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"Rubber Art Maestro Martha Friedman's Brooklyn Waterfront Studio Contains Gallons of Silicone and a Bundle of Antique Cigars"

By Sarah Cascone

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Martha Friedman. Photo: Paola Ferrario, courtesy of Art in America.

The artist introduces us to her custom "Martha Tool" and shares her guilty-pleasure podcast.

[Martha Friedman](#) is a maestro of rubber, casting the bouncy, stretchy material into sheets, ropes, and tubes that she incorporates into artworks that range from sculptures to choreographed performances—and, most recently, the painterly light boxes on view in her current solo shows at San Francisco's [Jessica Silverman Gallery](#) and the [Princeton University Art Museum](#).

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The series "A Natural Thickening of Thought" consists of 10 works, each featuring colorful, vaguely organic shapes made using dyed rubber. They were inspired by drawings of neurons by [Santiago Ramón y Cajal](#), the Spanish scientist who won the 1906 Nobel Prize for his research on the nervous system, which included detailed, groundbreaking drawings of what he saw beneath the microscope.

At Princeton, Friedman has paired the light boxes with "Mummy Wheat," a series of five busts made by coating the head, face, and upper body of her collaborator Silas Riener with rubber, covered by a layer of plaster, for 90 minutes. She then used the mold to make hollow, mold-blown busts, stretching our conception of the human body (pun intended). Two are adorned with gold leaf, while one sits next to a pile of thin rubber ribbons meant to recall mummy wrappings.

While she was preparing for the two exhibitions, we caught up with Friedman at her studio in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, to discuss the appeal of medical oddities, working with Riener, and the one celebrity that helped her get through the pandemic.



The Martha Tool. Courtesy of Martha Friedman.

Can you send us a snap of the most indispensable item(s) in your studio and tell us why you can't live without it?

The Martha Tool. It's a little red five-gallon bucket opener that my assistant wrote my name on. I use a lot of silicone rubber in my work, and it's expensive. I use the Martha Tool to crack open the

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lids of these five-gallon drums of rubber and I get every drop out. Even though it is dumb-looking, its usefulness makes it special.

I've seen people unsuccessfully toil for half an hour trying to get the lid off a five-gallon bucket using just their hands, and then get the pliers and screwdrivers in there, all to no avail. But the Martha Tool pops the lids off, easy-peasy.



Rehearsing with Silas Riener. Courtesy of Martha Friedman.

**What is a studio task on your agenda this week that you are most looking forward to?**

All the tasks. I'm in the last week of prep for two upcoming shows, one at Jessica Silverman in San Francisco and one at the [Princeton University Art Museum](https://www.princeton.edu/artmuseum/).

As part of my show for Jessica Silverman, I've created a performance called *Tenterhooks* with my longtime collaborator, Silas Riener. He's a choreographer and dancer, and we make body/object sculptures together.

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This week, we'll have our final rehearsal before the live performance, and it's always an adrenaline rush to see all the potential the piece has before it premieres. He's also a good friend and it is very meaningful to create something together.

For this piece, I'm casting 75 jumbo rubber bands that Silas will interact with. It's taken me weeks to make them all. I'll feel liberated when the monotony of creating rubber bands is over.



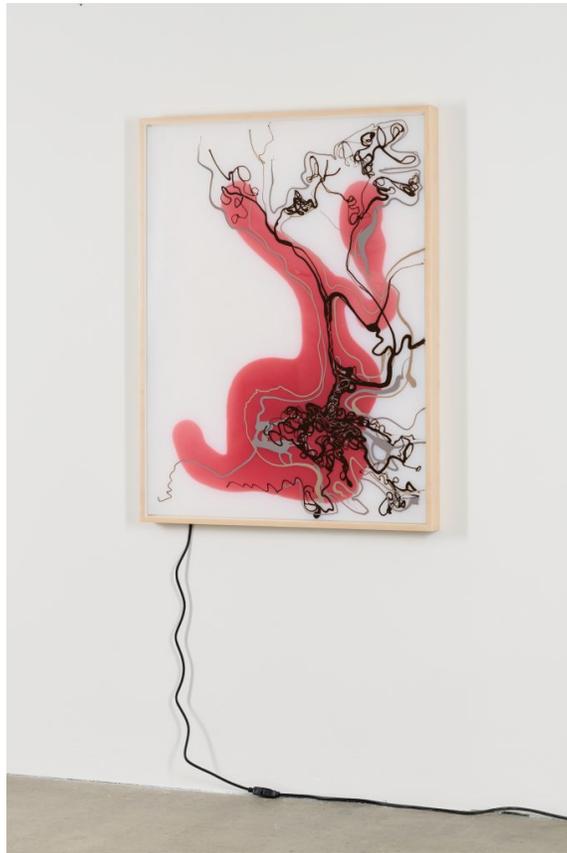
Martha Friedman, *Bust 4* from "Mummy Wheat" (2021). Photo: Kristine Eudey, courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco. © Martha Friedman.

