

Lauren Henkin: *Props*

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Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati
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Zaha Hadid’s first-realized U.S. building to have its architectural elements activated by site-responsive sculptures

The Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center will this winter host an exhibition of unconventionally installed sculptures that uncannily engage unconventional sites within Hadid’s museum design

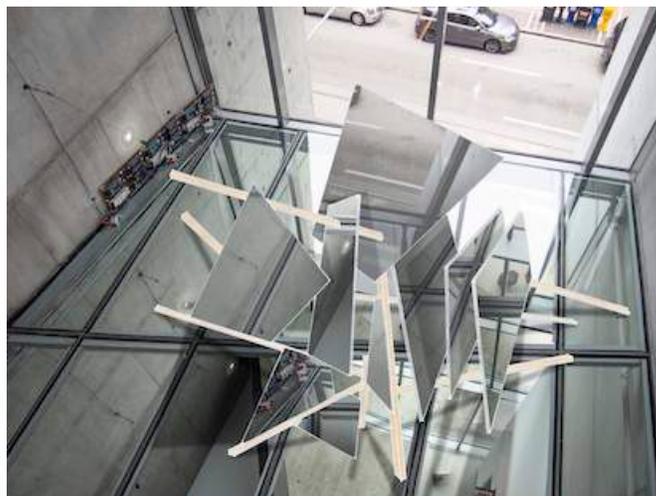
New York, NY and Cincinnati, OH – November 2019 – At the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati—Zaha Hadid’s first-realized US project, and the first major museum designed by a woman—mixed media artist/trained architect Lauren Henkin will this winter present *Props*, an exhibition of eight sculptures, located throughout the museum, that respond site specifically to elements of Hadid’s architecture. The eight works occupy a cumulative excess of 3,300 cubic feet of unconventional, ‘unintended’ exhibition space, none of which has previously been used to display artwork.

Props organizer Steven Matijcio—whose curatorial tenure at CAC has included shows from Ugo Rondinone, Do Ho Suh, Swoon, and Daniel Arsham—believes this is the first time an artist has been granted physical access to so literally interrogate stylistic elements of any starchitect-designed museum. Explains Matijcio of his decision to commission Henkin for the project:

“Lauren’s uncanny animation of spaces that are habitually overlooked within the museum speaks to a larger, more holistic consideration of an iconic structure that can seem overdetermined, and even overbearing. What happens when the work of a ‘starchitect’ is interrupted by peculiar agents living in spaces previously unauthorized?”



Prop 2 (rendering)
Concrete, board, foam
Location: Ground floor



Prop 6 (rendering)
Wood, double-sided mirrored acrylic, metal
Location: Skylight between floors 2 and 3



Prop 4 (rendering)
PVC pipes, adhesive, metal
Location: Women’s restroom

Henkin emphasizes that the sculptures in *Props* aren’t designed with traditional beauty or grace in mind; they are literal interventions whose conceptual basis is to encourage viewers to more deeply consider an architect’s gestural, formal, and functional intentions. With materials including PVC pipes, wires, and other construction supplies—some even sourced from the museum’s own utility closets—*Props* poses the additional question of how context and presentation affect art-viewing in an institutional setting. Locations and materials range from the mundanely functional (a PVC pipe-based work in one of the restrooms) to the dramatic and decorative (a tidy row of concrete mini-monoliths over Hadid’s famed "Urban Carpet" in the lobby).

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Two main factors contribute to the sculptures' intended effect. The first is location; that the works are placed outside of the architect's intended exhibition spaces. The second is the unpolished, industrial materials of which many are composed. Together, these aspects evoke a playful phenomenon whereby everyday visitors may at first question whether they're looking at intentional 'art' in the first place. Comments Matijcio:

"We've all had the encounter of walking into a contemporary art space and wondering if something that looks 'half-way' is intentional art or just a chance clustering of items, a renovation on pause. Lauren mobilizes that idea to loosen the absolutes of Hadid's geometry and materials, and to amplify the more porous and fluid dimensions of the building's design. In turn, the building affords the 'props' sculptural consideration, while also bristling at the contingent interruption they represent. These works will live in spaces within the building that have never before been employed for art, and I'm confident the presentation will be revelatory."

The hyper-site-responsive sculptures offer a diverse array of geometric presentations and are not limited to a particular style or medium. *Prop 4* is a delicate labyrinth of thin, industrial PVC pipes extruding from a corner of the second floor women's bathroom, while *Prop 6*—a jutting, quartz-like cluster of double-sided mirrored acrylic sheets affixed to one another with long wooden pegs—sits gently atop a glass skylight between the second and third floors. *Prop 5*, located in the stairwell void between the third and fourth floors, is an assemblage of warm-hued raw lumber (pine 2x4s and plywood) that Henkin opportunistically sourced from a storage area in the museum's basement.

Henkin is adamant that *Props* is intended to be a respectful dialogue with Hadid's work, rather than a criticism of it or a jab at the stereotype of a high-profile museum architect prioritizing their characteristic stylization over the maximization of practical exhibition space:

"Hadid so often blurs the line between architecture, furniture and landscape," she explains. "It was important to me to extend that uncertainty by pushing the boundaries of how we engage sculpture, while also upending common perceptions of how to experience art in a museum setting. In many cases, the way the 'props' are experienced is atypical, placed purposefully in circulation spaces where one can only see the work from above or below, or while climbing or descending stairs. Hadid once said that her CAC building intends its visitors to experience 'spatial discovery engendered by the labyrinthine complexity of spatial composition.' With that in mind, *Props* challenges viewers to extend that sense of 'discovery' to the sculptural works—to look at them not just at objects, but within broad environments without boundaries, incorporating the architecture and the scale of the body as active layers in each composition."

Henkin developed *Props* as an experimental offshoot of her photographic studio practice in anthropological landscape portraiture (found in the permanent collections of the High Museum, Yale University, the Cleveland Museum, and more). *Props* marks Lauren Henkin's institutional debut in the sculpture medium, though it is not the first time she has exhibited at a museum designed by a high-profile architect; in 2016, she mounted the inaugural photography exhibition at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art's new Toshiko Mori-designed facility.

The CAC building itself—centered about a dramatic, multistory atrium nearly 15 meters at its tallest skylight—is marked by a design feature once referred to by Zaha Hadid as a 'jigsaw puzzle' of diversely oriented exhibition spaces interconnected by black, zig-zagging skywalk staircases. Among those who have presented solo exhibitions within the architecturally intended areas of the dramatic, Hadid-ian space are Marilyn Minter, Katharina Grosse, JR, Tony Oursler, Taryn Simon, Rob Pruitt, Pipilotti Rist, and Sanford Biggers.

On the occasion of Swoon's heavily installation-based 2017 exhibition, curator Matijcio explained that "when Zaha Hadid designed the museum—her first U.S. project, 'a museum for the 21st century'—she ingeniously gave us the ability to turn up or down the volume of her voice for any particular exhibition. At the end of the day, though, she wanted to create physical interventions that required artists to creatively respond." To that end, concluded Matijcio of Henkin's conceptual presentation:

"*Props* will make people ponder, laugh, and question their assumptions. In the in-between, Lauren plants radicals that illuminate via disorientation. *Props* is so captivating because it plays with the idea of the provisional in a playful, yet poignant way."

Props is funded in part by a grant from the Maine Arts Commission, an independent state agency supported by the National Endowment for the Arts. Visit contemporaryartscenter.org/visit for museum hours and admission.