarian, so the antagonism was nice. It's usually so traditional, and that makes you fight for something.

I feel like there is a heavy focus on modernism in general when you talk about furniture design in that traditional kind of setting, and your work seems like less direct in its references.

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For sure— in school, Bauhaus ideals and thinking democratic design works is a perspective one can take. I was just never convinced.

Your process for making the show is all done in your studio in brooklyn?

Yeah my studio is in Brooklyn, but there is so much more elsewhere, I almost feel like I am a logistics instructor.

Do you deal with your stress, or do you just thrive on stress?

I do thrive on stress, when there are a ton of things happening, I feel very focused. But then when there is one project, I micromanage the fuck out of it, boss the assistants around and it's very useless.

Does it help when you start a project like this that there is a core concept— like here, with the octopus garden?

No, I sort of had some aesthetic thoughts on where I wanted to go, but when the show started it was at the height of the design world Memphis revival, and I had a lot to say about that.

Everything felt like we were seeing a cacophony of “fun objects” that were really stiff and geometric, and I wanted to do something that felt like language, textured, layers... Sort of art nouveau. But then I was simultaneously picking up all of this trash that was sort of contrapposto, contorted oddities.

Have you ever been a dumpster diver?

Certainly. But not recently.

I was the kid that played with trash while all the kids were playing with toys.

I am a bit of a trash shopper. One of the scrap yards that I go to doesn't let normal people in because it's so dangerous, and there are cranes just dumping cars everywhere. But one of the guys just gives me a shopping cart and I pay \$5 to fill up the cart.

How did you learn about the octopus concept?

That was really just a friend who was telling me that anecdote, and i looked it up and it weirdly felt perfect for a lot of reasons... I like that they don't socialize, and spend their entire lives alone. It's like being a private decorator.

Midden Heap will be on view through December 16th.

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