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CAN HANDMADE OBJECTS RADIATE JOY?

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CAN HANDMADE OBJECTS RADIATE JOY?

Marthe Elise Stramrud
MA essay
Kunstakademiet i Oslo

Introduction

I work with the sculptural and painterly in photography, sculpture and installation – often with an exploration of display and use. I use clay and photographs as vehicles for studying the oscillation between silhouettes, backdrops, flatness and form - between two and three dimensions - and between photographs, objects and the places they occupy in the public and private realm. I place my sculptures in the traditional exhibition format within a white cube gallery as well as in the forests outdoors or on people's dining tables. I have been fascinated with how works of art have the possibility of "vibrating energy" once they have been transported from the studio to their eventual home, where their energies are felt on what can only be considered a spiritual level. With this paper, I intend to guide you through some of my ideas and thoughts concerning a selection of my work from when I first graduated with my BFA in Photography in 2011, up until my most recent works, orbiting around the central question: Can handmade objects radiate joy?

On photography and my early photographic works:

In the work *Livingroom Poetics* (2011 – 2015), photographs were hung on a row on a gallery wall. I carefully paired household objects as my subjects. The final images were fossilized, so to speak, with a large format camera. I suggest new ways to look at and process things in our immediate surroundings while at the same time pointing at a potentially poetic "charge" found in trivial/everyday materials. Isolated from their intended domestic context, I wished to inspire a profound reflection on how we construct the world around us. My assemblages were not meant to be perceived as beautiful in a conventional sense, nor did I want the assemblages relate to "the perfect form". The objective was rather to consider the visual arguments in a discussion about the relationship between sculpture, objects and photography, and how the boundaries between these could be transversed. These sculptural compositions were created specifically for the camera (with it's infinite potential of combinations of light, angles and composition) and could only be described in photographs, which I believed amplified the sculptural form.



Marthe Elise Stramrud
Untitled (Livingroom Poetics no 2), 2011
Inkjetprint on baryta paper, 12,7 x 10,16 cm



Marthe Elise Stramrud
Untitled (Livingroom Poetics no 10), 2013
Inkjetprint on cotton paper, 59 x 73,75 cm

When Henry Fox Talbot photographed the Hellenistic sculpture; *Bust of Patroclus* in 1844, he took what may well have been the first photograph of a sculpture¹. Talbot became fascinated with how many different pictures he could take of the same object, and his work remarked on how well suited sculpture was as a motif for photographers. The photograph was an early extension of the sculpture for another reason as well; art historian Tobia Bezzola claims that modernist photographers between World War I and World War II played a crucial role in giving everyday objects sculptural status². Through fragmentation as well as manipulation of size, perspective and light - photography seemed to have a magic ability to turn the world into *objet trouvées*³.



Henry Fox Talbot
Plate 4: *Bust of Patroclus*,
from WHF Talbot, *Pencil of Nature*, plate V, London,
1844-46



Henry Fox Talbot
Plate 5: *Bust of Patroclus*,
from WHF Talbot, *Pencil of Nature*, plate V, London,
1844-46

I have continued working sculpturally with photography in this way. Most recently in a public commission for the rehabilitation-hospital Suunaas Sykehus (on Nesodden outside of Oslo, Norway) where 26 photographs were hung in 52 patient rooms. Having these playful, vibrant images in the hospital provided the rooms, and then - hopefully - the patients with a contrast to feelings of monotony and sickness most often felt in institutional buildings. This commission represents a central thought in my practice, that seems to keep coming up and up again - the idea that even if these are objects, they still have the ability to *animate*, or bring life to - their surroundings.

¹ Christine Hansen, *Sakte Bilder*, published in the exhibition catalogue *Sakte Bilder*, Lillehammer Kunstmuseum, 2016

² Tobia Bezzola, *From Sculpture in Photography to Photography as Plastic Art*, published in *The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture 1839 to Today*, 2010.

