

TWELV

ARTIST MISHA KAHN'S ANTI-RIGHT-ANGLE EXHIBITION "MIDDEN HEAP" ON DISPLAY AT FRIEDMAN BENDA

ART / CULTURE

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Artist Misha Kahn lives in a world free of right angles. Surrounded by a whirly swirly chaos of his own creation, Kahn has forged a path in the art community that isn't about reaching a destination efficiently. Think the aesthetic and structural opposite of Ikea. His work invites viewers to indulge in visionary play time, as everything from electric neon blobs to warm woven accents make for a space full of contrasting imagination. With an exhibition dedicated to an octopus' eclectic trash collection, and an apartment featured in New York Magazine that looks like a scene from a Dr. Seuss book, Kahn is a rising creative to watch.

We caught up with the artist for some insight into both his mind and his latest exhibition entitled Midden Heap, currently showing at Friedman Benda.

TWELV: Where are you from? And what's the story behind your infamous anti-right angle design style?

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MISHA KAHN: I'm from Duluth, Minnesota. I went to Rhode Island School of Design, and then I went on to New York. It's kind of hard to pinpoint where my aesthetic comes from. My dad's side are very driven craftsmen, and he made furniture that had more modern Dutch influence. So there's probably some childhood rebellion in there somewhere. Through school, I was constantly experimenting with ways to make things more interesting. We get used to seeing the same things over and over again, so to make something interesting, it almost has to be extreme. I'm interested in exploring that territory.

TWELV: Was there a pivotal moment when you decided to depart from the traditional design route? Or was it always your MO?

MK: It was probably always my MO. I think in school I was always making outlandish things to try and make the environment more fun. And then I took that attitude and persisted. I never wanted it to feel like work. The kind of whimsy you see surrounding my work is me trying to keep it playful and experimental.

TWELV: After you went to school at RISD and then went on to study in Tel Aviv, you spent some time working with a shoemaker. What was that like?

MK: While I was in Tel Aviv, I ended up getting interested in shoes. I spent a lot of time working with this one shoemaker, and I think it was interesting learning how to make forms in that way. Furniture class is literally rigid, and so I think making something that has structure but that is still soft and has a strange shape that had an effect on me.

TWELV: You've mentioned that you're often inspired by objects you're not sure if you love or hate. Can you expand on that feeling?

MK: If I'm starting a project and I'm really sure I'm going to like the final product, I feel like there is no reason to make it. If the outcome feels certain, there's no mystery or surprise. Anytime an aesthetic comes from a place that makes me uncomfortable or feels like a challenge, it feels so much more engaging. I'm constantly choosing elements that exist in that landscape. It's fun to see if you can get something that feels cheesy at first to a place where you actually start to like it.

In the last show there were lots of elements of stained glass that really resonated with me in a pure way. There's something so dowdy and dated about it, that it just drew me in like an artistic challenge to try to use it in a way that's exciting.

TWELV: Who (or what) would you say has inspired you?

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MK: There's lots that influences me. Definitely showing at Friedman Benda—Andrea Branzi and the Campana brothers are huge references and inspirations to me. It's amazing to feel like I'm in the same place as them. There's also artists whose work I look at a lot. I feel like I mention Franz West all the time and those sorts of forms that are shape/non-shapes. I'm really all over the place.

TWELV: What is your creation process like? Do you have the same approach for each new piece that you work on?

MK: Certainly not. I'm usually working on a lot of different projects at once, so I don't start one thing and see it directly to its finish. I typically have a lot of pieces in the air at the same time. I don't necessarily love that always, but it does help me move from one thing to the other. I have these cross epiphanies. I'll be working on one thing and then think, "Oh, that would actually work for this," so functionally that's really helpful.

I used to always jump in and make something. The drawing part was super quick and dirty. Now, I spend more time drawing and making models, and I think that when there are multiple parts to the process, it helps me work on more ambitious pieces. I feel like I've thought them through more.

TWELV: Your apartment was recently featured in *New York Magazine*, and people got to see how you live within a space that bears striking resemblance to your art. What's it like to live in your work?

MK: First off, my studio is not at all like that. It's a filthy industrial space with tools and things that I make use of and then they're gone. So it's been fun to have my work but to have a lot of other people's work, too. They're pieces that I find really influential, and having them around is a totally different experience when you take it home, both pragmatically and emotionally. I see these things even if I'm not really looking at them or thinking about them, and I think that's really nice. But yeah, our apartment is a little bit insane.

TWELV: Your latest exhibition *Midden Heap* is on display now at Friedman Benda. Can you tell us more about it? What went into building these pieces?

MK: There's a lot of different micro-series in the show. Half of the show is work that I did in Africa, with a group of women basket makers there. We came up with a weaving pattern using bits of trash in a way to make these structured cabinets. There's also a lot of my new work which is built around a way to make individual casts in bronze. I did that all by using tin foil. The surfaces have this really crinkled texture which comes from making quick tin foil molds instead of the usual process of rubber and wax. And there's a lot of stuff I did in studio with glass and metal forms that are

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organic and tectonic. With the woven pieces, it felt like we made a really wholesome experience. Everything was really warm and cobbled together in a really human way. On the other side of the gallery, it feels like there are evil creatures that have bright colors like toxic slime and crazy glowing glass elements. I thought that might be a nice juxtaposition to see those two worlds right next to each other.

TWELV: In an age where smart phones, rather than galleries, are the way that most people will experience your art, do you think your latest work has the same kind of impact?

MK: No. It's something I have thought of a lot before and I didn't really for this show, and I have regrets about that. I think some of the pieces are so layered, and there are so many frenetic objects that have such fine detail that you could never see on an Instagram picture. And I think seeing everything together in person is really engaging. In images on a phone, you just see the outlines and it feels messy. I think it's a valid way of experiencing things though, and it's an artist's job to make art that works both ways.

TWELV: Do you have any exciting future projects?

MK: Yes! Right now I'm building an underwater playground in the Maldives. It's for people to explore while scuba diving. It will be a kind of mosaic wonderland.

Midden Heap by Misha Kahn [American, b. 1989]
Friedman Benda, 515 W 26th Street New York, NY 10001
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