

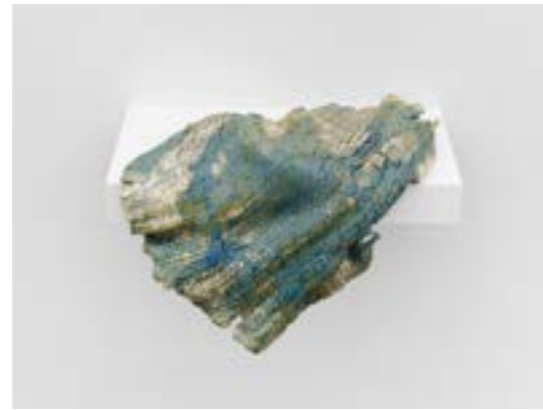
The Uncanny Content of a Shell Game:
On Hanna-Maria Hammari's Sculptures
– Marina Caron

»So the image is the uncanny content of a medium, the shape or form it assumes, the thing that makes its appearance in a medium while making the medium itself appear as a medium.«
W.J.T. Mitchell, »Image«

Hanna-Maria Hammari plays along the line between inside and out, surface and structure. Like a shell game, the classic con where three identical cups hide one ball, Hammari's work shuffles outer layers and their concealed contents. The shell game is typically played in a public place, such as the street, between an »operator« and one or more willing »players.« The player is tasked to follow the cup with the ball hidden beneath it as the operator rapidly shuffles the three cups. Though the game can, in theory, be played fairly, it is more often than not rigged. Using sleight of hand and misdirection, the operator removes or swaps the ball at some point in the shuffle, so as to cheat the player out of money. No matter how closely the player follows the original cup, whichever one they choose is sure to be empty. The operator's movements can be graceful or clumsy, skillful or amateurish; they too can win or lose depending on their technique and investment in the outcome. As with the operator and player, a similar dynamic emerges between viewers and Hammari's sculptures. Surfaces become playful, cunning, and inscrutable — they're mischievously unreliable in what they signal. Hammari highlights the amusing nature of this unreliability, and the way in which it creates an effortless, inexhaustible draw.

Many of Hammari's sculptures attempt –with varying degrees of realism– to make one material mimic, or, at the very least, signify another. She manipulates a medium in order to subvert expectations of the materials' properties; ceramic that's been glazed to look like steel, wood which becomes droopy and flesh-like, clear glass shaped like droplets of water. These forms don't produce convincing illusions but rather flickers of misrecognition, calling attention to the range of fidelity a surface can have to its object's interior. Hammari's misrecognitions don't seek a dramatic sense of rupture, but rather the small embarrassment of being tricked, the sense that things aren't always as they seem at first glance. The sculptures don't only play against us, they doubt themselves, their surfaces projecting an inner mutability. Hammari's fascination with the instability of surface extends beyond the bodies of her sculptural objects and into her studio practice. The sculptures themselves become objects traversing interior and exterior, beginning as the artist's ideas before being produced in the studio and then exhibited. Hammari's sculptures refer to their own artistic production through parodic formal analogies to biological reproduction, incorporating pregnant bellies, eggshells, and latex skins covering unknown creaturely limbs. The artist looks back at her own position, but not in order to build narrative or autobiography. The work is instead invested in the self as yet another unstable border through its generation of objects, which then gain a body and life of their own. The title of Hammari's exhibition at Museum Folkwang, Après moi, le déluge [After me, the flood] seems to refer to the material legacy an artist, particularly a sculptor, often leaves behind, the mass of objects they have produced and collected over time.

This essay looks closely at Hammari's fascination with destabilized boundaries between interior and exterior through her play with perception of material and her self-reflexive relationship to her position as an artist, in order to look at the new body of work shown in Après moi, le déluge. This new group of sculptures refer to furniture forms, transforming the exhibition space into a strange, domestic interior. Furnishings become another way for the artist to play along the lines between material, desire, perception and projection.



