MATT PAWESKI
MATRIX 191

FEBRUARY 3 – MAY 7, 2023
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART
“Shake off all the props – the props tradition and authority offer you – and go alone – crawl – stumble – stagger – but go alone.”

–Charles Rennie Mackintosh, 1902

There is a devotional aspect to Matt Paweski’s work. It is almost as if through a disciplined studio practice and rigorous attention to form, detail, color, and material, Paweski believes he can unlock the utopian potential of art. Attuned to history but forward-looking in this pursuit, Paweski makes sculptures that offer an ambitious vision of what his medium can do and mean today, proposing new ways of seeing and being in the world. Like all good art, his work grounds its aims in a “perfect, materially based clarity of intention.”

Paweski was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1980 and grew up in suburban Arizona. He studied art at Arizona State University in Tempe while simultaneously working as an apprentice painter and assistant for a commercial sign and display fabrication shop. In his words, “I basically came up with art and fabrication at the same time.” Paweski pursued graduate studies at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California,
and has been based in Los Angeles ever since, where he has developed his distinctive sculptural language in a continuous process of evolution and expansion, although not necessarily refinement; when things become too tasteful or predictable, Paweski moves on. His formalist abstract works, mostly made from painted aluminum, often look functional, referencing industrial design and furniture making. Yet in the spirit of high-end craftsmanship, they emerge from an intuitive, manual process of drawing, cutting, shaping, painting, reconfiguration, and experimentation, in which every honed edge or lusciously matte surface is processed by the artist’s hand.

Shapes that look like they could be buttons, cranks, levers, or hinges merge with attenuated lines, sliced metal planes, and melodramatic colors in a seductive language of machine-like forms that feels somehow both familiar and idiosyncratic. Some of Paweski’s works seem to have real-world referents in industrial product design—perhaps meat slicers, Lite-Brites, or circuit boards—while others derive from a lexicon that is more art historical, calling to mind iconic Minimalist sculptures or technology-inspired modernist paintings. The objects are usually small in scale, presented on pedestals or mounted on walls, which invites close visual engagement and physical navigation to inspect them from different vantage points. The physical intimacy that the works facilitate, coupled with their uncanny familiarity, is crucial to their potential meaning, opening up an ambiguous space in which the sculptures encourage us to look at the architectures and designs around us with new eyes.
CHAIR 4 (ROOTBEER), 2022. ALUMINUM, ALUMINUM HARDWARE, FIR PLYWOOD, PLASTIC, ENAMEL.
PHOTO - RUBEN DIAZ.
“It seems that in such a hyper-technological world, so much of what makes our lives possible is invisible and unseen, taken for granted daily,” Paweski says. “The sculptures are ... an anchor or trap to catch someone, give them pause, and focus them back on their own physicality, even if for just a second. A service interrupted that leads to something greater. There is a positivity to the uselessness of the sculpture.”

*Matt Paweski / MATRIX 191* is the artist’s first solo museum exhibition and his most ambitious presentation to date. Paweski shows a new group of modestly scaled tabletop and wall-mounted sculptures, all made specifically for the Wadsworth Atheneum, which seem to reference domestic objects like clocks, shelves, baskets, and mirrors. The works are situated in an installation that mixes elements of architecture, furniture, and interior design, including functional objects, such as chairs and pendant lamps, as well as tables that have been rendered non-functional by sculptures embedded into their surfaces. The intermixing of artworks and design objects further extends Paweski’s exploration of the fluid realm between the utilitarian and the useless.

In the tradition of museological display or perhaps even the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (a historical German term for a work of art that unites many different art forms in a singular scheme), Paweski transforms the MATRIX gallery with a series of calculated interventions. Floating walls break the oblong room into distinct spaces, creating domestically scaled environments in which to view his works on a more intimate register. A twelve-inch aqua green painted border traces the existing architecture of the space, including doors, windows, and even the air vents. Carefully sequenced throughout the gallery are wall-mounted sculptures, artist-made chairs, and four identically scaled pedestals that each contain one small freestanding sculpture. A cluster of eight sculptural pendant lights occupies and illuminates a “room” of its own.

The boldest statement in the exhibition is courtesy of its two strangest, most “difficult” artworks. *Vessel (Butter)* and *Bonnet (Shaker)* (all works 2022) consist of traditionally scaled, solidly proportioned tables constructed from fir plywood and finished with luscious coatings of green and yellow enamel paint, with aluminum sculptures embedded into each of their surfaces. These obscure, abstract amalgams of slits and curves seem both to emerge from their table supports and cut into them, as if they have sliced deep wells into the surfaces and interrupted their smooth functioning. Blending object and display, furniture and artwork, *Vessel (Butter)* and *Bonnet (Shaker)* bear the same overall dimensions as the custom pedestals fabricated for the exhibition, which carry works in a more typical manner, inviting viewers to compare different relationships between figure and ground.

