

Interview

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HAYDEN DUNHAM'S MATERIAL INTERESTS



LAUNCH GALLERY »

HAYDEN DUNHAM IN NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 2016. PORTRAIT BY CHRISTIAN HOGSTEDT.

With so much introspective fretting in some creative circles, it's rare to find an artist who considers the biological repercussions of the present-day human condition over the emotional ones. As such, new sculptures by 28-year-old Hayden Dunham in BIO:DIP at Red Bull Studios New York, are exceptional: In a conglomeration of forms, they integrate chemicals, minerals, and other substances found within and around us. Curated by Neville Wakefield alongside a separate show by Nicolas Lobo, Dunham's works compel us to consider how what we cannot see may affect us more than we know.

Sprawling assemblages, which the artist created on-site, subtly showcase Dunham's engagement with a layer of reality that functions on a molecular level. Through eating, drinking, breathing, and more, "there are so many exchanges that we experience every day that we can't see," she says. "We only become aware of them when we're uncomfortable."

Throughout the show, viewers can discern various types of pipes—a reoccurring motif in Dunham's work as a symbol for "distribution systems" that move water and air, among other things, throughout modern infrastructure. Dunham also rigged Red Bull Studios New York's venting system in order to imbue the space with a custom, all-encompassing atmospheric condition. Her longstanding fascination with transitions between the states of solids, liquids, and vapors is represented in a bulbous, black trough, that, when activated, becomes a fountain exuding a white fog.

It all ties back to Dunham's ongoing research on how substances interact and sometimes combine with the body, for better or worse. In another work, for instance, the grey, cracked coating on an amorphous pink shape is dried Kaolin clay, the active ingredient in some facial masks, "for extracting things out of pores," she explains. "It's from the earth, but when it merges with the body it actually removes debris from the body." Separately, visits to areas of seismic activity around the world inspired a large, hanging work that incorporates volcanic elements, including ash, obsidian glass, and lithium.

Even in light of horror stories (it's impossible to not think of the lead contaminated water in Flint, Michigan), Dunham's work is guided by a conscientious optimism around what she sees as humans' inevitable absorption of materials with which earlier generations would not have come into contact. It is a message that certainly intrigued Wakefield, and recently caught the attention of Chelsea powerhouse gallerist Andrea Rosen, who last week announced that her gallery would be representing Dunham.

We met with Dunham at Red Bull Studios New York.

RACHEL SMALL: Can you tell me how you developed the foundational ideas for this body of work?

HAYDEN DUNHAM: It started in Iceland. I was interested in volcanoes as a source of these deep heat interactions that are kind of explosive and intense and where all these minerals are colliding. Also, you have magma and you have liquid, all of these various degrees that are augmented and interact. There was a volcano eruption in 2011, but when I was there, I was visiting this power plant called Svartsengi, which is outside of Reykjavik, in southwest Iceland. Next to the power plant is this spa called the Blue Lagoon. So, all of the debris—or, you could even say, the waste product—from processing, is steam from the power plant, and it is actually used for the Blue Lagoon. It has incredibly high levels of silicon, so it's actually healing the body and has all of these side effects. But, one of them is that it coats anything that comes in contact with it in this white film. I'm really interested in that transition—materials changing forms and not being limited to their original form.

RACHEL SMALL: Where did you go from there?

DUNHAM: I was excited about liquids having the ability to transform both material bodies and physical

bodies. So I've just been trying to create environments where that could take place. I also started doing research into mineral water reservoirs. I went to Texas where they have an abandoned polio hospital in this town called Luling. It's an oil town and they have this special water that is really high in oxygen and was specifically used to treat polio. When modern medicine became popular the facilities were no longer used. At some point, I think people's relationship with water was very different. It's very much a part of us, you know, used for these healing practices, and I think that relationship is evolving. I get excited about identifying with materials and this blurriness that happens between the body and the material substance. So, I'm thinking about liquids as being, or really us being vessels able to carry some contents as water.

SMALL: Yeah. If you look at nutrition, it's broken down into vitamins and minerals. Minerals are literally part of the earth. It's interesting to think about how we need the earth, and how it's a part of us, and there are these chemicals...

