sculpture

January/February 2018
Vol. 37 No. 1

A publication of the
International Sculpture Center
www.sculpture.org

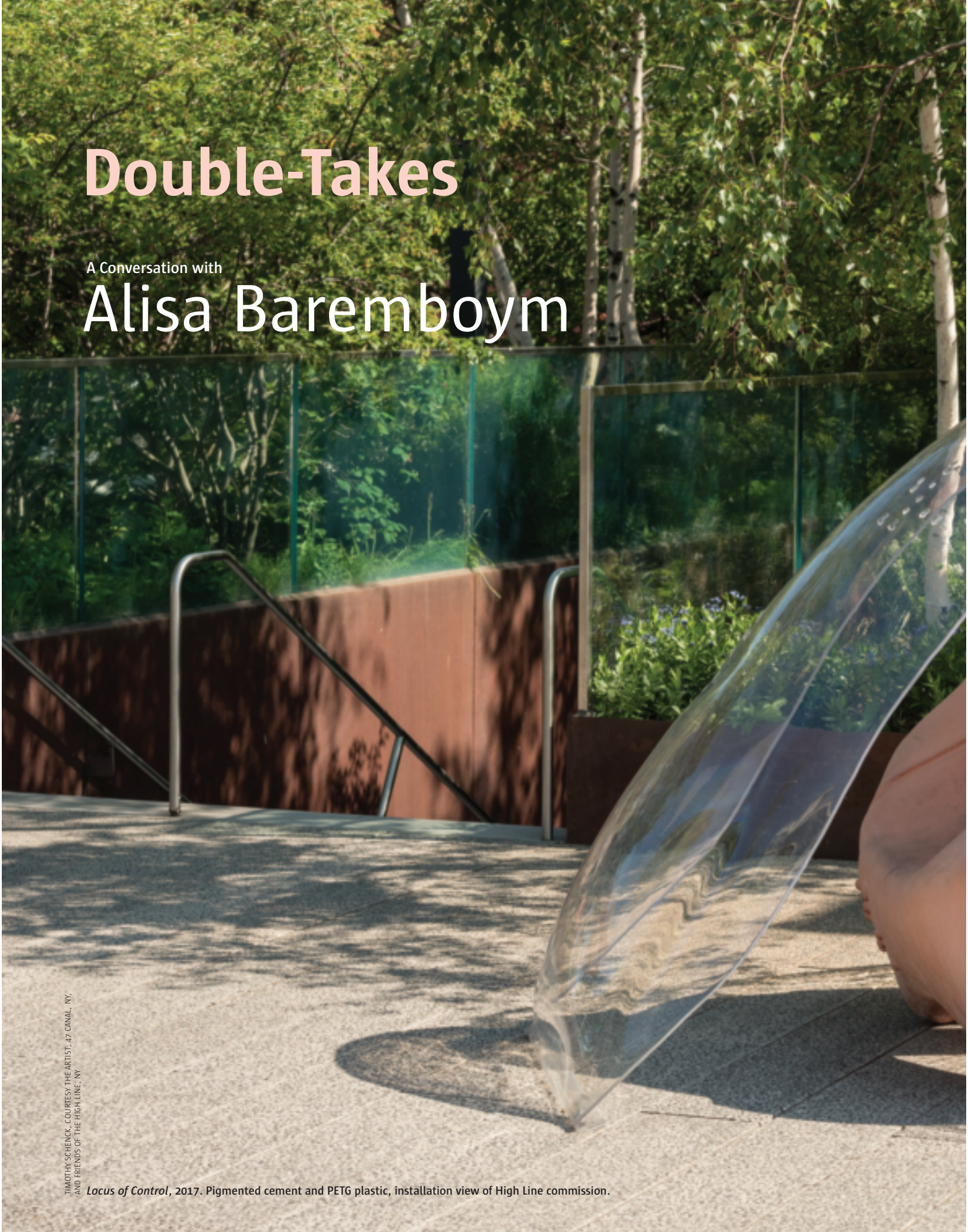
$7.50
0 74820 64837 7
0 2

sculpture
January/February 2018 Vol. 37 No. 1
A publication of the International Sculpture Center

Double-Takes

A Conversation with

Alisa Baremboym



TIMOTHY SCHENCK, COURTESY THE ARTIST, 47 CANAL, NY, AND FRIENDS OF THE HIGH LINE, NY

Locus of Control, 2017. Pigmented cement and PETG plastic, installation view of High Line commission.

