

# HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

## Totems for a Religion of One

Michelle Segre's rejection of commodity fetishism and a society that worships shiny surfaces is to be admired because she does it with such verve.

John Yau | 5 hours ago



“Michelle Segre: Dawn of the Looney Tune” at Derek Eller Gallery, installation view with “Voidsorption,” “Clown Clutter,” and “Dawn of the Looney Tune” (all 2017) (all images courtesy Derek Eller Gallery)

Michelle Segre makes sculptures that are both materially quirky and formally rigorous. This unlikely combination is one of the distinctive features of her work, another being its vulnerability. Segre's materials include bread, carrots, mushrooms, metal wire, thread, papier-mache, plaster, plasticine, acrylic polymer, sponges, painted pebbles, and mold – nothing that signals permanence, like steel or bronze. The work's resemblance to cellular organisms punctuated by vacuoles and Native American dream catchers clue us in to her preoccupation with the relationship between harmful waste and ecstatic visionary states.

At the same time, I have the feeling that Segre has absorbed wide swaths of the history of sculpture, approaching it from a decidedly idiosyncratic perspective. If, at times, her works brings to mind major historical figures, such as Isamu Noguchi, Louise Bourgeois, Dieter Roth,

Constantin Brancusi, Eva Hesse, and Theodore Roszak, the connection is always unexpected and fresh, and the conversation between her and art history is lively and animated.

In her current show, Dawn of the Looney Tune at Derek Eller (November 16–December 23, 2017), which presents seven recent sculptures, Segre continues her investigation of the meeting place between the ancient and the postmodern, between shamanic receptivity and ominous signs. She is making objects for a religion of one, as well as well as for a collective that has yet to be recognized.



Michelle Segre, “Pet of a New Order” (2017), bread, painted pebbles, plasticine, mold, aquarium, 8.375 x 8.375 x 4.75 inches

“Pet of a New Order” (2017) is a loaf of moldy bread sitting on a bed of fluorescent green pebbles inside an aquarium mounted on the wall. A piece of purple plasticine, like a tail, seems to be growing out of one end of the bread’s torso, with a purple form on the other side that becomes a kind of neck (or are they weird bookends?). Its skin is infected with spores. During the Middle Ages, poisoning caused by consuming rye bread made from ergot-infected grain was common. Ergot poisoning causes individuals to hallucinate and go beserk; it contains lysergic acid, a key component for synthesis of the hallucinogen LSD. Another one of ergotism’s effects is gangrene, the loss of one’s limbs.

Segre’s “pet” is a torso. The work is visually funny and viscerally disturbing. Even as she brings these unlikely materials together, she is thorough in her disorganization of the senses – a torso with a purple tail sitting on a bed of radioactive green pebbles: What do you feed such a thing?



Michelle Segre, “Voidsorption” (2017), metal, yarn, plaster, wood, papier-mâché, paint, acrylic polymer, plastic-coated wire, pebbles, thread and mushrooms, 99 x 33 x 8 inches

“Voidsorption” (2017) is an irregular, stretched-out metal oval whose empty interior is crisscrossed by black yarn, which rises from a mostly black, brick-like form. There are seven circular openings inside the oval, seemingly suspended by the yarn, with mushrooms of various sizes hanging inside four of the openings (or vacuoles). As with the other elements in her work, the mushrooms have two functions, as an abstract form and as a sign of elevated consciousness. Meanwhile, the flat oval traversed by black lines and interspersed by open areas becomes a drawing.

“Driftloaf Totem (Red & White)” (2017) is a modular vertical column made out of stumpy loaves of bread soaked in plaster. The column, which leans slightly, is punctuated by holes whose interiors appear to be painted red. Green wires emerge from the column only to return to it. Segre’s totem is abstract. If you are into numerology, the seven units of the column may refer to the seeker of Truth, but if Segre is thinking this, she does not take it too seriously. This is perhaps her greatest strength – she can be somber, whimsical, futuristic, and idiosyncratic, all while bringing together dubious materials. I mean, really, a sculpture made out of bread?



Michelle Segre, "Driftloaf Totem (Red & White)" (2017), bread, plaster, foam, metal, Aqua-resin, paint, 65 x 22 x 23 inches

Segre's lo-fi DIY aesthetic is at odds with sculptors whose studio assistants fabricate their artworks for them and seldom get their hands dirty, but that seems to be only a small part of her intention. Her rejection of commodity fetishism and a society that worships shiny surfaces is to be admired because she does it with such verve. The alternative she offers is complete and makes no concessions to the adoration of wealth.

At one point, standing in the stark white room with four of her sculptures, I was reminded of the hokey science fiction plot in which time has collapsed and the camera pans talismanic objects to evoke an unknown culture. There is something wonderfully strange about Segre's sculptures that never feels strained. There is a millenarian current running through her work that feels absolutely true to this moment in history: we are on the brink of some kind of cataclysm, but we are not sure how it will manifest itself. This unsettling feeling is what Segre is in touch with; it comes through her work in so many ways that I have come to think of what she does as urgent and indispensable.

Michelle Segre: *Dawn of the Looney Tune* continues at Derek Eller Gallery (300 Broome Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through December 23.