

## Notes On the end of Mike Kelley's Work and on the beginning of Julia Klemm's

Julia Klemm mutilates stuffed animals in her sculpture. This is enough for me to relate her work to that of Mike Kelley, and to follow that thread and see where it leads. Some years back, the artist Mike Kelley committed suicide, and I am sure I was not the only one who experienced a crisis of faith in the possible ongoing usefulness of the many concepts he introduced to artists of my generation, and articulated with such powerful effect.

But at the end his work fell off, the production value shot way up, it became decadent and the perversity of the work seemed more and more like a pale reflection of the perversity of the art world it inhabited. *And* in addition to that, it seemed overly "cultural", too mired in references to other things, but then it was always a kind of Baudrillardian "dark postmodernism". Of course "realizing" something is flawed does not change one's *feelings* about it. One just looks for other ways to love: "If it is flawed in this respect, at least it is not as bad as this other thing" etc. One makes excuses for the thing, trying to cover up the flaw: "You have to look at it in historical context, it is a product of its time" etc. The worst part of the dilemma is that this sort of rationalizing and justification is a defense mechanism whose pathos directly contradicts the very spirit in which Kelley's work was made.

It is important that Julia Klemm's sculptures are a product of accumulation and meditation on formlessness (the dump, the refuse of capital that are the stuffed animals and the smashed industrial kitsch) at the same time that they deal with subtraction and specificity. These are the dialectics of her sculpture. Klemm's notion of subtraction is quite different than Kelley's. For Kelley, every subtraction of material produced an uncanny absence, and this absence was deployed in his work with varying levels of irony. Anything subtracted was destined to become a Freudian lost object, and was to be mourned, although this "mourning" often took the form of a burlesque. But for Klemm, the notion of subtraction is a more classical one. It is simply the stripping away of unwanted or unnecessary materials and associations. It is refinement of a form, towards a more universal transmissibility. To call this formal refinement by its name, *purification*, produces a controversy. It is obvious what Kelley would have said to the notion; it seems impossible to contradict him in this regard and still affirm the continuity between his process and Klemm's. To put it another way: By attributing a process of *purification* to Klemm's works, one invites all of Kelley's bitter ironies aimed at Platonic ideals, his perverse conflation of materials with human beings, etc. It would seem that to speak of purification in sculpture, without irony, is to make an enemy of Kelley.

Julia Klemm is not a stranger to Kelley's work, but nor is she a fetishist of it. Initially, her artistic procedures seem explicitly geared against the notion of artistic purity. Her materials are corrupted from the outset. Mass-produced kitsch, stuffed plush and ceramic animals, as well as highly artificial glazes of the sort that have only come to market in recent years. These glazes evoke none of the historical lineage of ceramic sculpture. They do not bear earthy connotations, or evoke orientalist notions of the material's various utilities in places outside the west. (For anyone who has spent time in a ceramics studio, these particular clichés are as familiar as clay itself. They seem to cling to the medium in much the same way as romantic notions of history do in painting) Instead, they seem like failures from the field of industrially produced ceramics; test pieces for mass market items in which things went wrong, and now the whole process must be overhauled from the beginning. This is the comedy of her work.

Reduction or subtraction do not appear to be a component of the process, which is a form of agglomeration, a piling up. But purification *is* happening in Klemm's sculpture. The destruction of the ceramic animals is a clue. Animals' faces are almost never left uncovered. The pathos and sentimentality, the uncanny sense of life these figures possess, is simply too vulgar to be allowed to appear. Stuffed animals are ripped apart, soaked in watery clay, and wrapped around the ceramic animals' heads like a shroud. A leg or an ear may poke out here or there, but the identities of individual animals or figures are almost always effaced as they are subsumed into what will become the sculpture. The material of identity is subtracted, and this is just one form of purification.

Julia Klemm's concept of sculpture holds a contradiction between its appearance and its process. Individual sculptures appear as sad-sack affairs. They seem like segments of a Jack Smith theater set, falling apart before they are even born. Their jerky movements have been temporarily arrested, or they haven't yet begun. The wormy anthropomorphs, these lowest forms of animal life, are produced by means that are deliberately regressive and infantile. Lovecraft's Azathoth, "the blind idiot god" comes to mind. Higher forms, plush and ceramic representations of mammals and reptiles, always cute, majestic, noble, lovable, are torn apart and smashed, dissolved into a chunky primordial soup from which new life might spring. A certain hostility towards biology itself hovers around this process, an all-inclusive misanthropy of form. This is the darker side of Klemm's humor, the horror with which it is tinged. The sparkling surface of a nematode-like shape seems to have come from space, and it's alien quality is cold and inhuman. And yet, there is a different side to the sculptures, because their status as figures remains undecided. In fact, Klemm takes special care to undermine it. In one installation, a porcelain sink is removed from the wall of the room, and set alongside the sculptures on the floor, implying an equivalency based in material which is distinctly out of place in a framework of an understanding based on figuration. Such clues are common in Klemm's work, and these function as Brechtian devices of alienation. They are like silent narrators who remind us that anthropomorphism and pathetic fallacies are products of viewer projection, and not endemic to the sculptures themselves, which are "merely" clay, fabric, and steel. This is the two-fold quality of the Alien in Julia Klemm's work: the indeterminacy of the representational forms, their stem-cell quality and biological Lovecraftian overtones, and on the other hand, the total absence of representation, a consistent emphasis on base materiality and process as the source of meaning, alienation through abstraction.

In his posthumous text for Mike Kelley, John Miller stated:

“Often his work targets the vernacular, which, by definition (verna means slave in Latin), is a subordinate form. This approach allowed Mike to aggressively dilate what is considered the rightful focus of esthetic inquiry.....What Mike achieved cannot be repeated. Day is done.”

Julia Klemm's work takes both this dilation and the completion of Kelley's project for granted, and a new set of parameters is produced. These parameters are more philosophical than cultural, tending towards an idea of a sculpture whose meaning is broadly transmissible. Part of this results from a shift in focus on Klemm's part, from “esthetic inquiry” to *essential production*. In other words, the production of an essence where one does not yet exist. In “The Second Sex”, Simone DeBeauvoir proposes (in advance of Lacan's notorious “la femme n'existe pas”) that as a result of historical patriarchy, the construction of the essence of “woman” has barely gotten underway and so it is a mistake to speak of what is “feminine” in character. The essential production which takes place in Julia Klemm's sculptures is one that is gendered, and yet the gender of this process cannot be biologically determined. Mike Kelley once stated that “If you want to fuck something up, give it a body.” Klemm's sculptures have bodies, and they do not. Her process has a gender, and it does not. *What* Klemm is constructing with relation to gender is unclear so far, seen only through a glass, darkly. But this might be the result of the tautology of essences. Since they stand only for themselves, speaking about them with external referents often proves futile.

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