

A few weeks before interviewing Misha for this piece, our mutual friend Nina Johnson invited us (and several other bright lights) to dinner in the East Village. It was Indian food. One of the spots with chilli lights hanging so low you have to stoop to make your way to a table. Conversation covered love, fixation, passion mingled with professions, boredom, expectations, and our individual modes of existence as creative individuals. Misha was the quietest person there. He wasn't small or in the background, but rather unbothered and observant, engaged and in his own world simultaneously. He identifies as shy, which he is, but most people assume he'll be loud, boisterous, and vocally zany because of the visual energy of his work. There is a centuries-long tradition of this type of conflation, very likely linked to our fetishism of artists and artists' lives. But with Misha these projections seem even more prevalent. Perhaps because his work is constantly changing, and at a breakneck pace. He is one of those rare contemporary artists whose work remains

MISHA KAHN

INTERVIEW BY CAMILLE OKHIO
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as exciting now as it was 10 years ago when he set out on his own. His trajectory has been untraditional. He spent a year recalibrating on a Fulbright fellowship after graduating from Rhode Island School of Design. Afterwards he worked for a set shop building animatronics. Which was followed by a few years assisting a prop stylist, making still lifes. It was while he was assisting this stylist that his own work started to gain notice. Starting usually with a sketch, his ideas and method of creating are fully free flowing. He intentionally allows the subconscious to seep out. Misha's work is a chicken soup for the unrepentant. There is no strategy, no rigidity. All that Misha requires of himself is honesty. The work is functional (sometimes only barely so) because that is the type of output most natural to him. No material is off limits; no colour or pattern beyond consideration. Misha is a dreamer who doesn't remember his dreams. Someone living happily in the liminal, freely associating a reality of beauty, fun, and perversity perfectly interwoven.

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Let's start at the beginning. What was it like growing up in Minnesota?

It was great! I've thrown a lot of little Minnesota references into the objects I make. There's a cabin vernacular that runs through much of it—a little bit of that farm-craft energy of things being cobbled together.

Did you grow up on a literal farm?

No, not at all. I grew up in Duluth, which is like a little city.

What was high school like for you? Were you a dork? Popular? Somewhere in between? Probably a mix. High school was just palatable. I had a fun group of friends. I was really into swimming, sledding, and cross-country skiing. And then I studied abroad in Belgium for a year when I was 16.

What was that like?

That was great! But I really hated the high school I went to there. It was a Jesuit school. Super strict and uncreative, but it was because of that that I started taking art classes at night. And also there was just such good art in Belgium. I hadn't really been in a big city that had full-on contemporary art museums. When you're a kid in a little town you see lots of creative people and artists, but you don't really see the full breadth of possibilities.

So back in Minnesota what other creative expression were you exploring?

I was very into sewing. I would make lots of clothes and friends would come over and try things on. That was a constant.

Who taught you how to sew?

I got a sewing machine when I was really little, like five years old. I mostly taught myself, but my grandma was really good, so she taught me a few things. I kept fucking around and eventually I got good.

And what about your parents? What do they do for a living?

My dad is a contractor and builds houses and my mom writes kids' books.

That's so precious! When I think of it in detail, the idea of building houses with your actual hands is inconceivable to me. Was that what your dad was doing? Were you in awe of him growing up?

Well, when I was younger I thought his job seemed really boring. He was the one who was always on the phone. He called people all day long, coordinating the different aspects that went into construction. It's so funny because it feels so close to what I do now. I know a lot of other artists and designers who don't work like that. They have a single process and the studio is more thoroughly hands-on. But I like making things that have a ton of different components and techniques involved.

In a larger sense do you feel like some or all of your work is a response to what you saw as a child?

I feel like I make work in a very lucid and free-association kind of way, a free-for-all strategy, so everything gets worked in. It's a conscious decision to make work that way, but there are so few things that are one-to-one. You also find my childhood in some of the titles of my work—they're pulled from things from around where I grew up.

So this phrase 'one-to-one', do you think specificity is where value lies?

I think it's interesting. I think a lot of art sees specificity in that one-to-one relationship. Like, someone making a piece about a specific topic and really finding the value in the relationship between the object and that topic.