BY MICHAËL AMY

Left: *Lox Luggage*, 2011. Luggage, cans, archival pigment inks on cotton, and shrink-wrap, 41 x 16.5 x 12 in. Above: *Bedpan*, 2012. Glazed ceramic, 14 x 11.5 x 3.5 in.

Alisa Baremboym's eclectic and hermetic work is receiving a great deal of attention, judging by the number of exhibitions in which her objects have been featured and by the critical literature they have generated. Her sculpture juxtaposes materials and processes, opacity and transparency, lightness and weight, abstraction and figuration, the past and the future, the illusion of perfection versus the reality of its opposite. There are also elements of social engagement and playfulness. Baremboym's work is not easily pinned down, a characteristic that seems particularly à propos of our current social and cultural condition.

Michaël Amy: *Where did you study, and how did you arrive at your current body of work?*

Alisa Baremboym: I did my undergraduate work at the School of Visual Arts in New York City and then went to Bard for my graduate education. I made paintings on plastic and shot photographs when working toward my MFA. I was thinking about the body—about preservation and about how one works to maintain one's body. This led to my wall-works, which consist of manipulated images printed on fabric. We use fabric to protect or preserve the body from the outside world, and the images I chose often depicted preserved foods. I manipulated them in Photoshop to simulate repetition and abundance, then printed them on cotton and once more on silk gauze, overlapping the layers and suspending the top layer only millimeters away from the other surface. This compression creates an almost nauseating optical effect with the food images. I was also thinking about interiority—the sustenance one takes into one's body—and exteriority—the fabric itself. The doubling of the image, which becomes perceptible as one approaches the work, can produce an almost visceral reaction.

Material ambiguity and perceptual double-takes have always interested me. With the wall-works, there was a desire to get away from the flat image and a need to tackle objecthood. Regardless of material, I was always thinking about perception, space, and the body. In my early 20s, I kept going back and forth between making sculptures, paintings, and wall-based works. I took a ceramics class in 2011 and discovered that I had a knack for wheel throwing.

JOERG LOHSE, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND 47 CANAL, NY

I embraced clay as a medium for sculpture because it had alchemy built into it, changing by way of chemical process. Ceramic is used in industry, as well as in the biomedical field. It has the ability to create an illusion of softness and volume while being hard, thin, even flat, which is perceptually interesting to me. It is a porous material and can therefore, in the abstract, be a place of growth. Clay is also oddly similar to painting, because you start with nothing—from mush.

MA: *Were you making figurative paintings?*

AB: Some were figurative. They depicted things found in the real world. There has always been an element of realism in my work, partly because of my interest in the body. I wanted to get away from the flatness of painting. I would shrink-wrap things onto my canvases—those works were very sculptural. What connects me to realism at this point is the psychological connection between how we perceive materials and the way they feel or look versus what they are in actuality. One of the starting points for my sculpture is what things are made of, what their materials tell us about the world at large. I build on this conceptual scaffolding while aiming for something more topical.

Before producing sculpture, I made prints that were conglomerate photographs—still-lifes of preserved foods manipulated through Photoshop and pieced together. One is a print of lox wrapped around a suitcase—I was thinking of the idea of preservation and travel, of the import and export of goods. This comes from my experience of immigration as a child; my family lived in Italy and Austria while on the way to America. It also comes out of the absurd idea of shrink-wrapping luggage. I printed the images on fabric to transfer the interior to the exterior, flipping things around.

