



This catalog produced in conjunction with the exhibition
Claire Lieberman: *FUNNY BALL*
March 10 - April 9, 2022

Front cover: *FUNNY BALL*, 2022
black marble, 11.5 in diameter
Photo credit:
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Martin Art Gallery
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Claire Lieberman
FUNNY BALL



BUNNY BOMB

BUTTERFLY MACHINE GUN

Every time I look at my phone or my email after an update, I see a new icon has been substituted for something that was previously spelled out. Delete is now an X, a new tab is a + [plus] sign, and send is increasingly a miniature paper airplane about to take off. These everyday icons have become so familiar that they are often more *legible* than written language. This hieroglyphic-slippage in service of utility speaks to the immense power of visual communication. Like language, the visual too can portmanteau. Absent an explanation, these graphical neologisms deftly communicate meaning through simplified, streamlined and hybridized pictorial creations. Arguably, this forms the foundation of much of what is happening in contemporary art every day, and like the stone Claire Lieberman works with, this technique for expressing novel ideas and concepts has been with us for thousands of years.

In Lieberman's installation *FUNNY BALL*, the artist has carefully arranged sculptural components on an eighteen foot gameboard comprising eighteen triangular panels. The player-pieces are in fact stone sculptures distributed as if the gods were playing a gigantic game of jacks. The pieces in this war game are hybrid objects inspired by common battlefield weapons. In employing these regrettably familiar forms, Lieberman exposes just how completely the tools of industrialized violence pervade our collective visual vocabulary. A century of near ceaseless global conflict has been mirrored by the technological and manufacturing advancements of both armaments and consumer products. Today, we see weapons that look like toys, and toys that look like weapons which further act in service of the normalization of war. The relationship between the two is deeper still, first-person-shooter combat simulation video-games are common in homes around the world. Respectively, advanced missile systems employ those very same chips and technology for geolocation, target visualization, and acquisition in weapon systems currently in armories in almost every country. Rather than sanitizing this appalling conflation, Lieberman's 3D IRL emojis of playful destruction ask us to consider what move we'd like to make next in light of this tragic entanglement.

Against the backdrop of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, strategies for lethal defensive warfare are playing out in editorial pages, classrooms, and dinner tables across the world. Lieberman's timely exhibition is not a response to this particular conflict, but is the product of a multi-decade journey working with stone, against the ceaseless backdrop of global conflict.

Paul M. Nicholson
Director Martin Art Gallery



BUTTERFLY MACHINE GUN

CUTIE

Claire Lieberman: Dark Matter

A flightless butterfly, a silent rattle, a mute loudspeaker, and other balked, toylike objects that no child could lift, as they're made of gleaming black marble—nor that any parent would choose, as they're crossbred with hand grenades and machine guns: Claire Lieberman's visually and conceptually elegant work occupies a field whose coordinates are innocence and violence, venerable craft and futuristic form. Her troublingly seductive sculptures represent danger disarmed by being bound in stone, and also by a streak of wily humor.

At the Martin Art Gallery, an irregular octagonal wood platform made of pieced-together triangles—it evokes a mobile, floating gameboard—offers variably skewed perspectives on ten of Lieberman's recent sculptures. They are arranged in a ring centered on *FUNNY BALL*, the exhibition's titular work, which is a sphere patterned with raised circles; it suggests soccer balls, land mines and, coincidentally but inescapably, corona viruses. (Like almost all the work in this exhibition, it was completed during the Covid pandemic.) Also coincidentally, *FUNNY BALL* shares its title with a children's video game that looks like it began life as a cheerful emoji. In Lieberman hands, games take a dark turn that is made more explicit in some of her work's titles. *BUNNY BOMB*'s paired cylinders—the rabbit's ears—stand straight up from a third, segmented cylinder that suggests (vaguely) an explosive device. In the less ambiguous *BUTTERFLY MACHINE GUN*, the barrel of a gun protrudes from the belly of the bug. But even the deceptively child-friendly *BABY BALL (VERGE)*, with its little ear-like appendages and Pinocchio-long nose, and *CUTIE*, with its five stumpy arms—and two nastily sharp protruding cones—graft menace to sweetness. Of course, all kids test danger, as they must. On the other hand, toy guns do, tragically, get people killed, children in particular. Both of these implacable truths are undercurrents of Lieberman's sculpture.

