

The Artist Critiquing Feminine Clichés With Ceramic Heels and Cigarette Butts

Genesis Belanger's porcelain sculptures playfully send up the advertising campaigns she once helped create as a prop stylist.



By Merrell Hambleton

Nov. 2, 2018



The artist Genesis Belanger's sun-filled Williamsburg studio could easily be mistaken for a sort of strange, surrealist kitchen. There is a large, stainless-steel kiln in one corner and next to it, a rolling cart stacked with small rectangles of stoneware, like so many cookies fresh from the oven. A mint-green KitchenAid mixer, which Belanger uses to incorporate pigment into porcelain, stands nearby. Otherworldly objects — a bouquet of flowers and fingers, a champagne bottle stopped with the end of a hot dog, supersize cigarettes stubbed out in an ashtray as big as a dinner plate, all pale as raw dough — dry on a shelf, resembling cakes waiting to be baked.

Of course, Belanger, 40, doesn't turn out soft, sweet confections but meticulous porcelain-and-stoneware sculptures with an acid bite. Using tropes from Surrealism, Pop Art and advertising, her cartoonish pieces are sharp, humorous sendups of feminine clichés: the lipstick tube, the handbag, the manicure.



Fruit — often ripe and bitten into — is a recurring theme in Belanger's work. "It can be a metaphor for our obsession with youth and fear of aging," she says. *Nicholas Calcott*

When I visit her studio on a bright day in late October, the artist is putting the finishing touches on work for her upcoming show "A Strange Relative," which opens at the Perrotin gallery in New York on November 3 and will also feature paintings by the artist Emily Mae Smith (whose studio is just down the hall). Belanger, who is fine-boned with bright blue eyes and a quality of ethereal, radiant lightness, maneuvers deftly around the space, gingerly moving objects. I hold my breath as she nudges one sculpture — two long fingers kicked up like the legs of a pinup girl and adorned with large costume jewelry rings — along the wall with her knee. She tells me she once dropped a Seamless order on a sculpture and it lopped off the arm. "I don't get that attached," she says, smiling.

Belanger grew up in Woodstock, Vt., where she remembers poring over books about craft at the public library and painting still lifes alongside her father, who is also an artist. Though she knew she wanted to make art from an early age, her path to her current practice has been an indirect one. She did coursework at Parsons, Cooper Union and the Rhode Island School of Design — where she studied video and animation — before graduating from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with a degree in fashion design. She learned pattern making from the artist Nick Cave and interned at Moschino in Milan where, she says, "the line between art and fashion was thin." Still, after an unsatisfying post-college job designing clothes she concluded that "the depth of conversation you can have with a coat is limited."



Belanger never uses glaze. Instead, she incorporates powder pigment into wet clay using a stand mixer. "Glaze is melted glass, and it always feels really on-the-surface," she says. "This is more integrated." Nicholas Calcott



"Every show has pedestals that are some sort of almost-furniture," says Belanger. Here, a porcelain-and-stoneware sculpture rests on a chaise lounge with concrete cigarette butts for legs. Nicholas Calcott

For the next five years, Belanger worked primarily as a prop assistant making absurd and intricate items for ad campaigns: a giant powder puff for a Victoria's Secret spread, a paper castle for a Tiffany's window, white vinyl flowers for a Chanel party. She enjoyed the work and part of her believed that she could be happy "making everything very beautiful." Still, she felt a lingering emptiness. "I knew that even if I became an artistic director, I would want to be more of a mastermind," she says. "And I wanted things to be more esoteric."

Though she left advertising to pursue an M.F.A. at Hunter College in 2009, Belanger remained fascinated by the industry. She was interested, particularly, in the way advertising constructs femininity as glossy, mysterious and sexy. Using techniques borrowed from advertising — world-building, abstracting the female body — she started to poke fun at and upend these stereotypes. "I wanted to build narratives that dealt with some of the ways that women are complex," she says.



Belanger uses pigmented slip to add color to her sculpture. This mule and its partner, both finished with pom-poms and Cheshire cat-like grins, will sit under a vanity in Belanger's installation. Nicholas Calcott

For “A Strange Relative,” Belanger and Smith were thinking about the idea of female hysteria, a dated but persistent cultural diagnosis. “We thought that the contemporary version of a hysterical woman might be ‘the hot mess,’” says Belanger. “And how she’s considered desirable, but in a patronizing way.” The two artists started to imagine what kind of space this archetype would inhabit, and then began to build characters and props to fill it.

Together, they made a vignette which includes a painting by Smith and a vanity table strewn with objects by Belanger: an ashtray with a chewed-up piece of gum, a glass spilling ice and cartoon eyes, discarded cigarettes and pills. “She’s not a slick bad girl, she can’t even clean her apartment,” says Belanger, mimicking the adman pitch. “But she’s so sexy.”

“A Strange Relative” is on view from November 3 to December 22 at the Perrotin gallery, 130 Orchard Street, New York, perrotin.com.