For me work feels so much more specific when it's a compilation of all these different weird things I've seen and encountered, and then compounded by so many different emotions. Then it becomes beyond hyper specific. That's kind of interesting because then the work can only exist as that one thing, whereas when something is very one-to-one, I always feel like the irony is that it could almost just be anything. That's interesting. When you make in that way, letting everything pour out of you consciously but indiscriminately, you capture that one moment of creation and that's what makes the work impossible to replicate. Is that what you're saying?

Yes. I think part of what's special is that when you make this way, you get a really funny mix of the banal and low-brow things and larger themes concerning whatever's going on in your life at that moment or the world at large. That blend is really intriguing. When you look at art from hundreds of years



ago, there are so many giant oil paintings of religious scenes that are supposed to encapsulate magnitude, and on the flip side, there are these really banal portraits of a lady with a vase.

Ha! That's so hilarious, and true.

Ya, we have this tendency in material culture to think that things are supposed to be one or the other: either quiet moments to be isolated or celebrated, or a focus on this huge serious topic. But the work I like the best tends to have a little bit of everything. So more and more I've been trying to do that: everything all at once.

be about him getting to the bottom of this twig. There's a lot of joy in that! Or the big moment when you come home after being away for an hour and he's totally freaking out. That encourages an open-minded acceptance of these little boring things sprinkled through the whole day. But I've never gone to therapy. Maybe these are just really obvious lessons.

Nothing is obvious. I love that your dog brings so much into your life. It's like the innocence of a child, which makes me think of baby Misha again. When did you first start making? I was really into making little claymation films



Give me an example.

It could be seeing something funny like a stupid baby-animal meme on Instagram and letting a visual from that trickle into an object. It requires a lucid acceptance of the low-brow tumbling into everything.

That almost sounds like a goal people seek out in therapy—allowing this acceptance of unintended things to seep into your work. Or maybe I'm projecting. What do you think? I agree. Also I think having a little dog has let me see the world more in this way. He'll be so invested in a twig he found on the sidewalk and then the next 20 minutes will

as a kid, so there's a lot of little videos. That's the thing that stuck around. And I was also into making these gambling machines out of cardboard and papier mâché that were a mix between pachinko and pinball machines. I tried to get people to play them when they came over so I could win their money. I wish those had stuck around. I bet they were cute looking, but not everything survives.

No it doesn't, but there's beauty in the ephemeral. Would you tend to play with other kids or mostly adults?

I feel like it would have been the adults, because I wanted the cash.



I'm obsessed. Do you think you're still industrious in that way?

Kind of. It's funny meeting people who make work that is totally unsaleable, who embrace that it's unsaleable and find joy in not having to consider that component. It's like, 'Wow, I never considered that'. I feel like there's always an enterprising part of making work for me.

Has anyone tried to shame you for that?

Ya. The whole system is set up to do that. I think using how the industry is set up creatively is interesting, because it feels like I've always lived with these broader suggestions. You can't really make work without participating, so my practice does have those elements, and I think it's funny. People like to suggest that if you participate in the industry then your work is less creative, that it's a less pure pursuit. But it's just really another part of the puzzle and to remove it would be to subtract one more thing to be creative with.

I think that's central to Western society. Setting up a system with shame inherent in it and then chastising those who try to make it work for them creatively, or who choose another path.

For sure. For hundreds of years art has essentially been a pursuit for wealthy children. It's been that way for so long and things are set up in a way that it can only be that. I actually have a lot of thoughts about this. This world is set up to make sure people can only be artists if they come from great means, which is why we have so much boring art from people that all look the same. But I do feel like there has been a recent interest in correcting that. Unfortunately, from my perspective it seems like people are only interested in including diverse artists in the conversation as long as it's easy to slot them into existing categories.

Oh, definitely! There are so many Black artists, for instance, being prioritised because they make work derivative of very established white artists. And on a larger scale you can see whole categories being ignored within the racial disparity discussion. Figurative painters are most sought after while there is little to no attention being shone on Black artists working within abstraction, performance, conceptual art—the list goes on.

They're comfortable as long as you're making work that's very familiar to them already.