³ *Objet Trouvé* = A natural or discarded object found by chance and held to have aesthetic value (Merriam Webster)



Marthe Elise Stramrud
Disse Blomstene Visner Aldri, 2017
C-print in Facemount, 48 x 60 cm
Documentation of commission work for Sunnaas

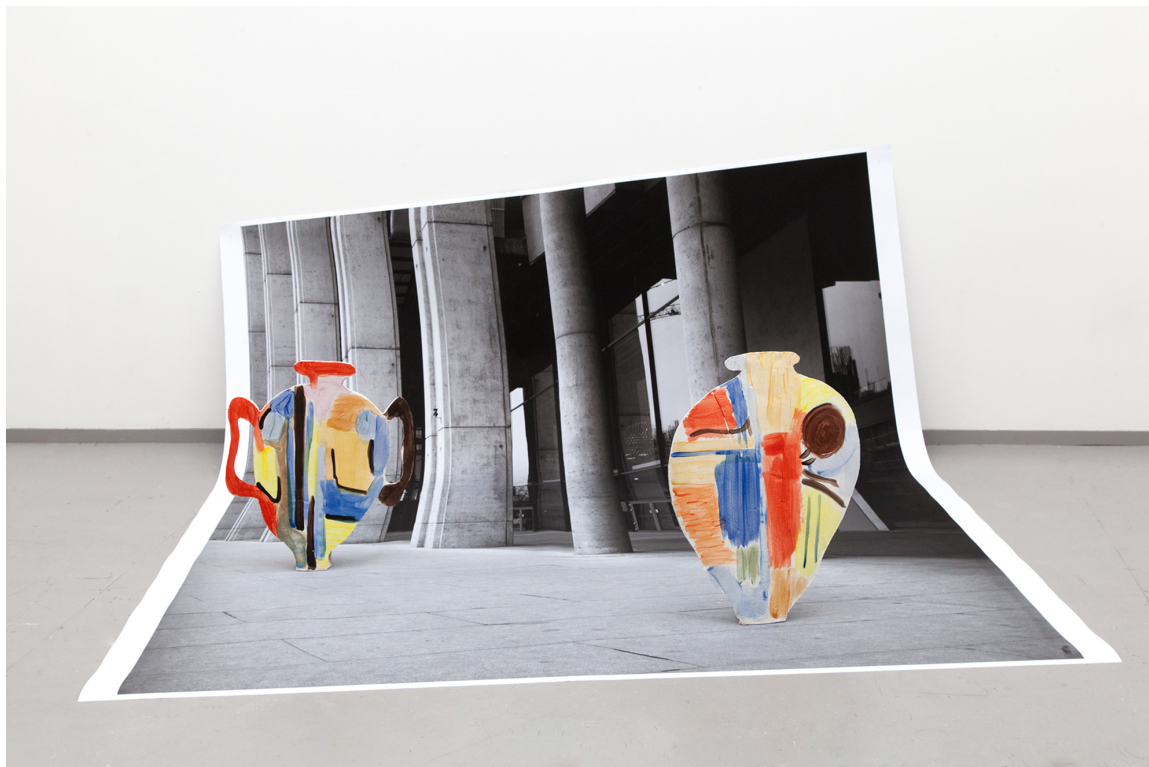


Marthe Elise Stramrud
Disse Blomstene Visner Aldri (no 8), 2017
C-print in Facemount, 48 x 60 cm

Putting ceramic sculptures together with photos:

When I started my master at KHiO (in Fall 2016) I was searching for new techniques and materials to broaden my repertoire. Photography was more or less the only technique I had learned to work with and I felt "technically confident" but was left with little or no surprises during my work process. It was then that I fell in love with clay. This was the beginning of a process that I felt was both soulfully fragile and physically strong. I leapt into this world of new narratives on shape, emotion and form.

Vessels (2017) was the result of discovering my materials arsenal along with firing, clay mixing and colour chemistry. The work consisted of one large black and white photograph depicting a row of pillars and several colourful flat ceramic vases with ceramic pieces placed on top. The photograph, measuring 2,5 by 3 meters is liberated from its traditionally fixed wall placement and is curved, sliding down the wall and onto the floor. The sculptures, on the other hand, are posing as three-dimensional round vases but in fact they are quite flat and take over the "frontal task" of representing something. Where traditionally sculpture is placed in the room so that one can walk around it and see it from all angles, and photography is framed and hung flat on the wall, I inverted this setup. These idiosyncratic glazed sculptures were antithetical to the black and white photograph, and the colourful vases become vivid characters in contrast to the neutral, tone of the black and white photograph. The two compliment each other in a polite tension - and the work as a whole becomes a type of animation - colourful characters jumping back in time to a monochromatic show reel.



Marthe Elise Stramrud
Vessels, 2017
Installation (B/W photograph and flat ceramic sculptures)
2,5 x 3 meters

Colour, clay, glaze and our visual imagination:

Throughout history, clay has been associated with the human urge to create, and the material has been used for making practical and artistic objects. Knowing that clay is really just fine-grained, rock or earth material blended with water formed into any number of shapes is quite extraordinary. To have that soft lump of clay in my hand, knowing everything is possible, that dust can reach its destiny of becoming a teacup or a tree-sized sculpture, ceramics presented me with an excellent material to continue the exploration of form, perception and fantasy.

