



## trapeze artist

When Yulia Pinkusevich makes art, it often involves orienting her body in a physical space. That's how you're meant to experience her work, too.

by Melinda Sacks  
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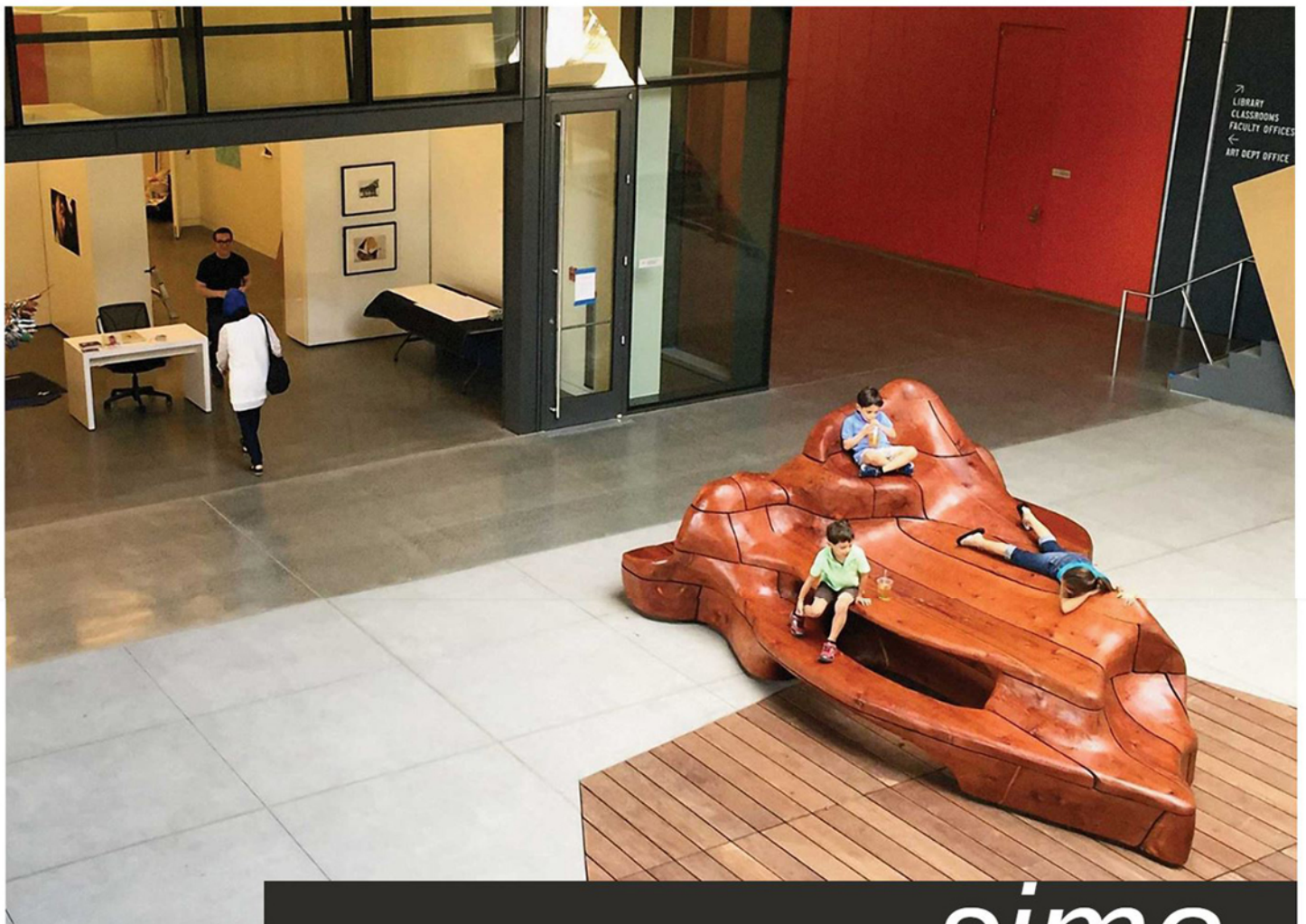
**Y**ulia Pinkusevich dangles from the ceiling of an empty warehouse, wearing a rock climbing harness that lets her move lightly along the wall, drawing stark lines and angles and filling them in with shades of black and gray. Her hands and feet leave little charcoal smudges on the white wall, traces of the full-body effort that is central to so much of her art.

Pinkusevich, MFA '12, works in an ever-expanding range of media that includes charcoal, ink, salt, concrete, polypropylene, metal, wood, and even light and shadow. Her creations are mostly large scale and often provocative. Fierce,

delicate, powerful and purposeful are some of the ways her colleagues in the art world describe her artistry.

