



# Misha Kahn Reflects on Millennial Life and Transcending the Zeitgeisty Trends

ARTSY EDITORIAL  
BY ARIELA GITTLEN  
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*Portrait of Misha Kahn by Matthew Leifheit, courtesy of the artist and Friedman Benda.*

“What exactly is a millennial?” I ask Misha Kahn. We’re sitting in Kahn’s Bushwick studio on a pair of the designer’s concrete stools, which cluster like a troop of friendly mushrooms. Around us is a flurry of final preparations for his first solo exhibition, “Return of Saturn: Coming of Age in the 21st Century,” which opens this week at Friedman Benda. I’m curious if Kahn, who is 26, will reject the implication that he fits the millennial mold, but instead he’s enthusiastic about the idea.

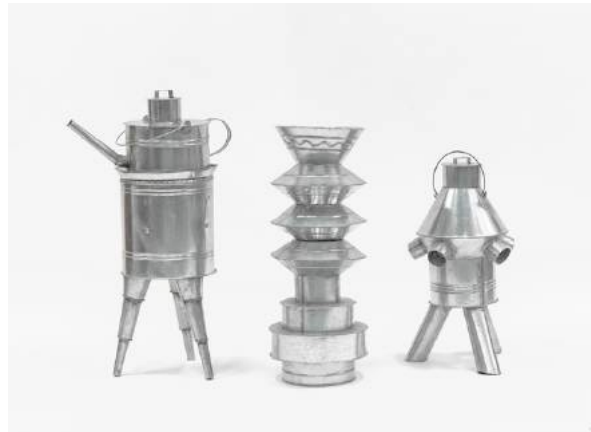
Kahn sees his generation as visually and culturally literate, open to a wide swath of ideas and influences. “We were ’90s babies born in the lap of wealth, buying lots of new things; then suddenly there were a million recessions,” he muses. “Everyone was thrift shopping, which meant revisiting different vintage periods, quickly cycling through all these different references. It spiralled out of control in a really liberating way. I can throw so many references into a piece (and also stuff from my imagination) and my peers will actually entertain that kind of thinking.”

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Misha Kahn  
*Group of black cement stools*, 2016  
Friedman Benda



Misha Kahn  
*Group of tines*, 2015  
Friedman Benda

Whereas the Memphis Group combined loud colors and unexpected shapes to playful effect, Kahn's approach is similarly brash, but his aesthetic is more rough and tumble. His pieces reject slickness in favor of irregular textures and amorphic forms. Right angles are rare. On a Fulbright scholarship in Tel Aviv, he studied with a shoemaker, an experience that continues to influence his work. "A foot is a really weird shape. You have to figure out how to take a flat material and mold it around that. I think that was the stepping stone to be able to create patterns for the cast cement sculptures." To Kahn, the boundaries between digital and material, traditional and avant garde, art and craft are fungible, un-fixed. In true millennial fashion, he's comfortable slipping between cultures and categories.

Kahn's pieces are certainly richly layered objects. His materials range from traditional to unorthodox, as do their combinations: vinyl meets cement, resin meets aluminum foil. He's more interested in fantasy than function. This approach put him at odds with many of his classmates at RISD. "In school, there was a strong interest among my peers in functionality and democratic design. None of that ever appealed to me."

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Misha Kahn  
*Coffee Table*, 2015  
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Misha Kahn  
*Saturday Morning Starburst Mirror*, 2016  
Friedman Benda

“The Return of Saturn” isn’t so much concerned with the physical utility of objects, but with their psychic impact—their ability to absorb our memories, hopes, and fears. The show’s title, which refers to the red planet returning to occupy the same place in the sky as it did at Kahn’s birth, suggests an opportunity for the designer to reexamine his origins. Like many millennials, he seems both nostalgic and uncertain about the notion of home. Paint-splashed floor tiles, which Kahn created specifically for the gallery space, were inspired by the linoleum floors of his childhood summer house. While these surfaces have a gestural beauty, other pieces in the show seem more sinister. A metallic chandelier resembles a hovering UFO, with no sign of whether or not it comes in peace.

The centerpiece of the show is *The Slippery Feel of Inevitability* (2016), a splashy synthesis of technology and handcraft. The 12-foot mohair tapestry was designed by Kahn using a combination of collage, 3D-imaging software and Photoshop, then created by Marguerite Stephens, an 83-year-old expert weaver. (Mags, as she’s known, has also collaborated with other artists including William Kentridge.) Kahn declares that the number of Jell-O molds visible in the tapestry is “shocking;” the result looks like Candy Land by way of an acid flashback, a trippy mixture of futurism and kitsch.

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Rendering of Misha Kahn, *The Slippery Feel of Inevitability*, 2016. Image courtesy of the artist and Friedman Benda.

The Jell-O molds fascinate Kahn not only for their formal qualities, but because his feelings about them have changed so dramatically over time. “When I left college I had a crazy collection of Jell-O molds,” he explains. Later, he adds, “I just threw them all on the street and the metal scrapper drove by and they all went to the scrap yard. I loved these things but I felt ashamed that they were so nostalgic, so ’50s and everyone loves them.” It isn’t clear whether Kahn’s feelings have changed yet again, or if he’s fondly remembering a past enthusiasm.

I’m curious what sort of self-discovery has occurred in light of Kahn’s Saturn return, but he hasn’t had any sudden epiphanies, more like a gradual dawning of understanding. One realization was how he could avoid getting wrapped up in the design zeitgeist—the notion of being at the forefront of a trend that starts to seem ubiquitous in a year or two. “I couldn’t really identify anything personal about why it was lovely to me,” he recalls of one such disappointing project. Kahn has learned that merely being the first to identify a trend didn’t make the work satisfying—only an intimate connection can do that. “I was just responding to the pulse, and that’s not good enough.” With a burst of millennial optimism he adds, “I want to make things that are *so* much richer than that.”

—Ariela Gittlen

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