

Mexican Artist Duo ASMA Follow Their Materials into the Unconscious



BY SHANTI ESCALANTE-DE MATTEI  March 7, 2025 9:07am



ASMA, "Nude and the Staircase, (A Doll)," 2024. Doll (Found objects, wood, metal, epoxy resin, silicone, fabric, synthetic hair, cardboard, acrylic, elastic, plastic, polyurethane, adhesive tape), vintage miniature playing cards, artist-made lamps. Doll: 40 ½ x 11 ¾ x 4 inches (103 x 30 x 10 cm); installation dimensions variable.

In a cramped basement space in New York’s SculptureCenter in early February, ventriloquist Sophia Becker adjusted the metal legs of a doll with long black hair, a single guarache made from metal, and an underwear-like piece made from medical materials that looks oddly fashionable. “Oh god that feels good,” the doll chirped in a girlish voice, before complaining that she’s stiff from a lack of play. “The lookers come but they don’t touch. I wish they would touch!”

Becker was on hand for a one-night-only performance activating the exhibition, “Ideal Space for Music,” by Mexico-based artist-duo Hanya Belia and Matias Armendaris, better known as ASMA. Becker puppetted the doll as she delivered a monologue about her life as an art piece, sitting in a museum.

The room was packed, with an overflow audience watching a livestream on the floor above. Becker guided the audience into another room where another doll waited for her chance to come alive, this time to sing a song. The ventriloquy was followed by a musical performance by the interdisciplinary artist and DJ Esra Canoğullari, also known as 8ULENTINA, which included elements from foley sound production to accentuate the theatrical aspects of the exhibition.

The past year has been decisive for the duo, which is represented by Mexico City's PEANA and House of Gaga, which has locations in Los Angeles and Guadalajara. Last October, they opened the SculptureCenter exhibition—their first institutional show—and then, just weeks later, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit opened its own show of their work, "Wander & Pursuit," which closed in late February. They also have upcoming presentations at Art Basel in June with House of Gaga and at the Singapore Biennale in October.

For "Ideal Space for Music," which runs until March 24, ASMA used SculptureCenter's basement to reflect on the subconscious, a consistent theme over the course of their nine-year collaboration (which is perhaps unsurprising considering Armendaris's mother's career as an art therapist). The exhibition includes a series of metal spheres, a video work, soundscapes, ink paintings, and light fixtures made from found objects, transforming the cold concrete space into a bunker of the mind, a post-traumatic landscape of the collective psychology in which the dolls reside.



ASMA in collaboration with Josue Eber, *I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel...*, 2024. COMMISSIONED SCULPTURECENTER, NEW YORK/COURTESY THE ARTISTS; GAGA, LOS ANGELES AND GUADALAJARA; AND PEANA, MEXICO CITY/PHOTO: CHARLES BENTONPHOTO CHARLES BENTON

“It felt different making this work, we don’t usually use the body, the figure, to communicate our ideas about the unconscious,” Belia told ARTnews after the performance ended. “We could feel it in the studio, when they came alive. All the parts were missing but the tension was there, and she could stand on her own. It was like magic.”

After building the internal structure of the dolls, Belia and Armendaris used found and sculpted objects to slowly piece together each doll’s unique body and sensibility: scraps of denim, synthetic hair, a piece of a clarinet, a sink faucet, a dental impression tray, and silicone, to name a few of the materials that came together to create each dolls’ particular personality.

Dolls have a long literary, psychoanalytic, and artistic history that ASMA drew from for the show. In conversations with ARTnews, the duo referenced Hans Bellmer, whose radical, grotesque, and sexual doll works got him labeled as a degenerate by the Nazi regime and Rainer Maria Rilke’s writing on the dolls of Lotte Pritzel, in which the dolls emerge as objects of uncanny contamination in which the human and the material are mixed in psychologically powerful ways.

“We mixed in the doll, as if in a test-tube, everything we were experiencing and could not recognize...The doll was so utterly devoid of imagination that what we imagined for it was inexhaustible.” Rilke wrote in “The Unfortunate Fate of Childhood Dolls.” “But I have to believe there were certain abysmally long afternoons when our twofold inspirations petered out and we suddenly sat in front of it, expecting some response.”

