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Existential Swallow the Parts Whole: Sahar Khoury Interview by Anna Betbeze



Sahar Khoury, *Cage Topiary with Accessories*, 2019,
animal cages, ceramic, cement, and steel, 148 x 84 x 42
in. Courtesy of the artist.

AB

I guess "purity" in sculpture is often evoked through a singularity of material. Do you think of your work as impure?

SK

God, I love this question. People have to comprehend what they are seeing or experiencing. I can see the appeal of having one material like, say, marble that makes up the whole entity; but marble requires exploitation, extraction, and resources to become an artwork. I tend to see conflict first, such as the negotiations and what had to be sacrificed to have this thing. My natural inclination is to make unity out of unlikely materials. So maybe I am more interested in points of unity rather than purity; purity just doesn't exist in my worldview.

AB

I recently saw a great Rosemary Mayer show in New York City at the Swiss Institute called *Ways of Attaching*, which seems to have something to do with your work. I'm thinking about the way you use cages and barricades and belts and attach them all together. Ways of attaching but also ways of restraining, ways of confining?

SK

She was such a magician! Her ways of creating density and light are so inspiring. I love to think about binders. Sometimes binders free the object to be more itself and/or create the context for viewing hierarchy. The belts are a subject and connecting line, and they are also helping the structure. The cages could be seen as helping animals feel safer, as it is argued; but they are also a barrier to experience and freedom of movement. This topic is so huge and can go down many political streams. I don't have a narrative, but I do feel compelled to point to constraint as a natural part of survival but also of social systems of inequity.

AB

I know you have sculpted your little deaf poodle, Esther, and tuxedo cat, Lola, and they appear often as the only figures in your installations. What meaning do they have for you?

SK

We think Esther is also now experiencing vision issues. I really don't get inspired by human figures, but animals have a spirit that feels cleansing somehow.

AB

I always loved Dorothea Tanning's sort of unhealthy obsession with her Pekingese dogs. For her it was really about communion with the animal world, and her dog as not a pet but a shapeshifter or avatar that carried meaning. The dog would show up in the strangest places in her work, always there but in different forms.

SK

I love that take, Anna. I never understood people's read of my cat sculptures as domestic. I don't think of them as domestic at all, but always on the line of interior and exterior. Bridging that space. To return to purity, maybe they are the one pure thing that exists. I don't think of them as pets or as cute things but as survivors of a big domestic human experiment and feel grateful that they put up with us, actually.

AB

Seeing that dead whale carcass on the beach at the Headlands seemed to haunt both of us and enter our studio work in different ways. What effect did it have on you?

SK

I wanted to make a silicone relief of the surface and huge scar. I never did. Somehow that felt like it would be going too far. It was this clock ticking away next to us, degrading every second; but while things were disappearing like flesh and bones, flies were taking their place. In nature this kind of entropy is marveled at or given its space.

AB

I think about how that whale was left on the beach at the Headlands, and getting to watch it decay enacted something very profound; but had it washed up in a fancy neighborhood, it would have been towed out to sea immediately. So many signs and signals are disrupted or covered up, cleaned up, towed away. I think we both make work to uncover or reveal hidden aspects of a culture in ruin.

SK

I definitely think we share that: wanting to spend time with the decay, and not in some fetish way, but more matter of fact.

AB

I'm curious about your background in anthropology. It seems to be embedded in your work. Do you think of your work as anthropological?

SK

Without a doubt, my years of ethnography and working in structurally vulnerable populations must seep in. Ethnography is a lot about observing the banal and the everyday and listening to it with a special sensitivity. There is meaning in the way things happen which over time tell you *why* they happen. I gravitate to the cheap and banal objects that are ubiquitous because I believe they have as much to tell me as a precious object in a vitrine in a museum. I am a strong believer that every object is political.

AB

Tell me a little bit about your show at Canada?

SK

I decided to call it *You Can't Cut It Into Pieces*. You have to swallow all the parts whole. There is the material diversity and the me diversity and all the fragments bound together, and I don't want any one part to be spotlighted as more meaningful or useful. Take it all or leave it.

Sahar Khoury: *You Can't Cut It Into Pieces* is on view at Canada in New York City until April 9.

Anna Betbeze is a visual artist whose experimental work involves exploration of haptic sensation, arriving at new forms that combine elements of sculpture, painting, puppetry, and pedagogy. Betbeze considers the ephemerality of lived experience alongside the supposed deathlessness of artistic creation. Betbeze's work has been shown at institutions such as MoMA PS1, Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, The Hessel Museum at Bard College, and The Power Station, Shanghai. Her project Touch Workshop was featured in TDR (The Drama Review) (Fall 2021). Betbeze lives and works in Los Angeles and is faculty at University of California–Riverside.