

# Issue 09 – Miriam Naeh

SOS / Sculptors on Sculpture is a series of weekly condensed interviews with early career contemporary sculptors.

Miriam Naeh is a London-based artist working with installations, sculptures and videos. Her works stem from stories and associations; some are personal, while others are gathered, stolen, or perhaps overheard in passing. She reshuffles visual elements that she draws from life and translates them into a new set of meanings, abstracting reality to a degree of absurdness.

SOS: My recurring question throughout this series of interviews has been about the Covid-19 lockdown. Where have you been based for lockdown and has this forced changes in your approach to making at all?

MN: I flew to Tel Aviv when there were only four Covid-19 cases in London, and planned to return to the UK by June. During my first week in Israel, their first Covid-19 cases were discovered. By the end of the week, a strict lockdown started in the country. This created a strange sense of limbo, where I was neither in London, nor in Tel Aviv, and instead I was floating and existing only in a virtual environment. Most of my online interactions were with colleagues and friends based in London, and on the few occasions I went outside, I found myself surprised every time I heard Hebrew. At the same time, I started to work on a show planned to open in June in Jerusalem, and when the show got cancelled, I had to leave the studio I got for it. So, by the end of March, I found myself sitting in an eerie Airbnb apartment in Tel-Aviv (the owner, who was very lovely, had decorated the apartment with garlic, mirrors, salt, and birds to scare evil spirits from coming), without a space to work or materials (there is no delivery operating due to the



Installation view of 'Stinky Souls, Soles and Holes', 2018, Goldsmiths MFA Degree Show, London.

lockdown) and in a strange, unsynchronised geographical consciousness.

I wouldn't say these circumstances changed my approach to making, but they certainly challenged it. I came to realise that I hadn't taken a break from the studio for a long time, so these circumstances forced me to slow down, focus on my research, look back on my previous work, rethink it, and concentrate on conversations and



ideas without the pressure of producing. Of course, this whole situation was beset by anxiety and struggle (and still is!), but it created an original time capsule, which hopefully I will appreciate in retrospect.

SOS: You make use of a wide range of materials within your sculptural works. Can you talk a little bit about what informs these material decisions?

MN: In my practice, I continually think about relationships that develop among objects, materials, and people. Our everyday surroundings are usually composed from unrelated materials. For example, an air conditioning unit might be installed on a limestone wall beside a plant. Within this scenario, each individual object embodies its own physical vocabulary and history. My installations usually deploy different materials and objects that are camouflaged together to form a scene or narrative. However, looking more closely at the individual parts reveals further hidden narratives and relationships. For example, I can select 'anonymous' found objects from the

Installation view of 'Stiff Enough to Knead or Roll', 2017, Deptford X Festival, London.

market, and combine them with items from my mother's childhood, before juxtaposing them with miniature objects I purchased on Amazon that try to replicate a designed product. All of these 'things' have a strong context or familiarity with our everyday lives, before being used as details in my handmade sculptures. Often I will make very gentle or slight interventions – an installation made out of wood and jesmonite might contain only one tiny found object. However, this small object can transform the whole hierarchy of the work.

By bringing these materials together under different narratives from their established or everyday functions, I am interested in the new possibilities and conflicts they generate. I work with ready-mades that have their own agency in the world, often offsetting them against forms and figures that are unfamiliar and haven't

existed before I made them. My sculptures are usually made with accessible materials such as jesmonite, plaster, dough, clay, concrete, fur, metal, and wood. The relationships between these materials are essential as well – stressing the weight between the fake, industrial, natural, crafted, and found.

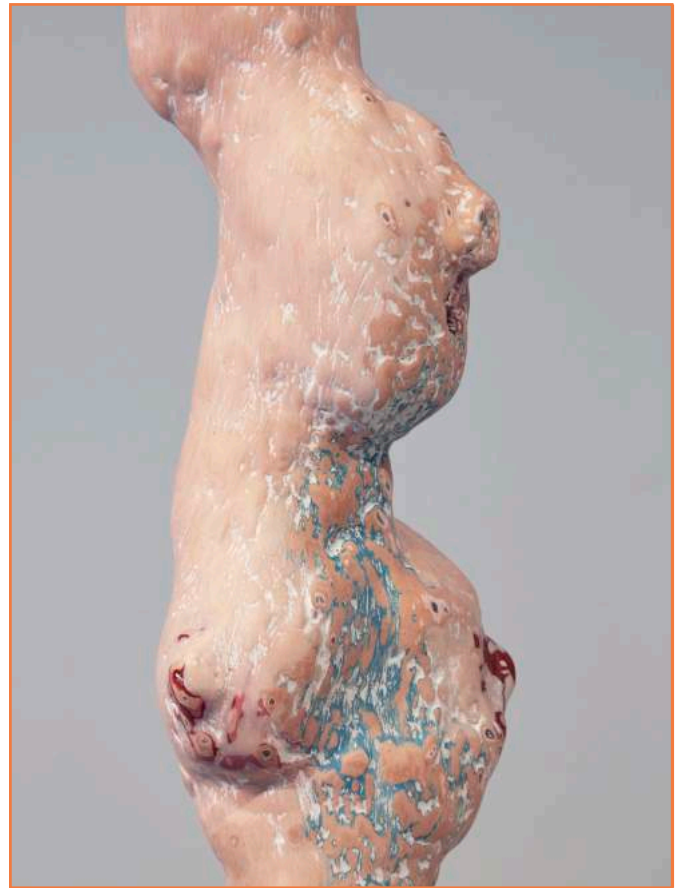
**SOS:** Are there any reoccurring questions that you return to in your work?

