

Moscow-born photographer Nika Sandler has always seen the world through her own specific lens. With so much to offer as a creative force, Sandler explores the complexities of nature and of the human experience. Through her work, she provides a range of both introspective and extroceptive explorations of a world we can recognise as our own and one which appears to be just beyond our reach.



In her candy-coloured 2021 photographic series, *The World of Hedonia*, Sandler explores the realities of the obsessive pursuit of pleasure. She also offers a critique of late capitalism, how it artifices emotion and poses unrealistic demands. In this interview, she tells us about her influences, capitalist exploitations of biopolitics and the necessity of unhappiness in the quest for happiness. Here, you can immerse yourself in a world so sweet it might rot your teeth.

**Could you start by telling us a bit about yourself and your work as a photographer?**

I was born in Moscow 24 years ago. Since childhood, I loved to immerse myself in the world of fantasy and drawing. Creativity was my way of self-discovery, socialisation and therapy. Over time, drawing faded into the background, and photography took its place.

Your website, says that you studied at the Dodecoco School of Modern Photography and the Fine Art School of Photography in Russia, as well as working on your own personal projects since 2020. What inspired you to get involved in the art of photography and to create your own work?

I was sitting at a psychiatrist's appointment. I thought about death. I needed a stimulus to live, and the unconscious led me to photography. It became my hobby, but one day in the library I saw a book by Joel-Peter Witkin with his transgressive piece of art and frank comments on them. Then I realised that I wanted to create my own work.

Your 2021 photographic series, *The World of Hedonia*, focuses on an all-consuming pursuit of pleasure, particularly, sensory pleasure. Could you tell us a little bit more about how you understand pleasure and why it features so prominently in this project?

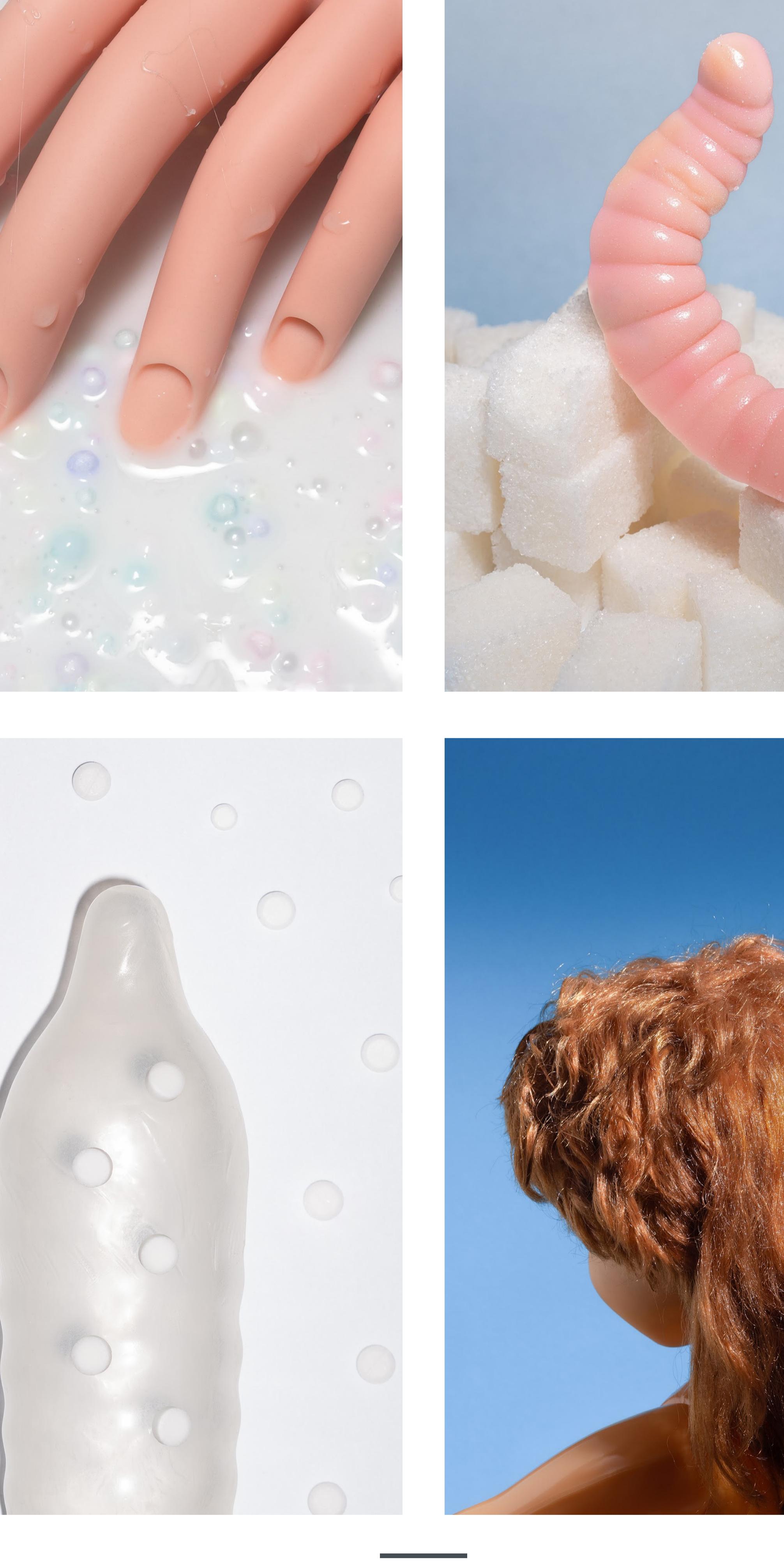
Pleasure was a phenomenon that made my life less meaningless and unbearable. In this series, I explored my values because I doubted them.

