

PIN-UP

PILE UP: THE FANTASTIC WORLD OF MISHA KAHN

By Natalia Torija



“It’s a full-on Bowery lighting shop,” jokes Misha Kahn about *Midden Heap*, his show recently on view at Friedman Benda gallery in New York City. It’s Kahn’s second show with the Chelsea gallery, following *Return of Saturn*, his triumphant debut in 2016. Where *Return of Saturn* seemed like a claustrophobic overflow of Kahn’s ideas spontaneously packed into Friedman Benda’s basement space, *Midden Heap* seems much more a well-choreographed orchestration. Starting from the crafted doors that transform the “white cube” gallery’s otherwise pristine entrance into a passageway to a secret chamber, *Midden Heap* is thought through

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down to the last detail. Yet, according to Kahn, the difference is that he simply “separated things a little bit more so that hopefully it feels less like *horror vacui*, and more like where things sort of hang out with their friends.” The result is far from modest. An otherworldly seascape meets sandy indoor garden, *Midden Heap* is an all encompassing, comforting, and happy place. The accompanying sound installation, which Kahn recorded with his friend Ryan Schaefer in a bathtub, underscores the fantastical mood.

The title *Midden Heap* comes from the earthy idea of “a pile of waste,” inspired by trips to the beaches of Tulum, Mexico and Dead Horse Bay in the Rockaways — originally the site of many horse-rendering plants in the mid-19th century and later a landfill. “It became all about finding these weird treasures,” explains Kahn, who describes his intention with an endearing story of an octopus’s garden where the individual pieces become part of an aquatic yard show.

Among the show’s most impressive pieces are several large woven *lutindzi* and *lukhasi* grass cabinets, which Kahn produced in Swaziland in collaboration with Gone Rural, a group of women weavers. In consultation with Kahn, who regularly FaceTimed in from Brooklyn, the women artfully entwined all sorts of found and crafted materials — beef bones, packing foam, yogurt containers, ceramic beads, and discarded Smartphones — and made them into pieces that are both massive and unassumingly intricate at once. (Their co-authorship is acknowledged in a brass plaque affixed onto each piece.) A gigantic chandelier, also made by Gone Rural, is constructed from aquarium tubing fastidiously packed with beads and colored grass interlaced with wire and recycled glass.



Kahn meekly refers to his pieces as “American garage craft;” however, the elaborate work behind each one is impeccable. Sophisticated bronze light

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sculptures made from hand-blown and recycled glass, sit graciously atop dirt piles around a dimly-lit wood board path. There are lusciously drooping blown-glass lamps adorned with ostrich feathers, furry chandeliers, and another 12-foot-wide steel octopus with dripping glass beads. A large fiberglass lounge with encrusted Technogel® blobs introduces a material Kahn has been obsessed with for some time now, so much he feels “like I want to make an incision to just slide it under my skin.”

Kahn, whose background is in scenography and set design, admits that the translation of ideas from his travels and studio into the gallery space is a challenge he continues to grapple with. “You always have to give people a place to start, or to latch on to,” he says about putting together the show, which also includes small tinted pools of water in which some of the furniture’s legs are placed. “It’s so much more about the formal qualities than any kind of ocean nostalgia or romanticization.”

Kahn recognizes the media hierarchy that comes with being part of a gallery that also represents blue-chip designers like the late Shiro Kuramata and Ettore Sottsass — or the very much alive Wendell Castle and the Campana Brothers. “Visitors are so used to having it all laid out for them: ‘this is the concept, here are the pieces, and it’s this series.’” Instead, he says he’s now learned to follow his own nature and ignore the pre-existing conditions impressed onto artists and designers. That also means that the found and repurposed materials he used for *Midden Heap* are not to be considered any less legitimate, whether it’s the glass made in Swaziland, from recycled Coke bottles, or the furnaces run on leftover KFC oil. “I asked myself ‘what are these weird rules creeping from everywhere?’ That feels odd,” he jokes, noting the need to question internalized conventions and constraints. “Design has become so graphic lately — everything is about these things that have to photograph really well, or that are fun in this sort of neo-Memphis style — these really crisp shapes. To me that doesn’t speak to anything that is happening right now.”