

## Seasonal Shout

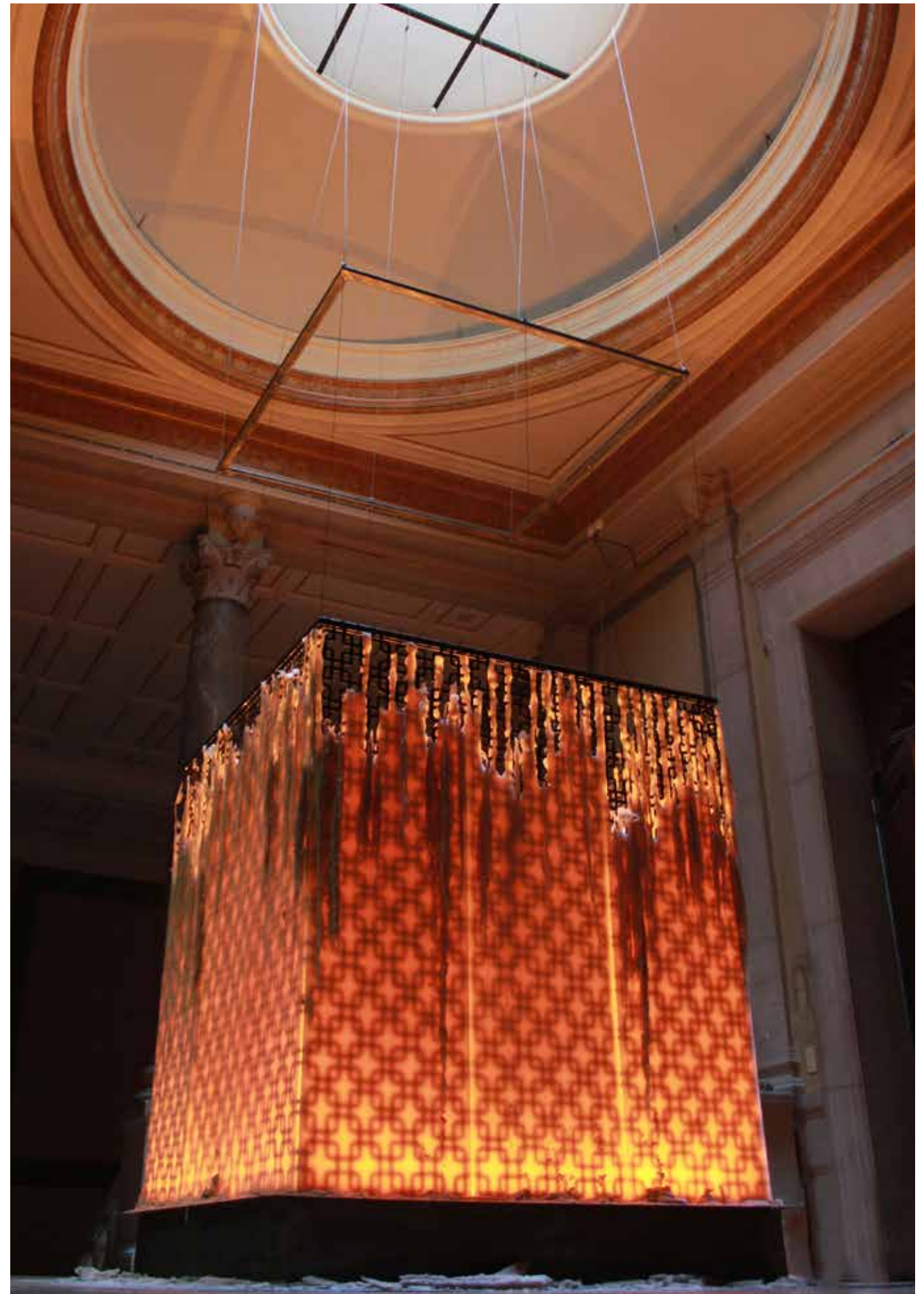
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Words by Lara Chapman

# BURN BABY BURN

## SCULPTURAL CANDLE INFERNO

Unless you don't have access to electricity, candles seem to go in and out of fashion. One minute your house is full of them and their (pesky) holders, and then the wind blows and you have nothing to seal your letters with. For makers and buyers, statistics suggest that sculptural candles are having a moment during lockdown, but rather than just a trend, like the candle in art throughout the centuries, does this have a symbolic meaning?



