

OutSmart
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Brooklyn-Based Lesbian Artist Debuts Her Sculptures at Houston's McClain Gallery

Julia Kunin's 'Rainbow Dream Machine' is on display through February 13.

Krystle Diaz ✉ January 4, 2021



Julia Kunin (courtesy photos)

Continuing her mission to increase queer visibility through art, out sculpter Julia Kunin brings her queer-coded Rainbow Dream Machine installation to Houston's McClain Gallery, 2242 Richmond Avenue. The exhibit is open to the public Tuesdays through Saturdays until February 13.

The installation will include six totemic, sentinel-like figures in addition to *Rainbow Dream Machine*, her first horizontal piece (and the exhibit's namesake). Kunin's distinctive style of abstract imagery and figuration is rooted in ancient utopian forms that seem almost robotic or warrior-like. Her gender-bending abstracts of the human body develop a surreal dialogue with her audience. The utopian forms that inspire Kunin's work include caryatids (stone carvings of draped female

figures in Greek architecture), 20th-century Arts and Crafts motifs from socialist Hungary, the Bauhaus movement (specifically Oskar Schlemmer's futuristic costumes), and illustrator Aubrey Beardsley's Art Nouveau-era drawings that incorporate subtle patterns based on organic forms.



*Julia Kunin,
Rainbow Dream Machine
(2019, ceramic)*

In the 1980s, Kunin began sculpting small objects and "archaeological" pieces that dealt with sexuality and gender issues. In 2007, she began using commercial luster glazes during her time at the John Michael Kohler Arts Industry Residency in Wisconsin. Following her first visit to Hungary in 2009, Kunin began experimenting with more complex glazes that allowed her to transform ordinary or grotesque forms into something spectacular. The pieces in this exhibit were all created during her time in Hungary, and took over four years to complete.

The iridescent glazes, rooted in ancient Persia, gained popularity during the Art Nouveau era. As a Fulbright Scholar in 2013, Kunin attributed the style of these pieces to the inspiration she found during her time in Hungary. "I've been visiting Hungary every summer since 2009, I'm thankful for all my friends there, and I couldn't have done it without their help," she explains.

After growing tired of being closeted, and seeing the homophobia and sexism that is common in Hungary, Kunin began to create abstract pieces with homoerotic imagery that was intentionally eroticized. "It's almost like a game when I am creating these pieces," she says, describing her artistic process. "I set the rules of the game, then I break the rules. I'm controlling the game."

No stranger to Texas, Kunin was showcased by the McClain Gallery at the Dallas Art Fair in 2019. She has shown her work at the Inman Gallery in Houston, the Barry Whistler Gallery in Dallas, and she also completed a Core Residency Program fellowship at the Glassell School of Art in Houston. Kunin attributes much of her inspiration to notable artists such as Harmony Hammond and Barbara Zucker. "I can't forget to pay homage to all the 1970s feminist artists who have paved the way for my generation. You can still see so much of that in my work today."



Julia Kunin
Mirrors and Keyholes (2019 ceramic)

Strategically showcased in the McClain Gallery, *Rainbow Dream Machine* comes alive when viewed in person, with its colorful luster glazes and raw, organic details. "Working with clay is very physical, and I work very intuitively," Kunin says. She deliberately reworks and manipulates the clay in order to leave finger imprints on the forms. "I've begun to leave some areas raw and unfinished [to highlight] the nature of the art. I love the contrast of the glitzy rainbow glaze and the raw, rough surface of the clay."

Kunin, who currently resides in Brooklyn, earned a bachelor's degree in art from Wellesley College and a master of fine arts degree from the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University. Kunin was also a member of the Women's Action Coalition, and is a founding member of the activist group We Make America.

"I hope that people will have a physical response to seeing the pieces," Kunin says. "I'm sad that I can't be in Houston for the show due to COVID-19, but I'm excited [that my work] is back in Houston for this exhibit."

For more information on Julia Kunin's Rainbow Dream Machine show, visit mcclaingallery.com/exhibitions/julia-kunin.

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