The materials with which Lieberman has worked over the course of her career run the gamut of durability and strength. She has produced a series of perilously fragile glass guns, and also done projects with Jell-O, which barely exists as solid substance; in videos, it was stomped into puddles. (As it happens, gelatin has a military application: in certain formulations, Lieberman has discovered, it approximates human viscera, and is sometimes used to assess munitions' damage to bodies.) By contrast, marble, her primary medium, is nearly indestructible, and has been a mainstay of sculpture for millennia, though it is uncommon in contemporary art.



BIKE STORY

Recent examples include Louise Bourgeois's sensuous pink marble hands, and, more pertinently for Lieberman, her huge, staring black-and-white marble eyeballs. Representing two faculties of human perception, Bourgeois's marble sculptures issue an invitation to touch that is almost a command, and is shared in Lieberman's work. She has, as well, a connection to Constantin Brâncuși, in particular his whiplike birds in space, executed first in marble (and then in polished bronze), and his sleek heads of sleepers, including babies'.

In early-twentieth-century modernism as now, sleekness was a trademark of cutting-edge technology (no Apple product has so much as a handle). Lieberman has always worked by hand, and continues to begin the sculptures at age-old Italian quarries, using hammers and chisels, mechanical drills and lathes, and finishing the work in her studio with grinders and polishers. She hasn't used the digital production methods now available partly because the replicability they offer doesn't interest her, but largely because they preclude the adjustments she makes along the way, which are key to her process. Nonetheless, her formal language borrows from the military and spacecraft industries—and, in turn, from sexual imagery. Phalluses poke out of many of Lieberman's oversize toys; *BIKE STORY*, a helmet cleanly shaped for speed, has an unmistakably vaginal slit on top. The integration of aerodynamic glamour and eroticism was signaled in the title for Lieberman's recent exhibition, *Unidentified Dangerous Beautiful Objects*—or, to use its acronym, UDBO. Swap out the D and B for an F, and you've got the alien spacecraft they strongly suggest.

Also at the Martin Gallery are two linocuts and seven works in black and white cast paper, emblem-like images that signal a relationship to Pop (one shouts *BLAM!*, a comic-strip exclamation borrowed earlier by Roy Lichtenstein). A nod to Andy Warhol in the subtitle of a chubby five-petaled flower executed in marble is even more clear in a cast-paper version, both lifted from a motif Warhol made into wallpaper (which, Lieberman points out, he had himself lifted, from photographer Patricia Caulfield). As with Pop, Lieberman's glossy, covetable objects are grounded in American consumerism. They have a kinship, in that regard, with Allan McCollum's *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works* of the mid-1980s, a near infinity of enameled cast-plaster products, all the size of baby toys, each different but nearly indistinguishable, exhibited on rows and rows of white pedestals. Like McCollum, Lieberman engages the absurdist comedy of our culture's super-abundance of interchangeable objects, and has taken note of how many of them are lethal.



RATTLE



The United States is a powder keg, the most densely armed country on earth. "There are now more than one billion firearms in global circulation, with 85% in civilian hands. Nearly half of these are owned by citizens in the United States," writes Suzanne Ramljak¹ in a recent book—Lieberman's work is illustrated in it—about guns in contemporary art. Uniquely combustible, our culture puts weaponry at the center of a national dialect of metaphorical expression. Lieberman has deployed it with striking virtuosity, carving the questions it raises in stone. "How can solid material like marble with a history related to monuments and memory be transmuted into a cue for open discussion and shared understanding?" she asked in a 2021 interview. "How do games and play maneuvers help us understand conflict? When does competition in innocent play spill into conflict? How can humor be inserted into representations of controversy?"² Shatteringly timely questions all.

Dark matter is a term in physics for hypothetical material believed to occupy more than eighty percent of the universe. As it neither absorbs, reflects nor emits light or energy, it is completely invisible, but its presence can be theoretically discerned by its gravitational pull. Mainly, at present, it is a place holder for something that resists known measurement. It could be said that Lieberman's sculpture takes such matter—and nothing is darker than the marriage of childhood and violence—and shapes and polishes it, the better to illuminate its power.

--Nancy Princenthal

¹ Suzanne Ramljak, *Loaded: Guns in Contemporary Art* (Atglen, PA, Schiffer, 2021), 12

² Jill Connor, "End Game: An Interview with Claire Lieberman," *AS/MAG*, Jan. 27, 2021



LOUDSPEAKER



FLOWER (A.W.)