Juliette Minchin, La veillée au candérou [The Candlelight Vigil], 2019, École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris, courtesy of the artist



Urs Fischer  
Leo (George and Irmelin), 2019  
Gagosian, Paris

Everywhere I look, I'm seeing candles. These aren't your bog standard, cheap-as-chips dinner candles or tealights, these are big, fat, maximalist candles – candles shaped like shells, candles of your dog, candles resembling multicoloured exotic vegetables, candles giving you the finger, candles inspired by ancient temples, TikTok-trending DIY swirly candles, candles that look like pastel-coloured sex toys, candles that are marbled, twisted, bulbous, busty, striped, vulva-esque, carved and knotted. It seems that sculptural candles are having their time in the spotlight or (wink wink) should I say candlelight... and their waxy bodies are whispering softly, "baby won't you light my fire."

Looking past the waxy seductiveness (and Instagrammability) of the fantastically kitschy decorative candles, my question is: why now? Candles have been around for eons, shedding light in our lives since the Romans stuck a piece of string in some leftover fat from cooking meat (called tallow) and lit it on fire – ignoring its reportedly dire and pungent smell – in approximately 500BC. For the intervening 2,520 years, candles have evolved through a number of materials – from whale fat and cinnamon wax to paraffin and beeswax – and manufacturing innovations, but what has remained consistent in candles until now, has been their steadfastly cylindrical and slightly tapered form. So why, in the hellish fire of 2020, did candles begin to morph into all sorts of shapes and sizes?

It would be easy to read our current penchant for candles symbolically – a search for light in a time of great darkness. The candle market as a whole has grown 22% in the last year according to the sales tracking company NPD. Candles are a simple way to return your bedroom-cum-office or living-room-cum-nightmarish-home-

school back into their homely selves when the sun disappears. "Candles instantly transform a space, they create such an ambiance when lit and even when sitting around they are a symbol of romantic possibility," says Piera Bochner, who makes kaleidoscopically colourful candles in the shape of beautiful vegetables, including romanesco, bumpy gourd and snake squash. "Since we have all been stuck at home for almost a year now, the ability to change the feeling of your environment is so desirable, people are craving that."

While the appeal of a candle-lit lockdown is certainly one aspect of the candle surge, I suspect there is more at play where sculptural candles are concerned, since any old dinner candle would function to create a mood. Given the price tag of these items, which ranges from €25 to €250, there must be more going on. To paraphrase artist Richard Hamilton, just what is it that makes today's candles so different, so appealing?

To truly get to the wick of understanding this, perhaps we must look to the chandlers (as candle makers have historically been known) who patiently weigh and melt down wax pellets, concoct wax recipes through rigorous trial and error, measure melting temperatures, stir in dyes, conduct drip tests, pour wax into moulds, wait for drying, un mould, clean the surfaces, and watch this magical material go from hard to soft, to something in between – an almost plasticky substance that is flexible, sculptable and texturally intriguing – over and over again.

Many candle makers have ventured into this waxy world from other creative disciplines – architecture, product design, styling and animation, to name a few – and as more creatives turn their attention to wax as a primary material for making, it is no wonder new forms and

innovations are emerging. But why the attention on wax?

Wax presents a solution to the problem of working from home as a maker, without access to the usual workshops and spaces. It doesn't need much equipment and is very accessible. Natascha Madeiski, a designer/architect, began making her Sculptural Candle series whilst locked-down in Switzerland. "I call it my 'Covid project'," she explains. "It is something you can do from start to end under these circumstances." Her candles – which resemble emerald green, charcoal grey, very pale pink and rich cream blocks of carefully cut, carved and stacked stones – are created using home-made silicone moulds. Likewise, stylist Callie Pettigrew has been pumping out candles of various shapes, colours and marbled combos, and new mould designs from her kitchen since establishing her candle company, Studio Dine, during the second UK lockdown. She estimates that she has made 600-700 candles since starting the enterprise two months ago, but she laughingly says that her kitchen is getting a little chaotic now.