I always had an interest in spatial relationships—sculpture offered a way of tackling that. I was also interested in the nature of tools and in the idea that certain tools may not have a use in today's world, though they may have a future use—a kind of reverse archaeology. You look at something and imagine what it might later be used for so that it doesn't go to waste. It's almost like product invention, but with a more abstracted purpose, which is to rotate our understanding of intentionality, in the sense that you are making something that could potentially be used in ways that you cannot yet imagine.

***Leakage Industries: Clear Conduit*, 2012. Gelled emollient, unglazed ceramic, USB cable with gender changers, flash drive, and hardware, 40 x 32 x 48 in.**

Bedpan (2012) was my first large ceramic object—for an elderly Duchamp. What would he make if he could not get out of bed and had to contend with his mortal body-machine? Some of my ceramics were just bisque-fired, so they remained porous. I was thinking of the idea of formlessness and of a new type of Surrealist object. In *Leakage Industries: Clear Conduit* (2012), which was shown at the SculptureCenter, the pink clay forms were placed on top of gelled emollient, which was cast into blocks. As the show progressed, the clay absorbed more and more of the mineral oil from the gel. The forms were taken from different types of sieves, including a pipe connector. There is an allusion to leakage, to things that move, and to conduits and drains.

MA: *The clay has the color of flesh.*

AB: It's fleshy, but the color is that of rubber or silicone, with an allusion to internal organs. I use things that have existed for thousands of years, such as metal and ceramic, and combine them with newer materials, such as vinyl, plastic, and gel, a crude-oil byproduct. The combination of materials makes my work look new. It is still possible to create and say something new, without heavy-handed dependence on cutting-edge materials. People have difficulty recognizing traditional materials for what they are in my work because of how I manipulate and combine them. I play with that perceptual shift.

MA: *Why do you use the gel? Were you inspired by Matthew Barney's work? I am also thinking of Beuys.*

AB: For me, gel has a relationship to the body in terms of its mass and feeling. There is also an environmental element to it, because it is made of petroleum byproducts. I am reaching beyond Barney in how I use it. There is something of Beuys, but his myth-making is a little too much for me. If I wanted to, I could weave a myth around myself based on the story of my emigration from the Soviet Union—though I would rather turn that into a film. Transcendence attaches itself to great art objects; Barney and Beuys deliver that.

So, the gel alludes to the toxic environment that we are creating. It embodies seepage. It is a substance between solid and liquid—a product of modern material advances—as well as a mysterious and elusive substance that plays with perceptual reading. Our shampoo bottles leach BPA, which seeps into our skin. As a result, people have more autoimmune diseases and cancers, while continuing to live with all of these plastics

JOERG LOHSE, COURTESY THE ARTIST, 47 CANAL, NY, AND SCULPTURE CENTER, NY

Porous Solutions, 2013. Ceramic, custom webbing, hardware, gelled emollient, Mylar, archival pigment inks on silk, magnets, and bent steel, 50 x 15 x 20 in.

that make our lives more comfortable. My objects are about the porosity of the barrier separating us from the larger world.

The Dollar Store is a huge inspiration for me. I look for weird, cheap, industrially produced objects that I can incorporate into my works, though they are engulfed in a different logic than my sculpture. My work may juxtapose a mass-produced and a handmade thing, the whole becoming a sort of reverse-engineered object. When you look at my forms up close, you can see that they are hand-built and not cast, but they look slick from afar or in reproductions—I like that. The not-knowing-what-you-are-looking-at effect slows down the perceptual judgment call. I strive for that, to a degree. I want to challenge the perceptual model inside your brain and create a divergent perception. The gel helps me accomplish that.

MA: *Isn't that what artists have always been striving for—to create the illusion of something that is not there?*

AB: Yes, trickery and optical illusion go back thousands of years. In my case, the clay looks like rubber. I was intrigued by the misperception. Some people relate it to skin, but it is more like an internal organ color. There is a power to the idea of the double-take, which I feel parallels lived experience.