From the 360-degree mural she painted at Facebook's corporate headquarters in Menlo Park to the redwood seating installation in the courtyard of Stanford's McMurtry Art and Art History Building, Pinkusevich's work invites observers to experience it with their entire bodies.

Growing up, Pinkusevich studied ballet intensively, appearing in three seasons of the New York City Ballet's *Nutcracker*. Today the 36-year-old assistant art professor at Mills College in Oakland is more than a decade into a prolific career as a working artist, and has created public art installations and exhibited her drawings, paintings and sculpture around the world. Recently she recalled hearing the performance artist Meredith Monk speak. "She talked about how ballet is all about connecting lines and spaces," Pinkusevich recalls, "and it just hit me—this is just what I've been doing all this time since I was a child."



*sima*

The sculptural seat in the permanent collection of Stanford's McMurtry Art and Art History Building was inspired by ancient sandstone formations and created from local second-growth redwood.

Photo: Yulia Pinkusevich

# dark matters

Much of Pinkusevich's work is informed by questions and issues that haunt her. She admits to dwelling on what she calls her "dark ideas"—the effects of globalization, the ramifications of capital punishment, what a postapocalyptic planet would look like. She sees her work as a way of disarming some of that darkness and pulling people into an aesthetic experience rather than clobbering them with intense and sometimes frightening topics.

"A lot of my work comes from anxieties that I'm processing within myself," she says. "I guess it's a way for me to externalize these things and not let them fester within me. I am looking for a way that we can have these difficult conversations without it being such a bummer."

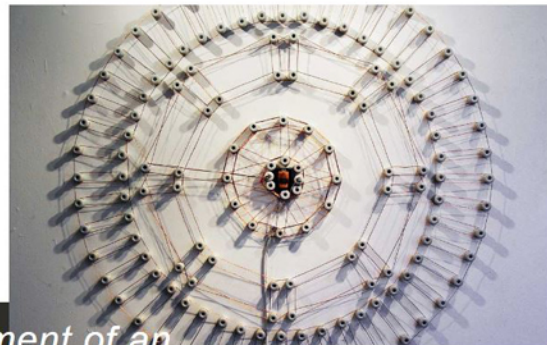
Paul DeMarinis, a Stanford art professor and an electronic media artist, met Pinkusevich when she came in for an interview for the MFA program. He still remembers being impressed by her strong sense of purpose.

"There is a darkness that we all share being citizens of this small planet," he says. "Yulia brings a kind of friction between eye appeal and deep consideration. That's why her work is masterful in its scale and diversity. It has real traction."

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Douglas Walla, the founder of Kent Fine Art in New York, which represents Pinkusevich, says, "There is an urgency and a connectedness to real-world events that spoke to me. Her work is not escapist; it attempts to grasp the gravity of what is happening in the world."

One of Pinkusevich's more provocative works is an installation in her Oakland studio, where visitors interact with it when her studio is open to the public and on First Fridays, a monthly community event when locals can visit artists' places of work.



## *sentiment of an invisible omniscience*

The electrified wire sculpture delivers a small shock when touched.

Photo: Yulia Pinkusevich

*Sentiment of an Invisible Omniscience* is an electrified sculpture that delivers a shock when touched. Constructed from copper wire and a disassembled charger from an electrified fence, the piece is accompanied by a sign that reads: "TOUCH AT YOUR OWN RISK" and "CAUTION: ELECTRIC SHOCK."

"It was a way to talk about capital punishment," she explains.

The work was inspired by the design of a panopticon prison, in which cells are arranged in a circle around a guard tower in the center, creating for the prisoner a sense of always being watched. During a recent open studios event, a group of visitors joined hands in front of the piece and one person touched it to elicit a shock that traveled through them all. They lingered afterward, discussing the experience and their thoughts about the death penalty. It was exactly the kind of response Pinkusevich had hoped for.

"People will sit on this couch and have these deep conversations about capital punishment and the state of the world," she says. "It feels like art can still have an impact."



# *polyscape*

The series of sculptures was made from injection-molded recycled polypropylene; the 3D pentagons are linked together with aluminum rings.

*Photo: Yulia Pinkusevich*

# stretching boundaries

While not overtly political, Pinkusevich's work emerges from her experience growing up in Ukraine when it was part of the Soviet Union and relocating to the United States as a refugee with her parents, both engineers, when she was 9 years old.

