

Domestic Ills: Sculptor Jessi Reaves Elevates Furniture By Making It Weirder By Katherine Cusumano — April 21, 2016



In her debut solo gallery show, the emerging artist **Jessi Reaves** embraces the misshapen, the uncovered, and the rickety. Climb onboard!

Early last fall, the artist Jessi Reaves began work on her first solo gallery exhibition, at Bridget Donahue Gallery in Manhattan's Lower East Side. At first, the process started slow, but ramped up in the three months immediately prior to the opening about a week ago, on April 10.

First came two “knockoffs” of the iconic table by the sculptor Isamu Noguchi: one small, like a coffee table, and a larger piece that incorporates fenders from a car. Reaves works with furniture as sculpture, exploring gender, the dynamic between art and design, and nostalgia in an armchair, a narrow shelving unit, or, say, a Noguchian table.

“Those were exciting pieces to start on,” Reaves said of the knockoffs. “They gave me so many other ideas; it was really easy to move forward from there.”

Over that time, Reaves has gradually accumulated enough pieces to occupy Donahue's 2,700-square foot gallery. Up until now, the 29-year old artist's work has mostly been seen in group exhibits. “The pieces have held up well in a group show context because they function in an interesting way next to more ‘traditional’ sculpture,” she explained. “It uses the same basic principles—our main scale reference is still the human body.” She paused, thinking. “I actually don't think it's that different.”

What is immediately different, though, is the way that Reaves's sculptures collapse the distance between the viewer and the art. Her work is meant to be used, sat on, worn in. “Comfort is actually very important to me,” she said. “Sometimes I'll sacrifice certain materials or I'll make changes to how something looks visually just so it can be more comfortable.” At the opening, children, their parents, and their pets alike pored over the work, perching on the chairs and couches placed around the gallery alongside shelves and tables. Unexpected combinations abound: A plywood shelf gets a makeover with a vinyl coat (the piece is called “Rules Around Here (Waterproof Shelf)”), while a rich, rust-colored armchair droops and sags in a glamorous, strategically careworn fashion.

Yet, it's hard to get too comfortable. Reaves worked as an upholsterer after graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design, where she studied painting. That is why she is so at ease producing work that, in many cases, looks not quite right or incomplete. Some pieces haven't been upholstered; others teeter on the edge of structural integrity. And they exploit a certain kind of nostalgia, memories of furniture that once occupied childhood homes—or maybe, in their misshapen, stripped-bare construction, the curbsides of childhood homes, waiting to be towed away.

But they are still sculptures rather than functional, manufactured design objects. Reaves bristles when the two are conflated. “I actually find design pretty limiting,” she said. “I’m looking to people who aren’t really in the design tradition, even if they’re making functional objects.”

The exhibit follows on the heels of what might more properly be called Reaves’s solo debut, a project with four pieces at SculptureCenter in Long Island City. Two of those pieces are en route to Herald Street Gallery in London, where Reaves will show at the end of the month.

Although the pieces are meant to be interactive, letting them out into the world has required an adjustment. She spent the last two months before the opening at Bridget Donahue working in total solitude at a residency in upstate New York. “Six o’clock would roll around on Thursday and I’d kind of look around and, be like, this is what I’m doing,” she recalled.

“I got into it,” she said. “By the end, I didn’t want to leave.”