

# sculpture

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A Conversation with

# Sofi Žezmer



## Forms of Proliferation

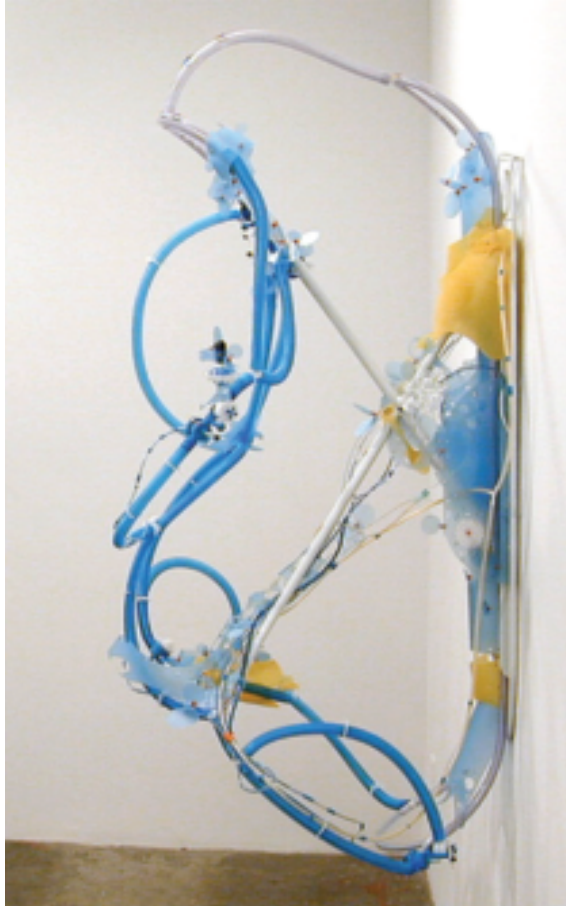
BY MICHAËL AMY

Sofi Žezmer's early biomorphic abstractions, made predominantly of plastic and occasionally loaded with hues integral to her unorthodox materials, burst into my line of vision toward the beginning of the new millennium. Though playful, her constructions touch on the intersection of science and technology while being imbued with the pulse of life, their forms continuing to contract and expand within one's mind after the first encounter. Having almost as much to do with drawing and painting as with sculpture, those works, with their diaphanous qualities, linear rhythms, delicate simulacra of lacework, planes, and splashes of color, toy with light, space, and ways of seeing. Like Žezmer's more recent works, her still startlingly fresh, path-breaking early works make us ponder how we tie bits and pieces of information together to create meaning.

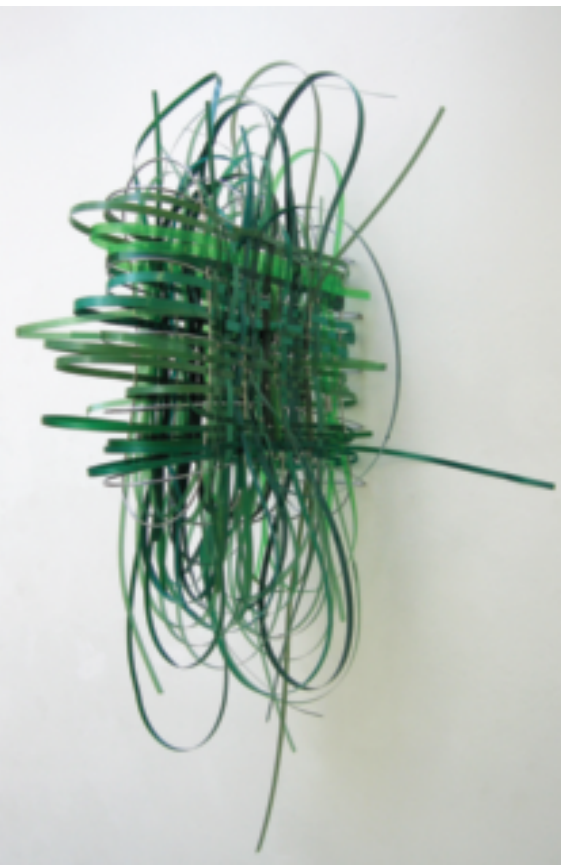
Opposite: *Universal LS1*, 2015. Glass, metal, and Styrofoam, 19 x 11 x 10 in.

Above: *Blindspot LS1*, 2016. Metal and synthetic materials, 19 x 18.5 x .5 in.

COURTESY THE ARTIST



Above: *Native Bond LS3*, 2004. Metal and synthetic materials, 75 x 52 x 32 in. Below: *Safari LS1*, 2011. Plastic and metal, 46 x 24 x 27 in.