Although candles are currently enjoying the attention of the design world, artists have long recognized the beauty and potential of this archetypal object. For centuries, images of dripping, self-engulfing candles have been used in memento mori artworks to remind us that we must all face death. The painting *Still Life with a Lighted Candle* (1627) by the Dutch Golden Age painter Pieter Claesz eerily depicts the final moments of a candle's life, its slightly oozing stump of body is just centimetres away from extinguishing itself, burning out forever. Candles, if they could speak, would softly tell us that life is fragile and fleeting.

Certainly, this symbolism is what draws contemporary artists Juliette Minchin, Urs Fischer and Marina

Abramović to candles. Minchin's sculpture *The Candlelight Vigil* (2019) is, essentially, a giant candle constructed from 300kgs of wax, 130 wicks and a metal interior supporting box. In watching the slow destruction of the performative artwork as it melts over several days, Minchin hopes the audience will reflect on their own temporality. It can "trigger the process of empathy, this strange feeling of projection of the human in the work," says Minchin. More literally, Fischer's candle sculpture *Leo (George and Irnelin)* was exhibited and set alight in October 2019, at the Gagosian in Paris. The larger-than-life sculpture is a portrait of Leonardo DiCaprio and his parents. Lit through a wick in the head of the life-like sculptures, the figures start to melt away, a black wax encased in the interior of their bodies dramatically oozing down their pastel bodies.

Those who buy them – and they sell for almost as much as \$1 million – can get the whole thing refabricated at a cost (\$50,000, in 2017) and delivered back to their home, ready to be melted again, and ordered again, and melted again, ad infinitum.

Another artwork harnessing the dramatic symbolism of candles is a performance that Abramović is reportedly preparing for her 2021 show at London's Royal Academy (postponed from 2020 for obvious reasons). According to the art dealership Widewalls, Abramović will be charged with up to one million volts of electricity "to the point she can extinguish a candle by simply pointing at it". Explaining the process, art fabricator Adam Lowe says that if it is done properly the electricity "comes out of your fingers and puts out a candle a metre away from the person. But if it goes wrong, it is a killing machine."

The candle, it seems, is the perfect medium to contemplate our inevitable demise, and sculptural candles are

transitioning from galleries into homes at a time when death is at the forefront of public consciousness. Consider the sculptural candles as mini, domestic momento mori artworks to remind us that the grim reaper is knocking at the world's door.

And yet, there is a strange irony at play. Sculptural candles are frequently covered by the media in listicles with headlines like "9 Candles We Want Right Now That Are Too Pretty To Burn" (*Refinery29*, October 2020) and "Playing with fire: the candles too beautiful to burn" (*Financial Times*, December 2020). This idea of being "too [insert nice adjective here] to burn" suggests that sculptural candles should only be used decoratively rather than functionally. If their aesthetics (and their price tags) sidestep their primary function – to be burnt down to a pool of wax – are sculptural candles no more than escapist products which give a cheery capitalist sheen to ideas of death and destruction?

Asking the candle makers how they feel about the idea of their work being "too pretty to burn" triggers varied intensities of responses but a unanimous consensus that they should, at some point, be burnt. Lex Pott, whose clever two-in-one TWIST candles were launched in 2020, thinks that it is "a horrible expression!" and compares his candles to a beautifully presented meal at a restaurant where you admire the food but then eat it "because that is what it is made for."

Janie Korn believes that most people tend to keep her fun and pop-art-esque candles. The desire to preserve Korn's handmade "magic candles" is understandable as they are often commissioned in the likeness of something dear to the buyer – the face of a loved one, a pet, or a nostalgic object – and there is something slightly violent about

the notion of setting that alight. Even she was once reluctant to burn them. "At first I thought 'how dare you burn something that I have put all this painstaking labour into!'" Korn explains that each candle takes 1.5-5 hours to make, "but now I'm changing my philosophy. Seeing them burn looks really cool so I've started to burn more of my own candles. I think it is a ceremony. It is an opportunity to release something, sort of like an effigy, and I hope more people do burn them."

