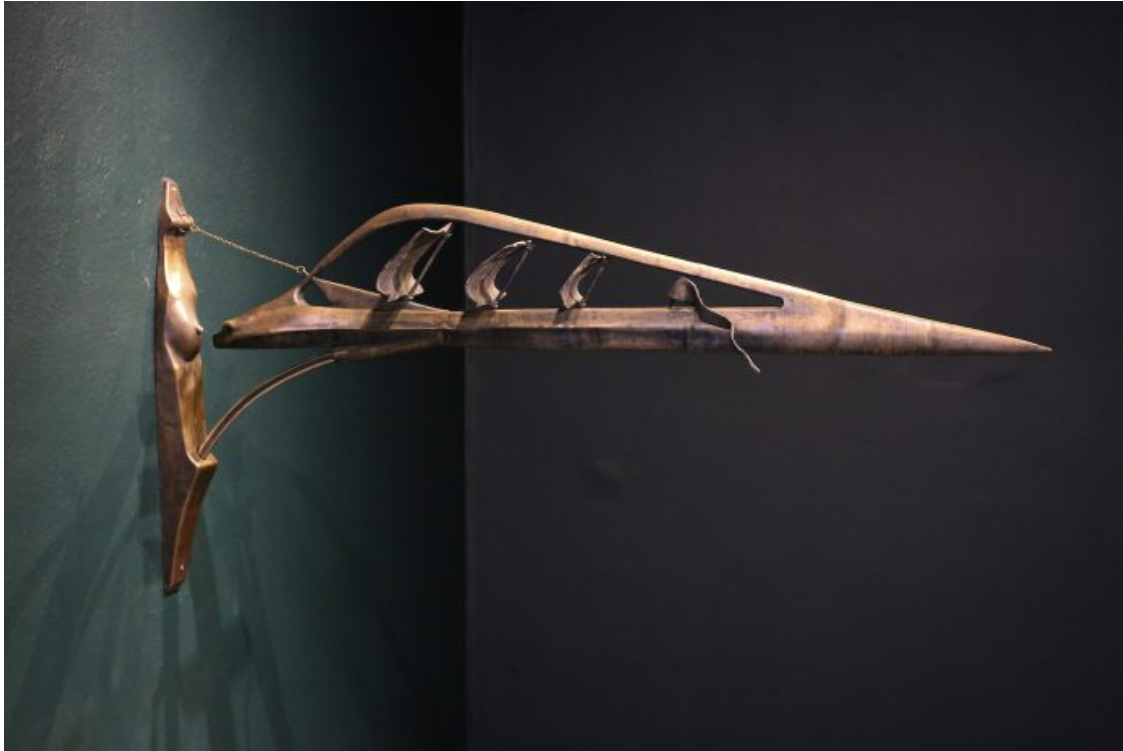


Shana Hoehn reimagines American iconography

In a solo exhibition at Women & Their Work, Hoehn re-contextualizes classic hood ornaments as symbols of female power and agency

By **Mary K. Cantrell** - August 15, 2019



Shana Hoehn, "400 years of digestion, serpent swallows ship," 2019; bronze, steel. Photo by Cody Bjornson

"I wanna tell you a story, every man oughta know, if you want a little lovin'; you gotta start real slow."

Roy Head's honeyed voice croons during the opening credits of Quentin Tarantino's latest flick, "Once Upon A Time In Hollywood." The soul tune, released in 1965, blasts as images of American icons flash on screen. Among them, a sleek metal greyhound hood ornament atop a classic car.

Hood ornaments, the oft-used visual cues, are the subject of fascination for Houston-based artist [Shana Hoehn](#), whose show, "Hauntings," is on view at [Women and Their Work](#) through Sept. 5.

Tapping into the iconography of post-WWII America, Hoehn's 13 sculptures harken back to more traditional times when a fast car defined all-American masculinity. Yet Hoehn isn't really as nostalgic for hood ornaments as she is curious about the subjugated figures they often use — in particular naked women and Native American chiefs — and what role such symbols still play in our visual culture.

