

An Interview with Artist Leeza Meksin

Learn about the New York-based artist and her new installation in deCordova's Sculpture Park, [*Turret Tops*](#).



What is the inspiration behind *Turret Tops*? What drew you to deCordova's turrets?

I'm interested in how the forms we find in architecture tell us something about our culture, our values, priorities, prejudices. I'm drawn to parts of buildings that are not just rectilinear boxes. The turrets represent an interesting intersection of function and ornamentation for the building. Although the turret towers were once used for castle fortification, the turret tops are completely dead space. They cannot be entered, but are quite big (as you can tell when you're standing inside my version of them which is made to scale). It's fascinating to me that so much articulated space was created with the intention of non-use.



How do you hope Park visitors will interact with or respond to this installation?

Playfully!



Why neoprene?

I'm interested in neoprene because it's a relatively new fabric with properties unlike any other fabric we've known before. And because one of its properties is a fleshy, skin-like texture that is evocative of the body. The neoprene is also important for these sculptures' time-sensitive temporary quality. Over the course of the year, the top layer that functions as a garment for the *Turret Tops* will come off to reveal a sun-bleached pattern of the parts of the neoprene exposed to the sun's rays. I've been weathering neoprene sample paintings on my fire escape to see what to expect, and I'm excited that the sun-tan looks very much like tan lines you would see on the body with the lines being a little fuzzy in places where the bathing suit or garment may have moved a lot.



Is there any reason why you chose the colors you did?

Yes, there were a few considerations that guided my choice of colors. First, I wanted the colors to reflect the body-clothing binary, so picking warm colors such as pink and deep plum for the inner layers, and a dirty gold color with neon-yellow-green on the reverse for the outer “garment” layer. Second, I looked for colors that would bleach over the course of the year, and give a final look of sun-tanned patterns with enough contrast to be easily seen. Lastly, I wanted to pick colors that would work well with the surrounding colors in the landscape. This however, was a bit tricky since the sculptures will be up for a year and will live through every possible seasonal landscape, from the greenery of summer to yellows, browns and reds of autumn and white snow of winter.



How are you referencing the human body in these sculptures?

I was thinking both about the nurturing qualities of the breasts and the sheltering, protective qualities of receptacles, i.e. wombs. I also thought about how certain types of dwellings such as teepees,

wigwams and yurts are so much more in touch with our bodies' relationship to space and to the world. They do not try to dwarf the human scale or shame it by stuffing us into tomb-like structures fit more for burial than for life.

It sounds like gender plays a big role in your thinking about these sculptures. Do you think about gender in contemporary sculpture in general?

Historically sculpture seemed to value durability and permanence above everything else. Maybe it was the way our ancestors claimed their presence in the world and fought against the encroaching sands awaiting to cover everything that once mattered. I'm interested in contemporary art that reflects the unfixed, impermanent and vulnerable aspects of our embodied experience.



What was the creation and fabrication process like? What all went into making *Turret Tops*?

In Spring 2017 Sarah Montross invited me to come see the museum and the grounds and to propose an idea. On my very first visit I got excited about the turrets. It was a sunny day and they were casting a shadow on the ground that looked like breasts, so I was hooked then.

After some day-dreaming and staring at current and historic images of the deCordova turrets I started working with Jacob Dyrenforth of *Show Shop* to create a functioning design and renderings that I used both as I applied for additional fundraising and also in the process of finding a fabricator. I found a perfect match in *Bent Productions*, a theater fabrication company made up of a husband and wife team - Richard and Becki Grey. Richard specializes in hard materials such as metal and Becki specializes in soft materials such as fabric. I knew right away that they have the expertise I need to move forward, especially when they invited me to do a residency at their shop so we can do all the fabrication together – that won me over.

The fabrication period was scheduled for late July into early August, but before that while I was still in NYC I worked with a 1" scale model in my studio to figure out the patterns for both the inside and

outside layers of fabric. On the inside I used 1.5mm neoprene and on the outside (the garment layer) I used 1mm glideskin. I made many versions of both skins before arriving at the 3 designs that we used: 2 outer layer designs (so each Turret Top has a different outfit) and 1 inner layer design, since both Turret Tops have the same “body.” Another interesting component of the pre-planning was working with Columbia’s Carleton Engineering Laboratory to test the tensile strength of the two fabrics I was planning on using. To my surprise the “body” neoprene was much stronger than the “garment” layer which snapped like a rubber band when enough tension was applied.

About the Artist

Leeza 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, IL in 2005, and an MFA from Yale University, New Haven, CT in 2007. She has exhibited her artwork and large-scale architectural installations at Miller Contemporary, New York, NY; The Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, Salt Lake City; and The Kitchen, New York, NY. She has been an Assistant Professor of Art at Columbia University School of the Arts, New York, NY since 2015.



Image Captions (top to bottom, left to right):

1. Photo by Sarah Vasquez for the *Big Bend Sentinel*
2. 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.
- 3-5. Leeza Meksin, *Turret Tops* (detail), 2019, neoprene and galvanized steel, 240 x 246 inches, Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Clements Photography and Design, Boston.
6. 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.
- 7-8. Photos by Sarah Montross (taken at Bent Productions)
9. Photo by Lisa Chestnut
10. Photo courtesy Leeza Meksin