

ASK HAPP— ASKA

Artist Siobhán Hapaska's body of work is a triumph of self-control and balance. She explores the intricate nature of human relationships and the conflicting ideologies that define our world, yet she saturates these complex constructs with a subtle sense of humor. Hapaska was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and studied at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her work is in many major institutional collections, including the Tate Modern; Irish Museum of Modern Art; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Hapaska's sculpture, *snake and apples* (2018), is on view at NorthPark Center.

INTERVIEW BY SARAH HAEMISEGGER, ANNA KERN, AND TAYLOR ZAKARIN

NP The public's engagement is often discussed in relation to your installations. You have previously commented on the viewer's interpretation of your artwork, stating, "I like ideas that are adrift... when things are not absolutes, they become more interesting, because it throws the responsibility back on you (the viewer), to understand what you might be." How do you feel about *snake and apples* being on view at NorthPark, a shopping center that receives over 26 million visitors a year?

SH When you encounter work in a museum or gallery, you are given the suggestion that you are looking at art, like a carefully composed installation of bricks or a urinal [Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917], because the artist declares it as art. I think there is an inherent and inescapable theatricality to viewing art in a space specially designed for that engagement. I imagine that art placed in a shopping center might effectively blur these cues of evaluation. It's not such a totally different concept when you think of art fairs. Shopping centers and art fairs have a lot in common. The layout has been carefully considered in both instances: the most economically successful gallery or shop will have the power to acquire more space and will be on the most trafficked walkway. Within a very competitive ocean of possibilities, a gallery or shop will aim to lure you into their individual cubes by asserting their unique identities and qualities.

NP Your work involves a wide array of materials. Which have you found to be the most freeing to work with? The most difficult?

SH I think soft, nonresistant materials have the ability to allow a sense of freedom because they are not fixed. They can be pushed, pulled, added to, or reduced, and therefore perfectly suited to accommodate a change of plan. I have been playing with a material called concrete cloth. It can become an infinite variety of forms—draped, cut, added to—but it is never fixed until it is drenched in water, then all my actions become concrete, literally. Alternatively, I use quite a lot of aluminum as my preferred rigid

material. From the outset, it gives me a set of fixed brackets to work within. With a hard material, you have to know in advance how you are going to use it because decisions to cut or drill are decisions that can't be retracted; they are permanent, so it forces me to have a clear idea of what I want before I start. As a consequence, the sculpture does not evolve, there are not too many surprises en route, and it simply becomes its predetermined self.

NP A work like *snake and apples*, constructed of shiny, slick, industrial materials, is seemingly devoid of the artist's hand. How involved are you in the fabrication of your works? Is it integral to the work's meaning to remove all traces of your presence?

SH I'm pretty much totally involved in the fabrication of all works to date. I choose to work this way because I have technical skills which allow me to. If I encounter my own limitations, I don't have any problem getting someone else to make it if they can do it quickly. I like to be as self-sufficient as possible. I don't have much patience, and I don't like waiting for something to be completed elsewhere. Removing all traces of my presence has a sliding scale of importance, and it also naturally depends on what materials I'm using. In some works, my non-presence is integral to the idea. Sometimes though, it just happens to be that way. For instance, you can't really give a large aluminum U-channel a gestural trace—it has its own inbuilt resistance to my presence, and it will always be itself. I don't think making something with care and precision demonstrates an OCD disposition; precision just cancels out any unnecessary background noise and false pathways.

NP Your sculptural practice explores various dichotomies: industrial and organic, female and male, good and evil, and motion and stasis, to name a few. These are, in many ways, the defining tensions of human existence. Have you found that these opposites make you uneasy, or alternatively, evoke a sense of peace?

SH You are correct in your suggestion that observable dichotomies or binary conflicts exist within my work, although it does not seek to explore these conditions for the sake of it. I would rather say these are “chosen” incidentals and not my primary focus. I find the relationship between opposing materials or concepts to be a sort of necessity, as there would be no real understanding of an opposite without its “other.” You wouldn’t have the ability to give a reasonable appraisal of a solid without the experience of a liquid. Opposites activate each other to produce something more complex than the two individual parts. They resonate

with each other like the two arms of a tuning fork. Opposing dynamics don’t make me feel uncomfortable nor do they evoke any sense of peace or equilibrium—I don’t look for that. They simply exist and become something new in their forced union.