DUNHAM: There's a separation between minerals and chemicals—chemicals being something that are augmented by humans and created in response to human conditions, and then minerals as being something from the earth. There is this blurring between the two that happens. Silica is very interesting because in powdered form it's an incredibly dangerous substance. It gets into your lungs and never leaves. When it's in liquid form it's this healing agent that helps with paralysis and all kinds of skin and cellular illnesses. I'm really interested in those dualities.

SMALL: Cool. Where else did you source your materials for the sculptures?

DUNHAM: So, there's volcanic ash that came from Iceland. I also visited volcanoes in New Zealand as well as California. The black is actually charcoal. Those round dots are obsidian, [which is] something that is made by volcanic ash. I was also really interested in lithium, which is something that's used to treat bipolar disorders.

SMALL: And that's in volcanoes?

DUNHAM: That's also found in volcanic rinds. And it's used to make batteries. At some point, Earth itself was a primary filtration system. This mineral water source that I visited had been filtered for two thousand years. Now, we are investing in water filtration systems which are man-made systems that extract chemicals from the water that have been added by humans or the tubing that encases the liquid that is distributed to your house. Like in Flint, Michigan...

SMALL: I was about to say...

DUNHAM: Yeah, it's an incredible example. I spoke with this woman in Texas who is a mineral water expert. She was telling me that it's difficult for water filtration companies to keep up with pharmaceuticals because there are [new] chemicals being produced every year. The water filtration companies can't keep up, so it just goes into the water and then it's distributed that way. That's why places like Marfa, Texas have unusually high levels of lithium, which has psychotropic effects. Fluoride is also something that has been added to the water. Originally, it was thought of as something that would sanitize the water, so it was a health-[related] addition. And now there's a lot of research being done about what the effects are. You can see it in our teeth.

SMALL: How did you come to learn about all of this?

DUNHAM: I've always been interested in mineral compositions, and the relationship between biology and chemistry and when those worlds collide...and how so much of that actually takes place within our bodies. DuPont is a company that created Lucite and Rayon and polyester for all these household items. They also developed Teflon, which is a non-stick substance that was used in cooking pans. There's a massive lawsuit taking place, because there's a byproduct, C8, which is a carcinogen and a very toxic material that now exists in all of our bodies. So, there's this whole interplay that's happening within our bodies that has been decided for us.

SMALL: I feel like I've heard of so many instances where pregnant women come into contact with something, sometimes medicine, and it can affect the child later during puberty and adulthood. It's insane how these things are passed down through generations in subtle ways.

DUNHAM: That's the other thing [that guides my work]: I feel optimistic about this infusion. You know, my friend broke her arm roller skating and she has a metal plate in her arm. There used to be this idea of a cyborg body as being something that's made in the distant future. It's evolved in sci-fi as dystopian ideas about what the future could look like. I feel that we are living inside of that reality. But for me, I'm really excited about what this potential inclusion of these materials could do. So, I feel optimistic and interested.

SMALL: It's also fascinating to think about how ubiquitous different networks of pipes are.

DUNHAM: Even thinking about sewage treatment, water filtration, or air circulation. I was really interested in controlling the way that the air moved in this space, so you could feel it when you walk in.

SMALL: Did you have to look at the building plans to implement that?

DUNHAM: Yeah.

SMALL: And what is the intended effect?

DUNHAM: That it's this warm wash. I want it to be kind of caring and soft.

SMALL: Do you have a plan for your sculptures from the beginning, or do they come together gradually?

DUNHAM: It's very organic. They have their own ambitions and intentions. I see my role as facilitating them into becoming the next version of themselves. They continue evolving. Even now, they're still evolving even though they look static. I guess you could say that I believe in the potential of objects, and their ability to transcend their form and affect people...I wouldn't say that anything is linear. They all exist outside of binaries, so they're more fluid.

SMALL: I feel like most artists who approach environmental issues or approach the intersection between manmade infrastructure and chemicals and what they see as "nature" or natural tend to be more cynical. But, I feel like your sculptures don't have a cynical vibe. It doesn't read as a criticism of this cross-contamination of synthetic chemicals and organic substances.

DUNHAM: It's more, for me, an opportunity to give people the ability to be empowered by information and to make decisions that can change entire systems and total infrastructures.

"BIO:DIP" WILL BE ON VIEW AT RED BULL STUDIOS NEW YORK THROUGH APRIL 17, 2016.