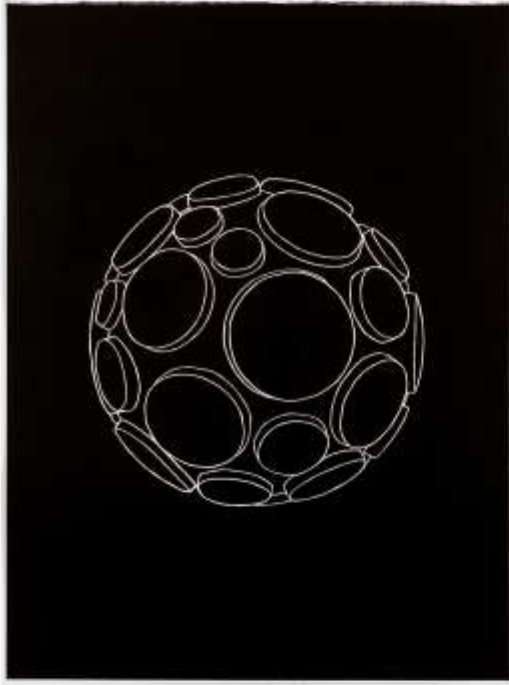
BUTTERFLY MACHINE GUN



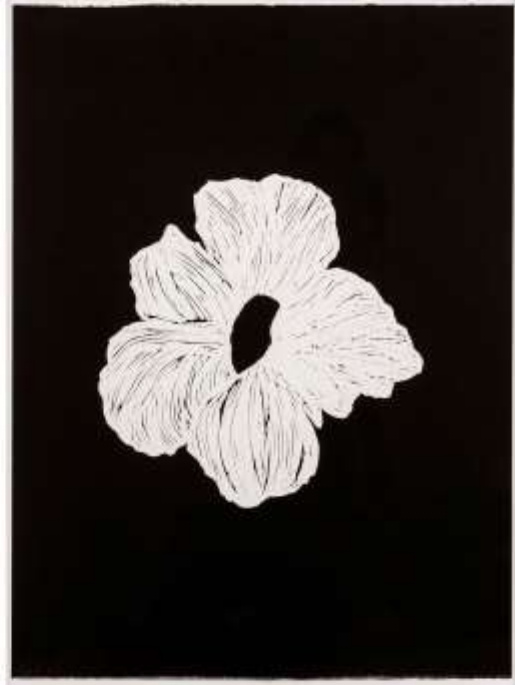
BABY BALL (VERGE)



BUNNY BOMB



FLYING BALL

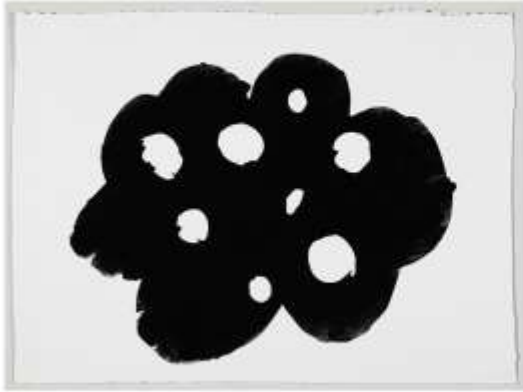


SPACE HIBISCUS

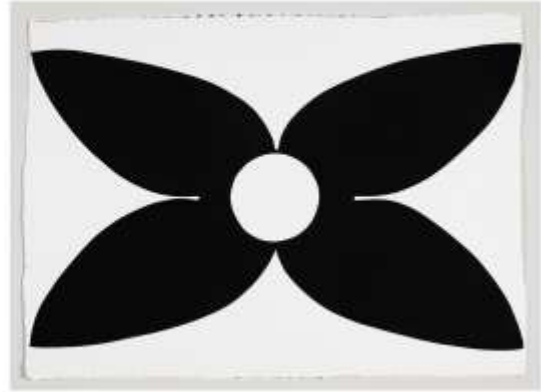


BLAM





BUBBLES



BUTTERFLY



B.B.



WAVING FLOWER



THREE EYE



Claire Lieberman is a sculptor and installation artist who combines such materials as marble, Jell-O and video. Her work explores a range of dichotomies, such as "the sublime and the quirky, desire and danger, indulgence and guilt." Lieberman is known also for her prints and sculptures of toy guns in glass. Lieberman's glass guns and photography are included in the book *Loaded: Guns in Contemporary Art* by Suzanne Ramljak, Schiffer Publishing, 2022. *UDBO - Unidentified Dangerous Beautiful Objects* is a book about her sculpture published with Massey Klein Gallery.

