

Martha Friedman

“Martha Friedman in the Studio with Daniel Belasco”

By Daniel Belasco, *Art in America*, February 2012

# Art in America

## MARTHA FRIEDMAN IN THE STUDIO WITH DANIEL BELASCO

THE SCULPTURE OF Martha Friedman is deceptively whimsical. Recalling oversized mundane objects by Oldenburg, Vija Celmins and Alex Hay, Friedman's work appears to be latter-day Pop, sourced in urban markets and suburban homes. But she has absorbed a variety of other sculptural influences, especially the process-based sculpture of Lynda Benglis and Eva Hesse. Friedman pushes her everyday objects into an uneasy psychological relationship with the viewer.

Born in 1975 in Detroit, Friedman earned a BFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1998) and an MFA from Yale (2003). After moving to New York, she became known for hyperrealistic sculptures of items like rope and lemons. Many were the sort of mash-ups of sexual puns and minimalist forms that always get a laugh, such as her Brancusian stack of five large cast rubber eggs, titled *Laid* (2006). Perhaps recognizing that sculptural double entendres are a formal dead end, Friedman deepened her exploration of object, material and space. Giant rubber bands, stretching from floor to ceiling, dominated a space in the exhibition “New York Minute” at Rome’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MACRO) in 2008. A series of large waffle sculptures were on view, either on plinths or wall-hung,

in her 2009 solo at New York’s WallSpace gallery. Rubber tongue sculptures, cast from meat sourced from Katz’s Delicatessen on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, took center stage in two solo museum shows, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit, and de Cordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, Mass., in 2010. Friedman has since experimented with concrete, first casting tongues and then moving to a new subject: the wedge, a common tool. Friedman has taught sculpture at Yale and the Cooper Union, and currently teaches at Princeton University.

While artists as varied as Bruce Nauman, Louise Bourgeois, Rachel Whiteread and George Segal have used cast objects and figures to transfer the aura of the real to the gallery space, Friedman’s single-minded focus on casting stands out within sculpture’s expanded field. Enthralled with the animistic power of the cast object, Friedman seeks to transcend its stubborn literalism.

We talked last fall in her studio in the Greenpoint neighborhood of Brooklyn while she was at work on an ambitious installation that will debut at WallSpace in October 2012. One wall was covered with large drawings of stacks of gray and orange wedges. Various old tongue molds and models protruded from shelves.

**DANIEL BELASCO** You’ve written about how your parents, a scientist and a doctor, with their molecular and medical views of imaging, influenced your work. What early art experiences, either making or seeing, impacted you?

**MARTHA FRIEDMAN** I was always being dragged to museums to look at Renaissance painting—not that much contemporary or modern art. I also went to a music camp called Interlochen, in northern Michigan, for three months every summer.

**BELASCO** What was your instrument?

**FRIEDMAN** Oboe. I was never a great talent. I just fell in love with the process of making the double reed. I would not practice, but would pore over the newsprint catalogue of oboe reed-making tools. It’s a really methodical sort of fetishy thing to turn cane into a double reed. You’re constantly testing it, blowing into it. So immediately there’s a connection between this little, made thing and your body. And I think that stuck with me.

At the same time I noticed there were art kids in these little art huts in the back of the camp. They could sleep in;

they didn’t have to get up at the crack of dawn and go practice. They were just sort of hanging out. And laughing a lot. And working late. So I switched and took a sculpture course. The teacher, Jamie Watson, changed my life. He showed me how to make a mold of a tree branch and I was hooked.

**BELASCO** How did your interest in molding and casting develop?

**FRIEDMAN** For one project, we made a clay blobby thing. Then we made a waste mold around it, dug the clay out of the hole in the negative space in the mold, flipped it over, poured a harder plaster into the cavity, and then broke it away. It was magical. I was captivated by a lot of things but particularly that transformative moment when liquid turns to solid. You remove the mold and there it is. I’ve never lost that reveal moment. Casting is a language I like. I’ve always rigidly stuck to this form, this modality of art-making.

**BELASCO** Your practice is unusual because you’re so focused on a specific technique.

**FRIEDMAN** At Yale, the sculpture department was the catchall for anything

that wasn’t strictly photography or strictly painting. I could be really hard on myself and say, “Man, you’re just plodding along,” like some sort of 19th-century sculptor lost in space. I keep waiting for it to lose its shine, but it just hasn’t. All of the ideas that occur to me are in this form.

