

Bath House

Writing by [James Payne](#)

Madison Donnelly (b. 1992, UT) is one of UMOCA's six artists in residence. Each resident artist is provided with a studio for one year and an exhibition at the museum. In Donnelly's exhibition *Bath House*, not everything is as it seems. *Bath House* is comprised of a hot tub, a towel rack, and a slide, but her installation's materials do not correspond to their appearances. Inside Donnelly's hot tub, where one expects bubbles and jets, one finds a conversation pit. The conversation pit is a midcentury domestic feature built into the floor of a living room that allowed for a large group of people to sit facing one another. For the past forty years, these pits have been exiled to the American imaginary alongside memories of key parties, quaaludes, *Laugh-In*, and Nixon. The faddish popularity of the conversation pit and its formal insistence on the communal in an era when social relations in the US had become wholly mediated by television is an apparent contradiction. But the conversation pit's current internet-age renaissance—the high-powered New York City women's club The Wing sports one—indicates that the more we lose group sociality to new media, the more we yearn for, or the more we aestheticize, IRL connection.

Donnelly's clever combination of hot tub and conversation pit, of exterior and interior, produces an object that is at once eerie and comforting. Donnelly defamiliarizes both of the sculpture's components, the hot tub's tiles and the conversation pit's upholstery, to create a whole that is more meaningful than the sum of its parts. While the exhibition's title, *Bath House*, puns on this pairing, it also suggests gay saunas and their cruising culture, so important in the latter half of the 20th century, that are rapidly becoming as periodized as the conversation pit. These saunas were emancipatory environments, autonomous zones outside of society where people at the margins could find themselves through finding one another. As mainstream capitalist institutions have assimilated gay culture—Pete Buttigieg's presidential candidacy and the legalization of gay marriage are prime examples—it has rendered bathhouses, gay bars, and the gay press largely obsolete. Donnelly's sculpture, therefore, can be read as an elegiac monument to the forms of leisure and sociality once possible in the 1970s, at the height of prosperity for middle-class Americans, that are quickly slipping into the aether even if they can be briefly summoned in the gallery.

Bath House draws on sculptural tactics that can be traced back to Surrealists like Méret Oppenheim to accomplish this formal sleight of hand. Oppenheim's 1936 sculpture *Object, or Breakfast in Fur*, consisted of a tea cup, saucer, and a spoon, but all were lined

in fur, melding the domestic to the erotic in an enigmatic bind. Oppenheim's Freudian work extended the Russian Formalist Viktor Shlovsky's idea from 1917 that the "purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" into the explicitly psychological. Shlovsky thought artists could do that by making "objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged." The unfamiliar materiality of *Object*, like that of Donnelly's installation, sets off a chain of associations that short circuits one's perception of reality to allow disjunctions, not just in the sculpture, but in life itself, to appear. It is in those disjunctions where new lives worth living might take shape, if only we can do the work to make them out.

Bath House runs from August 30th to October 26nd, 2019, at the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art in Salt Lake City, Utah.