

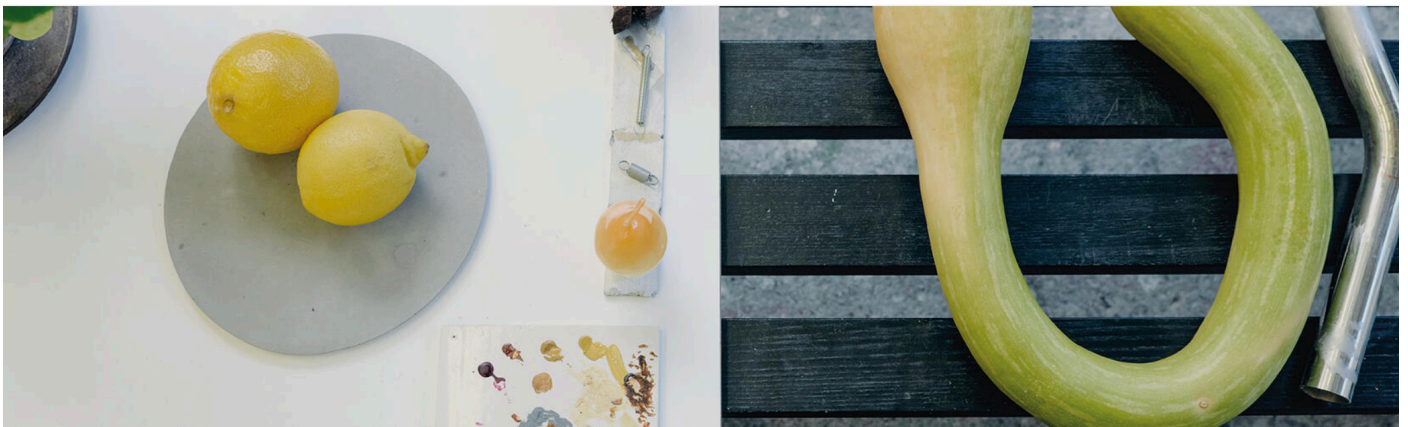


## The Fruits of Magali Reus's Labour

Amy Sherlock returns to the artist's east London studio to witness preparations for a major new exhibition at Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas

+2

BY AMY SHERLOCK AND MAGALI REUS IN FEATURES, PROFILES | 21 FEB 22



On the day I was supposed to visit Magali Reus, I tested positive for COVID-19. That evening, instead of cycling the short route across London Fields from my flat to her studio, I ran a bath and ordered takeaway. Kind friends offered sympathy, Netflix recommendations and doorstep deliveries while I was in isolation. Someone sent me a fruit basket: it arrived one morning wrapped in transparent cellophane, a bent-wood trug filled with apples, bananas, kiwis and grapes, tied with an extravagant bow made from orange and yellow curling ribbons.

This healthful bounty wasn't sent by Reus – even though she has been thinking a lot about fruit bowls lately, as she later told me over FaceTime, holding her phone up close to the sculptures in her studio, so that I could try to understand the precision of their forms, the textures of their surfaces. As an idea and as an image, the fruit bowl is what she describes as the 'conceptual anchor' of her upcoming solo show at Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. Maybe it's inevitable that a Dutch artist should feel obliged to confront this stalwart of the still life genre at some point in their career. (Reus was born in The Hague and did her foundation year at Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam before completing her BA and MFA studies at Goldsmiths in London.) It is part of an art-historical inheritance. I can certainly see why – as an act of composition and icon of the mundanely exotic – the fruit bowl would be of interest to Reus. Her own work involves prying everyday objects – from domestic appliances to air fresheners, brackets to plant pots – free of their conventional contexts and reconfiguring them according to a logic or grammar that feels clearly defined even as it remains oblique. The fruit bowl is a neat metaphor for her process: it's never a fruit salad – much less a compote – that Reus is making. Every element in her sculptural compositions has been carefully picked and remains complete unto itself: discrete,

contained – like the halved, shrink-wrapped grocery-store avocado she sent me a picture of as we exchanged messages during my isolation.