**BELASCO** How do you select the specific objects that become a sculpture?

**FRIEDMAN** A lot of it comes from just paying attention. It doesn’t come from memory. I’m not trying to locate a thing that matches a metaphor. I used to look at what was on the table, or falling off it, in still life paintings. Before that, I looked at magicians’ tools. My newest body of work comes from looking at the wedges that I use to pry apart molds. And then there’s the whole food thing, where I go to the supermarket and see what things are behaving badly, like the big yuccas that look like hairy brown ugly piles, and weird smooth eggplants—they seem slightly surreal in the marketplace.

Martha Friedman in her studio, 2011. Photo Paola Ferrario.

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**BELASCO** One painting that you've told me interested you was *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* [1602], by the Spanish Baroque painter Juan Sánchez Cotán [1560-1627]. How do you make the leap from flipping through art history books to making sculpture? Were you really mining them for objects that look strange?

**FRIEDMAN** Yes. It was not academic at all. It was like looking through a Williams-Sonoma catalogue, I'm embarrassed to say. I was shopping! Cotán's paintings are really fascinating because there's a starkness to them. The backgrounds are really dark and there's no space. I admire Cotán's reductive Baroque still life, with the arc of quince, cabbage and cantaloupe sweeping down to a stone tablet, ending with that cucumber, pushing out of the picture plane, sort of pointing at you: it's creepy, it's funny. I made two sculptures—a cantaloupe and a cucumber—about that one painting.

**BELASCO** Do you imagine the foods having an estranging effect on the viewer of your work, as they have on you when you see them in a painting or in the supermarket?

**FRIEDMAN** Yes, I actually just want

to steal that. By knowing how to make molds, you can just suction that effect off and bring it into the studio. I'm not particularly interested in carving, adding or subtracting material to get a representation of an eggplant or whatever.

**BELASCO** Could you tell me about how you go from that initial object to a fully expressed sculpture?

**FRIEDMAN** The most easily describable activity is a sort of formal play. I ask, “What can this thing do?” A lot of times I get my hands on the thing—the yucca, the eggplant—before I know what I'm going to do with it, and it usually takes me a long time, because I make a lot of different types of molds to cast a couple of different materials. I'm just pushing stuff around at that point to see if something interesting happens. Ideally the work can become anti-gravitational, as if I can release it from physical forces to some degree. I usually want it to be sort of funny, too.

**BELASCO** As you know, *Ladies' Room* [2010] is my favorite work of yours. With those two overgrown cast rubber tongues tasting that giant pimento olive, the piece lacks the restraint of many of your earlier works—in fact it's outrageous. The tongues



Right, Friedman: *Ladies' Room*, 2010, silicone rubber and fiberglass-reinforced gypsum cement, 18, by 90 by 12 inches.

Left, *Cucumber*, 2011, Plexiglas, polyurethane, paint and steel, 80 by 30 by 70 inches.

All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Wallspace, New York.



also form an architectural structure. The references and associations with gender, interiority and sensuality are really layered.

**FRIEDMAN** A tongue has an animation that another object like a wedge or a noodle lacks. I thought, “Okay, tongues, what do they do?” I do like when the objects in the pieces behave within a certain logic of how we understand them to function in the world. Tongues taste and tongues touch.