In a similar synergy, Bochner offers this insight: "What I love about candles and specifically sculptural ones is that tension of function and form. It is pretty unique to candles that their function causes them to self-destruct. They become an experiment in ephemerality and dematerialism, whoever has the choice of lighting a candle has control over its existence."

And with this idea of control we can return to pondering the sculptural candle boom. In the early 2020s – when decisions of what we can and cannot do are dictated by tiny viral respiratory droplets with deadly potential – it is not surprising that we turn to objects that we have a measure of power over. A simple flick of a match, the gentle *ffffwooooshhh* as the wick catches and the candle melts away, reshaping itself from upright to lusciously drippy. We can choose how much, for how long and for what occasions this destruction takes place. Buying a fun candle may seem like a simple or even mundane act (and perhaps it is and I've been waxing lyrical for nothing, having had too much time for overthinking on my hands), but I believe, that inscribed in this object is a question of personal agency – if only a tiny amount – at a time when agency is in short supply. To light, or not to light, that is the question. <



Janie Korn

# A Letter From Antwerp

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Nav Haq

**For Antwerp's M HKA's current exhibition, *Monoculture - A Recent History*, associate director and curator Nav Haq created a glossary of terms intended to help us all get real about the much-needed vocabulary required for proper participation with and in debates on culture and society, particularly in relation to increasing monoculturality - namely, cultural homogeneity. The glossary is for the museum, for its public, and all DAMN° readers are encouraged to help the museum to expand on it.**

## AMBIGUITY

The term ambiguity comes from Latin and means “at least two-sided”, “unresolved”, “uncertain” or “indecisive”. Ambiguity manifests in language, in thinking, and as a property of the things we experience. These might include objects, images, places, concepts and even other people. Until Immanuel Kant, Western philosophy mainly tried to eliminate ambiguity. Philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Simone de Beauvoir have rejected the ideal of this unequivocalness, which still lives on in the natural sciences. Today, ambiguity is a key concept for philosophers, social scientists, writers and artists who oppose unequivocal interpretations of reality, understanding that to be human is also to be fundamentally ambiguous or unresolved. Psychoanalyst Else Frenkel-Brunswik made a correlation between our tolerance of ambiguous things and our social outlook - the more tolerant we are of ambiguous stimuli, the more we tend to appreciate an open tolerant society.

## LIBERALISM

Cultural liberalism describes progressive ethical and social values on socio-cultural issues ranging from societal equality, minority rights, abortion, sexual freedom, freedom of religion and free expression. Nineteenth-century philosopher Henry David Thoreau understood liberalism as a perspective on society that stresses the freedom of individuals from any pre-prescribed cultural norms with the rights to “march to the beat of a different drummer”. Cultural liberals believe in open tolerant society, but that society should not strictly impose specific codes of behaviour. They see themselves as defending the rights to express individuality as long as they do not harm anyone else. Liberalism can also refer to human perception, and the level of openness when experiencing new things.

## MONOCULTURE

In societal terms, monoculture can be defined as the homogeneous expression and mode of living of a particular social or ethnic group. As a political practice, monoculturalism seeks to safeguard a national culture by excluding external influences. It can sometimes support the belief of superiority within the dominant group over minorities in any given society. In this context, monoculturalism may involve the process of assimilation whereby minority groups have to adapt to the dominant culture and practices, forming cultural homogeneity. Like “culture”, monoculture comes from agriculture, where it is used to describe the practice of producing or growing a single crop or livestock species in a farming system. This technique has resulted in plants that are in fact clones, however it is taken for granted that they have reached the “original” or “pure” form of the plant. Monoculture is widely used in both industrial and organic farming, and has allowed increased efficiency in production and harvesting, while simultaneously increasing the risk of exposure to diseases or pests. <

Monoculture - A Recent History, M HKA -  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp,  
until 25 April. The full glossary can be found in  
the exhibition catalogue.



Mladen Stilinović  
An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist, 1992