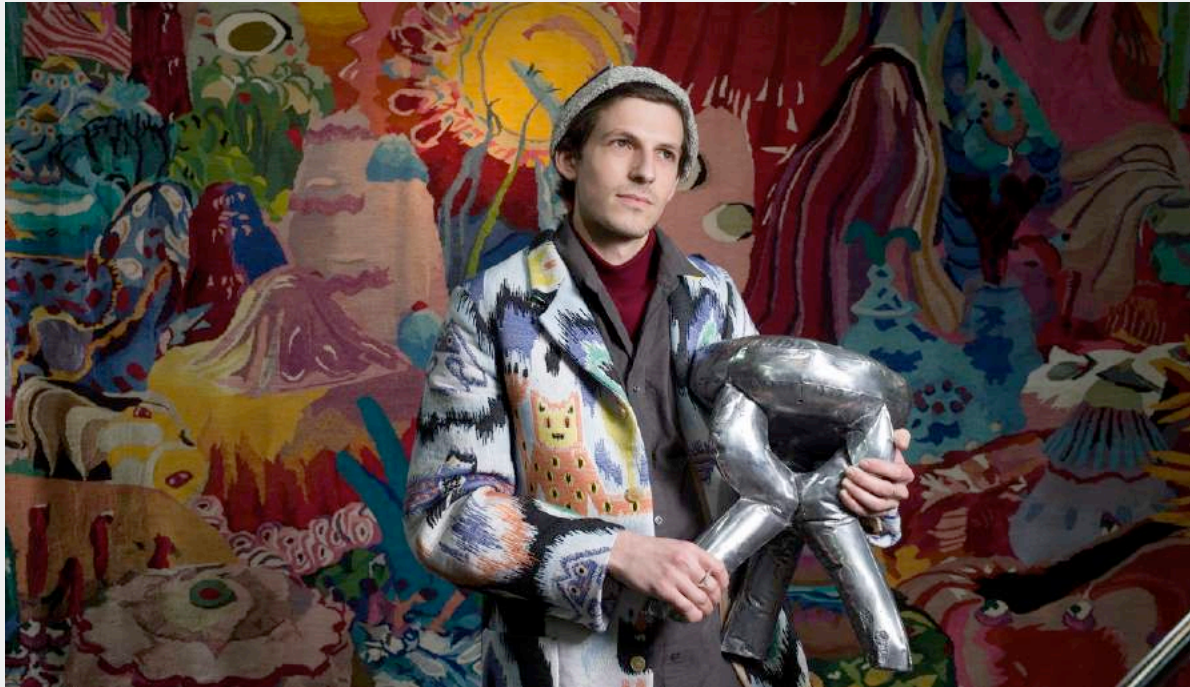


BARNEYS  
NEWYORK

# THE WINDOW

Artist Misha Kahn Offers A 21st Century Coming-Of-Age Story



Photographed by [Keith Morrison](#)

The breakout young artist behind the sets of some of Barneys' most memorable lookbooks strikes out on his own with a solo exhibition of his work.

Walk into artist Misha Kahn's studio, and you'll find yourself in what he describes as a "weird, psychedelic jungle." This is the same sense you'll get walking into his first solo exhibition, *Return of Saturn: Coming of Age in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, currently on view at Chelsea's Friedman Benda gallery. For the young artist, that's part of his appeal: an off-kilter sensibility that leaves the viewer unsure of what to expect. We recently joined Kahn as he prepped the exhibit for its opening night, getting an inside look at the workings of his creative mind.

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Artist Misha Kahn among his artwork in *Return of Saturn: Coming of Age in the 21st Century*, currently on view at Friedman Benda.

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One view of a portion of the exhibit at Friedman Benda.

With a background in furniture design and a penchant for the kooky, Kahn's work toes the line between the exuberant and the wistful—a dichotomy he embraces. "I was really specific with which pieces I was pulling from for this show," he told us. "I thought this show was darker. Especially the types of colors I was using. I wanted to introduce some more somber elements and some things where you're not sure if it's happy to not. It's always on that line—is it joyful or is it just a little foreign and sinister in this sort of toxic way? I think it's both."

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“I always imagine the room feeling like a bunch of characters” Kahn says. “It’s like some of your friends, you really like them, but there’s a little darkness. I think that’s here too.

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This guy just feels mischievous, but in a cute way. Like you know he's messing everything up in the room when you leave."