Magali Reus, 2021. Courtesy and photograph: Charlotte Hadden

I found something about that avocado brilliantly perverse – sitting in its plastic tray, splayed and slightly browning. Why cut open something that is, by natural design, sealed and self-protecting, only to re-wrap it in a (less effective) man-made layer? It creates a problem in order to present a solution, which says something about the entanglement of function and redundancy implicit in late-capitalist notions of ease. A flair for the perverse runs throughout Reus's work, which often features things that look like functional objects even as they draw attention to their own uselessness: the fold-out chairs in her series 'Parking' (2014), for instance, propped up with crutches; or the saddles mounted on metal frames – horses going nowhere – in a series of works that were first shown in her solo show 'Mustard' at the Stedelijk Museum in 2016. The 'Sentinel' (2017–18) series – first shown in 'Hot Cottons' at Bergen Kunsthall in 2017–18 and which I saw as part of her later South London Gallery exhibition, 'As Mist, Description' – staged use-value as a zero-sum game by incorporating elements that appear like fire hoses as well as matchstick boxes: arsonist and firefighter, both.

Despite – or perhaps because of – its evident bruising, the wrapped avocado, buttery interior tightly sheathed by translucent plastic, is a materially voluptuous object. The clash of textures, the fact of its enclosure, make me want to touch it. Perhaps more than anything, Reus is an artist attuned to the seduction of surfaces. One of the most consistent and distinctive features of her work is the precision of her finishes and the huge range of processes that she uses to achieve them – details acknowledged in the extensive materials listed in her captions. To pick an example at random: *Propeller E.K.* (2016) contains 'powder-coated steel tubing', 'sand-blasted laser-cut aluminium', 'blackened socket bolts',

'burned engraved wood' and 'upholstered, woven, braided, natural and dyed leathers and suedes' (amongst other things). There are a lot of verbs – volumes of congealed time and labour – implicit in those descriptors.



Magali Reus, *Sentinel (Bow and Shoulder)*, 2018, sprayed fibreglass and polyester resin, pigments, air-brushed aluminium, embroidered custom-weave viscose, polyester and cotton, sand-cast aluminium, laser-engraved leather, cotton twine, powder-coated aluminium, 1.6 × 1.4 m. Courtesy: the artist and The Approach, London; photograph: Plastiques

I think Reus is interested in the material bounty of the world, with all of its absurd, almost embarrassing excesses, because it evidences something profoundly human about the will to produce and consume. For all that this is a flaw, it has engendered dazzling invention. But – perhaps even more importantly – Reus is endlessly intrigued by the grain of a material and how she can work with or against it. There are certain ways of manipulating a material to make it more like itself, to conform to our expectations of it. Giving strips of fabric frayed edges, like the hoses in the 'Sentinel' works, underscores their woven nature; powder-coating in glossy white an aluminium form that looks like a fridge, as in Reus's early 'Lukes' (2014), realises part of the object's function by making it wipe-clean.

Reus's preference, though, is for materials that are good at impersonating other things – pourable, pigmentable resins; malleable, coatable aluminium; shape-shifting fibreglass. 'I am always pushing against the nature of materials', she explained, 'to make something that doesn't follow the rules.' This struggle between what a particular material tends towards and what it can be forced to be is the drama – and surprise, and perversity – of the work. Sometimes, this material dissonance is exaggerated to abject effect, as with the block of wiggly, flesh-coloured mincemeat, cast from polyurethane rubber, which sits at the bottom of *Dregs (Grub Bake)* (2014). (A similar form sits on the bookshelves in her studio.) For the Nasher works, Reus and her powder coater – with whom she has been working for years – have been developing new finishes by interfering with the powders and steel surfaces before application. The resulting effects deliciously confuse industrial production and intense manual manipulation. The finishes on certain pieces in the artist's new series, 'Clays' (2020–21), evoke photograms or analogue printing processes; their spectral, smoky traces read as being literally between material states.



