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EMBODIED

A BODILY INVESTIGATION THROUGH CERAMIC SCULPTURE

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Abstract

Embodied evolves around the tactility of the present body, in relation to the eternal absence and the perishability of itself and the world that surrounds it. I work with ceramic sculpture, where the body in relation to the material and the world is both my theme and my method. The body is always present and a basic condition to experience and make objects; it is the subject, the object and the execution in my work.

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Introduction

In this master project, I explore the present body in relation to its own perishability, through making and tactility. By emphasising the presence of my body within my making I wish to adress the tactile connection with the material, in the making and my craft. Not as a manifestation of the perfect body as in classical sculpture or as a “better way” of working, but as a method that will affect the object and the maker, as any other method within an artistic process. This subject is very much connected to discussions concerning arts and craft, making and the maker. That is where I wish to position my work, but my aim is also to offer the viewer a way into this work in the same way as I make; through their own bodies and a tactile experience. When I refer to the tactility of the viewing bodies, I do not mean as physically touching the objects, but the tactile sensation one can get while meeting an object. I am interested in how bodies automatically respond to, and in this way are shaped by objects, as well as shaping them. French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty states that he is not standing in front of his body, he is in his body, or rather: he is his body¹. I see the way my body relates to objects and material as how I make, but also how I exist in the world, so both the presence and the perishability of the body are always part of my work, and it is the theme of this master project. I believe this bodily way of relating to objects are important in both experiencing and making objects. This is the reason I choose to write from a making perspective, with my body as the main agent, but also because this is the closest I can get to what is *my* language, process and my way of expression in the format of the written word. This does not mean that my process is more important than the finished work, but they depend on each other and my aim is to describe the connection from my making point of view. I choose to write from a bodily perspective, though I consider body and mind to be inseparable, but I wish to enlighten the importance of the tactile connection between body and material in my artistic process. My aim is also that the viewer will sense their bodies when they look at my work. Maybe think

¹ *”Kroppens Fenomenologi”* p.115, Maurice Merleau-Ponty 1945 Éditions Gallimard, swedish translation William Fovet 1997, Bokförlaget Daidalos AB

about the perishability of the body and their own mortality, or feel their bodies connected to the objects through the bodily references in my work.

The absent body as in death is a common theme in art as well as other creative fields such as literature, music and theatre. Johanna Koljonen and Elisabeth Millqvist states in the lecture “Döden i Konsten” from 2015 that art helps us to relate to and process the phenomena of death. Millqvist describes a long, historical perspective of ways death is depicted in art, through motifs from the genre Memento Mori, often in combination with symbols of life². My theme is obviously well explored, but appears to be continuously relevant due to its inevitable bond to life and all living things. By approaching this subject through my present and making body, my aim is to make the abstract thought of the absent body more tangible.

Research Question

How can I explore the present body in relation to its own perishability, through a method based on making, tactility and ceramic sculpture and how does that method affect my work?

Background

I work with ceramic sculpture and recurring themes for my artistic work is the body, norms, roles and gender. I have worked professionally and internationally as a model for eight years and I carry this, throughout my life and in my artistic work. I got the idea for this project when I realized that I was thinking of and referring to my body the same way as do with any other material, like clay. I believe this is because of my work as a model where your movements, expressions and features are the materials. The body is so obviously the carrier of expressions in the fashion industry, but as a model you also carry the body as a role. You are the material and the object. Even though modelling is an extreme situation where your body is your work, I believe this way of looking at the female body is recognizable in many ways in today's western society, as material, a tool and as an object. This was an

² “Döden i Konsten” Elisabeth Millqvist, Lecture Båstad 05-08-2015, arranged by Axfoundation, UR play

important part of my exam work in my Bachelor, where I focused on expectations on young women in today's western society. I started thinking of what consequences there might be in that distant way of thinking of the body, and what the role of my body really is in my life, for example in my making. I realized that there was a strong connection between my body and the material in my artistic process. This got me thinking it might not just be about having a tactile experience in the making, but how that tactility actually affects and is a basic condition for my work. I realize there can be some confusion regarding my choice to describe my artistic process from a bodily perspective, but in the same time criticizing the hierarchical separation between body and soul. I do not think one thing excludes the other, but since I wanted to invite the reader into my process, my aim was to write as close to my process as possible, and that is my making body. That is the core, that is where I start and that is how I make.