Titles can also help effect double-takes. A cable that runs to a flash-drive, for instance, has a gender-changer at the end. Plugs have a male end and a female end, and I thought it was uncanny that they would make a gendered plug called a gender-changer, so I included it in the sculpture. If you plug into this sculpture with your computer or another device, you can download a GIF of a spinning meat grinder wheel, which highlights the futility of your effort.

MA: *What is the meaning of* Globility *(2013)?*

AB: That sculpture was made for the Taipei Biennial. At the time, I was making sculptures resembling mangled conveyor belts, with an industrial quality to them. I was

JOERG LOHSE, COURTESY THE ARTIST, 47 CANAL, NY, AND MOMA PS1

thinking about how different industries use branding to establish a psychological connection to their products. The drug Abilify, which is not an anti-depressant, helps you take your anti-depressants. Is this necessary, or is it a money-making scheme concocted by the pharmaceutical industry? A drug to help you take a drug to help yourself? There are all these insidious things going on in the world that inspire me to invigorate my sculptures with analogous actions. I started combining words into new words. "Globility" implies something, but you are not quite sure what since it's a made-up word. The meaning seeps into your brain, without you fully understanding it.

MA: *Do you use new media to design some of your work?*

AB: I always thought that "new media" was a funny and nebulous term. I use my computer to do research, and I use Photoshop, Blender, or Sculptris as tools to construct three-dimensional forms, in conjunction with my hands. What seems most new to me are our daily interactions with the outside world—both manmade and organic.

MA: *Do you write or draw in preparation for sculpture?*

AB: I do a bit of both, and sometimes I make three-dimensional models. The sculptures do not necessarily end up looking like what I have drawn. Drawing, writing, and thinking about new forms are part of my daily practice; they open my mind to new possibilities. I think it is important to keep generating things. When you make something, you have a lot of different options. When you asked me what inspired me, my first answer was life: because one reads, one talks to people, one goes places, one sees things, and one buys groceries. All of that inspires me.

MA: *Why do you embrace ambiguity?*

AB: I like for people to be intrigued and to consider what things are on a very basic level. I like for it to be like a puzzle at times: Why is this familiar? What do I recognize in this? What connections can I make to the world outside, based on the relationships I see before me?

For instance, the cutouts in *Dynamic Absorption* were produced with a plasma cutter. Heat was applied to create part of it; likewise, heat was applied to the ceramic element and to a sheet of plastic in another part. When thinking through materiality, one arrives at the intersectionality of process. The transformative quality of process drives the inner logic of this body of work. I like to follow a train of thought that leads not to a logical conclusion, but to a different train of thought.

***Parasorbal Systems*, 2014. Mangled steel, gelled emollient, archival pigment print on silk gauze, ceramic, vinyl, tubing, bungee cable, Mylar, insulation foam, webbing, and hardware, 39 x 43 x 55 in.**

MA: *What kinds of things are you reading?*

AB: Recently, I've been reading articles on psychology, human behavior, food processing, consumerism, and aids for adapting to contemporary life. I find the idea of self-help—psychologically and through consumer objects—fascinating.

The performance artist Seung-Min Lee and I made gel pads for a one-off performance at Luxembourg & Dayan Gallery in 2015, inspired by assistive devices. The pads, which had electro-conductive gel and ceramic or rubber objects inside them, were modeled after things made for autistic children and people with Alzheimer's. One object almost felt like an x-ray shield; its weight was meant to help calm an agitated mind. I am interested in the psychological conditioning of the masses—interconnectivity, on some level—and weave it into my work. Sometimes the idea is highlighted, and sometimes it hovers in the background. I am interested in the psychology of things; I think that how we interact with the objects around us is going to be a problem.