Emerging from this ongoing practice is also the central question of colour and its perception as a result of light. When I chemically produce the glazes for my clay – it's as though in each specific circumstance the clay itself is just one rudimentary ingredient. I then coat the ceramics with the advanced qualities of chemically created colour, brought to their full intensity only by the heat of the kiln. Glaze is fascinating for many reasons. Using the fired ceramic sculpture as a heavy, breakable canvas to apply what will be coloured glass is a total wonder. The way in which the clay become stronger than it were before - under a protective shield of playfully coloured glaze is something of a metaphor for the different moments I encounter in my process with ceramics.

Each glaze has its own nuances, as a result of firing temperature and colour chemistry, and thus adds unpredictability to the process as a whole. After withstanding the heat of firing, the cellular transformation that happens here is pure magic, and it makes glazing feel like a mini-adventure, one with many forks in the road, and such a multitude of final products. Working with silica that then becomes glass, flux which melts and binds the coating and imagining the colour coming from the refractory elements - it makes the ceramic artist something of a chemist and a cook and a painter all at once.

While painting these objects I have had to expand my mind a little, and actually *imagine* the colours as they will emerge from the kiln. Mostly I feel like I am painting blindfolded since the colours never turn out the same as their raw state. So, where colour theory and rigidity of process could usually guide me, with glazing it doesn't really fit! To be adaptive to this part of the journey, I have had to stay patient and flexible. Though of course, there are consequences to thoughtless techniques - glazing is such a difficult process to truly master, that expecting variability with a sense of humour become the most valuable assets at this part of the journey. Here, expectations are shifted and the colours I plan for with microgram precision when mixing the glazes ends up yielding unintended surprises coming out of the kiln. The consequence of this is that pieces I have worked on for months easily can end up broken, bent, in colours and textures I had not planned for and I have had to learn how to live with - and even to appreciate these "surprises".



Marthe Elise Stramrud
Droop, 2017
Highfired glazed porcelain on stoneware
40 x 49 x 30 cm

As mentioned earlier I am in a much greater control in my photographs. With them I can oftentimes catch myself predicting how the end result will come out before I even start working on it - and so I must admit that the nervousness of opening a kiln door after a firing is both as frustrating as it is extremely satisfying.

To lose control a little bit, is part of what gives these objects an imperfect, endearing set of qualities that we can relate to on some empathetic level, and it supports my thoughts on variation and animation. The colour is one thing, but then there's also the fact that when the glaze and clay goes through its transformation in the kiln, it literally changes its shape so much that it shrinks, and causes an uneven set of stressors on the clay. Sometimes objects warp a little, sometimes they crack - there is no monotony of technique that makes this avoidable, and it is part of what keeps me alert, smiling, and open to change.

It is also worth mentioning the *hardness* of fired clay. When the whole process of building, drying, firing, glazing and firing again is completed, it has transformed itself into a heavy, hard and rough piece that can handle a lot. This is a nice contrast to the experience of the clay being soft, whimsical and wet. On the sensory level, having a sculpture that was formed from water and minerals hosed down and under pressure while still retaining its shape is extremely satisfying.

The Animated Vase

The eye's optic nerve, combined with the illusions that come from a meeting of two and three-dimensional objects create a conduit to our fantasies. The anthropomorphic qualities we lend to these three dimensional objects is but an example of that fantasy or dream coming to life.

Wobbling, imperfect and colourfully glazed clay is comfortable at home in our visual imagination, and it feels more human, more playful, when it is set against a two-dimensional, black and white photograph of an architecturally constructed army of pillars, or when placed into the forest that adhere to the rules of a more logical realm. The reason why I believe these things are important to combine is exactly that where one represents the hyper-analytical and rule-based world, the other represents our intuitive reverence for variation - in colour and in shape.



Marthe Elise Stramrud
Silhouette II (Flat Vase), 2017
Highfired glazed porcelain on stoneware



Marthe Elise Stramrud
Vase or Vice Versa, 2017
Sculpture for *Wildlife Skulpturpark*, Highfired glazed porcelain on stoneware

The combination of mediums is then set on a stage that is also meant to be questioned; The "room" (the home, the gallery or the outdoors) hosts these sculptures and light becomes integral to the work as a whole. This is where the objects radiate something that feels suspended and joyful, like the sculptures are generous and they share the light that hits the rest of the surfaces in the room. This holistic examination means we can never really know which portion of the artwork exists in our minds, and which part of it is a result of the architectural solutions that host the work itself. More importantly, the works provide a certain giddy pleasure - more precisely, a *vibrating energy*, and *that* is what makes me want to continue this strange journey into the world of clay and colour.