Andreas Nobel claims that the hierarchical separation between body and soul have shaped our western society through history, but is still present in today and I agree with that³. The mind is the superior, the body is the one with flaws and desires, while the soul is pure. For example, having a well-trained and well-shaped body is a way of manifesting that your mind can control and resist the urge from having that chocolate bar. It shows that your mind can push your body into running those extra miles. It shows that you have good character and that you automatically are considered a good person. A fat person on the other hand is considered to be weak and dumb without character⁴. In this, I do not only see an example of so called "fat-shaming", which is very common in today's western society, but also an example of how it is visible that the mind is considered to be the superior and the body is a tool, a mask and in some cases an armour. It is not just about norms

³ *"Dimmer på upplysningen: text, form och formgivning"* s. 51, Andreas Nobel, 2014 Nilleditions

⁴ *"Mediers hets om bantning är farligare än fetma."* Karin "Kakan" Hermansson, SVT Opinion 28-11-2011
<http://www.svt.se/opinion/mediers-hets-om-bantning-ar-farligare-an-fetma>
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considering the shape of the body, it is also about the norms and hierarchy between body and mind. This is not a paper about ethics of the body, but how the body and bodily sensations is more than a tool, more than right or wrong. My work is about the sensations the body has and gives when it is, in itself and not as an object for someone else. This is one of the reasons why I choose to write this paper, mainly focused on the process from a bodily perspective, but it is also the most truthful and close to how I make my objects. I am not a writer and I am not writing a philosophical text about life and death, my medium is ceramic sculpture and that is where I express and embody senses, fears and stories. I want the viewer to feel a bodily presence when they look at my work, as I do when I work with my objects.

Method



My method takes place in the studio, where I make sculptures. I shape objects and ideas through the relationship between my body and the material. I never cast, not that I see casting as a bad thing, but because I would lose an important step in my own process. As I start working in clay, I shape theory paralleled with physical objects. Hence the material and my artistic ideas are basic conditions for each other; I see it as a unity. I eventually enter the phase where I make; the intense part where the material is responding to the body

and the body to the material, the part where there are no unwelcome thoughts, no doubts; I just make. Thoughts become clearer and sharper as I shape the material into objects; objects that are my thoughts, senses but also my language and my way of expression. This tactile way of working is the main method through all the steps in my process. My method might seem uncontrolled and random, and I want to keep it like that in some parts, but there are also a number of conscious choices in my practice that acts like a framework;

-I work through tactility. The physical relationship between the material, objects and me is crucial for my work.

-I do not sketch, but I make. I do not sketch in a traditional way with a pen and paper or in a computer. Neither do I make a detailed plan of a theory or an object and follow that plan, or hire someone to do it, but I make in full size and in detail. I see it as a “sculptural journal” where I return to the same shapes, over and over again. This is a way for me to keep the flow in my process and to push my work forward. I do not see these objects as sketches, they are just more or less important in relation to my past and future work, but that is something I only realize later in the process.

-I control the chance/coincident. I try to keep an open mind to be able to identify when something I want to use appears in the making or firing. I choose whether or not I will use it.

The sculptures

I work with three elements in the figuration that all have bodily references; the Moth, the Cocoon and the Keeper. I do not see a clear hierarchy between the objects; I see them as the different elements that represents completing parts of a story and my aim is for the viewer to relate the different works to their bodies. The Moth and the Cocoon is referring to the common symbolism around metamorphose and perishability; the cocoon withers away and out comes a beautiful butterfly that flies of into the sunset, while the cocoon stays behind as an empty shell.



The Moth

The Moth is not a beautiful butterfly and it will never leave the Cocoon, they live in symbiosis and thrive of each other as a living organism on its own. No one knows which one came first; the Cocoon or the Moth, what they really are or what they do or want. I see the Moths are the organic movement and what ties the installation together and they are mainly positioned on the Cocoon. They are covered in engobe and burnished to make them smooth and almost shiny, beautiful but a bit frightening and erratic at the same time.



The Cocoon

The Cocoon can be seen as the “mother ship”, organic and moving like the Moth, but in a more rough way. It is scraped and torn, but still very consistent and heavy in its appearance. It has the weight and size of a body and is placed hanging from the ceiling, slightly higher than a fully-grown, human body standing in front of it.