MA: *Is there anything in your work that alludes to your Russian heritage?*

AB: With the food work, yes. With the luggage-related works and the conveyor belt pieces, I would point to the politics of production. When we emigrated from the Soviet Union, we lugged canned goods around for three months. That ordeal colored my impressions and had an impact on subsequent sculptures. Also, I have this notion about the mass-production of objects. Many artists produce multiples, which can be seen as a modern solution to the making of a more populist art.

No one in my family is or was a communist; my parents came to America for the love of freedom and capitalism. I am interested in conveying the idea of a kind of movement, of transference, or permeability. This has to do with my coming from a different place

***Dynamic Absorption*, 2016. Sheet steel, perforated sheet steel, ceramic, heat-formed acrylic, conductive gel, color-indicating silica gel, polyethylene tubing, and cast nylon film, 42.5 x 59.1 x 19.7 in.**

when I was little and moving a lot during my formative years, as does my interest in change and adaptability.

The last thing I remember from before we left was a children's live-action series called "Guest from the Future." The main character, who was named Alisa like me, was a Soviet pioneer schoolgirl with special powers, and aliens were after her. When I came to America, in 1990, the first movie I saw on TV was David Cronenberg's *The Fly*. I was seven years old. This, too, put a stamp on my visual construction of reality.

1970s futurism was deeply ingrained in Soviet culture. I grew up with that during the '80s, when everything in the Soviet Union was lagging behind. My approach may come from the lessons of life under socialism—having to engineer something in an improvisational fashion, out of necessity, something that should exist but doesn't. The idea of self-reliance, of having to learn how to engineer everything, ingenuity emerging as the product of lack, definitely influenced me. I love figuring out how to make something and constructing an idea out of this need. Sending a fully formed idea out to be made by someone else is boring to me, and I rarely do it. That does not mean that objects made that way cannot be awe-inspiring—it is just not how I set about to make things. Really important decisions are made in the moment, when carrying out a task.

MA: *You still manage to remove your hand from the object.*

AB: In what way? Just because something lacks a handprint does not mean that the hand is not there. If you look closely, you will see imperfections. In digital reproductions of my work, there is a lot more gloss. Looking requires being in front of the actual work. But from afar, I agree, the forms read as alluding to mass-produced things. The impressions in some of the sculptures come from Dollar Store objects that I pressed into the material or from my own versions of those objects, which are less regular. Some parts are meant to look perfect or machined.

MA: *How do you warp your plastic forms?*

AB: Depending on the size of the plastic, I use a heat-gun or a DIY construction that holds a heat lamp. I heat the plastic first and then use a DIY suction contraption on it, over some mass-produced funnels and other objects—it's not a good vacuum, so what came out was half-vacuum sealed, which I like. It is like a trace of mass production, a leftover impression. I was thinking of alchemical transformations—the plasma cutting and the current running through the gel.

MA: *You enjoy mixing media in the same work, setting off dialogues between hardness and softness, or the illusion thereof.*

AB: I like that the different materials help you take things out of the typical context of visual understanding. Most things in life are not pure—everything is processed. I gravitate toward that. Each time I enter a Dollar Store, I find things that seem to defy comprehension. One could never come up with such things on one's own. They're like full-fledged glitches in the production of consumer items, mutant variations. I embrace the idea of cast-off, misfired objects—like the "irregular" sticker on clothing at a discount store.

