

MAIN THEME

Hyper-



Alisa Baremboym, *Soft Screw* (detail), 2012
Courtesy of 47 Canal, New York. Photography by Joerg Lohse

Materiality



Pamela Rosenkranz, *More Stream*, 2012
Courtesy of the artist; Karma International, Zurich; and Miguel Abreu
Gallery, New York. Photography by Gunnar Meier

From their shared concern with the blur of organic and inorganic, Pamela Rosenkranz and Alisa Baremboym discuss physicality versus technology and the shifting boundaries between our bodies and the external world. Interview by Ruba Katrib

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The work of artists Alisa Baremboym and Pamela Rosenkranz deals with the redistribution of what constitutes the organic and the inorganic—situations in which synthetic materials could look more like bodily substances, and the body appear more mechanical. Both artists make use of materials that are increasingly ubiquitous as a result of new industries and technologies, but that are also very synthetic and strange. This past fall, I asked Baremboym and Rosenkranz to participate in an exhibition I curated at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, New York. “A Disagreeable Object” touched on contemporary art practices that could be connected to the work of the Surrealists. In organizing the exhibition, I was thinking about current manifestations of the uncanny and the *informe* in response to shifting ideas about commodities and the body. This conversation considers their practices in relation to these approaches.

Ruba Katrib

Each of you refers to the human form in your work. However, instead of representing the form directly, you speak to a certain condition of physicality that is increasingly tied to technology and commercial products, which seems to create a heightened sense of disembodiment. How do you see this fragmentation playing out in your work?

Alisa Baremboym

What we can internalize and externalize gives us the ability to adapt to the present conditions we experience. A certain transformation happens in these interactions, and our perceptions of our own bodies are in constant flux. Also there is no longer a line between organic composition and appendage. I think these appendages exist somewhere between hardware and software, fully integrated and functioning along with us. My practice, in part, is informed by this pollution of surfaces and contradiction of materialities.



Alisa Baremboym, *Travel Impression 2*, 2013
Courtesy of 47 Canal, New York
Photography by Joerg Lohse



Pamela Rosenkranz, *Firm Being*, Venice Series, 2009
 Courtesy of the artist and Karma International, Zurich
 Photography by Gunnar Meier

Pamela Rosenkranz

I am interested in how various forms of contemporary knowledge, technology, and the economy develop our perception of the body. A part of my work centers around skin as the interface between the body and its environment. Taking skin as the medium per se, the economically codified and technologically extended surface collapses into the organic depth of this body as an evolved, natural product generated by blind and anonymous physical forces and biological processes. My work tracks how scientific knowledge distorts and stretches the “artificial” image of the body, and how it undermines the meaning of identity that comes with this image.

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RK It almost seems that the more scientific knowledge about the body is produced, and the more we can augment and alter the body through technology, the more abstract our experience of the body becomes. I am really interested in what you both are saying about how these lines between our bodies and the external world are shifting and, consequently, that our relationship to organic and inorganic material is changing as well. Pamela, could you talk a little bit about your use of Dragon Skin, a synthetic replica of skin? And Alisa, you work with a lot of gel emollients in your sculptures and print works—could you say something about that? As Pamela said, it is as if the material becomes an image in itself.

PR Does it make it more abstract or more real? I don't know. Both, probably. Current scientific and technological developments clearly alter the link between the body and its environment. Once it was unimaginable to implant a cardiac pacemaker—an artificial rhythm of what was believed to be the seat of the soul. And now there are headlines about a "prosthesis" of the brain—the organ which stores our innermost feelings, experiences, memories, etc. These changes in our representational relations to our bodies, its flesh, blood, and organs, are—on the one hand—culturally processed in B-movies where Dragon Skin feeds fantasies by faking human skin, where bodiless limbs are alive, hearts are pulsating long after they have been ripped out of the torso, and zombies and vampires stay alive when dead. It's a silicone used by the film industry to produce all these body parts that get stretched and splattered over the screen. On the other hand, Dragon Skin fills—in a culture where other silicones pump up bodies that are not looking fit anymore—the need to visually "complete" bodies that have been sick or hurt and or miss a part. It builds the functional and aesthetical surface of medical prostheses.

The function and fiction of this material spans a pretty wide range. I like how the imitation of skin is opening up the problem of abstraction. What's the abstraction of skin: skin color? The monochrome solution is nothing like skin, but it ends up being more real and touching than the spotted, wrinkly, pigment chart that it in fact is.



Alisa Baremboym, *Leakage Industries Clear Conduit*, 2012.
Courtesy of 47 Canal, New York. Photography by Joerg Lohse

AB I was thinking about how there are so many vague substances that we are in contact with and that we are not entirely conscious of. To a certain degree this has been the case for decades. Since the industrial revolution, humans have been susceptible to so many different refined elements not typically found in nature, and these are now being produced at an extremely accelerated rate. The environmental consequences of this are affecting how we interact with and use certain implements or tools for our everyday lives. This is what pushed me to search for this amorphous element, a substance that could hold a shape but had a shifting visual presence that was at once tactile and disorienting. The material became an abstract image in my mind, similar to the body itself. The human organism has always been abstracted by limitations of knowledge about its workings as well as belief systems about its transcendence. The visual representation of this abstraction is maybe a more contemporary phenomenon but one that has shifted from being metaphysical to being more corporeal.