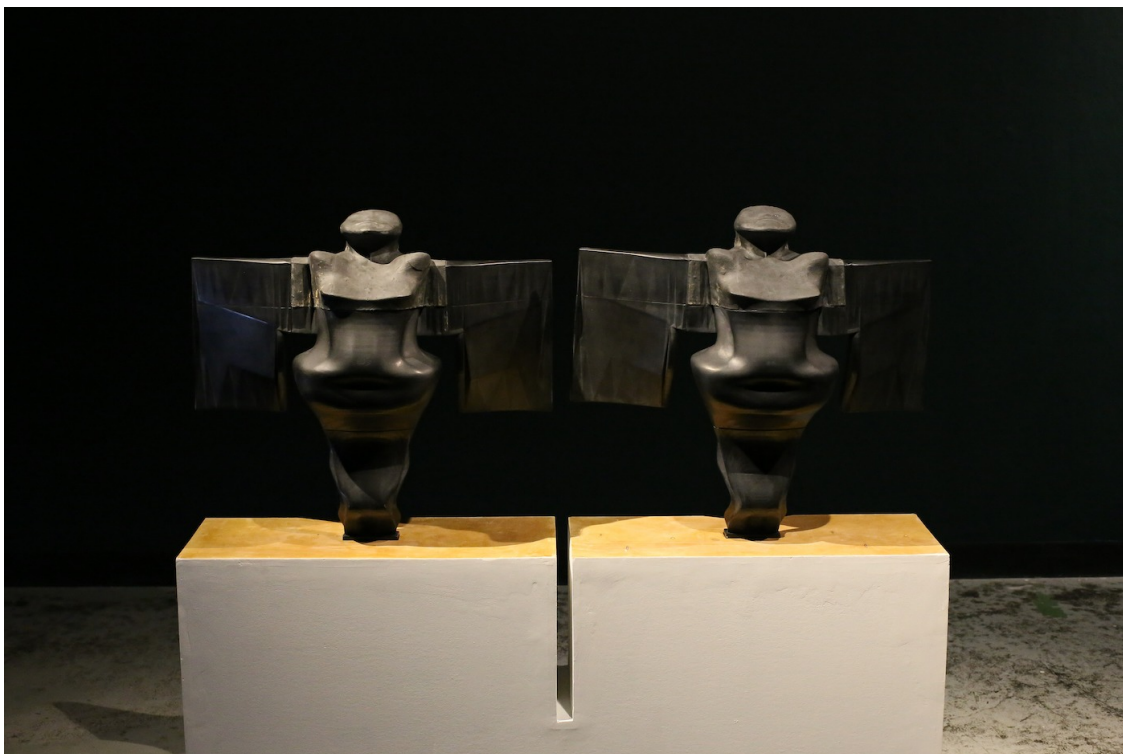
In "Hauntings," Hoehn offers reconsidered archetypes — multi-dimensional female figures ready to challenge viewers.



Installation shot of "Shana Hoehn" Hauntings" at Women & Their Work. Photo courtesy Women & Their Work

Bronze sculptures jut out of dark green walls creating tight maze-like paths through the gallery. The combination of hard bronze and soft feminine curves have a familiar, classical quality that nevertheless juxtaposes with Hoehn's unconventional female forms and animal hybridizations. For some of her wall-mounted sculptures Hoehn uses what she calls "feminized hardware" — breasts that serve as support brackets.

Hoehn's figures are modern relics, stretched and reborn using art-making methods old and new: digital 3D modeling software and traditional lost wax casting.



Shana Hoehn, "Lady-jet defies speed and meets Venus (Sisters)," 2019, bronze. Photo by Cody Bjornson

“Lady-jet defies speed and meets Venus (Sisters)” depicts a pair of female figures with enlarged stomachs, positioned side by side on a pedestal and folded like accordions. Hoehn explains that it’s a physical undoing of the elongated female form that the Art Deco aesthetic used to embody speed.

“I really love that (this piece) started to look like the Venus of Willendorf,” says Hoehn. “I was thinking that when you roll back time (my sculpture) is in conversation with this ancestral femme.”