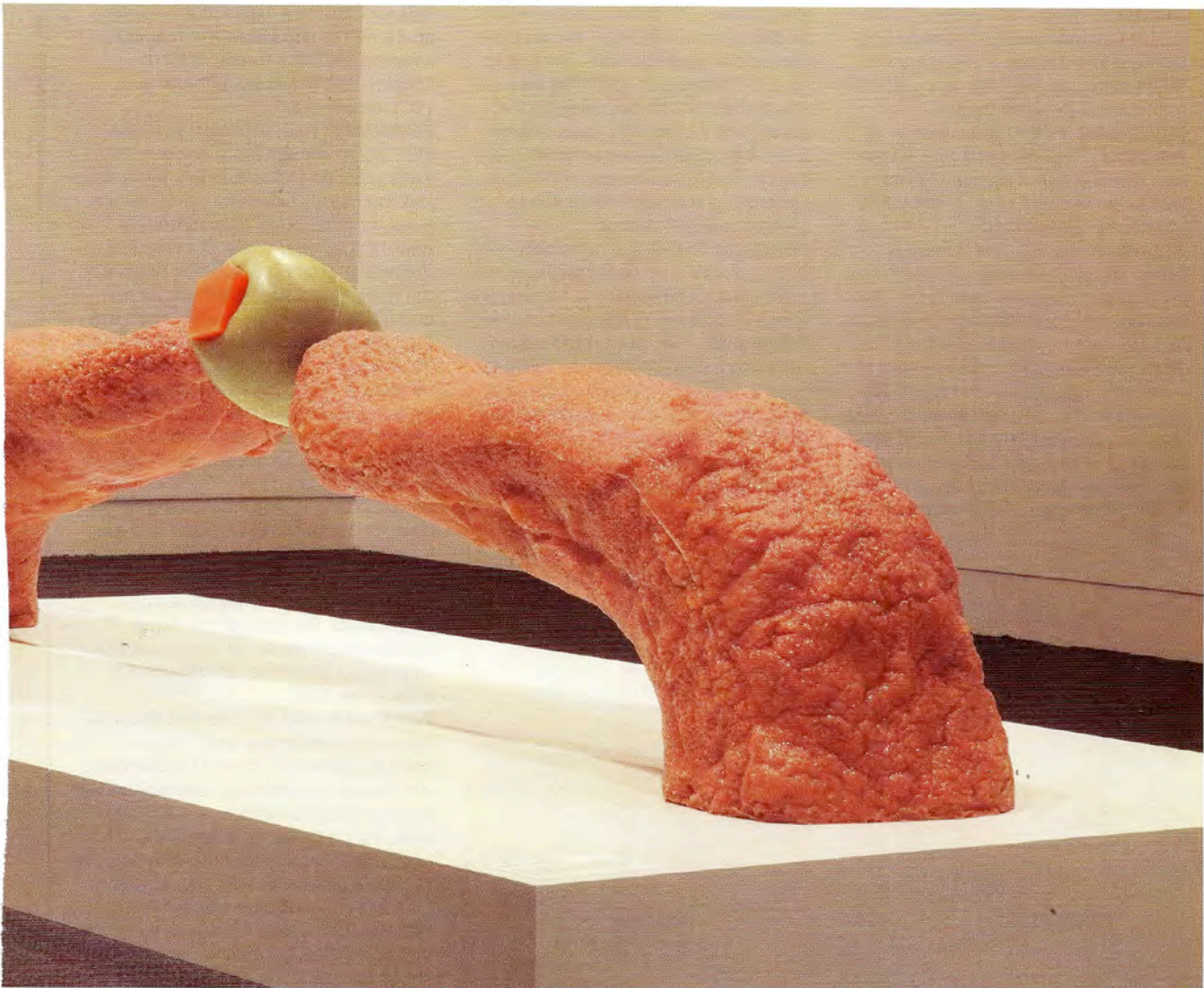
**BELASCO** Despite the title, it's a great monument to the deli, but I know that wasn't the intention.

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**FRIEDMAN** It's in there. I eat at delis all the time. I had made a big sausage sculpture some years ago which came from looking inside the glass deli cabinets and thinking about using those materials: sausages and sliced meats.

**BELASCO** It seems that rubber is the perfect material for you to represent meat.

**FRIEDMAN** Rubber is such a funny material because it's recognizable and not recognizable, it's industrial and natural; it's in its own weird category. It behaves strangely. And it's so

tactile. You want to put your cheek up to it or you want to pinch it. It's hard to keep your hands off.

**BELASCO** To switch gears, are there contemporary artists you feel a kinship with?

**FRIEDMAN** It's much easier for me to think about historical influences than contemporary peers. I have looked a lot at Eva Hesse, Anthony Caro, Naum Gabo. We could talk about any one of them.

**BELASCO** Gabo rarely comes up as a point of reference for contemporary

artists. But the work is interesting and you don't really see it that often.

**FRIEDMAN** It's also fragile. It stays where it is because no one can move it—all that Perspex and old fishing line. Some of his pieces are really beautiful puzzles. There's a structure and a fragility that disappear and reappear as you're looking at his sculpture. And they have rhythm. When I cast something over and over I'm interested in modularity. It's a way of making something big. You could just build. You could just add and add and add.

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**BELASCO** Hesse is a wonderful precursor because she quit painting and later got into casting forms using different materials that play with softness and surface to evoke the body.

**FRIEDMAN** When I was 13 or 14 at this camp, I found a book on Hesse. I was learning about Hesse and Henry Moore at the same time, which I actually think is sort of funny.

**BELASCO** You mention numerous British sculptors who are rarely exhibited in American museums these days. They have been supplanted by the Minimalists. Did you see their work in England?

