

Mufson, Beckett, 'These Eerily Lifelike Sculptures Probe Death, Pain, and the Grotesque, Creators, VICE, (June, 2017)

https://creators.vice.com/en_us/article/pay437/ivana-basic-eerily-lifelike-sculptures-death-pain-grotesque

These Eerily Lifelike Sculptures Probe Death, Pain, and the Grotesque

"People think there's one way the body can be, and anything that deviates from that is grotesque," says artist Ivana Bašić.

Like [insects in an entomologist's display case](#), [Ivana Bašić's](#) new sculptures at [Marlborough Contemporary](#) possess the uncanniness of organisms floating between life and death. When the Serbia-born, New York-based artist's show, *Through the hum of black velvet sleep* opened earlier this month, gallery visitors compared the sculptures to [bugs or aliens](#). The truth Bašić reveals to me over the phone, however, makes them more unnerving—and more thought-provoking. Although the glass, steel, clay, silicone, and wax constructions are mounted on rods extending from thick, white columns, Bašić tells me that sculptures are human.



Simultaneously massive and delicate, and floating eerily above the ground, two torsos are reinforced by curved carapaces, dangling shriveled, ash grey limbs. Where the heads should be are bulbous sacks. At regular, breath-like intervals, small mechanical hammers chip away at two nearby blocks of pale pink marble the color

of corpse skin. With each "breath," the machines coat the gallery space with a fine layer of marble dust, as if ages were passing in minutes.

Bašić's sculptures have been compared to the movie monsters of H.R. Giger and Ridley Scott. A more accurate conceptual reference, however, would be the stories of Franz Kafka, a key influence on Bašić's work. She prefers to seek inspiration from books and concepts over films and visual art.

We discuss *The Fly*, in which a human scientist combines his own body with that of an insect. The horror is different from that of space invaders or robots, because it comes from inside us. A fly on its own is harmless—only when combined with humanity does the concept become frightening.



The artist believes this mentality extends to the way viewers relate to her sculptures in *Through the hum of black velvet sleep*. "When people can't compartmentalize it, they have to call it alien," Bašić says. "I'm not constructing anything alien; I'm not constructing what is outside of me. All of that is completely in me. I'm just translating it into matter... People think there's one way the body can be, and anything that deviates from that is grotesque."

Through the hum of black velvet sleep is meant to put viewers face to face with rigor mortis. Bašić has been preoccupied by death since childhood, even before she lived through the 1990s war in what was formerly Yugoslavia. Before she picked up sculpture in 2014, she explored how death affects our perception of the body in life through video and performance. Now, the mentally-grueling process of sketching, designing, testing in clay, and then bending unwieldy materials wills Bašić's pain into the work.



Bašić describes her process not as creating something new, but as a translation. "For me, it's not what you would call a sculpture, like 'Oh, this is art.' They're very real, and they become very real because I live with them and all the elements of them have been made so that they would exist in reality... I'm translating pain that is already in me into matter," she says. "It's the existential weight of life and the inevitability of death, being contained in this vessel that is matter and this vessel will expire."

The artist's vision was so specific, it took three months of trial and error for Bašić to perfect the composition of her sculptures. Suspending interlocking pieces of delicate glass, plastic, and clay from a single metal rod, as Bašić does in the works on view, simply hadn't been done. "Everyone I asked was like, 'You can't bolt the glass that way. You can't control the shape that way so it exudes from the body,' and all these things," the artist says. With help from a materials consultant, Bašić recruited sculptors specializing in anatomy to design the bodies. A special effects artist added skin blemishes and wrinkles that imply the figures are near death.

While testing the suspension system leading up to the show, Bašić frequently woke

in the night and visited her studio to check on the sculptures, fearing for their structural complexity. The artist finds it difficult to describe the moment she saw them installed in the gallery for the first time.



"You really can't tell, in the clutter of the studio, how strong something is, how intense something is. You can only see that once you have removed everything around it and that is the only thing that is left in a space," she says. "I don't know when I saw them in the gallery. I was really in shock. I didn't know how that even came out of me, because they're completely mine and I know every single liquid and coat on their body. They're ethereal and more beautiful than I could ever hope they would be. I was really humbled to go on the quest to find them."

Through the hum of black velvet sleep is on view at [Marlborough Contemporary](#) through June 24.