Shana Hoehn, “Moth emerges from Lady-jet cocoon,” 2019, bronze. Photo by Cody Bjornson

In another sculpture, “Moth emerges from Lady-jet cocoon,” a female/moth hybrid appears to be launching vertically from her cocoon, contrails like spiral folds falling in her wake. Again, there’s the conceptual hybrid of traditional and digital object-making.

“I’ve kept (the shape of these figures) to a low polygon count, which is similar to a pixelated jpg,” Hoehn says. “You see all these little facets of her, so you know she comes from this digital place.”

The show’s origins grew out of Hoehn’s interest in the historical significance of ship figureheads, which are typically bare-breasted women and mermaids. After she spied a vintage Cadillac flying goddess hood ornament in downtown Houston, Hoehn began to make parallels between the midcentury car accessory and earlier examples of female exploitation and Western imperialism.

“Hood ornaments track anxieties around race, gender and the war,” says Hoehn. “In the 1950s (hood ornaments) started hybridizing figures of women and Native American men with jet planes to celebrate the war victory. This hybridization to me is about tropes of primitivism and the open frontier. There’s a very American mythology in these two subjugated figures.”

For Hoehn, the use of bronze and other metals was also a shot at reclaiming previously fetishized materials. “I’ve been enjoying calling myself a bronze babe,” she laughs.

And it’s about re-contextualizing the sexist, decorative mascots as something with more power and agency. “You have these small (hood ornaments) which are essentially trophies that are women,” Hoehn says. “To remove them from their vehicle, enlarge them into these monuments turns them into deeper characters.”

Hoehn’s exhibition is a refreshing reimagination of mythical, all-knowing female creatures. From [John Gast’s 1872 painting “American Progress,”](#) which imagines the doctrine of Manifest Destiny as a trailblazing angel, to the Cadillac flying goddess, the American automotive spiritual embodiment of speed, female figures have been used as symbols for everything from Western expansion to selling cars.

“The female form is used as an emotional abstraction for so many things,” says Hoehn. “The Statue of Liberty is an example. It doesn’t mean that women are more free. Right?”

A fascination with American culture began early for Hoehn, whose father and uncle both worked for the United States government, fixing military Humvees and designing airplanes for Boeing, respectively. Their mother immigrated to the United States from Japan, naming her son, Hoehn’s uncle, George after George Washington. Hoehn credits both her father’s and her uncle’s work in the war industries as being a source of interest for this subject.



Shana Hoehn. Photo by Cody Bjornson

“My dad, he’s very, very proud of being American. He lives in Texas and has the big belt buckles and drives a Harley and works for the government,” says Hoehn. “There’s always been this fascination with my dad’s side of the family really embracing what ‘American’ was growing up.”

Hoehn draws inspiration for her sculptures from her ever-growing archive of images — a collection that focuses primarily on women’s bodies and traumas across history. Hoehn’s image archive encompasses hysteria studies, witch hunts, pinup girls painted on WWII fighter planes and carnival performers. There’s also pop culture references to films such as Hitchcock’s film “The Birds.” Some of the images have been compiled in a newspaper, “The Sirens (Volume 1),” available for purchase for during the show.

One recurring visual theme in Hoehn’s archive is women with severely arched backs and includes images of patients in 19th-century hysteria studies, the iconic “[V-J Day in Times Square/The Kiss](#)” photograph taken in Times Square in 1945, an image from “The Exorcist,” and a 2015 paparazzi shot of swimsuit model Candace Swanepoel on a Victoria’s Secret photoshoot in St. Bart’s. For Hoehn, the similar images from different eras are like a kind of visual rhythm that demonstrates how certain social attitudes simply morph, rather than improve.

“We still see that today in who people design things for, who gets tested for different medical procedures, even how people still design cars,” says Hoehn. “They’re remnants of things that are still happening.”

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Mary K. Cantrell is a 23-year-old, Austin-based writer who splits her time working at the Umlauf Sculpture Garden and freelancing. She has journalism and women’s and gender studies degrees from The University of Texas and a fondness for covering local arts stories.