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Step Inside the Zany World of Furniture Designer Misha Kahn

AD drops in on the Brooklyn-based designer as he prepares for a scintillating solo show at New York's Friedman Benda Gallery

By Hannah Martin
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Furniture designer Misha Kahn in his Brooklyn studio, dons a pair of wacky finger-shaped boots to pose with his cement stools, resin light fixtures, and chaise longue, lovingly named Fat Ungrateful Little Piggy.

"I need to get pink rope to lace this all together," says furniture designer Misha Kahn.

It's just three days before the 26-year-old opens his first solo show at New York's Friedman Benda Gallery and he's zipping around his studio in Brooklyn's Bushwick neighborhood, classical radio blasting, as pieces get picked up and carted off

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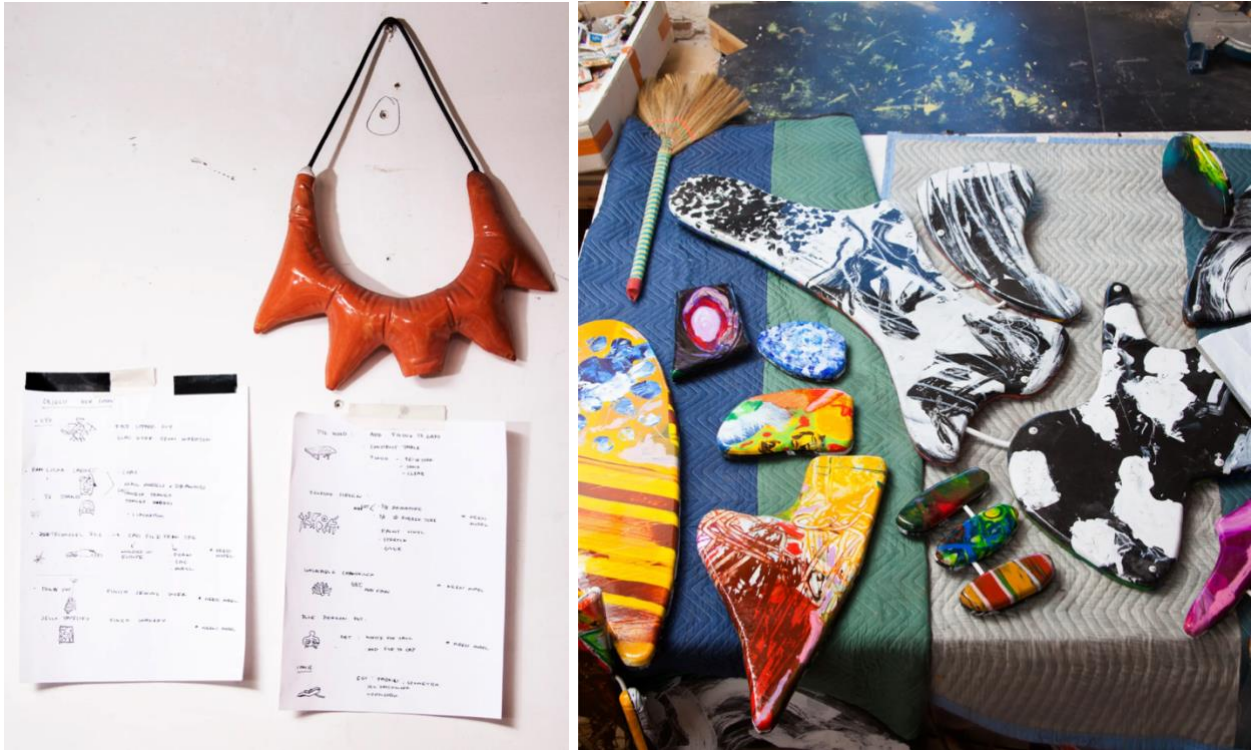
to the exhibition space. The chaise longue—a leggy Pepto-pink confection, currently perched on a sawhorse table—still needs to be laced into its latex.



Kahn shows off the model for *UFO Chandelier*—a copper chandelier outfitted with colorful glass bulbs that will be lit by fiber optics.

“I wanted to do Memphis as if it was about Memphis, Tennessee,” he says of the piece, likening it to Manet’s *Olympia* if she got dressed up in Dolly Parton’s lingerie. “Originally I covered it with denim and handkerchiefs, shearling, and brown leather, but the show is so print-heavy I ended up doing it in pink. And the latex was perfect—it pulled everything into place.”

The absurd piece of furniture hardly sticks out from the zany landscape in Kahn’s madcap workshop, where a plastic chandelier inflates with the press of a button, colorful baskets sprout legs, and a cast of furniture seems to have left Nickelodeon Studios in the 1990s and migrated north. It’s that fantastically cartoonish sensibility that garnered the Minnesota-born RISD grad a following that ranges from Dior—which requested a cement table for its London flagship—to an Atlanta collector who commissioned an elaborate climbing tree for her four cats.