In the introduction to *The World of Hedonia*, you refer to British philosopher Mark Fisher's concept of 'depressive hedonism' from his book *Capitalist Realism*. You describe it as "an inability to do anything other than the search for pleasure," and as something you felt "trapped" in. Why did you choose to include this concept in the project and what was it like experiencing it?

In the concept of 'depressive hedonia,' I saw a reflection of the 'trap' in which I found myself. In the project, this concept became a political layer that shed light on the scope and depth of the problems associated with pleasure and late capitalism.

Hedonism is a philosophy that is defined as the belief that pleasure – the total satisfaction of one's desires – is the highest good and proper aim of human life. Do you subscribe to this philosophy?

It seems to me that hedonism does not have a strong enough foundation to rely on it.



Could you talk a little bit about the project as a critique of capitalism? How do you think capitalism has impacted how we think the pursuit of pleasure can be achieved?

Capitalism influences people through biopolitics. I like how the Spanish philosopher Paul B. Preciado writes about this in *Pharmaco-pornographic Politics: Towards a New Gender Ecology*: "The success of contemporary techno-science consists in transforming our depression into Prozac, our masculinity into testosterone, our erection into Viagra, our fertility/sterility into the pill, our AIDS into Tri-therapy without knowing which comes first; if depression or Prozac, if Viagra or an erection, if testosterone or masculinity, if the pill or maternity, if Tri-therapy or AIDS."

You also occasionally offset the 'pleasant and seductive' objects and substances in your pieces with a 'creepy' element. Could you tell us a bit about this choice of blending the enchanting with the unnerving?

The 'creepy' element is the dark side of pleasure. Sooner or later, you get fed up with your favourite sweets and it becomes disgusting to you.

You describe the doll featured in *The World of Hedonia* as being your "alter-ego, living a New Year's experiment." What parallels can you draw between yourself, and the doll featured in the project?

In the photos, the doll 'did' everything I did behind the scenes. She had sweet dreams, plunged into sticky liquids and found herself in despair with a loop of marshmallows around her neck.

Your other works, such as *Mycophilia* and *Plant and Human Pain*, provide studies of natural subjects and environments, contrasting with the artificial and surreal subject matter featured in *The World of Hedonia*. What was unique about the creative process for *The World of Hedonia* compared to your other works?

In this series, I have sought to emphasise the unrealistic demands of late capitalism. That's why it consists of artificial objects.

*The World of Hedonia* has been featured in several magazines and has gained a lot of traction. Why do you think this particular project has been so successful?

It has gained a lot of traction because many people have a difficult relationship with pleasure. After publications in magazines, people with alcohol and drug addictions and postpartum depression wrote to me saying that the project resonated with their feelings and experience.

Is there anything you want the audience of this photographic series to take away from it?

It is not necessary to chase pleasure and be always joyful and happy. All feelings are normal and interconnected. Pleasure does not exist without displeasure.

Finally, can you tell us about anything else you're working on?

I recently had a wisdom tooth removed. This event aroused my interest in the study of teeth and their role in human experience, in particular the experiences of pleasure and pain.

Words  
Becca Child

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