

## HERALD ST

Jessi Reaves

android stroll

30<sup>th</sup> Sept – 12<sup>th</sup> Nov

For her first show at Herald St, Jessi Reaves has built sculptural chairs, shelves, lamps and cabinets which obscure traditional distinctions between the functional and the aesthetic. While her constructions employ the structural and technical lexicons of furniture-making, utility is resolutely downgraded in favour of the grotesque and the excessive.

Reaves enters an almost exclusively male domain of artists who have worked with furniture to challenge the fixed binaries of design and fine art. Isamu's Noguchi's iconic modernist coffee table, created for Herman Miller in 1947 and described in the original catalogue as "sculpture-for-use" and "design for production", has been a particularly significant point of reference. And yet Reaves brutally re-imagines this and other such hallowed relics of modernist furniture, fetishised as art objects in design history. By combining such "art objects" with unrefined industrial materials and objects that many of us might describe as junk, she transgresses their codes of elegance and good taste to create a new idiosyncratic language.

The sculptural shelving units which protrude from the gallery walls are surreal bricolages of plywood (the marker lines from initial measurements still visible), remnants of wicker chairs and baskets, gnarled branches of driftwood and gaping handbags emptied of their prior purpose as vessels for belongings. Within the broadly geometric frame of the shelves, space is articulated by a complex layering of planes and curving lines. In the larger shelf, an amputated headpiece of Eames' iconic recliner is wedged into the assemblage and painted in a plain brown paint, undercutting the austere autonomy of the original form and denying its function.

In a similar way, the chair titled *The History* merges high and low junk, combining the skeleton of an outdoor reclining chair with the seat of Marcel Breuer's famed Long Chair. The fabric that binds these two forms together is a knock-off version of John Galliano's brazen newsprint dress for Dior, which was covered with sensational headlines from the news stories of his sullied reputation. Galliano's use of the raw material of newsprint to make a functional textile provides a fitting parallel to Reaves' wider practice. The fabric at the top of the chair reads 'The History', perhaps a playful comment on how the materials in her work are being 'read' in the art gallery context.

Unlike the mid-century ergonomic furniture made from sleek steel, wood or plastic, Reaves' ottoman in two parts (*X* chromosome and *Find it on a map*) is heavy, impractical and inconvenient, constructed out of plywood, foam and blocks of fabric stapled aggressively into place. Split in half where Reaves would usually have incorporated a recognizable furniture element, we are left with two voluptuous biomorphic shapes and no obvious place to sit. Similarly disconcerting our expectations of function, one of the cabinets is draped in a translucent yellow slip that renders its interior shelves largely inaccessible and instead strangely eroticizes it. Yet the partially unzipped cover heightens our awareness of what is underneath as we begin to discern the painted plywood, wicker, plexiglas, encrusted sawdust and patterned fabric upholstery.

Reaves' lamps also pervert their assumed purpose. One hangs upside down from a nail like a sconce, adorned by two futile straps – fake balancing mechanisms. The standing lamp is of an intentionally awkward scale, too small to light from above but far too large to place on a table. Whilst we struggle to understand where the light is being cast, a purposeful purposelessness, the work is never totally divorced from the utilitarian.

The basket at the base of the lamp is embellished with floral motifs which Reaves has made by mixing wood glue and sawdust swept from the floor of her studio. Construction techniques are constantly conflated with the ornamental as this typical carpenter's trick, more usually employed to repair imperfections, is here transformed into a crude and exaggerated decorative gesture, replacing the flourishes and ornate inlays used to adorn traditional furniture. Lumpy accretions cling to many of the objects' surfaces, a stark contrast to the reductive tendencies of both modernist and minimalist forms.

This body of work is not without its contradictions as delicacy coexists with the crude. The round swivel chair is adorned with gold and silver thread, painstakingly hand-sewn, though it might easily have been spray painted or even singed. A box beneath the base props it up awkwardly, creating tension between the intricacy of the texture and its implied instability. Displacing practicality, Reaves sculptures are instilled with subjecthood, turning the modernist autonomy of the design object on its head.

Text by Jessica Freeman-Attwood