**FRIEDMAN** I did. I dropped out of art school for a year and lived in Leeds. My uncle lives there. I worked for some artists and hung around the University of Leeds art history department and went to see Barbara Hepworth's enclosed, glassed-in studio. Now modern British sculpture is

almost trendy. It's freaking me out a little bit that artists like Thomas Houseago are tapping into those figurative forms. And I'm like, "What is going on?" I've felt a kinship to that from the beginning but I've always kept it quiet. My interest in these artists has remained really earnest, even though I'm an overeducated artist who came of age in a postmodern deconstructed relational esthetic.

**BELASCO** That idea of humanism, which is such a nice word because it evokes a noble universalism, seems to be emerging from a long phase of being out of style.

**FRIEDMAN** Well, there are good reasons why it was problematic. This gets back to *Ladies Room* a little bit. I think because I'm a woman, it shifts my relationship to that modernist form-making. I'm aware of myself as a woman making sculpture, in relationship to early 20th-century men.

**BELASCO** There's also much debate about Hesse and Hepworth making essential feminine forms, and I'd imagine that would be something you'd respond to.

**FRIEDMAN** Well, it's really problematic. Unfortunately there are only two ways you can make feminine form. One is to be overtly critical of power structures, and the other is to reference the body. I'm always aware of being both the maker and the one being seen. On the really good days that falls away and it's just me in my studio. But I am reminded of being a woman all the time, like when I buy concrete. It's pretty basic, but when you're making things on a big scale with building materials or industrial materials, you're reminded in subtle and not-so-subtle ways that this is confusing to people. There's a kind of dissuading of you from doing things. "Are you really sure you want to make it that big?" or "Do you really need this material?" On some level I'm constantly aware that I'm breaking some rules.

**BELASCO** Do you get the most resistance or pressure when you try to procure concrete, as opposed to other materials?

**FRIEDMAN** Well, it's cool that you used the words "resistance" and "pressure," because these are reasons I'm interested in concrete. And concrete seemed perfect because it's all around us: it's the sidewalk, it's the buildings. It functions to hold us in place, to push us through space. We all have a physical relationship between that cool gray concrete and our flesh.

**BELASCO** It sounds like you're saying that you chose the material before you chose the particular form that you're working on now, which is the wedge.

**FRIEDMAN** I kind of did. I'm a little obsessed with rubber but I knew it needed a counterpoint. There needed to be something happening to the rubber in the sculpture, almost like squeezing the rubber of its juices. I layer the concrete and the rubber casts so there's a flaccid quality versus a rigidity.

**BELASCO** Had you worked with concrete before?

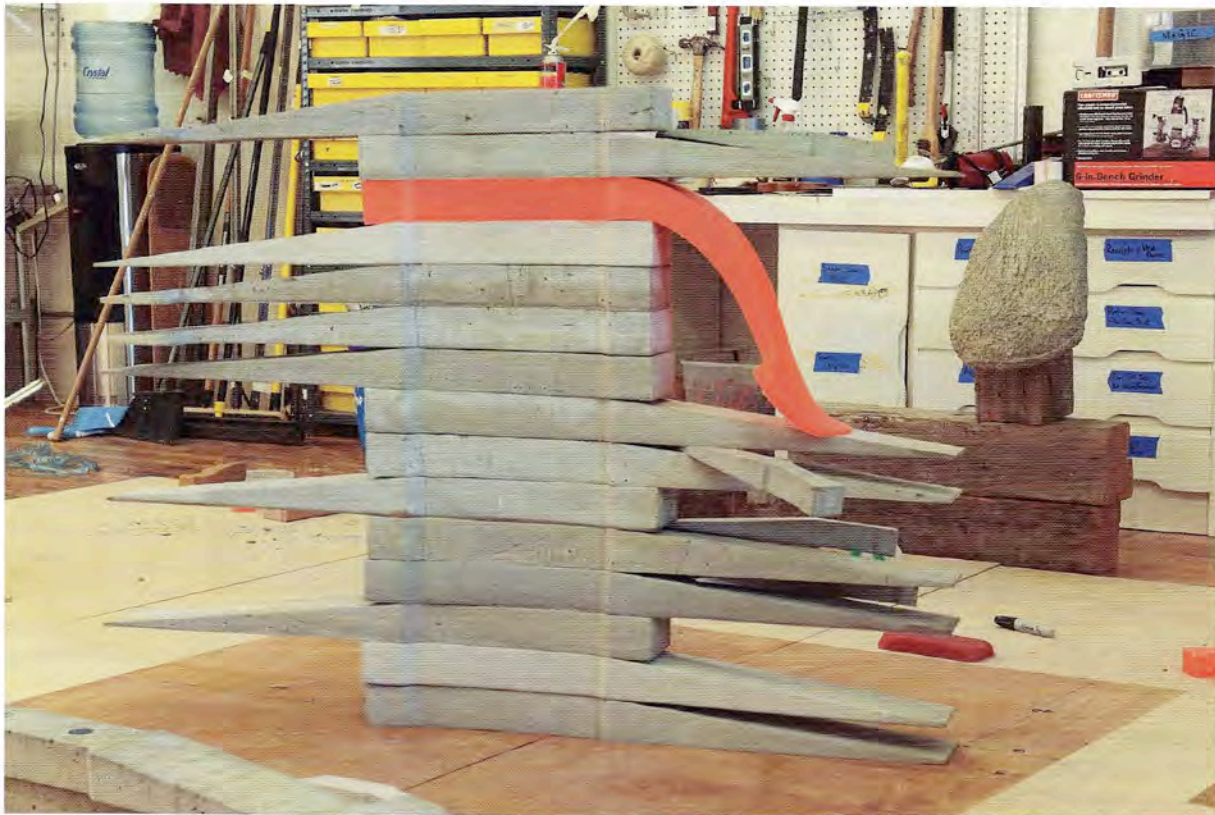
**FRIEDMAN** I knew how to mix concrete. But it's really fussy. Which is surprising considering how much of it we need. It has to cure at a certain rate and lose moisture at a certain rate, and it takes