NP The apples in the sculpture are seductive; their opalescent, luminous surface entices viewers to touch. However, like the apples in the Garden of Eden, we are not allowed to physically engage with the object. Were you hoping to inspire the same conundrum for the viewer that Adam faced in the Book of Genesis?

SH Flawlessly sprayed apples seem to theatrically seal interior worlds and repel contact, but only if viewers choose to follow the rules of engagement when looking at art. So, in a way, yes—you make a good observation. By touching them, it cancels their suspension of disbelief. So

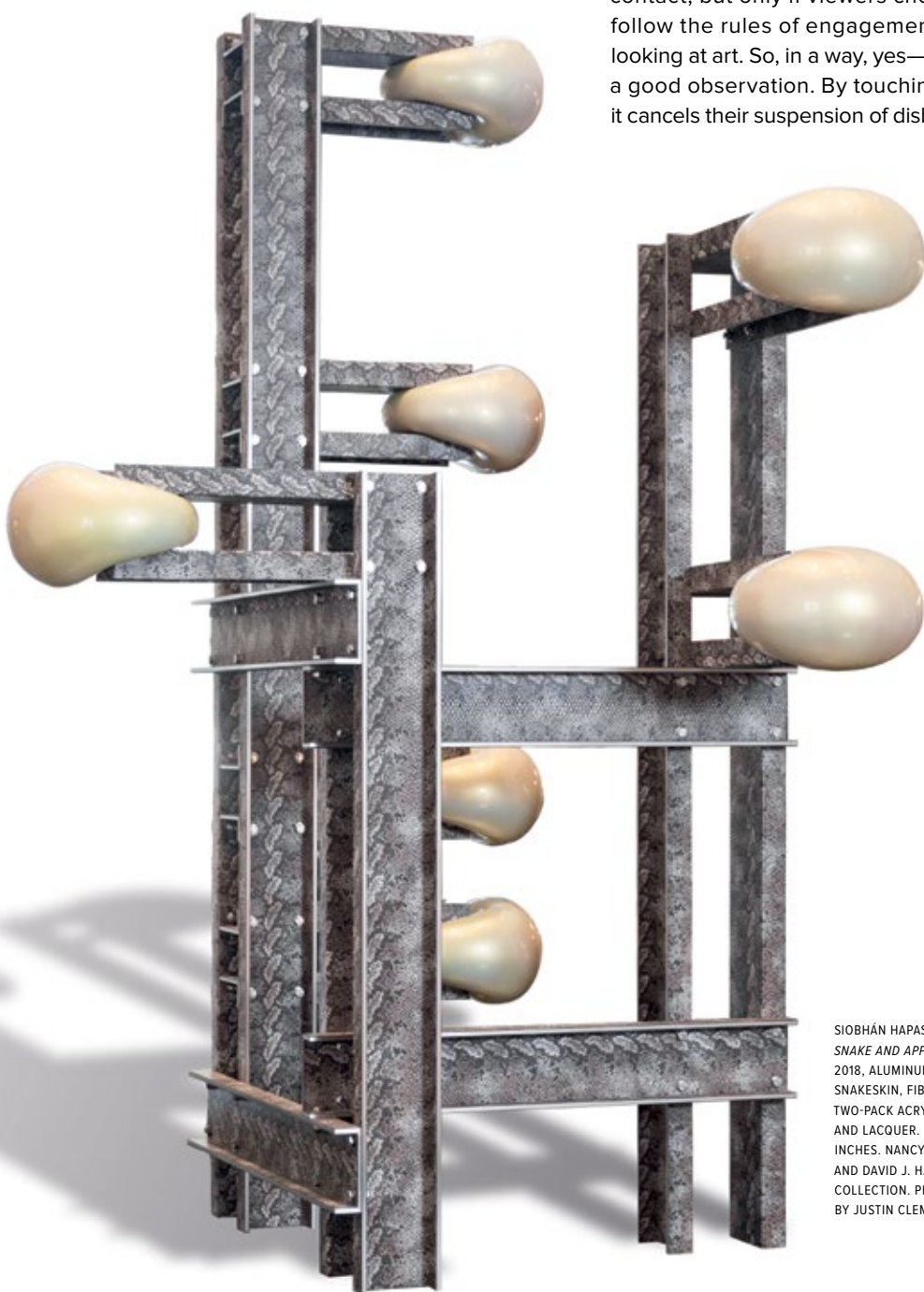
maybe, like Adam, you ask yourself, “Is it worth breaking the rules in this instance, though there is nothing to gain?” You already know how it feels and you already know what will happen—the little bubble bursts. It’s just a fiberglass form sprayed with two-pack acrylic paint. Apart from this, there’s also a very simple answer: greasy fingerprints don’t add much to anything.