In a way, Rilke’s meditation on dolls might be a fitting analogy for an artist’s experience with her materials. Yet, the image of the artist straining to project fantasies onto an unresponsive object is the inverse of what ASMA attempts in their practice. Instead of projecting their ideas onto materials, they immerse themselves in laborious material processes in the hopes of producing a collaboration between themselves and their emerging object. This has resulted in a reputation for complex works in which silicone is married with wood, electrical fixtures, brass, and even old desktop computers. This interest in hybridity is embedded in their joint practice.

In their independent practices, Belia worked as a painter and a writer, while Armendaris worked in printmaking and drawing. But in 2016, when Belia was 21 and Armendaris was 25, the artists began sharing a studio space in Mexico City’s Centro Historico neighborhood. The neighborhood itself has had an enormous influence on the artist’s practices, as ancient architecture and local industry collide into a diverse riot of materials and aesthetics. They quickly found an intense overlap in their interests which grew into a budding collaboration.



Artist-duo Hanya Belia and Matias Armendaris, better known as ASMA.
COURTESY THE ARTISTS/PHOTO MELISSA LUNAR

“We started assisting each other, but very soon we started having authority over decisions made about each other’s work, so we decided to make it formal. We gave each other six months to experiment,” said Belia. “We never thought we would work together for so long.”

(Belia and Armendaris are also romantically involved.)

In order to find a medium that would be truly shared, the duo settled on sculptural practices whose hybrid nature not only spoke to their jointly made work but their interest in critiquing binaries of the polluted and the pure, the natural and the artificial. But even as they have constantly evolved what materials they work with, their consistency in theme and conceptual approach ensures that their work is always identifiably ASMA at its core.

Since the pandemic ended, ASMA has shifted their approach to be less focused on objects and more focused on creating psychological landscapes as opportunities to show internationally and in larger spaces to expand the scale of their practice. Their show “Wander & Pursuit,” which first showed at House of Gaga Los Angeles in 2022, offered the artists their first opportunity to test this new phase of the work. For the show, the duo built an office space embedded with silicone paintings full of chivalric symbols: the mirror, the castle, the knight, the enchanted woods.

“With this work we turned away from the speculative to the angst of the present,” said Armendaris. In asking questions about the relationship between the decorative and the utilitarian, space and the people who inhabit it, and industrial materials and symbolic archetypes, ASMA worked to materialize our deepest, most unknown selves in the environments that shape us. That act of translating interiority is the foundation of ASMA’s practice.

“We are always translating between ourselves,” said Armendaris.

“We have different images in our minds of what the work will be because we have two different minds,” Belía added. “In the process of making the work together, figuring it out, we end up somewhere we could have never imagined. Maybe if I worked independently, I would have more control and be able to execute more exactly the image that I had of the work.”

But, as the duo explained, that vision of control isn’t appealing.

“When we first began we realized we make better work together,” said Belía. “Collaborating is hard but for us it’s worth it because we like the work that comes out of it.”

In the eyes of ASMA, however, their act of creation is not dyadic, but triadic. They not only translate their own minds for each other, but must translate the resulting synthesis through materials in whose limits and affordances they find something beyond themselves. This is a necessarily laborious process and, for the duo, they never take shortcuts. For example, they are currently teaching themselves *pate de verre*, an ancient Egyptian glass making technique popularized by French *nouveau* artists. With no masters of the technique in Mexico, ASMA is teaching themselves the techniques from books. Yet, even when teachers are available, they prefer to teach themselves.

“It would probably be easier to learn from people—and that can be beautiful. But there is something about investigating, thinking of how you’re going to do it, finding books, and in that process, there are failures that bring you to new places,” said Belía.

“You end up discovering the muscle of a material this way instead of the language of the material,” continued Armendaris. “The time that you put into an analog process creates a transformation, it becomes the perfection of the idea. We don’t want to lose what you can learn by making things.”

In an era where AI-generated images and text creep further and further into our media landscape—and the physical world—ASMA's deep and slow engagement with artisanal practices carries even more gravity without being regressive or nostalgic.

Whether it's a doll composed of found parts or exploring the psycho-social landscape of the corporate office, ASMA's work feels futuristic by being tightly engaged in the present, even when they're looking to the past. Somehow, given enough time, the duo can turn an ancient technique like pate de verre into an opportunity to explore the never-ending interplay between the mind and the world it is embedded in. They just have to respect the process.