

OBSERVER

Artist Misha Kahn Is Designing His World at Light Speed

By Cat Woods
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Expect to see more of the prolific artist's oversized proportions, oddly skewed silhouettes and unexpected textural pairings in galleries, at art fairs and just about everywhere else.

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Furniture-designer-turned-exhibiting-artist Misha Kahn is a master of subverting traditional forms and fabrics to create an almost childish, fantastical wonderland. To put it another way, he is one of those rule-breakers who has thoroughly studied the rules.

Naturally, given his predilection for extreme hues and unearthly silhouettes, I am dying to know what sort of environment nourishes Kahn's aesthetic and intellectual approach to design. His home, he tells me, is on his building's top floor and very sunny.

"The colors are all kinds of bright tertiary tones, painted with a sloppy deckle-edge to avoid cutting in," he shares. "I also live with pieces by a lot of my favorite creatives: a [Gaetano] Pesce dining table, pieces by the Campana Brothers, Wendell Castle and Katie Stout."

His Sunset Park, Brooklyn studio provides a contrasting rough edge. Industrial is how he describes it.

"It's next to an electrical transformer and it's also right on the water, so we get really wild sunsets," he explains. "I think this mix of really bright colors with very mechanical sci-fi forms has crept into my work since moving to that space."

Kahn, who was born in Minnesota, graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Furniture Design, but admits the field wasn't where he initially saw himself building a career. Yet just a few years later, his uniquely adventurous approach to form, which doesn't sacrifice function for artfulness, inspired the curators of the Museum of Arts and Design to feature his work in the 2014 Biennial.

"I love the human scale in the making and use of furniture, but I assumed I would wander further afield," he says. "Years later, I can steer the ship in any direction with my own studio, and the team and I keep tackling new challenges like outdoor sculpture and public art, collaborations with fashion brands, etc."

Lest you think Kahn's work involves laboring over a drafting table, tweaking the tried-and-true, keep in mind that he shies away from go-to mediums and palettes. He builds his creations using metal, glass, wood, ceramic, fiberglass, resin, cement and fabrics. But rather than trying to be a jack-of-all-trades, he works selectively, as his 2015 Scrappy series exemplified. He invited the traditional female weavers of Eswatini, Gone Rural, to collaborate. Since, he has partnered with tapestry experts in South Africa, glass sculptor Deborah Czeresko and the late (great) Italian jewelry designer, GianCarlo Montebello.

Travel is something Kahn finds particularly inspiring.

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“The weaving projects in Eswatini are so special because weaving is a part of the community, so when you’re working on a project you fall into a social circle,” he tells me. “I think this manifests in the work in a way that feels like all the conversations have been recorded. Working on fabrics in Italy is also interesting—getting to see the specialized industrial equipment used to make some of the nicest fabrics in the world and the careful approach to production.”

While you might know him from MTV’s The Exhibit, Kahn’s first solo show at a major institution—*Wobble Moon: Objects from the Capricious Age* at Munich’s Museum Villa Stuck—cemented his status as an artist to know. In June of 2022, he showed *Style Without Substance* at New York’s Friedman Benda gallery while simultaneously having a solo booth at Design Miami/Basel.

The Museum Villa Stuck exhibition, in particular, was a “huge moment” for him.

“You kind of imagine having a museum solo show where you get to take over room after room, but it didn’t feel real to me until months into the run of the show,” he reflects. “The museum director had gotten in touch with one of my best friends, [freelance curator, writer and jewelry designer] Kellie Riggs, about curating a show of my work—so it was really a special dream to get to manifest the show all together.

This year, Khan’s *Staged* exhibition ran from April through June at Friedman Benda, Los Angeles—timed to run soon after the release of his first book. Wait, you may be thinking. Kahn sculpts, shapes, exhibits, collaborates...*and* he writes books?

Indeed. *Casually Sauntering the Perimeter of Now* (published by Apartamento/Friedman Benda) is a look back at over a decade of his work, accompanied by transcripts of conversations with fellow designers, including Dries Van Noten, Su Wu and Todd Oldham. It launched, appropriately, at Milan Design Week in April.

Like the late Karl Lagerfeld and the eternal Buddha, Kahn lives purely in the present with no time to linger on past accomplishments. His agenda is full, with both professional and personal projects brimming. And some of those projects make the typical daily workload look like a light lift in comparison. Take this one:

“I’m currently working on building a house,” he says. “The studio is producing every element of the building and interior. It’s an exercise in finding the Venn diagram of sustainability, mysticism and radical aesthetics.”

No big deal then, just building a house.

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But that's not all. Kahn had work at Art Basel and Design Miami/ Basel, and he has a solo show opening in Korea in the fall plus an upcoming show in Athens next year and a public art commission for an NYC library that's going into production.

I begin to think of the title of Kahn's book as slightly ironic. The notion that anyone with this many projects running simultaneously might be "casually sauntering" is somewhat absurd. But that might just be Kahn's mystical magic. He can conjure up visionary, eclectic forms, prospects and ideas and seamlessly weave them all from thin air into being. So yes, he is an artist to watch, but you'd better be quick. Misha Kahn is moving (and making) at nearly the speed of light.