Magali Reus's studio, 2021. Courtesy and photograph: Charlotte Hadden

On the phone to me, Reus described what she makes as 'unreal things', which strikes me as apt. They have a tangible weight and presence, but are never quite what they appear; they exist on some unfamiliar ontological plane. This might be what accounts for her sculptures' overwhelming haptic allure: the fingers want to verify what the mind can't quite wrap itself around.

What is the use-value of a bowl of fruit? Foodstuffs have a vital purpose, of course (thus the amusing semantic redundancy – which puts me in mind of Reus's work – of 'functional food'), but they are also about the sensory pleasure of eating. When, for several days after my positive test result, I could neither taste nor smell, it struck me that the bananas and grapes in my gift basket had, correspondingly, lost something of their essential fruit-ness. They became indeterminate, 'unreal' things.

I can't say whether the fruit bowl hastened my recovery from COVID-19 but, after ten days of mandated isolation and numerous negative antigen tests, I met Reus at her studio, where she was working on several pieces for her Nasher Sculpture Center show, as well as a number of new 'Knaves' (2020–21). The studio – in a former dockside warehouse on Regent's Canal – is a big, airy space with high, south-facing windows; along with her machinery, iMac and hundreds of reference books, it's filled with houseplants, photographs and clippings, and many random, intriguing things. (A small plate containing jelly-like translucent dice caught my eye; Reus has a collection, including some very ancient ones: 'They are such foreboding objects.')

On the bookshelves that line one wall are well-marked-up tomes cataloguing early American metalwork, mid-century furniture, lampshades, office chairs, kites, horse bridlery and light fixtures, as well as all kinds of functional folk objects. A recent addition – the hardback, out-of-print *Windmill Weights* (1985) – sketches a basic

history and taxonomy of the distinctively shaped counterbalances seen on farms across the US in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Used to stabilise vaneless windmills, the iron forms served as a kind of maker's mark, performing not only a decorative but a marketing function. Borrowed from the book and re-cast in aluminium, two cockerels, a buffalo and a pair of conjoined crescent moons crown a series of four free-standing sculptures that will be exhibited in Dallas (*Grain of Wind*, *Hammock*, *Apricots* and *The Greenest Grass*, all 2021). Their perches stand, like spaghetti-warped sun-umbrella poles, in model-board bases with a cheap plastic mien. They make me think of the beach bars of my childhood summer holidays: white plastic chairs sinking into the sand and candy-striped umbrellas with ice-cream-brand logos. Juxtaposed with the Americana windmill weights' nod to agricultural history, these works evoke the great outdoors as a site of leisure as well as industry.



Magali Reus, *Knaves (Shadow Tonics)*, 2021, C-print on aluminium, powder-coated steel, welded and powder-coated aluminium, 85 × 60 cm. Courtesy: the artist and The Approach, London and Fons Welters, Amsterdam. Photograph: Mark Dalton

All of the pieces that will be shown at Nasher Sculpture Center deal in some way with the natural world. Maybe that's because, as for so many of us, the lockdowns of the past two years have reframed Reus's relationship to the outdoors. She spent much of this period at her mother's house near The Hague: the images in the 'Knaves' series began when she walked through autumn woodland covered in fly agaric mushrooms and decided to document them. (The red-hooded fly agaric, with its white spots, is something like a Platonic fungal form – used in everything from the Mario franchise to the emoji alphabet). It's also true that, as the global climate crisis escalates, it has become increasingly difficult to think about the world of objects and the processes of their production without considering their environmental impact. In typically oblique fashion, Reus's 'Bonelight'

(2020) sculptures comment on the way in which humans exploit nature to service our wants and needs. Often these needs are petty. Suggestive of fold-out picnic tables, the neat forms, with their realistic hamper-handle details and cutaway windows showing kitschily painted fruits, evoke nature-as-Instagram-backdrop and carefully composed images of outdoor summer lunches. ('What is a "true" experience of nature?' Reus asked me, at one point.) Another series stages its own liminal status, on the threshold between inside and out, nature and culture. The 'Clays' are door-like in scale and form, and borrow details from the hardware that surrounds entranceways and exits, but they are marked with compost-bag branding. If you were to lay their thick metal frames on the floor, you could almost imagine them as seed trays.