"We had to do a lot of woodworking in school, studying furniture making. And I hate woodworking, so everyone would call me a wood butcher. But because I was never into making joints in a real way, with this piece, I was just doing my version of it. In the end, it's a lovely table, but there are no joints in it. It's just all these little pieces of wood glued together over and over again."

This through-line of joy and foreboding can be seen in many of Kahn's works, and is something that caught the eye of Barneys' creative team, leading to several collaborations with Kahn on set design for Barneys photo shoots. "Translating my playful sensibility to make a result that's as chic and refined as Barneys, that's a fun challenge for me!" Kahn said. "A lot of time, they give me a lot of leeway, and it's good for me to have to figure out how to hone in on a single element that can help bring that extra energy into a photo."

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One of Kahn's sculptures, as seen in Barneys' Valentino lookbook.

“We took this copper coil and make these wild squiggles. And it transformed this material that’s just from the hardware store—a standard, stock material— into an object that, in the photo, reads like some kind of rendering. It works really well. It’s fun to do those because an object in photos can read so differently. An object in a picture, to see it in real life, there can be no glamour. And vice-versa. It’s a good challenge.”

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One of Kahn's stools, made of cast black cement, found a home in Barneys' Valentino lookbook.

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From Barneys' Officine Generale lookbook.

“This is by far my favorite picture from my work with Barneys. In the photo, it feels almost reasonable to have this huge pile of chairs, while in real life all these chairs are wired together and it’s kind of nuts.”

And harnessing energy is something the young artist excels in, as can be seen in the kinetic zest of many of his pieces. Swirling with color, many of Kahn’s pieces reference elements of his own 1990s childhood in Minnesota, including the inflatable furniture fad

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that saw a resurgence then. Kahn reimagines the concept, though, casting a series of stools, tables, and mirrors in either resin or concrete, lending a permanence and resonance to pieces that look as if they should be light as air.



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Kahn's unique perspective can be seen in his furniture pieces, as well as in the treatment he applied to the gallery's floors and the color he selected for the walls. Here, his *Kon Tiki* table is displayed along side his *Saturday Morning Starburst Mirror*, one of his cast stools, and a few of his "tins."



The texture on Kahn's *Coffee Table* was created by making a wax mold of wrinkled aluminum foil, then casting it in bronze.