Marthe Elise Stramrud
Vase or Vice Versa, 2017
Sculpture for *Wildlife Skulpturpark*, Highfired glazed porcelain on stoneware

Theories on Art & Human Emotion:

We see reminders of our human ability in the way we give objects anthropomorphic qualities, or when we design cityscapes according to patterns occurring in nature. The sensibility of the eye, the skin as well as the heart make us experience non-human forms in art and architecture as having a soul, therefore evoking a feeling of sympathy and recognition in us. I often catch myself referring to my various artworks as "she" or "him", thinking of them as "characters", or subjects. There is something personal about them; they affect people and somehow an emotional and imaginative bond is created when they are introduced into their "permanent" home. Professor in philosophy at Southern California Institute of Architecture, Graham Harman, also speaks of "all things allure" in his object-oriented ontology when he claims, "We cannot know objects - only love them"⁴.

The notion of empathy (Einfühlung) was originally introduced to aesthetics in 1873 by the German philosopher Robert Vischer, well before its use in psychology. Vischer described Einfühlung literally "feeling-in", as the physical response generated by the observation of forms within paintings. Particular visual forms arouse particular responsive feelings,

⁴ Graham Harman, *Object Oriented Ontology*, a new theory of everything, published by Pelican books, 2018

depending on the conformity of those forms to the design and function of the muscles in the body, from our eyes to our limbs and to our bodily posture as a whole. Vischer clearly distinguished a passive notion of vision – seeing – from the active one of looking. According to Vischer, looking best characterizes our aesthetic experience when perceiving images, in general, and works of art, in particular. (...) It is perhaps worth emphasizing that embodied simulation not only connect us to others, it connects us to our world – a world populated by natural man-made objects, with or without a symbolic nature, and with other individuals: a world in which, most of the time, we feel at home. The sense we attribute to our lived experience of the world is grounded in the affects-laden relational quality of our body's action potentialities, enabled by the way they are mapped in our brains⁵.

Architect and writer/thinker Juhani Pallasmaa has also gone to great lengths to establish a view of art and architecture as an extension of human emotion. Neurologically speaking, Pallasmaa has managed to create a lexicon around art and architecture as an extension of the human desire to connect, and that being the basis of empathy, at the heart of which are mirror neurons. This is applicable to my work because I see that visual forms generate a physical and emotional response that is connected to the brain, and thus the heart. I don't think it is possible to separate these philosophical arguments from the art-world, as they are at the core of how we create, perceive and react to images and objects created with artistic purposes. The theoretical underpinnings that come from neuroscience and philosophy have been particularly useful for my lens working with ceramics.

My aesthetics: Traditional skills are secondary – broadcasting joy is primary:

Many of my pieces might be considered as child's play, pop art, naïveté in ceramics; they might even be read as a big F%#! you to the field of traditional crafts. I believe however that there is something in the realm of the de-skilled that gives me room to operate in a specific way. Within the field of pottery you are often only considered skilled after "X" amount of hours at the potter's wheel or until you have mastered making 100 identical objects. My approach to skill is different: I want to *achieve* with the pieces – rather than focusing on perfect form. So far I have made over 200 ceramic objects that are living in other people's homes. They have either been sold or given away. As an additional function of holding flowers or water or sugar or coffee, these pieces also have the function of radiating joy.

IMAGE OF A BOWL OR TWO WILL BE INSERTED HERE.

I would also like to gain a deeper understanding about what happens when firing at different temperatures, and not to mention the huge technical world of mixing glazes - but at the end of the day, my skills are secondary. Instead of measuring up to the master ceramicist that knows how to create the perfect form, my skill and expertise is to *broadcast* joy and happiness. A friend once called my works "radios of love!" and I truly believe that all the gestures and smearing that goes in the making of these works – and the drawings that come from my amateur hands has the power to make the "radio" broadcast better. My belief is that this kind of aesthetic simply vibrates stronger than a more perfected form. Part of the reason being that we are imperfect and that makes us human beings, receptive to the all of the feelings and thoughts that are poured literally into these works of art.

