






Art

# Genesis Belanger's Uncanny Ceramics Help Us Cope with the Present

• Casey Lesser Oct 1, 2020 1:52pm   



View of Genesis Belanger's studio, 2020. Photo by Pauline Shapiro. Courtesy of the artist.

There's always something slightly unnerving about Genesis Belanger's sculptures. Her tableaux of furniture and ceramics, with their crisp edges, soft, buttery textures, and dusty pink and tan hues, are spiked with a sharp, humorous bite. Disembodied hands with pristine manicures and too-long fingers fondle supersized pills, a sausage, or a stray pair of grinning lips. Ghostly fingers protrude from bouquets of blossoms that can only be allusions to female genitalia. And mid-century-esque furnishings are strewn with vices and vanities: lipsticks, Big Macs, Birkin bags, prescription bottles, nail polish, cigarettes. Belanger takes aim at our obsessions with beauty, wealth, luxury, and femininity and tears it all down. Yet more than anything, the work is seductive—like a really great piece of ad-

vertising where you know you're being manipulated, but you go with it anyway. Belanger studied fashion and worked in advertising prior to earning her MFA at Hunter College in 2012. Now, she harnesses her years of working as a prop stylist's assistant to concoct bodies of work—stoneware and porcelain ceramics combined with custom furniture she crafts—that take shape like elaborate sets, but with conceptual depth. Her shows unfold like eccentric short stories, filled with anthropomorphized objects, enigmatic world-building, universal truths, and ample humor.



**Genesis Belanger**  
*Double Cherry*, 2017  
The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum  
On loan

That approach has paid off. Belanger is represented by three esteemed galleries—François Ghebaly, Rodolphe Janssen, and Perrotin—and has a busy slate of exhibitions for the foreseeable future. Up until now, her shows have largely been staunchly feminist critiques of contemporary American society. But her latest exhibition, her first at a museum, is an outlier: It's about grief.

Belanger did not set out to open a show about grief during a time of intense global mourning. “Through the Eye of a Needle,” which went on view in September at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, was originally slated to open in May. “I started working on the show almost a full year ago, way before the coronavirus,” she said, way before this moment where “so many people are dealing with grief of the highest level.”

While the show is not about this moment, it certainly speaks to it. True to her work more broadly, these sculptures examine consumerism, the way that we depend on and obsess over material objects, and how those objects become extensions of ourselves. Yet this time, she makes us consider what it means to genuinely support one another in moments of distress.



Genesis Belanger, detail of *No More News*, 2020. Photo by Pauline Shapiro. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

When we met at the Aldrich in mid-September, Belanger, who's based in New York, had returned to the city two weeks prior, after a summer in Maine. There, she worked for months, largely preparing for a November show at Rodolphe Janssen in Brussels; she started making ceramic seashells for the first time, inspired by mythologies of the sea. But she also created a couple of choice pieces for the Aldrich show—including a candelabra with tongue-flames and a large foot that sits on a plate, as though it's ready to be eaten. Belanger first worked with Aldrich senior curator Amy Smith-Stewart in 2018, when she was included in a group show at the museum called "Objects Like Us;" the exhibition included her work *Double Cherry* (2017). Smith-Stewart had first seen her work in a 2016 group show at Lucien Terras on the Lower East Side, shortly before the artist's swift rise in the art world. In 2017—arguably Belanger's breakout year—the Maspeth, Queens, gallery Mrs. gave her a solo show and presented her work at the art fair NADA New York; the latter, Smith-Stewart estimates, gave her crucial exposure. "That's when she started creating these tableaux for the objects themselves and conceiving them more as installation, creating more of a narrative around the space around the objects and connecting them," Smith-Stewart said. "I was particularly taken with the gender themes in the work and the way that she was weaving together Surrealism



Genesis Belanger, *A Fortress of Order and Generosity*, 2020. Photo by Pauline Shapiro. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Like many of her peers making work that portrays disquieting riffs on reality, Belanger is often compared to the Surrealists. But in this fraught year, where so much feels surreal, the term seems imprecise and incapable of conveying the way she elicits discomfort. A more apt descriptor is “uncanny,” a word Belanger herself uses often and works toward.

“When something becomes uncanny,” she said, “is when you see it, and it’s so familiar that it could be the thing you think it is, but it’s also absolutely not that thing—that makes you uncomfortable, both the familiarity and the difference.”

In 2018, her two-person show with Emily Mae Smith at Perrotin in New York displayed the belongings of a woman described as a “hot mess” through works that playfully toyed with the tired ways women are objectified. And in 2019, she presented *Holding Pattern*, an installation in the street-facing vitrine of the New Museum centered around a disorderly desk covered with junk food and flaccid office supplies. That summer, she had her first solo exhibition with François Ghebaly in Los Angeles, titled “Coins for the Ferryman.”