The Keeper

The Keeper is the static element. It is an abstracted version of a ribcage with both industrial and organic elements, which the viewer can meet as either a mask or armour. This is referring to my own critical interpretation of the common view of the body in today's western society; as a mask, armour and a tool. It is nailed to the wall, forever guarding the installation. All the works are tied together through the reduction fired and unglazed clay, but they all contain references from my making body and another sculpture in the installation; a movement, a piece of metal, a burnished surface, a static shape, cracks or a scraped surface. They are all connected, in different ways.

In the studio

I combine opposites in my work. I like to create a tearing sensation within my objects; appealing and repulsive, strong and fragile, organic and static, rough and smooth. Perhaps that is why I choose to work with ceramics and this particular clay, because of the duality in its natural qualities? I make all my objects in the same black clay that I fire in reduction. This gives the objects a metal-like surface, which creates an illusion of hardness, but also a scorched impression. To enforce that sensation, I add elements in some of the sculptures that refer to metal and industrial building constructions, like sharp edges, a net and reinforcements bars in ceramics, iron and stainless steel, before and after firing. The metal pieces that are built into the objects before firing become very fragile when fired, while the ceramics is hard; the total opposite of what the viewer expect. Fired clay, ceramics is hard. It gives me a sense of permanence and durability, and it is given the right conditions, but objects made of ceramics carries a promise of perishability that it will eventually break, and often quite easily. Unfired clay is in constant change. At first the clay is soft and cool in my hands, responding to my every pressure. Eventually, it starts to dry, and if I am not careful it will start to crack. It gets harder and harder as I work. My hands are dry; they crack. I lift, coil, pull, build and push the clay. My back hurts. I work close to my sculpture.



Sometimes I need to take a step back, not to get lost in details and to be able to see it from every angle and perspective. I relate to and measure the sculptures with my body. I am parallelly sensing the upcoming physical encounter between beholding bodies and the installed piece. I have a small ladder in my workspace, which I use to look at the work from above and when my work outgrow me. My neck hurts. When the clay is leather-hard, I change technic and I start scraping. It is important to scrape at a certain state of dryness to be able to get the right structure, but also using the right tool. I change tool without thinking of it, it has become a bodily extension, and a part of my body's movements. I paint some parts with engobe, made from the same clay.



I scrape again, paint again and burnish to make the surface shiny. My arms hurt. Paint and burnish. I dry it, carefully and fire. My head hurts. I do not consider the work to be finished when I take it out of the kiln, a lot can happen during firing so I need to consider everything brought to me by chance. I continue the sculpting process during the installation. Every time I exhibit in a new space, the process starts over again. I see my work as on going.

Sculpture, tradition and inspiration

An important part of my process is going to exhibitions and looking at other artists' work, preferably sculptures. I often imagine how the objects are made, what it felt like making them, what decisions were made throughout the process and installation, and how this and my body relates to the displayed objects. I relate their work to my own practice. In this paper I choose to position my work in relation to two exhibitions that I recently visited and who both can be labelled as ceramic sculpture; "Slukhål" By Eva Hild at Gallery Anderson/Sandström, Stockholm and "Sculptures and Drawings" by Klara Kristalova in Gallery Magnus Karlsson. I relate the works of Eva Hild to the tradition of the good craftsman and the pride in a well-performed craftsmanship, which is canonized by the sociology-oriented theorist Richard Sennet, for example. Sara Kristoffersson has compared Hilds' work through this manifestation of craftsmanship with modernistic artists, like Constantin Brancusi and Henry Moore and wonders if her work really is relevant today⁵. Klara Kristalova only offered a few sculptures in her exhibition, shared with her paintings, but just by seeing her objects makes me think of all the other times I have seen her work; at Magnus Karlsson (2010), at Bonniers Konsthall (2012) and at Kulturhuset (2014). Whether it is in a group exhibition, a big solo exhibition or just a few objects in a small room, in my opinion, her work communicates a strong tactile story through their roughly sculpted shapes, in dialogue with the narrative within the figuration.

