



PLATFORM 25

leeza meksin

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Leeza Meksin: Turret Tops

DeCordova's turrets, the most prominent architectural features of the Museum's Dewey Gallery exterior, elicit childhood memories of Rapunzel's fairy tale castle or recall the battle-ready fortifications in *Game of Thrones* and other medieval-era revivals (FIG. 2). Set atop a hillside in Lincoln, MA, the forms seem almost comically out of place and inconsistent with the nearby rustic farms and the tucked-away modernist enclaves, like the neighboring home designed by the Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius in 1938. The turrets' very "extra-ness" attracted New York-based artist Leeza Meksin on a site visit to the Sculpture Park in 2017. After initially thinking she would create a new outdoor commission that would involve draping the museum building with fabric—a type of project she had previously staged—she decided on a totally new enterprise: to bring deCordova's turrets down to earth by creating two conical replicas in the Park, maintaining their precise scale and relative distance.



Meksin's sculptural recreations, titled *Turret Tops*, stand in the Sculpture Park, hovering just slightly off the ground and capped by copper-green finials (FIG. 1 and COVER). Instead of slate shingles, her turrets are vibrant hues of maroon, gold, and neon pink neoprene fabric stretched taut over the custom-designed metal frames that are the same dimension and curved shape of the Museum's turrets. However, if one isn't aware of this reference, it would be easy to think the works are based on tee-pees or carnival tents, or resemble

extremely large wrapped presents. Their open-ended, pleasurable appearance is a deliberate bait-and-switch meant to entice the body and mind. With their oversized scale and outrageous colors, we are immediately drawn to these towering entities and bask inside their light-soaked interiors. Yet eventually they lead us to wonder why the



FIG. 2

artist has gone such a distance? Why turrets? Why neoprene?



FIG. 1

Architectural Drag

Much as drag performers use fashion to upend gendered notions of beauty and identity, Meksin's sculptures use strategies of masquerade to alter our expectations of architecture and sculpture. She disguises buildings with festive cloaking using soft, flexible fabrics that counterbalance typically hard, solid, and impenetrable built forms. These large-scale installations are thereby framed by discourses of gender, performance, and the body. Architecture is a predominantly masculine field and, historically, its achievements are more often credited to singular male architects. Such disparity of

recognition and value is one that Meksin also finds across architectural metaphors, where monolithic skyscrapers or Brutalist concrete complexes typically bear masculine associations, while less overtly functional, ornamental features, such as balustrades or cornices, are often assigned feminine attributes. Rather than dwell on divisive binaries, Meksin troubles these divisions, often in comical, outrageous ways.



FIG. 3

The pair of *Turret Tops* reference breasts and, for this writer, recall Madonna's iconic conical bustier designed by Jean Paul Gaultier and first worn during her 1990 *Blond Ambition* tour. These shield-like coverings exaggerated the forms of a women's chest and were seen as an outward symbol of female empowerment with their in-your-face sexuality and fortified structure (FIG. 3). Meksin's turrets similarly convey a flexible, performative strength. They are created from neoprene, which can be used for lingerie, as well as bathing suits and scuba gear. The synthetic material is hardy enough to withstand even more rugged, industrial conditions, when used as automotive belts in engines, for instance. Neoprene's wide applicability and strength appeals to Meksin's broad approach to textiles. Often choosing materials that have a "dynamic gender-life," she similarly works with spandex, which is used in "athletics, dance, and fashion, [and which] simultaneously elicits the feminine and the masculine, the queer and the burlesque, the glamorous and gaudy."¹ Spandex, like neoprene, is synthetic, industrially-made, and stretches tight to opaquely shield yet clearly define a body. It is not loaded with the histories of traditional woven textiles or craft production—it is a bionic, superhuman fabric to be worn in outer space and deep underwater.

Outsized Ornament

When neoprene or spandex is placed around the exterior of an enormous building, we become so much more aware of its tensile strength and fanciful possibilities. Meksin began pursuing this direction in 2011, by completing her first "outfit" for a building. *House Coat* enveloped a home in Benton Park West, a neighborhood of St. Louis, MO, with a massive white spandex cloak patterned with oversized gold chains (FIG. 4). This renegade installation, only on view for a few weeks, made visible Meksin's outsized ambition and desire for

collective creation in unlikely “non-art” spaces. Her goal in dressing up the St. Louis home was to enchant and energize the passers-by. Working in this mode, Meksin is well aware of predecessors such as Christo and Jean-Claude who have created massive fabric installations, draping coral reefs and suspension bridges. Meksin seeks a different direction of pleasure and provocation in the fabrics and patterns she chooses, particularly by maintaining their original references to drag performance and athleticism.

From *House Coat* to *Turret Tops*, Meksin’s projects explore the distinctions between architectural and human scale. When we look up at the turrets of the Dewey Family Gallery, we rarely consider their monumental size in relation to ourselves. They are too far out of reach at such a height and too closely attached to the context of the building. Yet standing beside or within one of Meksin’s *Turret Tops*, our connection to this architectural feature changes into one of de-familiarization and speculation. One may begin to wonder about how this seemingly functionless architectural feature has pervaded through time.