**MN:** I like to think of my working methods as similar to the structure of a chain. Often I find myself finishing one work and simultaneously beginning the next one, pursuing and exploring new concerns that emerge through the production process. As artworks feed into one another, new questions are revealed.

One thread that weaves through most of my installations is my interest in the way stories, events, and artefacts alter our collective unconscious as they are retold and revisited. By posing these stories alongside the mundane and the personal, I look to question the inherent value of things and the distinctions between fiction and reality.

Focusing also on the form, I am interested in the gap between the familiar and the estranged. The questions resurface in almost every work, manifest through the encounter between an organic form and a systematic structure, and the power dynamics between the installation and the viewer.

**SOS:** For the Guest Question, I was thinking a lot about your experiences of growing up and studying art in Jerusalem. This question comes from an interview between Chiara Bertola and Mona Hatoum in conversation in 2009. "I am curious to know when you had the first realisation, as a child, that you might become an



‘Tall Tales, Tall Tails’ (detail), 2018, Jesmonite on steel frame, unfired clay, painted mdf.

artist. And, in particular, how the culture of your native country has influenced, encouraged or hindered that initial decision.”

**MN:** My childhood was weird. My father is an academic, so my family moved around the world quite a lot, and as a young child, I had to 'reinvent' myself each time and get used to different cultures. Back then, most of my friends were dogs and animals – a fact that influenced my practice a lot as many of my works are told from a non-human perspective.

But to return to the question – I didn't realise as a child that I might become an artist. I wasn't scribbling away during class, and wasn't particularly 'talented' at 'art' the way it is taught in schools. I was playing around a lot, inventing

tales and stories, and building weird objects – but I didn't necessarily connect it to art. We arrived back to Jerusalem from New-Haven at the beginning of 2000, entering a complex reality which shaped my adolescence. I started to write plays, mostly dark and comical ones and looked for places that I can have an open dialogue with diverse voices. This was the first thing that drew me to art school, to study for a BA. The art school was based in the midst of a marginal neighbourhood in Jerusalem, and residents came from various multicultural backgrounds including Arabs, ultra-traditional Jewish orthodox, Arab-Jews, and students. The students came from varied backgrounds as well, and we connected and communicated through art. This experience shaped and encouraged my artistic identity, not necessarily in terms of my work's content, but in the conversations and meeting points it generated.

SOS: You combine elements of video, performance, sculpture and installation within your practice. How do you describe the relationship between them?

MN: In my practice, the relationship between mediums continuously shifts from work to work, and each piece has a different hierarchy between the elements it consists of. Yet, over time, the way I approach using these mediums also changes. I blur together the different parts in the way that I think about them – not in the way that they operate. Some works only consist of sculptures, but when I install them, I feel as almost if I am directing a film, each sculpture performing as a character. Some works include only moving image, but instead I treat this material as documentation or a static sculptural element. I enjoy this blurriness and confusion, and it definitely challenges the production process, as I am never certain how a work will end up, or what form it will take.



'Hot.Stone.Massage' (detail), 2019, concrete, Jesmonite, glazed ceramics, pigments, miniature Evian Natural Spring Water bottles, basalt stones bought on Amazon

Recently, I also started to work with sound-artists to embed sonic elements within my work, animating static parts in order to create a theatre-like scene out of object, sound and audience.

SOS: As an artist with interest in storytelling and narration, is there a particular book or tale that has inspired you and transformed your thinking?

MN: Oh, so many! Perhaps the book that transformed my thinking most was Daniil Kharms' short stories. I think it was one of the first times I read absurd literature, even before Beckett's. Kharms' world is impulsive and disordered. His characters behave irrationally, and his stories are never linear. There is no order, and as a reader, you have no idea what to predict. It is ridiculous, but also really sad and moving. I loved this sense of blending all of these ingredients. It made me think a lot about how to structure narrative, and how to treat or lead a character. Another thing that influenced me in Kharms' work is the way he switches quickly between harsh depictions of reality, and fantastical, dream-like scenes, so they seem to occur at the same time.