Belanger conceives of her shows as a whole; her process is not unlike building a set. She starts by looking at floor plans, then determining the furniture pieces, and then the ceramic sculptures. The ceramics begin as sketches, which she works on every morning. Each piece is made from slabs of clay—an impressive feat given the three-dimensional forms she makes and the limited elasticity of the material. And unlike most ceramic artists, she never uses glaze, preferring matte surfaces; the colors you see are either the natural hue of the clay or achieved through mixing pigment into the porcelain or stoneware. However, due to the finicky nature of ceramics, not everything works out. “I have a really high loss rate,” Belanger said. “If I make something that I love, and it doesn’t make it, I just remake it.” She creates patterns for some of the pieces to ease that process.



**Genesis Belanger**

*Reception, 2019*

New Museum

On loan

Given her experience studying fashion as an undergrad and working in advertising, Belanger is keenly aware of how visuals communicate and connect with people. “She has a really insider perspective on what sells, and why certain things are sexy,” Smith-Stewart said. “I love how she says ‘a well-manicured hand can sell anything.’ She understands also how gender permutes, and how it sets the stage for what sells. The work has what she calls like this ‘odd and lush’ sensibility that ensnares you. But then when you look deeper, you see this darkness, but there’s so much humor to it, and it has this feminist agency. I mean, who doesn’t love beauty—but it’s so great when you know how to weaponize it.”

“Through the Eye of a Needle” presents an array of Belanger’s signature ceramics, many perched on furniture pieces, like an upright piano covered in gray fabric. “I was looking at grand houses that are closed down for the season,” Belanger explained. “I thought it was really interesting how each piece of furniture had a slipcover made to fit it that sort of turned these furnishings into odd ghosts and indicated that their use was on pause. I thought that that was a great metaphor for the way that a person grieves.”

She wasn’t necessarily thinking about death, but the grief we experience in response to transition, like a bad breakup, and how we fail to offer emotional support to one another in such scenarios.

“The way that we do show our condolences is through consumer gestures of buying a bouquet or a box of chocolates or fruit basket or sending a casserole or some sort of odd dish,” Belanger said. “And that felt to me sort of both fascinating and odd, possibly inadequate, possibly really nice, I wasn’t sure. I wanted to explore that and make an environment that was sort of surrounded with those tokens of condolence.”



Genesis Belanger, *You Never Know What You're Gonna Get*, 2020. Photo by Pauline Shapiro. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

In the show's main room, such tokens of condolence include *You Never Know What You're Gonna Get* (2020), a chocolate box with eyes, an ear, a nose, and a mouth instead of candies (a riff on the "five senses gift"); pieces of fruit that are partially eaten or peeled or overripe; and various vases of flowers, laced with creeping fingers or a taunting tongue.

One wall is covered in gray curtains, with decadent hands peeking through. A recurring element found in several of her shows, the curtains are used as a device to imply "a space beyond the space you're presently inhabiting," Belanger said. "And that can be a metaphor for any type of transitional space. You know, the transition from this world to an afterlife...or even just in a funeral parlor, where curtains are often used to make a small, more intimate space to mourn."

Lurking throughout is the suspicion that, consciously or not, through such gestures of condolence, we might actually just be consoling ourselves.



Genesis Belanger, detail of *Abundantly Empty the Ceaseless Void*, 2020. Photo by Pauline Shapiro. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.



Genesis Belanger, detail of *Abundantly Empty the Ceaseless Void*, 2020. Photo by Pauline Shapiro. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

“Are we doing it because we actually want to console someone?” Belanger said. “Or are we doing it because we are checking a box that said, ‘I consoled’ or ‘I did the good thing’? So now, I don’t have to think about it anymore.”

Ultimately, the question the show poses is, “Can you make up for real empathy with consumer gestures?” This ties back to the show’s title, which comes from the Bible. In the book of Matthew, Jesus says, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”

“Are we all the rich man with no chance of getting into heaven?” Belanger mused. “I’m an atheist, I don’t even think there is a heaven, but I think the question still feels relevant.”

She does offer one glimpse of a true expression of empathy. Between the two main rooms, on one wall low to the floor, there’s a sculpture of a spigot with a drop of water falling from it, above a bare foot. Belanger was inspired by a podcast about a woman who is a leader of her parish and washes the feet of the unhoused each year. Alluding to Jesus again, perhaps inadvertently this time, it’s the least alluring of the works on view, but certainly the most hopeful.



