



Amy Brener  
***Recliners***

# Amy Brener *Recliners*

Evoking notions of temporality, consumerism and fragmentation, Amy Brener's sculptures embody the diverse and experimental nature of current sculptural practice. Her work combines various composite elements to build irregular, large-scale forms that confuse temporal logic, pointing simultaneously to an ancient history and a far-off future. Through her use of synthetic and vernacular materials, the artist negotiates the transitory nature of our contemporary condition, in which objects no longer endure and technologies slip quickly and quietly into obsolescence.

For the past three years, Brener has been casting synthetic resin with assorted embedded materials to create luminescent, totemic sculptures. While they resemble once-functional futuristic machines, they also bring to mind fossils and time capsules. The iridescent forms are indeed striking from afar, and contain labyrinths of incongruous surface minutiae—beads, mirrors, lenses, hardware, found objects and shards of past technologies—that glimmer upon closer inspection.

In their approximation of the effects of geological forces, such as sedimentation, fossilization and erosion, Brener's sculptures portray an arrested moment in an unknown organic continuum, providing edifying clues to an unknown past. Yet at the same time,

their machine-like materiality embodies a science fiction aesthetic that points to an imagined future. Conventional perceptions of future technology are sleek and minimal, but these works point to a clunky, awkward, eroded sort of future that confounds typical ideas of linear time and progress. The sculptures function as a material archive of time and space, both past and future, micro and macro. Amorphous and otherworldly, their beauty is unusual and enchanting.

The *Recliners*, on view in the MacLaren's sculpture courtyard, are Brener's first resin sculptures designed for outdoor display. Not only do they evolve with exposure to the elements, they also reflect natural shifts in light and atmospheric conditions. Taking this into account, Brener created these works to be more dense and architectural than her previous resin sculptures. The *Recliners* are fitted with their own wedge-like bases to counterbalance the weight of the tall, tilting structures. As viewers circulate, a generous spectrum of reflections and colours is activated, and various layers of depth within the sculpture are revealed. These are Brener's first works that contain what could be described as windows: clear middles that viewers can look through and see a composition of found objects. One sculpture's "window" also offers a view through to the other sculpture.



In the work's title, *Recliners*, Brener nods to the role of the reclining figure throughout art history. Indeed, recliners have a storied past, detectable at pivotal moments in Western art history from Renaissance Venuses to Neoclassical odalisques to Modernist bronzes. Although Brener's *Recliners* are not intended to represent the human body, they are figurative and can be read as a pair of reclining bodies, leaning against one another, abstracted to an extreme degree.

Resin is a naturally occurring material, a gluey, sap-like substance secreted by trees; however, Brener uses a synthetic polyurethane resin, a base material that harkens back to the experimental sculpture of the mid-1960s. Artists of that generation—Lynda Benglis, Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse, to name a few—revolutionized sculpture by exploring unconventional materials including latex, fibreglass, polyurethane and plastics. Working with untried materials is inherently risky. Hesse, for example, was lauded for her ability to allow chance to interrupt her artistic process. While she exerted skilful, physical control over the execution of her works, her synthetic materials were granted a certain amount of freedom to set, dry, warp, fissure and evolve as they willed.<sup>1</sup>

In a similar vein, Brener's work emerges from that liminal space between meticulous technical control and unpredictable whims of chance. Her process is highly physical, spontaneous and time-sensitive—once poured, the resin sets quickly and

she must act accordingly. Her first step is to construct rough frameworks of plywood, then line parts of them with plastic sheathing and other textured materials. Laying them horizontally on her studio floor, she then decants the resin in small batches to create separate layers. The layers are tinted with their own colours and are often embedded with small, carefully selected objects. The folds in the plastic film are inevitably reproduced on one side of the sculpture, highlighting the sticky, unstable artificiality of the resin. Once the sculpture is dry and removed from the plywood frame, Brener chisels some of the layers away to create a more complex encrusted surface.

Brener's work also finds antecedents in practices of assemblage and construction. Her composite forms echo Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines* and Louise Nevelson's *Sky Columns*, both of which ignored traditional artistic media in favour of everyday materials. Additionally, they both gathered various aggregate elements to create a single, freestanding form. Another parallel can be drawn between Brener's work and the early figurative compositions of Tony Cragg that combine fragments of found plastic, urban detritus and manmade objects, which Cragg considers to be "fossilized keys to a past time which is our present."<sup>2</sup> Like Brener, Cragg's work encapsulates shards from the past to challenge binaries of the Modernist paradigms: nature and culture, unity and fragmentation, permanence and temporality.

The use of accumulated found objects and industrial materials is common ground in contemporary sculpture. It is understood

by some as an artistic strategy for negotiating one's relationship to a society oversaturated with material culture. As curator Anne Ellegood remarks, contemporary sculptors "articulate their relationship to *all this stuff* through strategies of assemblage and accumulation by building installations that include an incredible range of objects."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, critic Alexander Forbes refers to this approach as "material conceptualism,"<sup>4</sup> in which artists are "engaging in a deconstruction of what we expect from material, whether by the choices that are made in the materials themselves or the way in which they are brought together." Indeed, through her deft approach to assemblage and her intellectual and expressive investigation of everyday materials, Brener negotiates the material abundance of the everyday, and inserts herself into the ever-expanding landscape of contemporary sculpture.

by RENÉE VAN DER AVOIRD

<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Sussman and Fred Wasserman, Eds. *Eva Hesse: Sculpture*. The Jewish Museum. Yale University Press, New Haven, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Lisson Gallery. Tony Cragg: Artist Page. <http://www.lissongallery.com/artists/tony-cragg>. Accessed June 19, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Ellegood. *Motley Efforts: Sculpture's Ever-Expanding Field*. In Vitamin 3-D: New Perspectives in Sculpture and Installation. Phaidon Press Ltd., London, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Forbes. *Thinking Materials*. In Material Conceptualism: The Comfort of Things. Aanant & Zoo, Berlin, 2013.

**AMY BRENER** was born in Victoria, British Columbia in 1982. She received a BA in Studio Arts at the University of British Columbia (2006) followed by a MFA at Hunter College in New York City (2010). She recently participated in residencies at the prestigious Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Madison, Maine as well as the Bemis Centre for Contemporary Arts in Omaha, Nebraska. Brener's work has been exhibited internationally, in cities such as Toronto, Victoria, Berlin, Los Angeles and New York. Her work appears in numerous private collections, including the Francis J. Greenburger Collection, and she has a commissioned work permanently on display at the Dufferin Liberty Centre. Brener currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.





Publication to accompany the exhibition *Recliners*, curated by Renée van der Avoird, held July 10 to October 26, 2014, at the MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie.

© MacLaren Art Centre in collaboration with the individual contributors, 2014. All rights reserved.

Amy Brener, *Recliners*, 2014, resin, pigment, plexiglass, found objects, 293 x 51 x 46 and 188 x 25 x 36 cm.

Photographs:

Cover, page 4: Amy Brener. Page 2, 5: André Beneteau.

Design: Shannon Linde

The MacLaren Art Centre gratefully acknowledges the ongoing support of its Friends, Patrons, Donors, Sponsors, Partners, the City of Barrie, the Ontario Arts Council through the Government of Ontario and the Canada Council for the Arts.

*The City of  
BARRIE*

ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL  
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO  
an Ontario government agency  
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Conseil des arts  
du Canada      Canada Council  
for the Arts

MACLARENARTCENTRE

37 Mulcaster Street  
Barrie, ON L4M 3M2  
[www.maclarencart.com](http://www.maclarencart.com)