It's so dark. But also why it's so exciting when people consciously veer outside of that path and achieve some version of success regardless of the norm. Now I'm curious about how older generations have played into your practice. There are a bunch of older people that have been big influences on me. Mags Stephens for one, who runs the tapestry workshop that produces tapestries for me. She's in her 90s and has such a free approach to this technique and craft that has been around for so long. They are literally making Gobelin tapestries but are also so open-minded and intuitive about how to work within that. There's also GianCarlo Montebello, who died recently at the age of 79. He did work for everyone, including Man Ray and Niki de Saint Phalle. Working with him was really eye-opening for me. You go to school and learn to execute something in a very specific way. His way of working with materials so freely wasn't something that felt acceptable to me. It initially felt like you were doing something wrong or corrupting the material.

So this inversion of the 'proper' way to manipulate a material influenced you early on? Yes. Nicole Eisenman's brilliant fountain at the Whitney Biennial a few years ago is a good example. That installation was such a star. It had all these bronze figures wearing shitty college sports socks. It was a really funny mix, having a really royal material that was rendered super carefully with figural elements that were intentionally slapdash. It all felt so right together. That's an element that I've learnt from other people.

I also love Bruno Gironcoli, the late Austrian sculptor. He made these huge cast-metal sculptures like cityscapes, with random things like croissants or little babies stuck on. It's that mix of formal qualities I like, where some of it feels very high and some feels very low, but it feels holistic. Is it a city? Is it a spaceship? It lives between all these different things. And the longer you look at it, the more you get from it. I feel like most work isn't like that. You look at it for seven seconds and you're like, 'Yep, got it!' Maria Sibylla Merian is also like that. She was working in the later 1600s and early 1700s just drawing bugs. I feel like she must have been on so many psychedelics while she was drawing.

Do people ever ask you if you drugs?

Ya.





Ha! I thought so. And do you do them? Of course! In the book that *Apartamento* is doing on me I felt a bit guilty thinking of my mom reading it and seeing all these disparate mentions of acid trips. I was like, 'Ugh, this is getting to be too druggy'. I never need drugs to make my work though. It's never something I need for input. But I do think psychedelics are super valuable. I recently read that they think mushrooms were a huge part of how language developed.

Wow! That's amazing. You always hear of the usefulness of psychedelics, that they're proven to open up new passageways in the brain. I always love thinking of the Viking berserkers who took this specific kind of psychedelic fungi before war. It aided in their fearlessness, which in turn terrified their opponents even more deeply. Psychedelics have always scared me a bit though—who knows what fucked up shit is lurking in the subconscious. I think thinking about how to form a different connection in your brain or how to approach something differently is useful though. So I feel unapologetic about psychedelics in that sense. I do find it really annoying when people use acid as a descriptor, like, 'That's blank blank on acid', as though something is just a boring object that got put through the magical air fryer of psychedelics.

And in the same way that an acid trip can't make what was already uninteresting suddenly interesting, it can't really make a boring person any less boring. Do you think there are non-creative people and creative people? Or do you think everyone has a capacity? I kind of am inclined to think that probably everyone is creative, because it does feel like muscle memory to create. Most kids are creative, so it seems more like something that's lost, rather than something that wasn't ever there.

I want to circle back to a phrase you used: 'royal materials'. I feel like often your work is misinterpreted because it's so clearly contemporary—layered, colourful, and abstracted—and thus it's easier for people to say, 'That's very Coming Soon', rather than, 'That's very Versailles'. The work definitely has a relationship to palace objects. It starts with the fact that a group of skilled people are working on a masterful and elaborate object, which is just so far from what the last 100 years of production have

been about. Another thing I keep thinking about is how the relationship between architecture and object is so shitty now. And that connection was such a nice component. If you have a room that is mirrored, then the furniture should also have inset mirrors or mother of pearl. Materials don't have to be isolated. If they're both really good, they will both shine. When you see how most people think of interiors today, usually one thing is downplayed with the intention of highlighting another element. Which is really bad, because it's actually the palaces that are completely done.

That pulling-back and less-is-more mentality can really make our eyes lazy. That fear of excess.

Oh my god, yes. It's something I say all the time because I think people have really lazy eyes. Like, if two things have a print on them, their lazy eyes just glaze over both prints, which is so absurd. You were once a primate that used to find tiny berries amid a jungle of foliage, you can do this.

Oh my god, how cutting. I couldn't have said it better. I feel like people do the same when they try to make sense of a person and their work. Like, loud work cannot be made by a quiet person, which is so simplistic and inaccurate. It goes against the grain of what we think. I remember, this one collector who had never met me before was at my studio and she was like, 'Act more like Misha!' She had such an idea of what I'm supposed to act like though she had never met me.