Material Surface, Material Skin

Hammari began her practice with photography and video before an early shift to sculpture, or »more tangible materials,« as she says. Despite this shift, her sculptures retain a core concern with images. »I often make sculptures and installations that work as images of themselves,« the artist said in a 2021 interview, »sort of exploring different avenues by which perspective becomes a projection.« At times, the surfaces of Hammari's objects become sites of reference, misdirection, and, as she notes, projection, suggesting multiple possible readings depending on the viewer's proximity and perspective. In a 2018 exhibition at Studio Picknick, Berlin, Hammari showed a series of objects titled Untitled (Skin) that were installed on small shelves or placed on the floor. When viewed from a distance, the objects look like creatures, with the material taking on a sense of liveliness. Upon a closer view, the sculptures' material basis becomes more legible as thick slabs of ceramic, molded into undulating folds and impressed with a surface texture reminiscent of reptile skin. The objects' varying iridescent and glossy glazes contribute to their lifelike quality. As one gets even closer, the imprints that create the surfaces' textures become recognizable, one made from a knitted textile, another from the imprint of metal mesh. »Images are not that special or unusual,« W.J.T. Mitchell writes. »They can rise out of accidental perceptions as well intentional acts, so that we see a face in the clouds, or (as Leonardo da Vinci recommended) look for landscapes and battle scenes in the splashes of mud thrown against a wall by passing carts.« In this Untitled (Skin) series, Hammari works along this line of the intentional and accidental emergence of images in material. Through simple gestures of molding, imprinting, and glazing, Hammari creates objects with a fickle loyalty to their appearance, objects which mischievously toggle between flesh and ceramic, creature and thing.

In another series of works titled Sweating Stone, Hammari fixes small glass droplets to the surfaces of large, unpolished leopard serpentine stones. In this series, the surface of the stone isn't directly manipulated by the artist through adding color or imprinting texture, as we saw in the Untitled (Skin), but is altered instead through the addition of glass drops. This simple and economical gesture effectively evokes the liveliness Hammari is so fascinated with, but via different means. The misrecognition in this series doesn't come from the type of material misdirection we saw in the Untitled (Skin), where ceramic resembles flesh when seen from a certain distance. Instead, the misrecognition comes from the suggestion that the stone is behaving in an unexpected way, as if it's sweating or secreting sap as a living organism might. Hammari isn't interested in creating believable illusions but instead in encounters with objects that quickly oscillate between multiple potential readings. This oscillation occurs not only perceptually, but also relationally. The artist undermines a settled sense that one is examining an inert object, through anthropomorphizing material punchlines.

Many of Hammari's works are produced in series. These series, like Untitled (Skin) and Sweating Stone, are often comprised of individuals belonging to a similar body-type. In Untitled, another sculptural series, Hammari creates tall, wooden, figure-like columns. The sections at the top of the columns droop back down towards the floor through a series of closely spaced cuts in the material, seeming to reference the common »wooden snake« child's toy. In her 2020 exhibition Double at Deborah Schamoni, Munich, Hammari showed two of these Untitled wood sculptures standing next to one another. One sculpture has a very long drooping section that reaches back down to the floor and then wiggles across it. In contrast, its companion has a short terminal section, ending midair in a gentle curve. »So the image is the uncanny content of a medium,« Mitchell writes, »the shape or form it assumes, the thing that makes its appearance in a medium while making the medium itself appear as a medium.« Mitchell points to the image as not only something which animates a medium, but which also makes the medium present itself as itself. In this series, wood makes its own

materiality present through the sculptures' untreated surfaces and trunk like stacking units. This rawness is then undermined through the drooping sections, which move with an easy and curving flexibility not often attributed to wood. The technique that makes the wood bend so effortlessly is quite visible and rudimentary. But there is a tension in the objects' relation to their own materiality that lends to their sense of internal dynamism and liveliness.

In these three series, Hammari destabilizes the border of the sculptural body by creating objects with an ambivalent relationship their own materiality. Across these examples, a viewer's proximity to the objects influences what they see, each object vacillating between liveliness and thingness as one moves around it. Interior and exterior misalign and realign in a dance that opens small spaces through which the material world appears porous and indeterminate.