MA: *Do you purchase these items or just photograph them?*

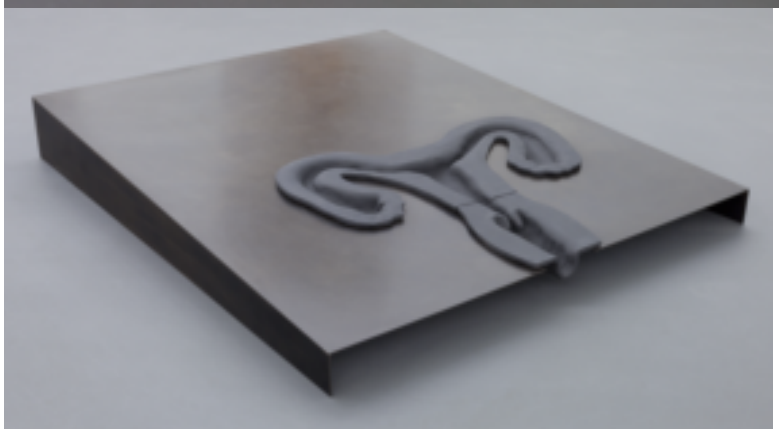
AB: It depends. Sometimes I see interesting things and move on. Other times, I buy. I bought a gas funnel shortly before Hurricane Sandy approached—suddenly this object appeared at local Dollar Stores. It has a very timely and timeless quality to it. It is a recognizable object, but it also has a very specific use.

I think a lot about people who have knee or hip surgery—a lot of the reconstructed parts are made of ceramic, plastic, or metal. There is a certain bio-ceramic that mimics the way bone allows tissue to grow over it. The natural bonds with the artificial, and vice versa.

MA: *Do critics take your work too seriously and miss the humor?*

AB: I don't know. The humor is pretty dry and idiosyncratic. Some people will find the bite I took out of one sculpture funny, and some will think of it as abject. There is no such thing as a universally sanctioned sense of humor.

PAVEL DOUSEK, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND 47 CANAL, NY, AND GLASGOW SCULPTURE STUDIOS



JOERG LOHSE, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND 47 CANAL, NY

Above: Installation view of "Conflict (process)," 2015. Left: *Process*, 2015. Sheet steel and ceramic, 6 x 40 x 48 in.

For "Conflict (process)," my 2015 show at 47 Canal, I was thinking about shrapnel and war, and a kind of outside/inside dichotomy. Because of the reference to a uterus, people were reading the forms as ovaries. I found the terminology for the title in a guide for managing large corporations. The process of conflict constitutes a point of evolution within certain structured relationships, which provide growth within a corporate setting.

MA: *How do a uterus and grapeshot come together in your mind?*

AB: Grapeshot, part of dispersive cannonball shot, was an early form of shrapnel that aimed for maximum damage. I made grapeshot from ceramic, resin, and gelled emollient. Ceramic parts are embedded in the resin, like fossilized remnants of previously exploded grapeshot. I was thinking of violence and what it means to be a woman, tuning into what I was reading in the news. I arrived in New York in 2000, and in 2001 we had 9/11. Since I was 19, New Yorkers have been living in a state that is consciously or unconsciously always on alert. All of this was on my mind. There also seemed to be an uptick in the amount of violence being reported in the news, spreading fear of bodily harm.

In 2014, I saw MoMA's Robert Gober show and was floored by it. I have always loved his work, and I came up with the idea of making a ramp. As far as the uterus goes, I was thinking of the Minimalist works at Dia:Beacon, almost exclusively made by men, with their grandiose proportions and industrial materials. I found the connection between the canon of Modernism and my cannonball sculptures funny. I made the ramp out of cold steel—almost a Judd-like structure—and sunk a uterus into it.

Before the sculpture is complete, I don't think about what it will mean exactly. I arrive at meaning partly through intuition. This is a cross-section of a uterus, made of black ceramic. I thought of it as a gravitational contraceptive, because of the ramp implying leakage and its ashy black quality, which contrasts with the joyous peachy color of the grapeshot. I connected the grapeshot to the surrounding space by way of pipes (more leakage), thinking of the impact exerted by the outside world on this interior space. The liquid vinyl blocking the windows filtered daylight, and thus some part of the outside world seeped into the gallery. I was not aiming for a linear, cause-and-effect type of meaning. The show was meant to give you a feeling—that mattered to me. The sober subject matter became humorous to me, and I kept referring to *Process* as "heavy metal uterus." Within darkness, there is always an element of humor. The objects I make are influenced by life, and I hope, in turn, to return something to the world at large.

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