Whereas the first room has a funereal air, the second feels like a waiting room or an office that’s been vacated. There’s a folding table, expertly crafted by Belanger and her assistant, with a giant rotary phone with its receiver off the hook (No More News, 2020). And there’s a large banquette with a forlorn, toppled handbag and two side tables holding big green plants trimmed with ribbons and deflated balloons—vestiges of a party that no one cared to clean up. There’s a sense of panic and emptiness; you can imagine someone getting a call, then dropping everything to rush to the hospital.

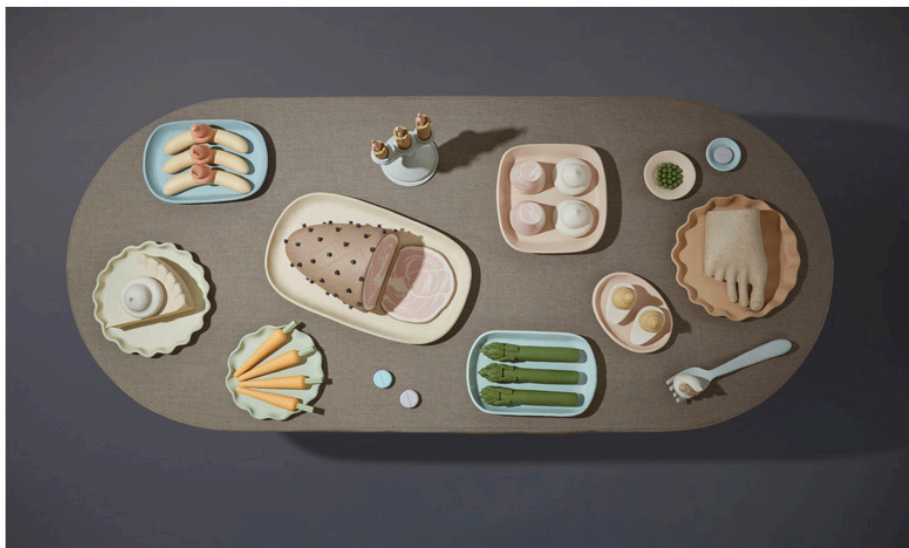
The star piece, A Fortress of Order and Generosity (2020), located in the main room, is a banquet table of culinary delicacies and curiosities. There’s a slice of lemon meringue pie, a pair of deviled eggs, a strange banana dish involving ham, candy-colored mystery meat, phallic stalks of asparagus, and a few pocketwatch-sized pills. At the center is a large, half-eaten honey-baked ham with a slice of marbled pink flesh cut away. It’s mirrored across the table by a large gray foot with two

toes lopped off; one appears beside it, dipped in a daub of white fluff and ready to be consumed on a fork. Puffy, suggestive dollops of mystery gloop accompany several dishes. “I like how it could be whipped cream or mashed potatoes or like so many different nebulous puffs,” Belanger said.



Genesis Belanger, detail of *A Fortress of Order and Generosity*, 2020. Photo by Pauline Shapiro. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

These oddball foods speak to Belanger’s references—vintage advertisements, cookbooks, and other vestiges of the 1950s, ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s. “Trump’s campaign of ‘making America great again,’ that evokes nostalgia,” she noted. “And I’m always asking the question of, ‘When was America great?’” That unsettling question is one of many posed by Belanger, and it speaks to one of her greatest strengths. “The ability to do things that tap into the sociopolitical, what’s going on in the world, while using humor and seduction, is really hard to do well,” Smith-Stewart said. In her case, that’s often been most effective in her critiques of female clichés and the ways that women have upheld or enabled misogyny and the patriarchy, including, for example, the 53% of white women who voted for Donald Trump in 2016. Her allusions to addiction and the opioid epidemic are also potent.



Genesis Belanger, *A Fortress of Order and Generosity*, 2020. Photo by Pauline Shapiro. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.



That clarity and the originality of Belanger's work might also speak to her own proclivity for audiobooks over other sorts of media. "I don't own a TV, I don't watch anything on the computer. If I didn't have the partner I have, I don't think I would have been watching movies," she laughed. "But I never stop listening to books and reading newspapers and magazines." She does look at Instagram, though, preferring the suggested page over her feed. "It shows a part of the world I would never see, like I would never follow a weird celebrity thing or some of the beauty stuff. It's a very odd world."

In many ways, Belanger's works open our eyes to the coping mechanisms we rely upon—especially now, in this fraught reality that often feels simulated, where we're primed to turn to the material world for comfort. But she also helps us to reflect on our own behaviors, such as the difference between projecting empathy and actually living life as an empathetic human being.