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Above, studio view of *Stack of Concrete and Rubber Wedges*, in progress. Photo Paola Ferrario.

Opposite, *Waffle Paper*, 2008, handmade paper, 40 by 30 inches.

three weeks before it reaches its full strength, and during that time you have to keep it moist. It's not what you'd expect.

**BELASCO** You have to nurture it.

**FRIEDMAN** You do! This big strong rough material—you actually have to be like, "Are you okay?" Spread it, check it, spray it.

**BELASCO** Can you tell me what you're doing with the concrete now?

**FRIEDMAN** I'm working on a show for *WallSpace* that's going to be called "Caught." It is about a young Yale science student, Michele Dufault, who accidentally got killed on a lathe machine last year. I didn't start the body of work thinking about that, but I was really affected. And I knew I wanted my installation to feel more dangerous than my work has in the past.

**BELASCO** Do you mean a Richard Serra-esque illusion of danger, or a sculpture that poses an actual threat?

**FRIEDMAN** I just went to Richard Serra's show at Gagosian and I actually got a little nauseous, just lost, like vertigo. I want my installation to feel a little scary, though it is still static sculpture that has its place. This girl, as I understand the story, was working alone in the chemistry shop at midnight or 1 A.M.

and her hair got caught in the lathe and it pulled her in, and she asphyxiated somehow. She had real agency over this tool and was making something physical, and it killed her. It killed her by her hair, an iconically feminine thing. And she's a student, and I teach. For all of these reasons I was obsessed with this story. I found myself making a body of work that seemed to be in direct conversation with the notion of tools and danger. There are two types of wedges that I've used at the studio to open molds: one's a hammerhead and one's a straight. I enlarged them and cast them in concrete and rubber. Then I stacked them to make static machines that are compressing rubber wedges. And so there's verticality, but there's also implied rotation.

**BELASCO** Of the lathe, you mean. What I see now in the studio is a stack of 12 or so gray concrete wedges with a fluorescent orange rubber wedge stuck in the middle. Does that one represent this girl?

**FRIEDMAN** Yes and no. The orange one represents the body being caught or compressed. But I hate to say "that's

the girl"—that kind of freaks me out. The stacks are going to be 9 or 10 feet tall. As a viewer you'll move through these stacks. So also you're the girl. I want it to feel like you're inside a stopped turbine or something. I think about the way a lock works, which reminds me of the form of a lathe. So the tool quality of the wedge is really important.

**BELASCO** But the wedge is not dangerous.

**FRIEDMAN** No, it's not in itself. A wedge opens things up, and holds things together. The whole show revolves around things being held together or pushed apart. My work is made to seem poised or balanced at that threshold between something released and something stored. ○

**DANIEL BELASCO** is associate curator at the Jewish Museum, where he organized, most recently, "Shifting the Gaze: Painting and Feminism" (2010).