Reus has entered her landscape period, even if she's still confusing grass with astroturf. ('A general-purpose growing medium,' reads one of the 'Clays': matter for a particularly fecund phase of the artist's work.) We first met, in early 2014, when I wrote a profile of her for *frieze* – my first feature in the magazine. I had just seen works from the 'Parking' series in a group exhibition curated by Vincent Honoré, Laura McLean-Ferris and Alexander Scrimgeour at David Roberts Art Foundation. The sculptures resemble rows of fold-down chairs, such as you get on certain London Underground lines or in hospital waiting rooms, installed at seating height, but with their non-load-bearing nature emphasised by the fact that many of them were propped up by, or had lying across them, crutch-like structures. This alluded – for me, at least – to underperforming bodies: what I called at the time 'all the indignities implied by the word "limp"'. There was a pathos to those works, but also a humour. Reus was drawing attention to the almost atavistic way in which we make characters out of the objects that surround us: the means by which colour, form and texture create personality. I considered them to be portraits.



Magali Reus's studio, 2021. Courtesy and photograph: Charlotte Hadden

A concurrent solo show at The Approach, 'In Lukes and Dregs', grouped together the titular bodies of sculpture in familial collectives – think Barbara Hepworth's *The Family of Man* (1970) in domestic detritus. The fridges were called 'Lukes' because they were open and hence lukewarm, implying a whole world of putrefaction, oozing, curdling and leaking that

was sublimated by their slick, hyper-cool surfaces, Arctic-blue finishes and clean lines. (You could see the fungal photographs in the new 'Knaves' series as visualizing a mouldy underbelly that has always been implicit in Reus's work.) There was something provocative, almost lewd, about the fact that they didn't have doors, inviting viewers to peer inside. It is a very intimate thing to look inside someone's fridge. It can reveal things that you might not want to know. I understood the nakedness of the fridges in terms of desire and seduction – hunger – but, like the unstable seats in 'Parking', they also seemed to be about vulnerability and, literally, emptiness.

There is a neat circularity to this passage from empty fridges to overflowing fruit bowls – as there is to my revisiting Reus for my last feature as a *frieze* editor. In the Dutch Golden Age, still lifes were a reminder of the inexorable march of time. Unlike the earliest-known examples of painted fruit – Ancient Egyptian funerary frescoes, which symbolised the sustenance that the dead would need in the afterlife – in Christian tradition, still lifes acted as *memento mori*: symbols of the brevity of life and charged moral messages that over-indulgence in this world might stop you from reaching the next. They showcased the wealth and material abundance of the world's first consumer society – the spoils of trade and empire – as ostensible reminders that we go to the grave with nothing. Dutch still-life paintings are complex, highly codified and, often, ideologically ambiguous. The fruits, like the ornately decorated blue and white porcelain bowls on which they often sit, are early commodity fetishes. A lemon is never just a lemon.



Magali Reus, *Grain of Wind*, 2021, sand-cast and hand-painted aluminium, CNC'd and sprayed model board, powder-coated, sand-blasted, blackened, rusted and copper-welded stainless steel and mild steel, nuts and bolts, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist, The Approach, London and Fons Welters, Amsterdam. Photograph: Plastiques

When Reus was back in The Hague over the summer, she spent a lot of time climbing into skips outside houses undergoing renovations. (It was the tail-end of COVID-19 home-improvement mania; there were many.) She took fruit with her – peaches, grapes, cherries, strawberries. Not to eat, but to stage small-scale still lifes amongst the debris. She took hundreds of photographs. The fruits pose languidly – smooth, firm and ripe amidst the dust and detritus, the plasterboard entrails of human habitation. She's not yet sure what she'll use the images for. To everything there is a season.

*This article first appeared in frieze issue 224 with the headline 'Magali Reus'.*

*Magali Reus's solo exhibition 'Sightings' is at Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, USA, from 14 May to 11 September.*

*Main image: Magali Reus's studio, 2021. Courtesy and photograph: Charlotte Hadden*