The gelled emollient I use is a substance derived from petroleum or crude oil that is developed in different consistencies and used by various companies for things as diverse as cosmetic products, animal feed, ointments and pharmaceuticals, among other uses. The vague terminology and widespread use for this shape-shifting substance is related directly to this idea of the abstracted body. It is a body with not-yet-defined consequences, but a body with ominous tones of simultaneous extension and preservation, as well as potentially overextended physicality of



Alisa Baremboym, *Clear Conduit (detail)*, 2012
Courtesy of 47 Canal, New York
Photography by Joerg Lohse



Pamela Rosenkranz, *As One (Melting Sorrow)*, 2012
Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

abnormalities. I use this gel as a vehicle for materials such as silk and porous ceramic. The printed silk bonds with the gel to create a translucent surface. The porous ceramic interacts with the gel by soaking up and sweating out the mineral oils contained within it. This forced, biological cause-and-effect relationship is formed between the gel and the substances it fuses with. It's an experiment of a living logic.

RK Commercial products are a major part of this conversation. Our relationship to products, as well as to materials, has certainly changed over the past hundred years. Pamela, you touch on this in your works, as in the water bottles filled with Dragon Skin. I think for you, by intervening into existing products, you reveal how these manufactured substances are integrated into our lives. With the water bottles, something as basic and pure as water has been packaged and marketed, which you explore in poignant ways. And Alisa, you are almost making new products out of existing materials. They suggest uses that we haven't uncovered yet, but that are perhaps around the corner. Could you both talk about the use of products in your works?

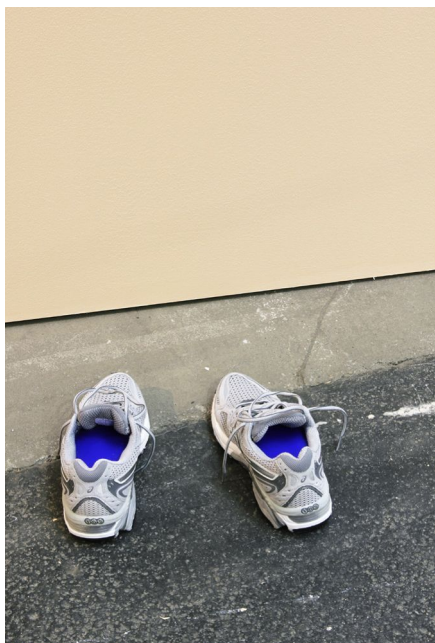
AB I grew up with an understanding that almost anything could be customized. This kind of relationship to objects (and products) came about from witnessing a deficit of things needed for everyday life in the totalitarian regime of the Soviet Union. When something was needed, either it had to be engineered by you or your relative, or found through black market channels. On a basic level this permeated my practice. I recycle some products found in our contemporary world, such as USB extension cables, flash drives, or suitcase accessories, and reposition them in relation to ceramic sculptures. Fused, they become newly integrated altered objects. This abstraction of purpose or use value changes the way one approaches and interacts with them. Ceramic is a naturally porous organic material that absorbs synthetic materials, much like the body. I find that the intersection of the products of nature (such as ceramic) and machine-made products (such as cables or plastic) is slowly becoming what we consider to be organic or natural. In light of this fundamental shift in perception, these materials begin to function as natural resources.



Alisa Baremboym, *Torque*, 2013
 Courtesy of 47 Canal, New York
 Photography by Joerg Lohse

PR I work with specific brands—such as Evian or Fiji in the case of bottled water—to activate the history of the material substances in the product and contrast it with its idealized meaning. In the case of my Fiji series I take on their copyright slogan “Untouched by Man,” for example. Their strategy is to advertise the product as water from a source that has not yet been touched by “the compromised air of the 21st century,” but the bottled water becomes the essence of what actually constitutes that compromise.

I think it is important to collapse the notion of “culture” into a very large term for “nature.” The blurring of the distinction between natural and synthetic products highlights the fact that these plastic water bottles, or Samsung LCD flat screens, ASICS sneakers, etc., are embedded in a complex ecological and geopolitical web that has successfully been extracted away from the ready-to-consume product. Consider, in the case of Samsung, the wars for oil and coltan being fought at this moment. Or, to return to the discussion of bottled water, there are particles that make plastics smoother that go into the drain system and back into rivers and seas. This contamination has effects on the hormonal balance: by mimicking estrogen, these chemicals are most likely responsible for girls menstruating earlier and boys growing less hair, alongside other more complicated consequences. Invisible, this water is still looking pure and wet but is in fact soaked with human influence.



Pamela Rosenkranz, *The Wild Blue Me*, 2011
 Courtesy of the artist and Karma International, Zurich
 Photography by Stefan Korte