**Michaël Amy:** *You came from Europe to study art in New York City back in the early '80s. What was this like for you? What were you interested in? What were you looking at?*

**Sofi Žezmer:** I was born in Poland but left when I was eight years old. My parents, who are both doctors, kept moving; we went to several different countries and stayed in each one for a few years until, finally, during my teens, we moved to Germany. From there, in the late '70s, we came to New York for the first time, when I was 18. I spent my first year studying at New York University; while taking a drawing class in SoHo, I heard about Cooper Union and was determined to study there. It turned out to be an incredible experience, with exposure to all sorts of new ideas and the possibility to experiment in all manner of media. Later on, in the early '90s, I worked toward my Masters degree at Hunter College. That, too, was an intense, formative experience.

In the early '80s, the East Village art scene was taking off, and one could sense its pulsating energy. Galleries were popping up everywhere, some on hard-to-reach, run-down alphabet streets, filled with drug dealers. I felt courageous just going to some openings. Back then, I lived on 7th Street and Third Avenue. I once saw Keith Haring drawing with chalk on black posters in the Astor Place subway and David Hammons selling snowballs behind Cooper Union. I spent hours in art museums and commercial galleries, loving the cultural richness. In dramatic contrast, there were thousands of homeless people living on the streets. One of them created a huge installation, every night, on the fence of the parking lot opposite Cooper Union's main building, using found stuff he had collected over the course of the day. It differed so strongly from everything else I saw. I regret not taking photographs of his work.

**MA:** *How and why did you move away from the traditional materials and subjects of sculpture?*

**SŽ:** Found objects, packaging, and a variety of odd-looking stuff, including design objects and industrial things, became my materials. I was drawn to objects with embedded information linked to how they are used in their proper context, that also have a strong abstract quality. This hovering between different contexts and meanings fascinates me; it may be autobiographical. When moving from country to country, I noticed how the meaning of the same object is determined by the culture, and how it is impossible to translate certain words exactly across languages.

**MA:** *Plastic is prevalent in your work. Why did you choose it? And how do viewers react to your mass-produced, synthetic materials?*

**SŽ:** Growing up during the '60s, I was immersed in plastic products. They had an aura of being new and somehow better. I was absolutely enamored of them. Later on, I guess I opted so strongly for plastic because of its omnipresence in a wide variety of forms and because it transmits a sense of global, contemporary urban life with all its contradictions. In some cases, plastic objects have the same ephemeral character as their packaging—made for quick consumption and alluding to a sense of opulence and overflow while being of little value.

Many of my plastic works had to do with a sense of the boundless profusion of hybrid biological and technological forms. The work evolved on an intuitive level. Back then, I was carefully observing biological formations and was fascinated by the contrast between the proliferation of organic forms generated by nature in order to secure the survival of a certain species and, on the other hand, the rampant proliferation of industrial products manufactured by humans in highly developed technologies. My work is received in different ways by different audiences. Some people mainly see environmental issues reflected in it, while others respond to it on a purely formal level, appreciating the structural intricacy, pseudo-science-fiction language of forms, and quirky combinations of colors.

**MA:** *Does your work with plastic constitute a critique of consumerism?*

**SŽ:** Yes and no. The materials and objects produced by a society—how it uses and disposes of these materials—directly reflect the values of that society. My work is, in a way, double-edged. By using mass-produced, synthetic materials, I definitely draw attention to over-

bearing consumerism. However, that is just one of the associations made through my work, which also deals with issues of perception, the transient experience of physical reality, and the correlation between forms and information.

**MA:** *Do you make preparatory drawings and then find the objects you will need?*

**SZ:** My work evolves out of specific observations or feelings — for instance, a response to a sentence I once heard or read. *Blindspot LS1*, for example, developed from the idea of looking at something from both sides at the same time. Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* was stuck in my mind — hence, the idea of looking on the other side of the mirror. The next step for me in developing a piece is finding the right objects and materials. This seems to happen by chance, though I am sure my brain subconsciously probes different objects until I find the right thing. In this case, I was visiting a packaging company while working on another project, and I noticed a mirror foil that connected perfectly with the idea of looking on the other side of the mirror. I got it, and it sat around my studio for about a year before I used it. While I was working on yet another piece, I re-discovered — once more by chance — some metal price signs I had tucked away years before, and suddenly I made the connection between them and the mirror foil. From that point on, *Blindspot LS1* just needed to be made physically. The metal sign was installed perpendicular to the wall, so the viewer could stand on either side of it. She could see, from one and the same position, her reflection and look through circular, window-like openings in the foil to perceive what was happening on both sides of the mirror. This work is about the physical limits of perception — the fact that we can focus on either one thing or the other, but not on both at once. Though we readily subscribe to the illusion of one world out there, in which we all participate, the reality that we experience is actually situated on an emotional level and related to perception.

