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Relax and Plug In: Jillian Mayer Makes Sculpture for the Screen-Obsessed

BY [Carolyn Twersky](#) POSTED 08/24/17 2:18 PM



Models enjoying Jillian Mayer's *Slumpie 2* (2017) at MoMA PS1 during a PopRally event. ARTNEWS

“Amazing!” three toddlers screamed almost simultaneously as they ran up to Jillian Mayer’s sculpture *Mega Slumpie* (2017), a sparkling, colorful structure in the lobby of MoMA PS1, on a recent afternoon. The children began inspecting the sculpture, rubbing their tiny hands over its bumpy surface, laughing wildly. This tends to happen with many of Mayer’s “Slumpie” works, which are free to be touched and climbed—as much playground as sculpture.

When such revelers are absent, the Slumpies can resemble deformed rocks that have been repeatedly vandalized with paint, glitter, and the odd plant. They are “purposefully bulky, cumbersome, quasi-utilitarian,” Mayer said in a recent interview. They’re inspired by the less-than-elegant forms that people’s bodies take when they interact with phones—a stance that can only be described as “slumping.”

“I was looking at people when they were engaging with their devices in public and I watched the human form change,” Mayer said, before comparing this engagement to the way “a dancer would be able to understand negative space.”

There is, in a word, no judgment here. Mayer, who is 30, strives to make sculptures that playfully, pleasurably support phone use, and she has nothing bad to say about those who dwell on their phones at social events. “Who’s to say how many people they’re coordinating with or communicating with?” she asked. Slumpies celebrate these invisible networks, which are threaded together through Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and the like.

The prehistoric-Barbie structures are made out of fiberglass, wood, epoxy resin, and Amazon Prime cardboard boxes, a combination that allows them to float, which is important to Mayer since she lives in the sinking state of Florida.

The Slumpies have been popping up in exhibition for about a year now—David Castillo Gallery in Miami presented the first two last year, the Pérez Art Museum Miami showed them in November, and next month one will be on view in “Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas” at the University of California, Riverside’s ARTSblock, which is part of “Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA.”



Jillian Mayer, *Mega Slumpie*, 2017.
COURTESY DAVID CASTILLO GALLERY

Mayer has made them in a variety of sizes, and to meet a variety of needs, whether people prefer to slump while standing or to slump while reclined on a daybed. There are even some for babies who enjoy slumping while catching up on *Sesame Street* on their iPhones.

The toddlers encountered *Mega Slumpie* at PS1 because it is as part of “Past Skin,” a show that questions the boundary between bodies and the virtual world. When the curator of “Past Skin,” Jocelyn Miller, who is a curatorial associate at the museum, first encountered the sculptures at PAMM last year, she was intrigued by the fine line they walked between humor

and critique. “They’re very funny, but also very intense,” Miller said. “I love the way Jillian is playfully, but also critically, addressing this kind of contemporary, technological condition where we’re sort of deforming our muscular skeletal structures to interact with our devices.”

On the second floor of PS1, two Slumpies sit in a room, juxtaposed with works like Jordan Kasey’s *Roller Coaster* (2016), an oil painting that zooms in close on a child upside-down on a rollercoaster. “We were trying to create a very productive confusion between things you can touch and be on and things that you couldn’t,” Miller said.

Children aside, museum visitors can often be quite hesitant before plopping down on an artwork, so a sign invites guests to “interact with this work at their own risk.” A wall label adds that “Mayer is invested in the choreography of users as they learn how to interface with her sculptures, an activity that foregrounds the intelligence of the body in a kind of performance that exists in parallel to viewers’ mental projection into their screens.”

Not everyone who enters the galleries is eager to participate. “It’s very personality dependent and also age dependent,” Miller said. “There’s sort of an anxiety that they’re being watched, because you are—you’re performing.”

I recommend taking the risk of sitting down. It may take a second to get situated, but upon succumbing to the shape of a Slumpie, I found it easy to get lost in my phone, which became wonderfully accessible in my new position. “The objects work,” Miller said. “They’re comfortable and amenable to phone use, just as Mayer claims.”

Just like the phones whose use they facilitate, these pieces of sculptural furniture are likely to have a built-in obsolescence, Mayer acknowledged, becoming less useful as technology changes. “In several years we’re not going to be holding phones the same way we do currently,” she said, “and then Slumpies will just be sculptures.”

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