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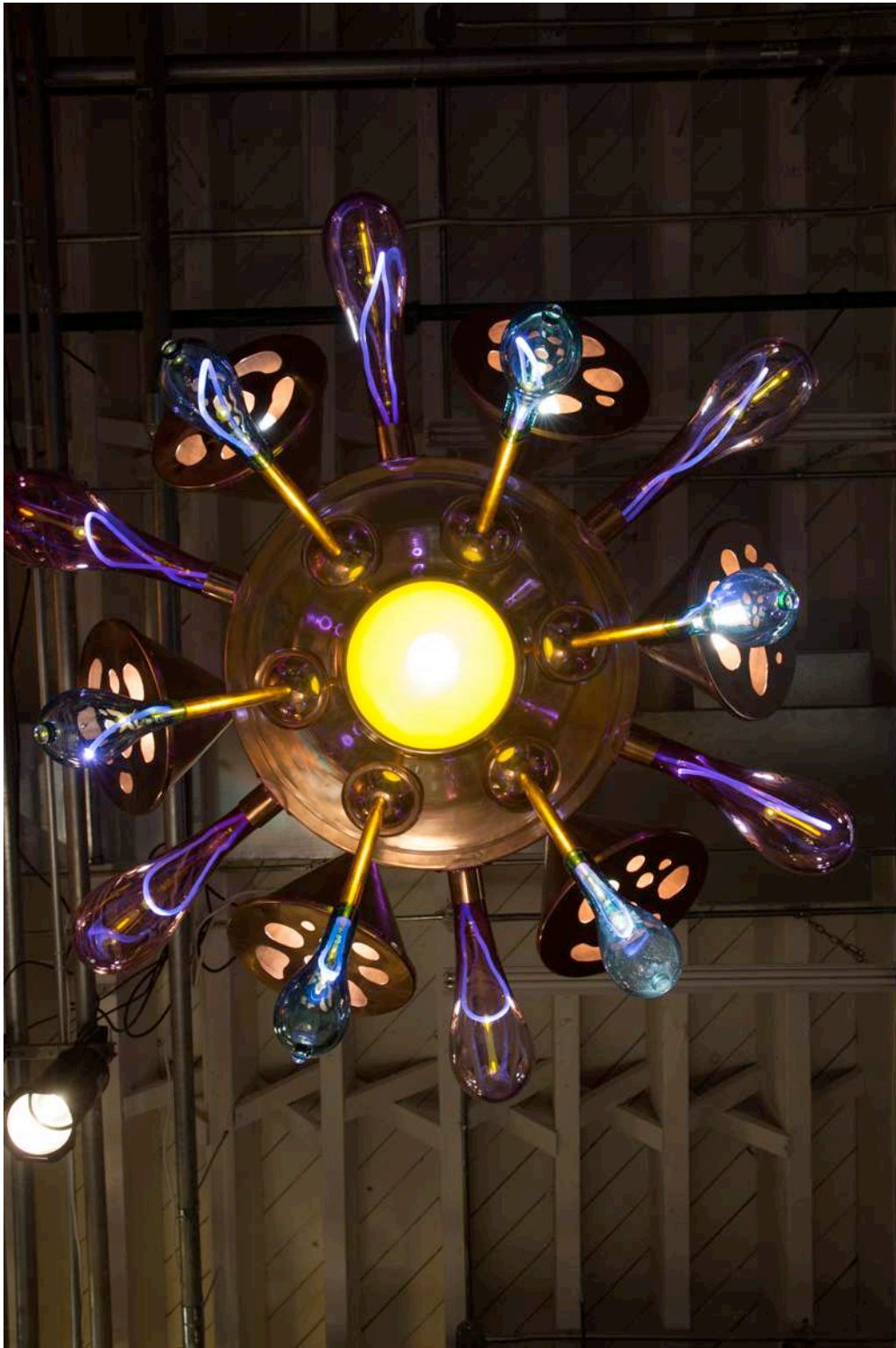
That solidity comes into play when these furniture pieces find a home in a collectors' space. "When you walk into your home, it should be a happy place to be, so seeing really austere or dark furniture that doesn't encourage you to use it because it's so lovely, sharp, or precious—that seems so wrong to me," he says. "But at the same time, many people have really impersonal objects, where everyone else has something that looks similar. That's why so many of my pieces deal with creating a process where every piece is unique. Each person's object is going to be just theirs. That sets up a relationship with the piece where they feel bonded to it, and that's a nice energy to have."



Lighting and light fixtures are featured through the exhibition, with *Salt of the Air* being foremost upon entering.

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Viewed from below, *Salt of the Air* takes on the proportions of both a flower and an alien insect.

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The connection and bond to objects plays a central role in Kahn's concept of the show. He recalled moments of digging through his family basement or attic and the nostalgia for items that he both loved and loathed. The show has been described as being "about the objects people keep in their dark, lonely emotional basements." This sense of digging up a memory or discovering something unexpected is an emotion that the artist keeps front of mind when considering how his work is received by viewers.

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“The orange wallpaper is really surreal—there are these floating oranges, and then some of them are peeling and you feel like maybe you could start ripping into the wallpaper,” Kahn says. “We were cleaning it all with orange-scented wipes, to get the wallpaper paste up, so it does have a slight orange scent.”

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A cast-resin mirror pops against Kahn's surrealist wallpaper and reflects an inflated vinyl chandelier.

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Another example of Kahn's unorthodox woodworking skills can be seen in the legs of this chair.

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“A lot of times as a designer it’s really tempting and easy to mentally place objects—you imagine them in this perfect room that’s sparse, where you enter someone’s house and

it’s just about the glory of this one object,” Kahn told us. “But with the items I love, it’s like rummaging through hordes of shit and coming across something that’s really special. You experience that by yourself. It’s not about the glory of a presentation. So I was thinking about how to give someone that experience, or at least get that energy into the object, where it’s more about that kind of uncertain personal connection rather than something that’s obviously there for the glory.”



“The tapestry uses many rendered elements that are put together in a way that feels like it should be possible, but it isn’t. It’s setting up this landscape that couldn’t ever really exist, but visually, it kind of works. I had a huge collection of Jell-O molds, and it was fun to rehash that with the larger piece in the tapestry.”

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Kahn's *Return of Saturn: Coming of Age in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* is on view at Friedman Bendagallery, 515 West 26th Street, now through April 9, 2016.

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