**MA:** *Do you know where you are going from the outset, or do your works come about by way of trial and error?*

**SZ:** Once I connect the ephemeral aspect of the work with actual materials, I usually have a very clear image in my mind of what the piece should look like. However, when I start to physically work on the sculpture, I discover different options to realize it and move ahead through a process of trial and error until the work feels right.

The process of generating a work happens piecemeal while I am working in the studio. However, when I am preparing for a show or working on a site-specific piece in connection with architecture and deadlines, it is a different story. In those cases, I make loose sketches for potential pieces and accelerate the process of finding physical, material form for them by going through notebooks and my data bank of images. I try to visualize the show in my mind as a film, the camera lens corresponding to the eyes of the viewer. I try to sense how a viewer would feel moving through the exhibition: What other objects are there, including columns and win-

*Janus Observation Center LS1*, 2017. Metal, wood, synthetic fabric, and 2-way special mirror glass, 20.8 x 19.6 x 23.2 in.





“Looking Glass,” 2017. 2 views of exhibition at the Polish Sculpture Center, Orońsko, Poland.

dows? How high is the ceiling? What kind of light is available? All of these elements influence the process of generating the work. When I employ professional craftsmen to realize elements for some of my pieces, I prepare precise drawings for them, and sometimes models.

**MA:** *Where do your ideas come from?*

**SŻ:** By the time I was 20, I had lived in five countries, each with a different culture, different values, and different interpretations of history that partially contradicted each other. The perspective of the perpetual foreigner who has to decipher an unknown system in order to survive became a source of abundant observations and experiences, some bordering on comedy and the absurd. I find it curious how people who grew up in only one culture can keep insisting that their perspective is the only correct one. The process

of perception began to interest me, as did the malleable experience of reality in relation to images, things, and language. To this day, my work evolves out of these subjects.

**MA:** *Your mature works resemble machines. A machine aesthetic drove many early 20th-century avant-garde artists, including Boccioni, Duchamp, Picabia, and Man Ray. Is my reading correct? Were you referencing one or more of these artists?*

**SŻ:** I studied these artists in detail while writing my Masters thesis on the Polish Constructivist Katarzyna Kobro. However, I do not consciously reference their work in my own. Perhaps the fact that my parents are medical doctors—I was exposed to different machines when visiting their offices—has more to do with it. Machines and machine parts constituted my first toys. I’ve been fascinated with the edge between nature and technology for as long as I can remember.

**MA:** *Do the medical instruments that appear in your work reference the body?*

**SŻ:** Maybe, though I don’t aim to make the body a subject. My sculptures are mostly self-contained—like an organism, a cell, or a modular unit. I install my sculptures in relation to the viewer’s body so that she can interact with them in specific ways—look through them, into them, wander beneath them. The medical instruments attracted me because of their abstract qualities, such as transparency, lightness, and oddity, and they have the ability to be transformed and combined with other objects through my interventions. Nevertheless, they retain an echo of their original function in association with the body.

**MA:** *Do you imagine scenarios for your objects?*

**SŻ:** No, but I can see how, when looking at some of my pieces, one might expect such a thing. In my current work, I imagine the interaction between viewers and my sculptures as a kind of dance choreography or film sequence.

**MA:** *How important is humor? I am thinking of your wonderful abstractions that take ironing boards as a point of departure.*

**SŻ:** The moment of surprise is important to me, as is the shift to an unexpected perspective. My titles are often puns or expres-

sions with double meanings. I like to press together contradictory associations. For example, *Safari LS1* (2011) looks, at first glance, like a bundle of green grass mimicking nature. Looking more carefully, one notices that the main structure is a cage or a modern design object meant to hold wine (each of these readings comes with its own field of associations) and the blades of grass are actually remnants of transport packaging bands. The word “Safari” is placed precariously between two possible readings, namely a safari conducted out in nature or the wild territory of an Internet search engine.

**MA:** *Your work is often delicate and fragile looking. What are you seeking to convey through this?*

**SZ:** Once one moves to a different linguistic and cultural context, the fluidity of understanding the unit of object/word/meaning is disrupted. There are always other perspectives and connotations. For example, when holding the palms of one’s hands together, one experiences them simultaneously from inside and outside the body. I guess that what I focus on is the gap between experiencing and understanding. Fragile structures seem best suited to convey that idea.