Making and body as Theory

There are several discourses going on within the field of arts and craft regarding the present body and making. An example from the discourse related to making is Richard Sennet, as I mentioned earlier in relation to Eva Hild and the idea of good craftsmanship. He writes about the idea of craftsmanship as a special condition of being engaged and as a desire to do a job well for its own sake⁶. I do not completely agree with this view on craft and

⁵ "Dubbelhetens Skulpturer – Om keramikern Eva Hild, *Former Långt från samtiden*" Sara Kristoffersson, 2009-10-16 Svenska dagbladet, <http://www.svd.se/former-langt-fran-samtiden-5f92> accessed 2016-03-15

⁶ "The Craftsman" p.20, Penguin Books 2009

craftsmanship; I think it can be misdirecting and simplifying, but it seems hard to avoid while speaking of making and tactility through craft. I do find some interesting parts in the field of artistic research though; there is for example former PhD student at Konstfack, Andreas Nobel who problematizes the written word as superior minister of all kinds knowledge and descriptions⁷. In his analyse of the office chair he relates to the hierarchical separation between body and soul, which he claims have shaped the western self-image through religion and philosophy. He reflects on the relationship between the body and the chair as equal agents depending on and shaping each other⁸. There is also Frida Hållander who is currently a PhD student at Konstfack, who asks the question “whose hand is making” in relation to feminism, new materialism and her own work, which problematizes the relation between bodies and power. I do, as Nobel and Hållander approach the question of a dissolved subject, bereft its superior agency and in constant change, in relation to everything and this can be connected to both phenomenology and new materialism⁹.

Discussion

So what insights does this bring to my work? My aim is to create that presence by manifesting my own bodily process within the objects through scratches, traces and through the spatial installation, but how far into my world should I invite the visitor and how can distance be created?

I believe I share some elements with both Eva Hild and Klara Kristalova; my work contains an amount of distance and presence at the same time. Hilds' works are exquisitely performed and one cannot help to be seduced by the flowing shapes and the amount time and skill behind the work. I find nothing disturbing with her objects, they can be placed anywhere, which I believe is

⁷ *"Dimmer på upplysningen: text, form och formgivning"* s. 51, Andreas Nobel, 2014 Nilleditions

⁸ *"Dimmer på upplysningen: text, form och formgivning"* p. 24-25, Andreas Nobel, 2014 Nilleditions

⁹ *"New materialism: interviews & cartographies"* p. 93 Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, 2012 Open Humanities Press

one of the reasons of her success, but I am disturbed by the lack of disturbance, even the shadows are soft. The most difficult part for me is perhaps the way she treats the surface; sands, fires and paints, until there are no traces of the ceramic process left. I understand this as a conscious choice of creating a distance between her process and the audience, which is enforced by the abstract and flowing shapes and makes her work impossible to grasp. I consider a certain amount of distance to be necessary; especially for the makers' own sake, but Hilds' work takes me away too far. To me, the works of Klara Kristalova represents the opposite to Eva Hilds' work, when described in relation to presence and control. Due to my material knowledge, I know there must be a big amount of chance and coincidence in how the glaze will melt and what expression will be created, but it is obvious to me that this is a conscious choice of chance. The choice of chance is controlled, but the chance itself is not. Her works gives me a strong sense of tactility and I can almost feel the thick glaze pouring down my own face and my own fingers pulling the clay, just by looking at them. I interpret her distance to lie within the obvious narration I experience in her works. I create the distance through the choice of control just like Hild, but not through perfection. I believe that even someone who is not trained in ceramics will understand that the scrapings, the asymmetry and the cracks in my work all are choices, since my work also contain elements that are very worked-through and precise. In this way, my aim is to enforce the viewers' experience that this is the image, sensation and abstraction of the perishable body; this is not the actual body. By leaving that part open, my aim is to offer the viewer their bodies through my work and to create a tension between presence and absence.

Decisions and knowledge

I am not completely sure how I make the aesthetic decisions in my work; but I believe it is not so different from the technical decisions. Since I know the material so well, I usually work with that material knowledge directly, without thinking or analysing further. It is more of a bodily sense of what tool, what technic and how much the clay can take, than a conscious thought. The aesthetic decisions are even more direct, faster and without doubt, completely based on a sensation and what looks "right" to me. The difference between

the technical and the aesthetic decisions gets smaller with every year of practice, and they often depend on each other, so this makes me wonder if there really is a difference? What if the difference is more about experience and practice than different knowledge? I have been making technical ceramic decisions for about ten years, but aesthetic decisions all my life, so that communication *should* be more developed and “natural” to me. In this case, it means that I also must have learned how to make aesthetic decisions and have been collecting knowledge over the years on how to make these aesthetic decisions, just as I do with other knowledge. Decisions, one could consider being part of my personal taste and language, my “core” and the “I”. As I mentioned earlier, my work can be connected to both phenomenology and new materialism through this reasoning and I find this very interesting in relation to my making. I like the idea of the sculptures and the material are making me, as well as me, them.

