

Mimi Bai

A chair that...

Artist Statement:

In my work, I endeavor to highlight the complex, shifting nature of identity as well as the nuances and contradictions found within interpersonal relationships. Intersectionality – the intersecting vertices of race, class, gender, etc, that affect an individual’s experience in society - is the overarching framework for my work. My undergraduate degree in Sociology offered me the tools with which to recognize how I am implicated in and benefit from systemic racism, economic exploitation, and gender inequality. The desire to address these realities and resist replicating them in my own life is a strong motivation in my sculpture practice.

I seek to locate myself in my immediate world; then from there look out onto the larger political and social context: “meaning is created once something can be related to personal experience.”¹ My work serves as a method of researching, experimenting, and learning how to engage with the world. The work begins with an internal examination of the tensions between desire and restriction, pleasure and discomfort; I dissect my own lived experiences and then use this knowledge to create objects. These objects take the form of chairs, but are in fact contraptions designed for my ongoing investigation of how to live with integrity, humor, and compassion: “a philosophical riddle masquerading as furniture.”² The chairs become both object and location where desire, power dynamics, and relationships are externalized.

Chairs are a recurring motif in my work because of their implicit reference to the body as well as their recognizable form and symbolic value. This allows me to explore subjectivity and the body in relation to others without directly using the figure. My work revolves around the body in space, whether through direct physical interaction or the viewers' projection of the absent body onto a piece. While the designs of the chairs develop from my

¹González-Torres, Félix, and Julie Ault. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. Göttingen: SteidlDangin, 2006, pg 28.

² In conversation with Barbara Lattanzi

own experiences, they connect to the viewers' imagination and their corporeal memory. Many of my sculptures also invite the viewer to sit in them; they then are compelled to make decisions on how they will behave once in the chair. Through this process, the viewer (now sitter) becomes an "active accomplice" in my work.³ The chairs support real or imagined bodies in space, placing them in positions for confrontation, support, confession, accommodation, and reflection.

In *Dome Chair*, the *Tête-à-tête* series, and *Untitled 1-7*, I endeavor to graft structural and cultural critique and self-reflection onto forms borrowed from contemporary design. The propositional, experimental, and ever-evolving nature of these sculptures are mirrored in their flat-pack construction and prototypic state. I find the optimism and utilitarian value of design very seductive, yet I am highly skeptical of the compatibility of justice and equity with capitalist modes of production. I use this internal tension in my work: the clean lines and pleasing forms leverage the aesthetic appeal of design, but the intent of my furniture is to investigate our relationships and identities.

A chair that...:

The show's titular piece *A chair that...* is an alternate biography, told not through chronological events but rather by an inventory of desires, insecurities, hopes, and flaws: "a chair that makes me less self righteous...a chair that keeps me humble...a chair that makes me sit down to eat..."

The list details genuine (embarrassing, neurotic, self-absorbed) desires. There are clear tensions between the author's more admirable aspirations and her less-than-flattering realities. These tensions become the motivating questions behind all the works in the show.

Dome Chair:

Dome Chair is a tool for self-reflection that marries vulnerability and unease with pleasure and intrigue by engaging the sitter visually, sonically, and physically. I hope to prime the participant to consider the competing narratives that define their individual experience. I

³ González-Torres and Ault, pg 111.

am deeply invested in the rejection of binary systems that oversimplify the shifting, multi-dimensional nature of identity. A person can be both generous and racist, compassionate and petty. To recognize these conflicting ideas is not to excuse them, but rather to increase our ability to hold multiple narratives simultaneously.

Tête-à-tête Series:

The *Tête-à-tête* chairs create strange encounters through physically enforced intimacy. The designs of these two-person chairs place the sitters in different postures to heighten their awareness of their own body in relation to another. The presence of the other person, regardless of who they are, must be acknowledged and addressed in some way. *Sit*, *See*, and *Touch* shape an interaction between two people, which can take on any number of forms: comfort, confrontation, confession, collaboration, etc.

Untitled 1-7:

The simple, unadorned forms of *Untitled 1-7* function as a type of Rorschach Test for the viewer, allowing for subjective interpretation of power, positionality, and group dynamics. The viewer's perspective and personal experience affects the roles or identities they ascribe to each seated position and into where they seat themselves.