**MA:** *Which artists have inspired you?*

**SZ:** I deeply admire Cy Twombly. I love the lightness and matter-of-fact presence of his drawings and sculptures, and the sense of authenticity of each mark. I am amazed by how his works transport such a vast range of feelings; they seem so simple yet are so complex. Richard Tuttle is also one of my heroes; his obscure, unconventional pieces made of trivial materials seem to be peripheral footnotes in cognitive experience, yet they have an intense presence. I admire Gabriel Orozco for his poetic and sensitive observations of strangeness in the commonplace and Mona Hatoum for the political urgency of her work and how she charges objects with psychological tension. In the early ’90s, I discovered Allan Wexler’s work, with its keen observations of human customs and the absurdities tucked within ordinary behavior. I love his transformations of commonplace objects and the work he does now with his wife Ellen — reinterpreting the space between architecture, design, and pure thought.

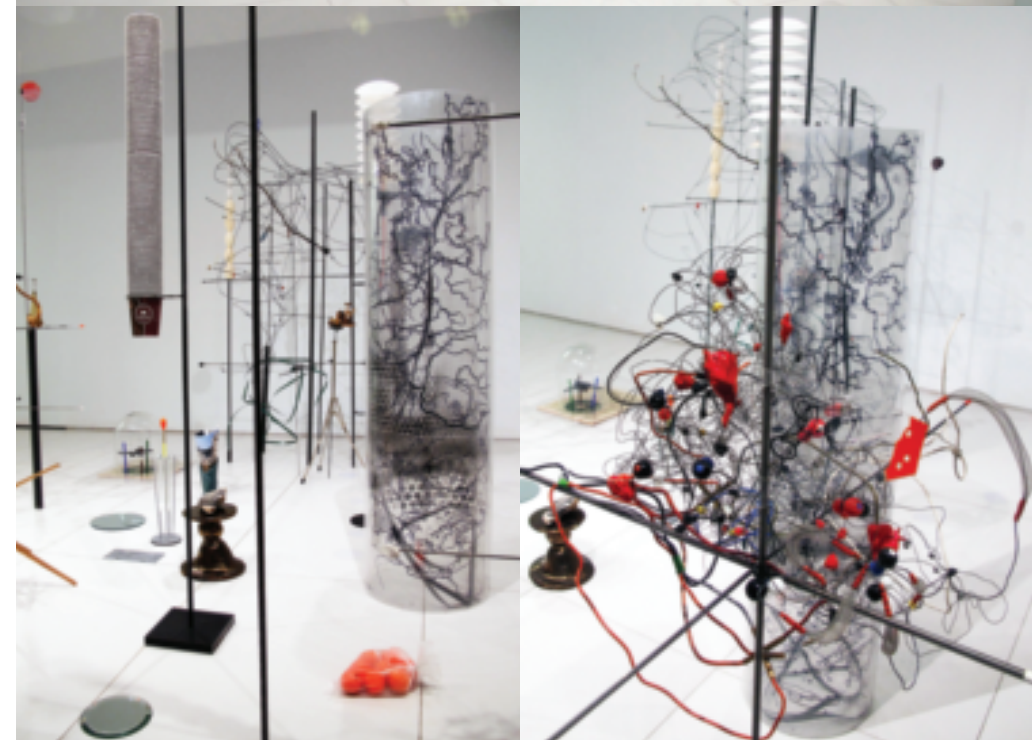


*Nature Studies LS1*, 2017. Wood, metal, paint, and synthetic materials, 11.2 x 8.8 x 6.4 in.

The later work of Mirosław Batka is also of great inspiration to me, and Tomás Saraçeno’s ability to make futuristic landscapes physically manifest is incredible. They are precisely engineered for people to explore, dissolving the boundary between experienced and projected reality. Nahum Tevet’s installations reference the modern urban experience through a sliding scale of proportion, ranging from the size of architecture to that of a generic storage space. I discovered Helen Marten’s work at the 2015 Venice Biennale and was immediately struck by her incongruous forms, poetic and unstable structures — it is as if the pieces were at once things and organisms, both new and nostalgic, precise and clumsy, like life processes.

**MA:** *What about writers?*

**SZ:** Numerous texts have left an impression on me over the years, starting with Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*, which I read in the early ’80s. James Joyce’s *Ulysses* has also stayed with me. In the early ’90s, I discovered Maurice Merleau-Ponty and phenomenology. *Sense and Non-Sense* contains wonderful sentences like: “The highest form of reason borders on unreason,” and “The joy of art lies in showing how something takes on meaning.” Other influences include Willard Van Orman Quine for his idea that we cannot prove at which point a fact is perceived in and of itself or when exactly the meaning of words begins to influence how we see that same fact and record it in our memory; the German neurobiologist Gerald Hüther, who sees life as an image-generating process, where the borderline between inner images and external, experienced reality dissolves, since thinking and feeling evoke images that provoke physical experiences and actions; and the physicist Hans-Peter Dürr, who is convinced that matter, as we commonly understand it, does not



Top and details: *Terra Incognita LS1*, 2017. Metal, glass, fabric, feathers, wood, paper, stone, and synthetic materials, 200 x 140 x 140 in.

exist—what exists are relationships between the things we are aware of, which are in constant flux, and transformation.

