





### When push comes to shove

In one form or another, Michelle Bellemare's sculptures appear to be readymade facsimiles of recognizable consumer products ranging from plastic food containers to electrical power bars. They seem obvious at first glance yet each involves a methodical process of design and fabrication that bears close scrutiny. These works are complex and psychologically loaded explorations into the human condition.

Bellemare's works are at once approachable and forbidding. She references common household items yet always manages to incorporate some form of subtle material modification. Regardless of their original function, her sculptures operate as analogs of the human body. They purposefully evoke its vulnerabilities, as well as its resilience in the face of physical and psychic trauma.

Despite their economy, Bellemare's projects involve a time-consuming process of prototyping and testing the limits of materials that routinely demands months of research and preparation before actual production. Eschewing almost all trace of the artist's hand, many of her sculptures appear to be machine-made. One might almost imagine them being put together on an assembly line, and yet counter-intuitively each is a meticulously constructed one-of-a-kind object.

Bellemare's attention to detail, from the thickness and colour of a material to its placement in a room, reflects a deep commitment to the design and production process as well as an inherent need to get things right, to create aesthetic objects that manifest an elevated degree of veracity. Bellemare may reference prosaic off-the-shelf consumer goods but psychologically her works operate on another level. Her sculptures may be improbable but they must seem plausible.

*Casket* is a visually stunning monument that perfectly mimics the Ziploc brand containers commonly used to store leftovers. Bellemare elongates the basic form,

increasing its scale to correspond with the length of a human body, essentially creating a consumer-friendly coffin that seduces us with its reassuring familiarity. From the opaque container to the cerulean lid with the smart snap corner and familiar logo embossed on top, this casket soothes our anxieties about aging, frailty and death by sanitizing, compartmentalizing and displacing our fears with its smooth, space-saving design.

*Cushion* is another pointed proposition. Leaning against the wall, what at first glance appears to be a common garbage bag is revealed to have four upholstery buttons neatly but purposefully embedded within its squat shape. The household comfort promised by the familiar buttons is undercut by the cold reflective sheen of the plastic, suggesting nothing less than a discarded human torso. The truncated form contrasts our desire for comfort with the disposability of those most vulnerable in our society, particularly the homeless.

*Sleeping Bag* is very much what its name implies, a custom-made sleeping bag that has been fastidiously sewn together using lengths of tensor bandage to articulate the exterior, while the interior is lined with quilted gauze. Lying on the floor like a pleated sarcophagus, the soft sculpture appears to be a cozy and inviting retreat, a healing cocoon. Conversely, it also evokes a stifling sense of claustrophobia.

*Moving forward falling back* is an unnerving kinetic sculpture featuring a larger-than-life hourglass filled with over 66,000 replica pills modeled on Tramadol Hydrochloride—a prescription painkiller. Triggered by motion sensors, the hourglass turns clockwise causing the pills to cascade from the top chamber to the bottom over a three-minute duration before repeating. The result of over two years of research and prototyping, *Moving forward falling back* is the most complex sculpture the artist has produced, a successful marriage of creative design and mechanical engineering.

Performing both the inevitable passage of time and an endless cycle of medication, the installation addresses our societies predilection to push our bodies beyond their limits.

Bellemare's sculptures are inherently performative. Each is designed to accommodate the artist's body, and suggest a possible use or function. The lid on *Casket* is removable and resealable, and could conceivably be used to store a medium-sized body. *Sleeping Bag* is fully functional, albeit extremely impractical to use. To varying degrees, all of Bellemare's projects implicate the viewer in a familiar 1:1 scale relationship. Like bodies, they tend to sit or slump or lean to reiterate the unyielding pull of gravity.

Gender inequality, economic inequity and an aging population are common themes, fears that we face as individuals and as a society. If there is a sense of foreboding that animates Bellemare's work there is also an underlying absurdity. How else might one hope to explain a larger-than-life Ziploc container or a fully operational six-foot high hourglass filled with a lifetime supply of Zytram XL? Bellemare's projects are fueled by the ebb and flow between the abject and the absurd. The tensions and anxieties we sense in her work mimic our own, highlighting the uncomfortable ways in which consumerism preys on our deep seated fear of mortality.

*When push comes to shove* speaks to our troubling times. The tangible materiality of Bellemare's sculptures leaves us with a palpable sense of the human body on the brink of collapse, persisting despite its fallibility and shortcomings.

— Ivan Jurakic

Cover Image: *Moving forward falling back*, 2013/15. Photo: Scott Lee. Interior Images (from left to right): *Casket*, 2006/07. Photo: Isaac Applebaum. *Cushion*, 2009/10. Photo: Isaac Applebaum. *Sleeping Bag* (detail), 2011/12. Photo: Isaac Applebaum. *Moving forward falling back* (detail), 2013/15. Photo courtesy of the artist.

### List of Works

*Casket*, 2006/07  
Copolyester vacuum formed Tupperware tray and removable lid  
198 x 60 x 41 cm

*Add it up*, 2007  
Adding machine calculator tape, shadow box frame  
188.5 x 17 x 8 cm

*Cushion*, 2009/10  
Garbage bag, metal buttons, bungee cords, PVC pipe, garbage (cans, bottles, plastic packaging), grommets, expandable foam, protective polymer coating  
79 x 43 x 84 cm

*Sleeping Bag*, 2011/12  
Tensor bandages, gauze, down filling, linen, aluminum screening, interfacing, metal boning, thread, zipper, tensor bandage clips, embroidered tag  
173 x 51 x 18 cm

### Artist Biography

Michelle Bellemare is a sculptor whose work explores how the properties of different materials can embody emotional or physical vulnerability in relation to the demands of contemporary life. Her approach is relational, experiential and phenomenological. She is a graduate of OCADU. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally at the Koffler Gallery, the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Diaz Contemporary and Centre Clark in Montreal. She is the recipient of several grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and Ontario Arts Council. She lives and works in Toronto. [www.michellebellemare.com](http://www.michellebellemare.com)

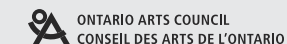
*Push*, 2014  
Fimo polymer clay, powder pigment, wall mounted shelf  
9 x 11.5 x 14 cm

*Moving forward falling back*, 2013/15  
Handblown borosilicate glass, stainless steel bracket, 70,000 injected molded polypropylene plastic pain pills based on Tramadol Hydrochloride (Zytram XL 100MG tablet), internal mechanism, motion sensors  
182 x 60 x 98 cm

*Nervous System*, 2015  
Sculpted and cast plastic powerbar and plugs, armature wire, heat-shrink, LED bulbs, Lithium Ion Polymer Battery, Micro USB charger, variable resistors  
213 x 89 x 35.5 cm

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