Yikes, that is so off. What are some of the things that people have said about you or your work that you really appreciated?

The first time I showed a really big cast-bronze piece—a console called *Tingle Tangle Mingle Mangle*—in Miami, some seasoned collectors asked if it was a new François-Xavier Lalanne piece, and I was like, 'Wow'. It's so weird to be complimented by that because they didn't think it was original, but in reality, for me I was so taken by the fact that I was able to get to a place to produce something at that level of quality to be mistaken for Lalanne, whose work I love.

Wow. And I'm sure you thought of how far you've come and where you started production-wise. What was the first piece you sold?

Well, I sold things that I made in class when I was like 18 at Minneapolis College of Art and Design. The first sale was a coffee table, and I remember the people who bought it called and asked if I would make them a headboard. That felt inconceivable to me. Also the amount of money it takes to impress you when you're 18 is such a delightfully achievable threshold.

How much does it take to impress you now?
We sold a couple things for a huge amount, and I was like, 'Wow, that was a lot. That's cool'.

That's a house essentially.

Ha. Yes, but I somehow still don't have a house. But the transaction happened. Somewhere in there lies a business class. It makes you realise you're part of an economy that's like the whale carcass at the bottom of the ocean. I do wish that the middlemen in the art market would realise that they were scavengers—imagine if art advisors were like, 'Oh no I self-identify as a scavenger'. It would make things so much more tolerable.

It seems so obvious that everyone clamouring for five percent off the top is a bottom feeder. But back to school—so you went to MCAD and then RISD. Can you tell me what the community was like there?

Well, I transferred after one year at MCAD, but I loved RISD. I think the irony is that most of my really good friends now that did go to RISD weren't people I knew or was friends with while I was there. The program I was in was also quite traditional, so I was still a little bit of an oddball there. I somehow dove into making work that was at least heading in the same direction as what I'm doing now. That was pretty immediate. And people were always like, 'Yeah this is funny, but it's not going somewhere'.

But then it went somewhere. I love proving people wrong. So was the energy at RISD competitive? Confusing? Inspiring?

I didn't think it was very competitive. It was very fun. It was also cool to be working out of a workshop where everyone else was working all the time, but they were also chatting, listening to music, and eating snacks. It never occurred to me to have a workspace that didn't feel like that. I do feel like my current studio is an extension of that energy, but with better craftsmanship.

Where did you work after you graduated?
I got a Fulbright for a year, so I had a year of limbo time. Then I worked briefly at a set shop building the animatronic components. After that I worked for a prop stylist for a few years as her assistant. I mostly made still lifes and that was super useful for me. And then things really started to take off.

What year was this?
2013 or 2014.

And how many people work for you now?
Six.

I've seen work by people who have some connection to you that's very clearly derivative of your aesthetic. How do you feel when that sort of thing happens?

Some of the things caused me some pain, but I think there's also some joy in it. You're not really succeeding unless you're inspiring other people to pursue what you're doing. When we look at historical work, usually the value we see is influence. That's the most egotistical answer, but it also is the one answer that leaves room for you to not just be a panicky janitor frantically trying to clean up people's copies. The copying has also pushed some of my work in different directions. I've moved on maybe too quickly from works and series because I felt like someone was coming for them. So I thought, 'Whatever, let them have it and I'll move on', and I think that hasn't always been good for me.

Also a certain level of the complexity I was adding to the work was to make sure people couldn't easily reproduce it. How easy is it to reproduce something that melded weaving with cast bronze with cast crystal. So much of the stuff I'm doing now has so much process put into it. You can't set up a folding table and start making these pieces. But it also makes the work way more difficult to produce for me. And then you see something more straightforward and you're like, 'Oh god, that would be nice'. But it has really had an effect on me. I was talking to another designer and he was like, 'Really? You worry about people copying you? I would never'. I think it's deeply human to feel territorial about something you put energy into.

I think when people suggest you shouldn't feel that way it's because they don't put energy or







thought into anything they do. Have there been specific moments when you wanted to give up? I think about quitting all the time, but I haven't.

Do you think you'll work as a furniture designer forever?