Left: One of Kahn's resin balloon necklaces hangs above his checklist for the Friedman Benda show. Right: Colorful components of a folding screen, yet to be assembled.



Kahn examines his sketch for a screen made up of painted vinyl-and-plywood components.

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The chaise—like his popular Saturday Morning resin series, balloon-like cement stools, and log benches composed of candy-color trash—was made start to finish in his studio. “There are always a bunch of ideas in rotation,” he explains of the Technicolor laboratory. “Once something has marinated for about a month and I don’t think it’s garbage, then I’ll start following through on it.” Beginnings, middles, and ends of projects poke their heads out from the paints and drills: a pile of gelatinous sketches that later became a wild tapestry, a remnant of the first resin piece he ever made, 12-inch-tall heeled boots that look a pair of fingers. “I had a fantasy of making a lot of those and doing a ballet,” he says casually.



A blow-up chandelier is fastened to one wall of Misha Kahn’s Brooklyn studio, displayed alongside a spaghetti plastic bowl he found at a thrift store and a bronze lamp.

For “Return of Saturn: Coming of Age in the 21st Century,” which opens February 25, Kahn re-creates his wacky wonderland in a white box. Well, sort of. He’s painted the gallery walls brown, installed linoleum tile floors, and while his plans to line the stairs with carpet were de-railed by the gallery, the intentions were there. “I wanted it to feel like a family friend’s kitchen,” Kahn explains. “With a bohemian aunt vibe.” Add a massive mohair tapestry covered in imagery of jello molds, some copper retro-futuristic light fixtures, and a china cabinet looks like a steampunk Snuffaluffagus, and the space is well on its way.



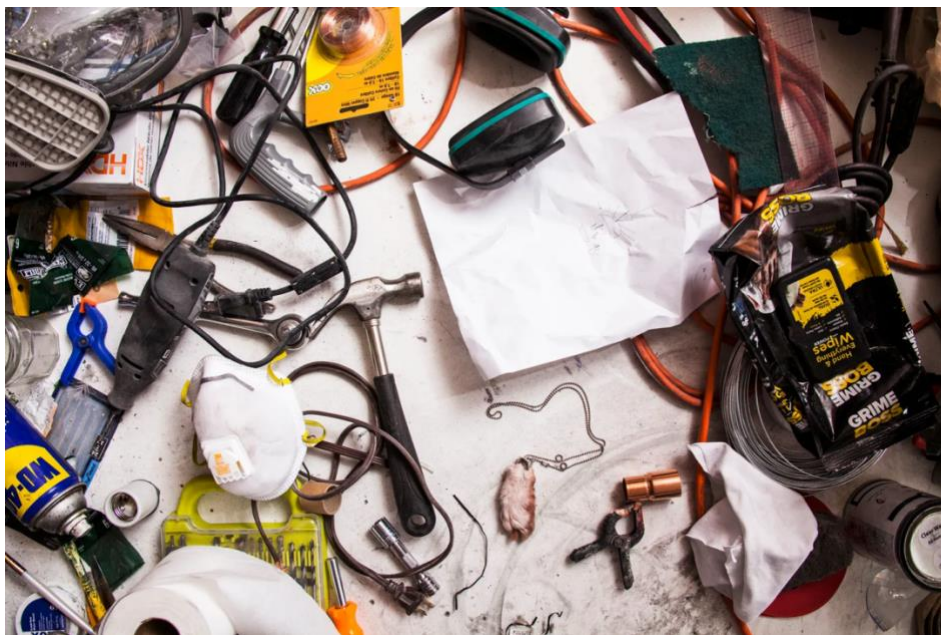
Kahn’s kooky finger footwear—created during a stint studying shoe design in Tel Aviv—came from an idea he had for a ballet. “I was dating a ballet dancer at the time so it all felt very real,” he says with a laugh.

And while the show is, in part, Kahn's reflection on the aesthetic whims of his millennial-hood—the cache of jello molds he collected in college and later dumped in the garbage, or the visual intrigue of the TV show, *Pepper Ann*—he's also looking forward.

“People aren't thinking that much about what the future's going to look like,” he says. “I think there needs to be more room for delusional visions of what things could become.”



In Kahn's jam-packed studio, a rubbery mold resembling an octopus tentacle crowns the doorway. “It's getting cast in Technogel, the stuff they make Dr. Scholl's out of,” he says. “It's going to be just this big gummy clear-blue topography.”



A beloved rabbit's foot peeks out from a pile of hammers, dust masks, and wire.



Kahn unearthed the original sketches for *The Slippery Feel of Inevitability*, a massive tapestry of spun-and-dyed mohair that was inspired by his collection of jello molds.

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A shoe Kahn designed is perched on a shelf.