Artist as Operator and Player

»I am very much a studio artist,« Hammari says, »and much of my time is spent engaging with different materials and techniques that I try to »master« with wildly varying levels of success.« Hammari explores her studio practice self-reflexively through her sculptures, referring to creative production through the objects she produces. In her 2019 exhibition, Lie in Wait, at LC Queisser, Tbilisi, Hammari showed a series titled Untitled (Trap) that mimicked spring-loaded, metal animal traps. Four of the sculptures were spread across the floor with one hung on the wall. This series at first appears to be made of spiked, curving metal elements in symmetrical arrangements that look as though they could snap shut at any moment. The objects have a hemispherical form, popping up from the floor as though they were shaped around a globe. Upon closer inspection, there are no hinges or springs, and the sculptures aren't even made from metal, but instead from ceramic. Despite their functional lack, they retain a sense of menacing purpose. Another work titled Pregnancy Armor hangs on the wall nearby. Made with similar ceramic techniques, the piece looks like metal armor intended to be worn by a pregnant person over their belly and breasts. After seeing this work, the Untitled (Trap) pieces' hemispherical form takes on a new reference, as though all the works in the series were made to somehow cover or interact with a pregnant belly. This series' relationship to reproduction is ambivalent, suggesting a reaction that is both protective and violent. There is a palpable apprehension in the works around the body and its products. Biological reproduction becomes a heavy handed, parodic analogy for the artist's relationship to her own creative production. With four of the Untitled (Trap) forms covering the floor, each one intricate and carefully crafted, the artists' labor becomes conspicuous through its excess.

In another work, Vapor Snag, shown at Johan, Frankfurt am Main in 2017, Hammari builds a precarious, thin metal slide, about 5 centimeters wide, that loops and swirls across the length of the gallery space. The beginning of the slide isn't visible, as it's hidden around the corner at the back of the room. The slide ends near the room's entrance, simply dropping off into space, with a pile of broken eggshells littering the floor beneath. In a video documenting the slide in use, we see an egg appear from around the back corner, tumbling across the room, falling to the floor at the end with a crack. A few broken eggshells are scattered on the floor throughout the space, suggesting there were some who didn't make the entire journey. But, whether or not they made it to the end, there is no safe landing zone; the only possible result is to fall to the floor. »I believe my work finds itself rather smack in the middle of the anthropocentric,« Hammari continues, »expanding on the idea of sculpture as a site of internal reflection.« In line with Hammari's description of her work as anthropocentric, Vapor Snag can't help but be read allegorically, becoming a dark comedy where the egg could be a stand-in for an artist or her works, tumbling charismatically while gaining momentum





through downhill, looping circles, only to finish with a smack on the floor. Like the Untitled (Trap) series, Vapor Snag expresses a self-conscious doubt around artistic production that is both anxious and funny.

Alongside an investment in craft and technique, Hammari incorporates found objects into her work that she collects from flea markets. A photographic series depicting a selection of these objects is presented in this catalogue. Many of the objects operate in similar modes to the works Hammari produces herself, often utilizing a material's properties to signify some aspect of the referenced form; for example, a polished, pink, green and white onyx pear appears fleshy, juicy and fresh. Through access to her collection, we begin to see Hammari herself as both operator and player in this material shell game. She produces objects that lure us with their shimmering instability, at the same time that she is drawn to and collects objects she finds in the world that share this same quality. Through both production and collection, Hammari's enjoyment in this endless search for concealed content becomes a part of the work.

Along with destabilizing the sculptural body, Hammari's works look back at their maker, rendering the body of the artist and the practice they emerge from both conspicuous and fragmented. The objects maintain their material slipperiness at the same time that they project an insecurity around their production — the artist's studio becoming a wavering and uncertain site of formation. This self-questioning is another mode through which Hammari constructs encounters with objects that boldly resist identification.

Après moi, le déluge

For her new exhibition at Museum Folkwang, Hammari presents sculptures that deviate from her typical series format, sitting instead as a group of individuals in the room. The sculptures reference furniture forms, together transforming the exhibition space into an uncanny domestic interior. In one sculpture, long, swirling tendrils spring from four corners of an upholstered, backless chair, spilling onto the floor. The tendrils are strung with circular beads that resemble oversized pearls. The piece is painted in a monochromatic black, making it difficult to tell where Hammari's intervention ends and the found object of the chair begins. The sculpture has its own sense of liveliness, at the same time that it implies an absent body, one who might have occupied the chair at some point. In poet Lisa Robertson's short essay on Eugène Atget's photographs of fin de siècle, Parisian interiors, she describes the way a furnished room is inscribed by those who use and move through it; »By ›furnishing,‹ we also mean surfaces as they index and influence our wandering transit. Furniture, or composed surface, is transitive. It is structure for touch or approach.« The swirling tentacles springing from Hammari's chair read almost as traces of the »wandering transits« around it, exaggerated trails of a body in motion. The tendrils also seem to emerge from an excess within the chair, as if its own materiality couldn't be contained within a static form. This overflow of energy contrasts with the gravity that a chair projects onto the body as a place to rest, to sink in. Given its overflow, the sculpture no longer invites »touch or approach«, as Robertson says. But its surfaces still carry a direct relationship to a body or a user, creating a tension between form and function, material and use.