**MA:** *What did you aim for at the outset of your career? Fifteen years ago? What do you hope to achieve today?*

**SŽ:** After graduating from Cooper Union, I had a studio in Williamsburg and focused on making sculpture, transforming objects in subtle ways, constructing assemblages and ephemeral wall pieces using wire and found materials, and occasionally plaster, gauze, tape, plastic, and wood. Design objects and machines interested me as much as ethnological collections, and anatomical and botanical forms. I was essentially after the same issues that preoccupy me now—namely giving physical form to transient experiences

and bridging a personal perspective with what I recognize as constituting a contemporary life experience.

About 15 years ago, I focused predominantly on mass-produced, synthetic materials and constructed quirky, colorful, hybrid-looking, proliferating structures. I was interested in the edge between what seems ordinary and extraordinary, which materialized by merging biological and technological forms. Formally, I was mixing categories by making sculptures with linear characteristics and painterly qualities. The work had a cartoon-like, science-fiction look to it.

Today, I have returned to the type of work I produced when I was starting out—I simplify things, bring about subtle changes in found objects, and work with a much wider range of materials, predominantly metal, glass, wood, ceramics, and fabric. Collage, drawing on paper, and photography are now an integral part of my work, as is installation.

**MA:** *You engage much more with nature, plants, and daylight than you did before. How did this come about?*

**SŽ:** About seven years ago, my interests started to shift, and the work became increasingly sketchy, with an impermanent character to it. I also broadened the range of my materials. I began to focus on light as a medium and started collecting dust, clothing, natural wood, and thread. The initial impulse for this change might have come from looking at the work of John Bock, Gabriel Orozco, Urs Fischer, and Thomas Rentmeister. Also, several years ago, I was invited to teach a seminar as a visiting artist at the Hochschule Koblenz—Institut für Künstlerische Keramik und Glas (IKKG) in Germany, where I experimented with glass and ceramics. Since then, those materials have become an essential component of my work.

**MA:** *Are you more involved with installation now than you were before?*

**SŽ:** Yes, my solo show at the Marta Shefter Gallery in Krakow last year included both a performative piece on the street and a large installation in the gallery. The performative piece had to do with communication and expanding the meaning of words. I set up a small coffee table with two chairs, a drawing block, cups, and a pot of green tea on a





Above and detail: *Terra Incognita LS2*, 2017. Metal, glass, wood, ceramic, paper, fabric, plastic, feathers, fur, stone, porcelain, motor, synthetic materials, and sugar, approx. 15 x 12 x 9 ft.

My recent show at the Polish Sculpture Center in Orońsko (near Warsaw) featured all new work, with large interactive installations alongside freestanding sculptures made of transformed commonplace objects. *Terra Incognita LS2* expanded to fill an entire wing of the glass Orangery. Again, viewers animated the installation, walking between the elements, following different patterns of attraction, looking into details, and exploring different associative interconnections. While doing so, they became part of the piece and could be observed from outside the transparent space.

**MA:** *What is your work about?*

**SZ:** It is about a sense of curiosity and wonder for the boundless, transformative process of life-experience, about exploring the absurdities and contradictions in human conventions, and about the process of generating meaning in physical form.

*Michaël Amy is a professor of the history of art at Rochester Institute of Technology.*

busy sidewalk and asked passersby to join me for a brief conversation. While we talked, I “collected” words that the person used repeatedly, that seemed essential in the conversation, in order to make individual *Word-Portraits*. I also asked each person to expand on several words of his or her choice, adding others by association, and thereby creating an expanded field of meaning. These *Word-Portraits* were included in the show, installed in relation to a larger work on paper made in collaboration with visitors to the gallery, who continued to expand on the meaning of the words that I collected on the street.

*Terra Incognita LS1* filled an entire room. Freestanding metal grid structures consisting of thin metal beams and pipes were placed in the center of the space. The installation expanded inside and outside these structures, using a range of found and specially constructed elements. The entire space was meant to function as a delicate, precariously put together, three-dimensional interactive drawing that integrated viewers, who could move around freely, zooming in on different visual elements and autonomous sculptural pieces.