The wall- and pedestal-mounted sculptures are more in line with Paweski’s usual work, although their animalian forms and contrasting, sometimes garish colors and
Gradients feel decidedly new. Guided by intuition, the process behind these intriguing objects begins with iterative drawings in pen on paper, through which the artist considers varying configurations of line and shape in two dimensions. From there, Paweski creates scale models in cardboard, which allows him to experiment with how his drawings sit in three-dimensional space. Once the configuration is finalized, often after extended periods of living with and tinkering with the maquettes, Paweski cuts the forms from sheets of aluminum using a simple band saw and bends them with a manual sheet metal roller. The pieces are then painted in his tabletop spray booth and assembled with aeronautical-grade rivets.
“I have always been drawn to the audacity of details,” Paweski says. “Decisions that could be considered diminutive or secondary actually hold the most power for me. They are quite demanding, really, both in the time required for their discovery and the faith necessary to execute them ... There is also a pragmatism to scaling things to your body, to making objects you can hold and move and manipulate yourself. So too is there a pleasure of processing materials with your hands, the sensuality of turning raw matter into refined objects. I think that these qualities come through and connect the viewer, that the intimacy generated in the studio is apparent in the work.”

The new body of sculptures creates an interconnected web of references both to the outside world and among the works themselves. Some look like miniature architectural maquettes, perhaps proposals for esoteric monuments, which achieve harmonious balance between opposing extremes of palette, visual weight, and surface finish. Others are small knots of wave-like metal curves that call to mind roboticized flora or fauna; small pieces of black-painted metal punctuate the works like commas or apostrophes and interrupt their symmetry. In the lamps and shelf-like works, forms that are decorative in the other sculptures are repurposed as structural supports.
“I like to keep the work in vibration between language and material,” says the artist. “The works remain familiar and relatable to the experiences I have had. They are objects we have used or interacted with, or memories of places we have been. But at the same moment they are totally alien, only really relatable to the other sculptures they are born from and the language they have created.”

Paweski’s pursuit of higher meaning through meticulous craftsmanship and attention to detail calls to mind a number of historical traditions and practitioners. The Shakers, for one, are an important source of inspiration. The separatist Christian sect dating back to the 18th century is most enduringly known for their furniture and handicrafts, which serve as material expressions of their belief in the spiritual importance of harmony, order, balance, and simplicity. Despite their famed emphasis on form over function (a Shaker axiom goes “Beauty rests on utility”), the Shakers reveled in patterns and precise measurement, often devising specialized tools or devices that performed hyper-specific functions. Humble, unadorned, and earnest in nature, every perfect detail in a Shaker work was aimed at the divine: a “marriage of the technical with the transcendent.”

Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928) and Janette Laverrière (1909-2011) are also touchstones for Paweski, who finds in their interdisciplinary practices compelling
models for blending art, design, utility, and formal invention. Mackintosh was a Scottish architect, artist, and interior designer associated with the Art Nouveau and Symbolist movements, whose best-known works include commissions for private residences and commercial buildings for which he designed comprehensive interior schemes, from the structure to the fittings and furnishings. Mackintosh’s signature aesthetic of taut curves and elongated, attenuated lines married with a proto-minimalist spatial sensibility is exemplified by works like the iconic *High-back side chair* (1898), with its melodramatic proportions and stylized detail. Laverrière was a postwar Swiss-French artist and designer known for distinctive objects with ambiguous functionality, “avoiding excessive simplicity but also any superfluous decoration.” She believed in the importance of both functional and non-functional design in the social sphere, and her playfully mysterious designs for lamps, tables, chairs, and mirrors (like the *Cocteau mirror*, 1989) look equally at home in a mid-century showroom and a contemporary art gallery. Both figures demonstrated the same steadfast belief in the fluidity of form and function that animates Paweski’s practice today.
Paweski’s awareness of history and context, coupled with the singularity of his aesthetic, make him a true embodiment of the spirit of MATRIX. With their intensity of line, color, and craftsmanship, his sculptures are like compact bundles of energy waiting to be unleashed. Their greatest power lies, however, in the ambiguity they are able to sustain. In a world overrun with standard design, material waste, and visual information, these works function like modest proposals, prompts for questioning, or catalysts for reflection. They draw us in with their formal beauty and strangeness, then send us back into the world looking for answers. “I would say that I live in a kind of delusional utopia, and the work carries those traits,” Paweski says. “The objects are very optimistic. I expect a lot from what I make, and I assume that people will find all the secrets and draw the connections.”