NP The exploration of this story in your work is as close as you’ve come throughout your oeuvre to doing a series. What is it about this subject that has drawn you in?

SH My first thoughts were not focused on the Genesis story, it was simply apples. I was eating an apple while looking at my iPad wondering why Apple used a bitten apple as its logo. Was it because the apple has historically been a symbol of knowledge? Was it due to Newton’s discovery of gravity in his observation of a falling apple? Was it an acknowledgment that the granddaddy of computers, Alan Turing, was found lifeless with a bitten, cyanide-infused apple in his hand? The graphic designer for Apple decided to use a bitten apple simply to reinforce scale, so that it wouldn’t be confused with a cherry. Steve Jobs chose an apple because he had worked in an orchard as a boy and liked the McIntosh variety. So, with these roads not leading me to Rome, I started to think about the bitten apple in Genesis. In terms of a series, just like the variety of apples and snakes, these sculptures supported many different configurations and scales with color changes. I enjoyed seeing more apple or less snake and vice versa, squeezing the apples between increasingly restricted structures, and how these formal arrangements changed each other.

NP *Snake and apples* presents sleek, enticing forms seemingly on the verge of bursting. Despite being surrounded by shops and restaurants in a highly trafficked area, the viewer is lured toward the undeniably powerful presence of the piece. Do you feel that the sculpture’s location impacts the meaning of the artwork?

SH I guess a successful shopping experience operates on the presence and availability of desirable objects, but the difference is that these desirables are highly recognizable. We know what they can



SIOHÁN HAPASKA,
SNAKE AND APPLES,
2018, ALUMINUM, ARTIFICIAL
SNAKESKIN, FIBERGLASS,
TWO-PACK ACRYLIC PAINT,
AND LACQUER. 99 X 68 X 58
INCHES. NANCY A. NASHER
AND DAVID J. HAEMISEGGER
COLLECTION. PHOTOGRAPH
BY JUSTIN CLEMONS.



DETAIL OF SIOBHÁN HAPASKA'S *SNAKE AND APPLES* (2018). PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTIN CLEMONS.

offer us and how to judge their quality or how they might enhance our image or existence. A visitor going to a museum has chosen to go and look at art, so they won't be surprised by seeing it. In most cases, they are adequately equipped to give a relatively informed appraisal. The average visitor to a shopping center is generally hunting for something else and may be lured into unwittingly looking at art just because it's unavoidably there. Perhaps this placement hastens the question, "What am I actually looking at?" Maybe this uncertainty is a lovely thing, approaching something before the apple has been bitten, in blissful unexpectedness. It slows down the process of visual consumption. Maybe that is the potential of art placed in this context.

NP In both your work and various interviews, you've touched upon humankind's irresponsible stewardship of the environment. In many ways, the story of the expulsion from Eden is a written account of the first human abuse of our earth's resources. Is your examination of this story related to your interest in environmental concerns?

SH I would say my interest in the story revolves more around the consequences of acquiring a choice, knowledge, and how

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our choices—based on information or not—turn out to be good or bad. The Garden of Eden myth can be read as an illustrative tale which seeks to privilege an original state of innocence, warning the first humans not to question things but to comply with given rules. So, from the first encounter, where Eve was shown by the snake that she gained the power to think for herself, her punishment was perpetual misery and misogyny. For me, Eve and the snake are the heroes in this myth; with a little push, she gives birth to the concept of self-determination and consciousness. The enduring problem is not the possession of knowledge, but it is how we choose to use it or not. Irresponsible stewardship of the environment is just a byproduct of the irresponsible stewardship of ourselves collectively.

NP CenterPark serves as a backdrop to your artwork—a public courtyard filled with trees and gardens for visitors to freely enjoy. Does this placement emphasize themes already present in the sculpture?

SH Yes, it does now, but when it was first made, I didn't envisage this location. It certainly adds to the range of possible associations. I think this snake and apple has found a surprisingly perfect home.