Lieberman has had solo shows at Massey Klein Gallery, NYC; Gebert Contemporary, Scottsdale; Hot Wood Arts, Brooklyn; THE LAB, NYC; Marcia Wood Gallery, Atlanta; PDX, Portland; Seoul Art Center, Korea; the University of Alaska, Anchorage; Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University; and Southeastern Louisiana University.

She recently exhibited in *line of sight, lethal vision*, mudac museum, Lausanne, Switzerland which traveled as *im Visier* to Forum Schlossplatz, Aarau, Switzerland. Her group shows include several exhibitions with Massey Klein Gallery, NYC; *Mein lieber Schwan (My Dearest Swan)*, ACC Galerie Weimar, Germany; *The Food Show: The Hungry Eye*, Chelsea Art Museum; *Up in Arms*, Parker's Box, Brooklyn, NY; *New Prints*, International Print Center, NYC; and *PULSE New York* with Marcia Wood Gallery.

Lieberman's work has been written about in *Sculpture Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *Whitehot Magazine*, *artcritical*, *Glass Quarterly*, *Vasari 21*, *Two Coats of Paint*, and *Artist Studios Magazine*. A two-page image of her sculpture, *Camouflage Jell-O*, was included in *Camouflage*, a book published by the Imperial War Museum of London and Thames and Hudson.

Claire Lieberman has received awards from MacDowell (2022), *Escape to Create* (2022), The Arctic Circle, Territory of Svalbard; National Endowment for the Arts; Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris; Friche La Belle de Mai, Marseilles, France; Künstlerhaus, Salzburg, Austria; and Yaddo. She received a BFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University and an MFA with distinction from Pratt Institute.

Nancy Princenthal is a Brooklyn-based writer whose *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art* (Thames & Hudson, 2015) received the 2016 PEN/Jacqueline Bograd Weld Award for Biography. Her most recent book is *Unspeakable Acts: Women, Art, and Sexual Violence in the 1970s* (Thames & Hudson, 2019). She is also the author of the monograph *Hannah Wilke* (Prestel, 2020). A former Senior Editor of *Art in America*, where she remains a Contributing Editor, she has also written for the *New York Times* and many other publications, including *Bomb*, *Hyperallergic*, *Apollo* and the *Brooklyn Rail*. Her writing has appeared in monographs and exhibition catalogues for a wide range of artists, including Ann Hamilton, Alfredo Jaar, Gary Simmons, Willie Cole and Lesley Dill. Having taught and lectured widely, she was a longtime faculty member of the MFA Art Writing program at the School of Visual Arts, and was most recently a visiting lecturer at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts.

BABY BALL (VERGE) 2022 black marble 11 in x 7.5 in x 7.5 in
BIKE STORY 2022 black marble 9 in x 16 in x 12 in
BUNNY BOMB 2019 black marble 18.5 in x 7.75 in x 5.75 in
BUTTERFLY MACHINE GUN 2019 black marble 11.25 in x 24.25 in x 15 in
CUTIE 2018 black marble 8.75 in x 11 in x 11 in
FLOWER 2017 black marble 13.5 in x 13 in x 12 in
FLOWER (A.W.) 2020 black marble 9.5 in x 8 in x 8 in
FUNNY BALL 2022 black marble 11.5 in diameter
LOUDSPEAKER 2019 black marble 12 in x 19 in x 15.75 in
RATTLE 2022 black marble 10.5 in x 7.5 in x 7.5 in

B.B. 2022 cast paper print 30 in x 22 in
BLAM 2022 cast paper print 22 in x 30 in
BUBBLES 2022 cast paper print 22 in x 30 in
BUTTERFLY 2022 cast paper print 22 in x 30 in
THREE EYE 2022 cast paper print 30 in x 22 in
WAVING FLOWER 2022 cast paper print 30 in x 22 in

FLYING BALL 2022 30 in x 22 in framed linoleum relief print, ed. of 20
SPACE HIBISCUS 2022 30 in x 22 in framed linoleum relief print, ed. of 20

Your work is very powerful and I'm confident that your project will inspire audiences to think more deeply about the objects of violence and the aesthetics of form.

Betti-Sue Hertz

Betti-Sue Hertz is Director and Chief Curator at Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University in the City of New York.



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