These sculptures expand their focus from the body of the sculpture, or the artist, and out into the domestic space. A metal mesh folding screen, adorned with mussel shells bisects the room. These types of room dividers, while sometimes translucent, typically block one's view and are often used for privacy. But Hammari's sculpture is made from an open metal mesh. Instead of partitioning the room into private spaces, the divider seems to mark a movement

through it. Like the chair, the screen also refers to a body, but instead of indexing touch and use, it indexes movement and visibility, one's »wandering transit,« as Robertson says. These types of shells are used in decorative inlay for their pearlescence, but appear in Hammari's sculpture in their raw form, hung on the screen in lush cascades. The shells appear fragile and gentle against the industrial steel they hang on. The divider marks not only a physical path through the space, but also a way of looking through, at and around the other objects in the room — through a screen of material contrast.

The objects we live with are not all for the body to rest on, to move around, or to use. Some are for decoration and for beauty, meant to reflect the pleasures of the person living among them. Alongside the chair and the screen, Hammari shows a small series of sculptures made from stacked crystal objects with an eerie green light glowing through the multifaceted and varied forms. »Yet by »furnishing,« we mean something additional to the customary mobilia — bed, shelf, curtain and so on,« Robertson writes. »We mean also the way a room and person compose an image of time, through a process of mutual accretion, exchange, erasure, renovation and decay.« Furnishing, as Robertson draws out so beautifully here, refers both to the objects that we live with, and to the accumulation of objects and experiences that result from the process of living in a space. The cut crystal forms recall kitschy home decor with their ambivalent relationship to value; at once signifying something luxurious, while actually being quite ubiquitous and inexpensive. The exhibition's title, *Après moi, le déluge*, seems to refer to the way an objects' meaning can shift following a person's death. What was once a personal index of accumulated memory and experience becomes a flood, an overwhelming, unwelcome and undifferentiated mass of things. The crystal stacks with their otherworldly glow, point to the self within the furnishings. The objects become the outer layer in the shell game, and one's personal investment in them the concealed contents, fragile and contingent.

The shell game operates within conditions of highly probable failure — the operator's effort to keep the ball concealed renders a consistent link between content and surface maddeningly elusive. But the game's draw doesn't lie in its reliability or fairness. The draw rests instead in the joy of the attempt — the attempt to track something solid through the dizzying shuffle. The perpetual deferral of success is part of the play. Just as the identical cups dance back and forth, trying to lose the players gaze, so too does the concealed content shift and shuffle. Hammari's work focuses on this type of pleasure and commitment in the face of failure, in the face of unstable ground. She creates objects that recreate these dynamics with viewers, or with the artist herself, exaggerating these conditions of instability in order to draw attention to them. It is the pleasure in the attempt that imbues so much of daily life and encounter with material with meaning and doubt, as well as with absurdity.

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- 1 Mitchell, W. J. T. »Image.« In *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, p. 35–48. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, p. 40.
 - 2 Blidaru, Adriana. »Hanna-Maria Hammari.« *Living Content* (blog), May 25, 2021.
 - 3 Mitchell, W. J. T. »Image.« In *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, p. 35–48. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, p. 40.
 - 4 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
 - 5 Blidaru, Adriana. »Hanna-Maria Hammari.« *Living Content* (blog), May 25, 2021.
 - 6 *Ibid.*
 - 7 Robertson, Lisa. »Atget's Interiors.« In *Interiors*, p. 38–43. *CCS Readers, Perspectives on Art and Culture 1*. Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Berlin: Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; Sternberg Press, 2012, p. 42–43.
 - 8 *Ibid.*, p. 42.