*Jared Quinton*
Interim Curator of Contemporary Art
Matt Paweski has presented solo exhibitions at Gordon Robichaux, New York (2021 and two-person with Sanou Oumar, 2018); Herald Street, London (2020, 2017, 2014); Octagon, Milan (2019); Park View / Paul Soto, Los Angeles (2018); Lulu, Mexico City (with Elia Kruglyanskaya, 2018); Ratio 3, San Francisco (2016); and South Willard, Los Angeles (2015, 2013, 2012). Group exhibitions include White Columns (curated by Mary Manning), New York; Gordon Robichaux, New York; Queer Thoughts, New York; La MaMa Galleria (curated by Sam Gordon), New York; Bodega, New York; Harris Lieberman, New York; Wallspace, New York; Parker Gallery, Los Angeles; South Willard, Los Angeles; PHIL, Los Angeles; Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles; Thomas Duncan Gallery, Los Angeles; 356 Mission, Los Angeles; Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles; Octagon, Milan; Librairie Yvon Lambert, Paris; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; and kurimanzutto, Mexico City. His work has been reviewed and featured in numerous publications, including The New Yorker, The New York Times, Apartamento, Mousse, Contemporary Art Review Los Angeles, Contemporary Art Daily, Artforum, Los Angeles Review of Books, Artnet, Dwell Magazine, Art in America, Flash Art, and New York Times T Magazine. In 2020, his first monograph, MP.19, was published by Zolo Press.

Paweski was born in 1980 in Detroit, MI, and lives and works in Los Angeles. He received an MFA from Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, CA, and a BFA from Arizona State University in Tempe, AZ. Paweski is represented by Gordon Robichaux, New York and Herald Street, London.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

**Bonnet (Fancy), 2022**
Aluminum, aluminum rivets, vinyl paint
12 x 25 x 8 in.

**Bonnet (Shaker), 2022**
Aluminum, aluminum rivets, aluminum hardware, fir plywood, plastic, enamel, vinyl paint
Sculpture 14 x 14 x 20 in. / Table 33 x 48 x 32 in.

**Bouquet (Polished), 2022**
Aluminum, aluminum rivets, vinyl paint
24 x 24 x 24 in.

**Chair 2 (Butter), 2022**
Aluminum, aluminum hardware, fir plywood, plastic, enamel
33 x 17 x 17 in.

**Chair 3 (Avocado), 2022**
Aluminum, aluminum hardware, fir plywood, plastic, enamel
33 x 17 x 17 in.

**Chair 4 (Rootbeer), 2022**
Aluminum, aluminum hardware, fir plywood, plastic, enamel
33 x 17 x 17 in.

**Heart Shelf, 2022**
Aluminum, aluminum rivets, vinyl paint
16 x 24 x 8 in.

**Mirror lamp, 2022**
Aluminum, aluminum rivets, acrylic, LEDs and wiring hardware, enamel
8 individual lamps, each 10 x 14 x 14 in.

**Mirror shelf #1 (for JL), 2022**
Aluminum, aluminum rivets, vinyl paint
12 x 12 x 6 in.

**Mirror shelf #2 (for JL), 2022**
Aluminum, aluminum rivets, vinyl paint
14 x 26 x 8 in.

**Princess, 2022**
Aluminum, aluminum rivets, vinyl paint
20 x 18 x 12 in.

**Vacay, 2022**
Aluminum, aluminum rivets, enamel, vinyl paint
8 x 15 x 8 in.

**Vessel (Butter), 2022**
Aluminum, aluminum rivets, aluminum hardware, fir plywood, plastic, enamel, vinyl paint
Sculpture 14 x 26 x 8 in. / Table 33 x 48 x 32 in.

All works courtesy of the artist, Gordon Robichaux, New York, and Herald Street, London.
ARTIST CONVERSATION
with Matt Paweski and curator Jared Quinton
Thursday, February 2; 5pm exhibition preview;
6pm conversation – In museum

CURATOR TALK
with Jared Quinton
Saturday, March 4; 1pm – In museum

GALLERY TALK
with Robert Wiesenberger, Curator of
Contemporary Projects, Clark Art Institute
Saturday, April 15; 1pm – In museum

Born 1980 in Detroit, MI
Lives and works in Los Angeles, CA

WADSWORTH ATHENEUM
MUSEUM OF ART

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