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## Exchange Value: Jon Kessler at Salon 94 Freemans By Scott Indrisek



"Jon Kessler's Gifts," on view at Salon 94 Freemans through March 28, is a welcome peek at an art-economy based on emotional exchange, rather than cash. That may be a slightly disingenuous statement — roughly half of the works here are indeed for sale — but a good percentage of the exhibition is composed of delicate, handmade sculptures Kessler created for friends and family members, all of whom have gifted back those works for the duration of the show. Many of them move, however slightly, when pushed or prodded; some are mechanical; most involve stacked, cantilevered, or adeptly arranged objects that, if misaligned, would simply collapse; a good number incorporate kitschy memorabilia sourced in Chinatown or at the downtown New York outlet Pearl River. (Kessler draws a link to sculptures he made in the '80s, which similarly explored an aesthetic of lowbrow "Asian" exotica.) The gift sculptures look a bit like Haim Steinbach collaborating with Carol Bove — they're intensely personal and subtly hilarious, any flirtation with whimsy tempered by a serious compositional eye.

On opening night last week, Kessler talked me through a number of the more personal offerings. There's "The Lady—Juliette Kessler's 16<sup>th</sup> Birthday Gift," 2010, a sculpture he made for his daughter. "This was her favorite doll," the artist said of the Indonesian puppet figure that is the work's centerpiece. "We used to play with all the time — I would be the voice of the lady, and do puppet shows for her. When she got too old to play with it, I turned it into an automaton using a really traditional, 19<sup>th</sup>- century mechanism that moves the doll's arms and head." Nearby is another kinetic sculpture, a 50th birthday present for Kessler's wife, which has a slowly opening-and-closing shell that he bought at the Soho store Evolution. Other gifted works include one given to Tom Sachs and Sarah Hoover on their wedding day, and pieces marking a wide range of birthdays, from a 30th (artist Andrew Ohanesian of "House Party" fame) to an 80th (Barbara Appleby).

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Subtle perversities abound in the show. "Keeper of the Key," 2013, is a quasi-interactive edition of 10: A mass-produced sculpture of a pudgy Asian man who appears to be attacked by a colorful blob. "This was a commission: If you give me your front door key I will stamp your name in it, and then pour pigment into a Magnum Trojan, making a unique object that fits on this guy," Kessler explained. The key is embedded in that lumpy, Magnum-cast form. The commissioner is not required to provide the super-sized condom, thankfully: "You don't have to go out and embarrass yourself at Duane Reade," the artist said. "Titty Twister," 2014, is more explicitly prurient. A plaster cast of a woman's bare upper torso, with moveable, silver nipples, is set atop a small cabinet housing a Moog synthesizer. As the title suggests, twisting the anatomical knobs alters the synth's throbbing frequencies. "This forced me to email my friends and ask who had a girlfriend with small breasts and large nipples," he said. "I learned how to cast silver for it."

Other sculptures are more sweet than suggestive: One of them — combining a cast of the artist's hand with machining equipment and coral found in Tulum, Mexico — was intended for Kessler's sister-in-law, the author Siri Husvedt, who was due to turn 60 the following week. She would discover the gift for the first time at the exhibition, already unwrapped and on display.