I don't think so. Life is so long. There are just so many ways in which it could just keep shifting. More and more I'm realising how much stuff is just out of our control. The thought that for my whole life people will be buying rarefied objects like art or fine furniture just seems so unlikely, though I do think creative building will always be valuable. I think the format will shift.

visual examples of how it's supposed to be used, and if you don't use it that way everyone thinks it's wrong. I actually kind of love that. I also think using any material is violence to the earth. Trees in particular. It's interesting and weird because people associate wood with being cosy and homey. People live so comfortably with furniture made out of these majestic creatures.

Wow I have never thought about wood in that way. We sit down for a meal and are literally sitting—if we're lucky—at the bones of an ancient carrier of knowledge and memory. That's such a profound comment, and also so



You work with so many mediums so voraciously already. Do you have a favourite?

What I enjoy even more than the mediums themselves is meeting new craftspeople who are incredibly skilled. It makes the process of production so fun because you're unlocking this whole world of knowledge and you can ask anything you can imagine.

We also just started making things out of wood in the studio, which is really funny to me because I had to do a lot of woodworking in school and I said I never wanted to use this material again. It's such a fussy material, and you're told you have to work with it in a certain way, and there are so many

obvious, it's shocking we don't discuss things in that way more frequently. So what mediums have you yet to try that do interest you? I feel like I really gobbled up a lot of materials already. I haven't really done anything with big slabs of stone, though I have done things with found rocks. I like how clunky and immediate they are. I really want to make carved-stone work—I think that's a new frontier hopefully this year.

Walk me through your process. I'm sure it changes with every piece and medium, but what is the ideation stage like for you? What steps do you take to reach completion?

It really depends on the thing. I sketch a lot. I use virtual reality to draw things all the time, but not everything, and I make little models, too. For some things, once they leave the sketching phase, they're more sorted and don't need too many adjustments. The piece I was working on today was entirely different. We got the parts back and I was like, 'Hmm. I want to move all these things around'. And now we're building a whole new composition from these finished pieces. There's a big spectrum of the route things can go.

Where is your studio?
In Sunset Park. I love it.

And where do you live?
In Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

How long have you been there?
Six years.

What attracted you to the space?
I actually sobbed when we got the apartment because I didn't want it. It's a railroad and a pretty good one, but I wanted another apartment that was like an industrial loft with no kitchen or bathroom. Now I'm glad we didn't get it because it would have been hell. My boyfriend, Nick, said that if we got our current place, I could decorate it however I wanted.

And how have you decorated it? What collections are represented within it?
I feel like it's fun to have other people's work in the house. We have some Campana Brothers pieces, a Gaetano Pesce dining table, a Wendell Castle table, a few Katie Stout lamps, and a couple of Tadanori Yokoo posters.

How do you feel when you come home? Are you happy there?
I really like it there. But of course, after six years there are things that you want to change.

Is the way you engage with your home straightforward? What activities do you engage in and in which parts of the house?
I'm pretty didactic about the house, except I do eat in bed.

Casually Sauntering the Perimeter of Now

Misha Kahn

Casually Sauntering the Perimeter of Now
Misha Kahn (Apartamento Publishing, 2023).

I must admit I do that too, but feel such shame about it.
I don't have the wherewithal to feel shame. I eat in the bathtub a lot too.

Wait, how do you pull that off, logistically?

I like to have the bath filled up a little bit and then the shower filling up the bath. Then I sit down in the shower and eat. Sometimes the food gets wet. And I don't do that every day, but still somewhat often. It's usually cereal I eat in the shower, because you're sitting down and

you're warm, but you're also wet and you're eating something wet.

What are the things that you can't see that bring you joy?
The feeling of warm water.

And what about your happiest moments?
My parents bought this little summer cabin when I was like 10 years old. The previous owner had died, and I found all this money they had stashed in the dishwasher. My mom took me to Sam's Club and let me buy a trampoline. That is the most pure answer I can give.

Oh that's lovely. What about one of your most transportive moments?

I was with friends on the way to a majestic little cove near Tulum off the beaten path. We were all by ourselves except for these three strippers with long silk scarves dancing in the outdoor showers by the cove with a drone hovering over them. I felt like I had left earth and gone inside a computer. It was totally captivating, and nothing about it made any sense.

Have you ever looked into the abyss?
No.

What is the most important emotion?
I think contentedness.