Following her grandfather, who had already immigrated, Pinkusevich arrived in New York with her parents and 2-year-old sister just before the collapse of the Soviet Union. The family carried \$200 with which to begin their new life. Her mother, a former math teacher with a graduate degree in engineering, found low-paying work as a seamstress.

"I don't think as a child I really understood what that took," Pinkusevich, herself the mother of a 18-month-old daughter, says now.

Remarkably flexible and coordinated as a child, Pinkusevich had trained in ballet in Ukraine. After the move to New York she was accepted as a pupil at the School of American Ballet. But by adolescence, she says, she was starting to find the rigorous daily training schedule burdensome and somewhat joyless. She remembers the creeping doubts that made her question whether she wanted a career in ballet; at the same time, her interest in other forms of expression began to blossom.

As a student, Pinkusevich concentrated less on her academic studies and more on drawing and painting, gaining entrance to Rutgers University Mason Gross School of the Arts and later, the MFA program at Stanford. Briefly drawn to studying architecture because of the potential for large-scale works with big impact, she attended a summer program at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. She gained invaluable skills, she says, and realized architecture wasn't quite the right fit.

"I wanted to create more public art that humans can engage with in a particular space," she says. "I wanted to take my practice off the wall."



# *untitled*

Pinkusevich reenvisioned the landscape beyond the walls in a 360-degree acrylic and chalk mural created at Facebook headquarters in Menlo Park.

*Photo: Yulia Pinkusevich*

## art writ large

Corporate residency projects and public art commissions offer opportunities for on-site installations that suit Pinkusevich's bent for large-scale expression and engagement.

She has been a resident artist at Autodesk in San Francisco, where one of her projects was inspired by the way humans and machines collaborate to explore space. The series of topographical images of the surface of Mars began as photographs taken by autonomous robots, to which Pinkusevich applied paint, laser-etching technology and pastels.

She has done stints at Google headquarters in Mountain View, Cité des Arts International in Paris, Goldwell Open Air Museum in Las Vegas and the Wurlitzer Foundation in Taos, among others, designing and building immersive, multimedia installations that inspire and sometimes stop people in their tracks.

The goal for her three-month residency at Facebook was to transform a high-ceilinged, windowless lounge at the corporate headquarters in Menlo Park into a space that refreshed and energized employees.

Enchanted by the local salt flats, Pinkusevich wanted to give the employees hunched over their computers a sense of being part of the landscape beyond their office walls. She used acrylic paint in shades of purple to capture the salt flats' eerie glow.

"The idea for the painting was that one can imagine dissolving the walls of the Facebook buildings and be in the salt and marshland surrounding campus," she says.

She worked from the platform of a motorized scissor lift that moved her around the space as she sanded and painted. "I became aware of how distinctly different an artist's process is from a tech worker's," she says. "The physical nature of painting and the sound from my daily work was a strong contrast to the silence and lack of physical movement of computer work."

In fact, the scissor lift and sander made so much noise that she switched to using them after 5 p.m. and on weekends. But, she says, not everyone was bothered by the disruption. "Many people were curious and excited by the mural-making process. Once I even arrived on site to find a note from an employee thanking me for making their workspace beautiful."



## *city of salt*

Pinkusevich casts and sculpts sodium chloride into a series of intricately eroded shapes.

Photo: Yulia Pinkusevich

# elemental experiments

When she starts a new piece, Pinkusevich often has a clear vision for her final product, but that wasn't the case when she recently began experimenting with salt as a medium for sculpture. She was intrigued by the physical properties of salt, and by the mineral's intimate and contradictory relationship with the human body: "It's the only rock we eat. It corrodes and heals. We need it to survive, but it can kill us if we consume too much."

Her experiments required purchasing large quantities of sodium chloride from a distillery in San Jose. At one point she found herself transporting 1,000 pounds of it from the South Bay to her Oakland studio in her 2003 VW Golf.

"I was impressed the car made it back with that much weight!" she laughs.



## *mother and child*

Pinkusevich with her young daughter.

*Photo: Phoebe Deutsch*

To create her salt castings, Pinkusevich pours the granulated salt into a crucible, a container suitable for melting materials at high temperatures. She places it in a kiln the size of an Easy-Bake oven and heats it to 1,500 degrees Fahrenheit, just above salt's melting point. Wearing safety goggles and heavily insulated gloves, she then pours the molten salt into molds she has fashioned from sand, clay or metal. Once the salt is cool and hard, Pinkusevich removes the form and uses water to sculpt the blocks of now marble-like material to her satisfaction. If the individual pieces are smaller in scope than much of her work, the medium has a universal quality that is anything but.

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