**What kind of atmosphere do you prefer when you work? Do you listen to music or podcasts, or do you prefer silence? Why?**

I generally like silence, but if I have to work late, I'll listen to podcasts and audiobooks. Lately I've been listening to Masha Gessen's biography of Vladimir Putin, [Mandy Matney's Murdaugh Murders](#) podcast, and a podcast called [Power: Hugh Hefner](#).

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Martha Friedman, *Floating Thought #7*, from "A Natural Thickening of Thought" (2022). Photo: Glen Cheriton, courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco. © Martha Friedman.

**Who are your favorite artists, curators, or other thinkers to follow on social media right now?**

I'm into medical oddities and general curiosities right now. [@Ridiculously\\_interesting](#) and the [Yale Medical Historical Library](#) on Instagram are really good for that. [@HistoryFeels](#) has great historical stuff that is fascinating.

Then there's a Ukrainian artist named [Luba Drozd](#), who collates a lot of really useful information about what's happening in Ukraine using Instagram Stories.

Honestly, I'm probably most obsessed with [Mandy Patinkin's Instagram](#). It's videos shot by Mandy's son, who was holed up with his parents during the pandemic, of Mandy and his wife, Kathryn Grody, doing banal, everyday stuff. Strangely, it's given me a tremendous amount of solace during the pandemic.

My guiltiest pleasure is the podcast [Bitchsesh](#). It's about reality TV that my friend turned me on to. I used to watch the *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, and my friend said Bitchsesh was a funny podcast by two women talking about it. But it turns out they cover all the *Real Housewives* franchises, and I think Bitchsesh is so funny that I've started watching the other *Housewives* just so I'll get the jokes better on Bitchsesh. It feels like the tail wagging the dog.

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**When you feel stuck while preparing for a show, what do you do to get unstuck?**

I'll look out my studio window at barges that float by. The empty barges travel east, up Newtown Creek, and then hours later pass by going west, laden with tons of cargo: crushed cars, garbage, sand. There's something mesmerizing about watching the monumental detritus of humanity reduced to its elemental forms and then massed together, drifting by.

The other thing I'll do is play the video game *Among Us*. You're on a spaceship and either assigned tasks as a crewmate or as a spy whose job is to wipe out all the crewmates. You have to lie a lot and people say funny things. It's really competitive and gets my adrenaline going.



Martha Friedman, *Floating Thought #1*, from "A Natural Thickening of Thought" (2022). Photo: Glen Cheriton, courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco. © Martha Friedman.

**What trait do you most admire in a work of art? What trait do you most despise?**

The trait I most admire in a work of art is rubber.

The trait I most despise in a work of art is rubber. Just kidding! I don't despise anything in a work of art.

**What images or objects do you look at while you work? Share your view from behind the canvas or your desktop—wherever you spend the most time.**

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Usually when I'm making a body of work, I'll stare at some referent that intrigues me, and that item will often become the seedling for my next body of work. In the past, that referent has been a wedge, a waffle iron, a tapestry, and most recently, drawings of neurons by Santiago Ramón y Cajal.

As I work on my current show, I keep looking at this bundle of antique cigars that I found at a junk shop about a year ago. I find them mesmerizing. I've been reading about the historical employment of women in cigar-making. It was thought that their dexterity and sensitiveness of touch learned in the needle trades would transfer to rolling cigars.



Martha Friedman's studio. Courtesy of Martha Friedman

I've made lots of oversized rubber weavings and have been fascinated by Sigmund Freud's assertion that one of the few things women ever invented was weaving. According to Freud, women were inspired to invent textiles by their own pubic hair, which they greatly valued as a kind of veil to hide their shame around their castration/lack of a penis. This cigar bundle—as a collection of phallic symbols of male power—seems like the diametric opposite of all that. Not sure what that means, but it's intriguing.

["Martha Friedman: Brain in Hand"](#) is on view at Jessica Silverman Gallery, 621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, California, April 29–May 28, 2022.

["Body Matters/Martha Friedman"](#) is on view as part of the "Art@Bainbridge" series at the Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, New Jersey, May 20–July 10, 2022.

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