

Nevine Mahmoud

SOFT OPENING | HERALD ST

There are breasts, and then there are tits. With their supple glass curves and pointy resin nipples, the pair hanging temptingly on the wall here were definitely tits. The pinky-beige *breast (Rosa Alptraum)* and her deep-red sister *breast (tamarind)* (all works 2019) were convincingly smooth and perky, just begging for an illicit feel. Confronted by Nevine Mahmoud's sculptures of fragmented erogenous zones, I sensed the conflation of two prohibitions: the taboo against touching an artwork in a gallery, and that of touching a stranger's body. Both can be tempting; both must be resisted. I must not stroke the velvety, white-marble *bottom tear*: a spherical, human-size, butt-shaped peach with giant blue-glass drop emerging from the top. I must not run my finger along the fleshy folds of the orangey-pink glass *bust (phantom Li)*. *A final sculpture, carved slide,* was a curved chair-size marble slab that seemed to lie on its side atop colorful Formica floorboards, as if waiting for somebody to curl up and spoon it.

The five works in Mahmoud's exhibition "belly room" were not so much sculptures as come-ons, daring us to make the first move. There I was, staring stupidly at a pair of perfect champagne coupe breasts positioned at eye level, like some shameless creep. I studied the delicate nipple detailing, and the gentle fleshy curves molded around the smooth aluminum bracket attaching each boob edge to the wall. Next, I was crouching down to scrutinize the delicate crack down *bottom tear*, inspecting all round to confirm the fruit's 360-degree perfection. Anywhere outside an art gallery, the police would've been called. Alone and unobserved in the tiny space, amid a bevy of carefully arranged body parts as delicious and succulent as hard candy, did I dare reach out my hand and cop a feel of the high-polish glass and shapely marble?

“Belly room” was marvelously obscene, a masturbator’s paradise. Even the checklist, with its suggestive references to “handblown” glass, “Italian” or “Argentine” marble, and assorted “hardware,” began to read like a coded brothel menu, a sensation not impeded by the gallery’s soft-porn double-entendre name, *Soft Opening*, stamped teasingly at the top. The London-born, Los Angeles-based Mahmoud has described her delight in working with labor-intensive materials and achieving her hyper-glossy finishes through “repeated touching and sanding and stroking.” So only the maker gets to fondle this provocative art! This show was like an orgy for one: the artist. The rest of us were left to our own frustrations, imagining the physical sensation of surfaces so alive they seemed to lightly perspire. I could imagine a collector buying one just for the perverse pleasure of stroking it whenever she pleases.

Mahmoud cites Louise Bourgeois as an influence, and the connection with the late French-American sculptor’s polished, disembodied body parts is evident. Bourgeois’s *Sleep II*, 1967, is a giant carved marble phallus set on two massive rough timbers, like a bone-dry penis tower attempting to raise itself off the floor, symbolic of deflated patriarchy. In contrast, Mahmoud’s seemingly drenched, life-size sculptures were not going for symbolism. Each braless wall tit was realistically meaty, about the size and color of a roast—a pink slab of ham on the left, a bloodred cut of beef on the right. Other works appeared subjected to gravity, from the drooping silky bulges of *bust (phantom Li)* to the glass apparently seeping out of *bottom tear* to the toppled *carved slide*. Mahmoud’s living sculptures create unexpectedly intimate encounters, like accidentally brushing against a stranger’s sweaty skin in a club, complete with the unspoken anonymous frisson. Sometimes a peach is just a peach, but not here.

— Gilda Williams