Making and craftsmanship

When it comes to knowledge, skill and time, I consider some of Richard Sennet's ideas and discussions to be misleading and romanticizing, as he describes a craftsman as someone who is dedicated to do good work for its own sake with the emphasis on engagement. I do not seek satisfaction in doing good work for a rewarding sensation or some kind of luxury, because seen in this way, making and craft almost becomes some kind of “guilty pleasure”. We do however seem to share some opinions around the problem of perfection and erasing the evidences around the making process, which he considers creates a static and pristine condition of the objects¹⁰. I consider skill and time to be important in an artistic process, in fact I see them as basic conditions for my work and a part of my method, just as my hands, tools and thoughts. By possessing and using skill, I know how to build without cracks, I know which tools to use and when, I know which technic I should use and I can materialize and express myself in an artistic way. I do appreciate good craftsmanship and good material knowledge, but I do not wish to discuss the value of objects, time or engagement in that sense, but the value of the tactile

¹⁰ “*The Craftsman*”p.258, Richard Sennet, 2009 Penguin Books

making as a very important *method*, to me and to other makers. A method that will affect the artist, the process and the end result.

Conclusion

In attempt to answer my research question; how I can explore the present body in relation to its own perishability, through a method based on making, tactility and ceramic sculpture, I come to these conclusions:

I believe the answer to that question lies within my method of tactility and making, through which I explore the tactile relations between bodies, objects and material. I have come to the conclusion through my investigations in this master project, that the subject, the object and everything can be considered to be in constant change in relation to each other, which makes the relation perishable in itself, as well as the subject, the object and the body. Therefore, I conclude that through making and tactility, I *am* in a way exploring the present body in relation to its own perishability; the present body is a constant reminder of the absent. In this way are my objects describing my process as well as the theme of the perishability of the body and everything. In my analyse of the connection between knowledge, the tactile making and how I make decisions, I conclude that it is *through* the tactile making I both learn and make decisions, and these agents are not to be separated in a hierarchical way. I am my body, and my body makes. How my method affects my work should accordingly not be a question, but more of a fact. The question should perhaps instead be directed to how my method is visible for the viewer, and if that is relevant. For someone with the same material knowledge, it is probably visible, but maybe not for someone who is not trained within ceramics. Still, I do believe and hope that my bodily process is sensible and relevant in some way through the carvings, finger-marks and strokes to create a deeper understanding of my work for the viewer, but also a kind of tactile communication between the maker and the viewer as bodies, subjects and objects in the world.

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Appendice

Installing my work in the exhibition space took me a week of reflection and hard work. Since I build the Cocoons in three different parts, but also add the moths while installing the work, the installation becomes an active sculpting process. I merge the parts and enforce the shapes of the Cocoons with Moths, steel-wool and coloured hemp. I also include the space where I build the installation and I would like to develop the spatial aspect more in future exhibitions.

I was very excited to meet the audience and I got to experience a lot of interesting conversations during the period of the exhibition. Some things were not received as I expected though; my aim was to create tension within the objects through opposites, both conceptual and material-wise, but the material tension appealed stronger to the visitors than I expected. The metal-like colour of the objects, in combination with the ceramic qualities and both the static and organic elements confused and triggered the viewers so they could not keep themselves from touching the objects, even though I informed them what the material was and how the objects were made. I wanted to create a tearing sensation between the tactile memory of different materials and the visual experience, but it obviously became stronger than I expected. I do not mind people touching the objects if they are careful, but I might have to consider some protecting actions as in making the objects more resistant to tougher treatment. Some people are surprisingly reckless, but I would not like to put up signs next to my work, asking people not to touch them.

I really enjoyed that me and my work got to meet a lot of different visitors, and different bodies. This inspires me into thinking of my future work, and after this exhibition I feel very confident that I would like to work more towards public installations in my future work.