In Europe, turrets appear as early as the Roman Empire. Integrated into Hadrian’s Wall, they offered an observation platform or place to attack encroaching enemies from a distance. Turrets later adorned aristocratic castles, their role shifting away from active wartime fortification, yet still signifying an enduring strength that was hard-won through battle and defense. When Julian and Elizabeth de Cordova traveled to Europe in the early 1900s, they encountered such castles across France and Spain.



FIG. 4

In their desire to connect to this Old World heritage and pedigree, they deliberately modeled their Lincoln summer home with such features. What is now called the Dewey Family Gallery became the salon in which they displayed their ornate art, furniture, and tapestries, including copies of Old Master paintings and sculptures. While the round spaces of the turrets were filled with their collected decorative arts, the turret tops were inaccessible; no stairs or access point gave one entry to these upper architectural spaces.

While the de Cordovas were building their homage to Old World Europe in Lincoln, MA, debates emerged among certain artists and designers criticizing the value of architectural ornamentation. In his now well-known text "Ornament and Crime" of 1910, the German architectural critic Adolf Loos aligned the progress of modern culture with the removal of ornamentation from utilitarian objects, writing "...we have outgrown ornament; we have fought our way through to freedom from ornament." Loos argued that ornamentation, such as an oversized castle turret, was no longer organically connected to modern culture. As modernist architecture developed through the twentieth century, some designers further rejected associations of Old World aristocratic dwellings and privileged the clean, sleek, and progressive lines of industrial forms and machine aesthetics. If the de Cordovas' original turrets already manifested this supposedly anti-modernist sense of functionless ornamentation, Meksin compounds those associations, rendering her version of the forms even more decorative. Yet by allowing visitors inside the pseudo-shelters, their function is also redeemed. Both structurally useful and supremely ornamental, they confound one of modernism's fundamental polarities.

Sun-Bleaching and Shadow Play

Turret Tops turns fleshy fabric into exterior walls. The two sculptures have distinct identities; one cone is draped in a gold sheath that has been cut with scalloped semi-circles that loosely resemble fish scales or shingles. These cut-aways reveal a neon pink under layer. The second cone is a deep burgundy fabric that is bound by intersecting gold belts linked by large gold metal rings that recall the strapping of an elaborate harness or a Christmas tree ornament. These unexpected color combinations fizzle and pop in our perception and are signatures of Meksin's aesthetic. Equally important are the ways in which she binds fabric with colorful ribbons, threads, and zip-ties around the metal armatures, particularly along the opening to each turret. Rather than disguising her seams, Meksin calls them out through contrasting color, so we are even more appreciative of the components that keep things bound tightly together. Enduring the elements outdoors, the colors of *Turret Tops* will change over time. Some of the most vibrant

components will fade from the bleaching of the sun over the course of the artwork's year-long display. Meksin is planning to reveal these faded portions by removing the outer layers of both turrets by the spring or summer of 2020. Exposing their "suntan lines" at the beginning of beach season, *Turret Tops* will further merge bodies with dwellings by incorporating how we cover (or expose) our skin and, by extension, ourselves.

Sarah Montross, Senior Curator

I: Leeza Meksin, Project Proposal, Faculty Diversity Grant Application, Columbia University, 2018.

CAPTIONS

COVER: Installation view of Leeza Meksin, *Turret Tops*, 2019, neoprene and galvanized steel, 240 x 246 inches, Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Clements Photography and Design, Boston.

FIG. 1: Installation view of Leeza Meksin, *Turret Tops*, 2019, neoprene and galvanized steel, 240 x 246 inches, Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Clements Photography and Design, Boston.

FIG. 2: Turret of Dewey Family Gallery, deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum.

FIG. 3: Madonna on Blond Ambition Tour, 1990. Courtesy of Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo.

FIG. 4: Leeza Meksin, *House Coat*, 2011, Site-specific public art installation, St. Louis, MO, custom-designed spandex, rope, sandbags, ratchet straps, bungee cords, thread, and an escape ladder on a two-story house. Courtesy of the artist and Cosign Projects.

BIOGRAPHY

Meksin was born 1977 in Moscow, Russia. She earned a BA and MA from The University of Chicago, IL in 2000, a BFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2005, and an MFA from Yale University, New Haven, CT in 2007. She has exhibited her artwork and large-scale architectural installations at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Brooklyn, NY; The Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, Salt Lake City; Lenfest Center for the Arts, Columbia University; and The Kitchen, New York. She is Assistant Professor of Art at Columbia University School of the Arts, New York.

PLATFORM

PLATFORM is a series of one-person commissioned projects by early- and mid-career artists from New England, national, and international art communities that engage with deCordova's unique landscape. The PLATFORM series lets artists expand their practice and visitors experience new approaches to contemporary sculpture.

RELATED EVENTS

Neoprene Workshop

August 24, 2:00—5:00pm

Join PLATFORM artist Leeza Meksin for an all-ages outdoor workshop exploring neoprene, the popular fabric used for scuba gear, shape wear, mouse pads, and much more. Practice new ways of testing your creativity with different fabrics and learn more about Meksin's new *Turret Tops* installation.

Unveiling the Turrets

Summer 2020, Date TBD

After a long winter, join in watching the removal of the outer layers of *Turret Tops*. Leeza Meksin returns to discuss how the neoprene fabric has bleached and changed through the seasons.

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