⁵ Sarah Robinson, Juhani Pallasmaa *Mind in Architecture: Neuroscience, Embodiment, and the Future of Design*, 2015

Some of these pieces are functional sculptures, like the flat vases, and some of them are even not so sculptural - like the bowls, spoons, coffee cups etc. But what I love so much is that the vase, the bowl and the plate – once they start moving around – are also “that little guy over there”, “my little speckled cutie in the corner” and “funny plate face sweetheart”. They have just as much value as a standing empty shape as they do when they are cradling fruit and holding flowers. Sometimes they end up taking up a part of the room in the way a pet or a friend would!

IMAGE OF A VASE WITH FLOWERS IN IT WILL BE INSERTED HERE.

Though my influences are wide-ranging, there is one artist that has meant a lot to me on the subject of sculptural personalities, and that is Betty Woodman (she sadly passed at age 87 just a few weeks ago as I write this). Born in the US in 1930, Betty Woodman began her career as a potter and only recently got a name on the international art scene. She created vital and blazingly colourful ceramic sculptures and installations, as well as playful and unconventional forms. She was playing around with scales and dimensions, with flatness and forms, and with architecture and movement. In the beginning of her career she was considered more of a craftswoman than a fine artist, but that has changed. At the age of 76 (in 2006) Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York gave Betty her first US retrospective (and the museums first ever of a living female artist).

For almost seven decades, Woodman has experimented with the vessel form – adding to it, fragmenting it, pushing it beyond function and almost beyond recognition. Some of her pieces are like sketches for imagined pots – all Crayola-box colours and decorative flourishes – magically taken shape. As critic Peter Schjedal has noted, “Woodman doesn’t make pots that invite touching. Her work is frontal: Painted surfaces as well as three-dimensional forms.”⁶

In her own words;

At this point there is a lot of art around that seems really intent on making you feel bad; perhaps aiming to raise your consciousness of all the evil in the world in the hope that you will do something about it. I don’t think that’s what I am doing. I am trying to make you feel more, and to make something that I get pleasure out of seeing.⁷

I do not interpret her statement as a rejection of the evil in this world, nor as a rejection of the political nor that the artist doesn't have the power to influence social change. I rather think that she felt that her contribution to making the world a better place came through invoking feelings of pleasure and happiness, much like those Pallasmaa mentions;

When experiencing a work of art, a curious exchange takes place; the work projects its aura, and we project our own emotions and precepts on the work. The melancholy in Michelangelo's architecture is fundamentally the viewer's sense of his/her own melancholy enticed by the authority of the work. Enigmatically, we encounter ourselves in the work. (...) They are not merely depictions of selected objects, or resolutions to a specific design task; they possess their own fields of gravity, orbits and sources of light. They represent simultaneously a beginning and an end, a question and the answer. Profound artistic images make us look at the world anew and experience our own condition with a heightened intensity.⁸

⁶ Quote of Amy Sherlock from an interview with Betty Woodman titled “Feel More”, published in Frieze Magazine, March 2016

⁷ Quote by Betty Woodman, published in the interview titled “Feel More”, written by Amy Sherlock and published in Frieze Magazine, March 2016

⁸ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, 2012

Reflections:

Form is crucial for better broadcasting. With my flat pieces I have folded that form out, making the pieces sort of like paintings that radiate energy - their flatness and surface area providing the viewer with larger antennas for all of that joy I mentioned earlier. And the reason why they are able to radiate better than a traditional painting hanging on the wall is that while they are a painting – they are also a functional object that you can put your bouquet of red tulips in, something for the hands to touch and move around. As Betty Woodman puts it; “Functional and art objects don’t necessary need to be in opposition.”

The evolution of my process enters around accentuating emotions that come when we choose to slow fabrication down, allowing for the mind to drift. As artists, this is a form of spirituality without deity. To appreciate the small victories of a perfectly baked glaze is also an act of patience and letting go. With all of the works I have made and continue to make I want to bring forth joy, or something like it! Sparking human feelings of curiosity through these animated interplays, I hope the viewer relates to the feelings I have enclosed inside the works. Not only are the pieces made with joy but they also hold that joy inside them, fired within them in clay and colour.

If any broader goal is reached by this practice, it is that I seek to work towards a practice of appreciation that eventually might help diminish just some of the weight of the world. This may seem like an impossible task, but I see my works as something of a love letter - the vibrations they release may help to un-burden our hearts in small, but significant ways. I think that if I keep chipping away at it, my contribution is a defense of intuition, sensuality and slow process and I am getting curious to find ways to nurture the side of us that yearns for more delicate tokens of human empathy. My pursuit is to make space for non-verbal reactions like joy, melancholy and humour, a radio transmitter and a love letter - sealed and delivered and waiting to be received.