

Clay and plush, or Julia's art of ek-stasis

The catalogue's cover shows a detail of a picture puzzle, appearing again, this time in entirety, on the frontispiece. It is an image playing seesaw, unsettling our habitual patterns of apprehending, of catching the world in a glance. Initially, it shows a raw figure situated in front of a mountainous landscape, with claws spread as wings, quickly shaped in few gestures, the rough and earthy forms merging with burst pastel glaze, circumscribing a serpentine move upwards – a gross figura serpentinata, a crawfish Nike? At its bottom, the figure merges directly into an uncoloured pedestal. It might be exactly here where our quick glance is vexed, where the picture-embracing atmospheric perspective created by the 'mountain' is shaken and where we suddenly look at a body of damp clay, loosely coated by an airy plastic foil. Now we see: It is a portrait of an artist's studio, with a view on the work processes taking place here. However, the figure does not show up again in any of the eight installations or series of objects of the past four years Julia is showing in the catalogue. And indeed, in ceramic terminology, we deal with a so-called *Feuerteufel*, a firebug, a side-object of the firing process, a little company added in the kiln, the only witness to the transformations the objects undergo in this dark and hot place.

In order to stay in the world of allegory (which is a potent world in Julia's art), it is here, in the kiln's immense heat, where the firebug becomes a demonic agent, an agent that substitutes the artist's interventions and assists the complex and crucial chemical processes that transform liquid mixtures (of silica, metal oxides, calcium carbonate or potash) to hard glaze, that accompanies its mingling with (in Julia's case) soaked plush and clay, and the latter's conversion to stony ceramic. Thus, this little creature is intrinsically linked to the diverse material processes of transformation and assembling in this mystic place. No wonder that ceramics and alchemy once met in a kiln. Here, Julia's assembled objects with their different material propensities and tendencies to persist, to dissolve and to merge are "fired as one", as the description to "Abject Performance" (2015) reads – not in order to be fixed though, but to continue existing in a status of becoming on various levels – of emergence, to quote another title of her works ("Emerge", 2017).

In the Renaissance, the firebug would have been called a fire demon, a creature existing in and through fire, completely conjoined with the natural world of becoming and perishing, like his fellow demons acting in water, earth and air. When speaking of similar transformations, Albrecht Dürer departed from the metaphor of the kitchen, as the ideal place, with its warm, moist, steamy mixture (or, in pre-modern terminology: its complex) where procreative processes, the coupling of forms and the becoming of new forms are rendered possible. Julia's art takes the firebug and the locus where it operates seriously – it is a witty presence in her art's (sometimes black, but always subtle) humour and (oftentimes uncanny) playfulness, in an art informed by a deep respect and intransigence towards the forming dynamics of materials (never controlling but accompanying) and the existential and affective modes of attraction and repulsion, fascination and horror, heaviness and ease these dynamics initiate: pallid worm-like structures emerging from seemingly liquid pedestals, widely opened cavernous caves instead of intact bodies, fragmented limbs of industrial ceramic animals roughly coated by pastel-coloured cloth in organic and plushy appearance, a mummy or cocoon in human form wrapping a void, the blurring of distinctions between inner structures and outer shape, disfigured or wrapped animal faces, no familiar and art-conventional possibility of completing the sculptures forms by walking around them... All this approximates

Julia's objects, yes, to Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, of "casting off" the viewer and his or her sense of cleanliness and integrity. Yet, the "other", the objects looking back in Julia's art does not merge in a pure experience of horror, in a paradoxical amalgamation of subject and object. Rather, Julia's objects wittily look back like Louise Bourgeois in Robert Mapplethorpe's famous photographic portrait (1982) of the artist, where Bourgeois, vested in a plush coat, at the same time tightly and tenderly embraces an oversized penis: They are placed on spring boards just about to jump, they swing on oblique pedestals, they anarchically take over empty stores, gardens and show rooms, they seem to celebrate their autarkic status of flux, their status of becoming within installation settings of suspense.

All this seems to fit perfectly into a current high peak of ceramics which artists like Caroline Achaintre motivate in a growing artistic interest in process-based work instead of focusing on products (frieze 179, 2016). But process-basedness in Julia's art is not a means in itself. On the contrary, it implies a precise investigation in our sentimental exposures to the animal world, in other words, to our decorative, homey fetishes and transitional objects of ambiguous affection: Her points of material departure are, on the one side, the industrial animal ceramics that decorate our homes, the porcelain hunting scenes placed on balconies or the life-size dogs put besides sofas and in corridors and, on the other, the plush toys mounted on beds and cuddled for some years by children. It is these 'animal relics' Julia's objects are made of, that motivate me to speak about them in terms of liveliness – a liveliness, or even animation, that is grounded in our emotional exposures to them. Once loved, caressed and handled with care, the plush and ceramic animals at a certain moment of their homey existence are "cast off", put aside, sold and given away.

This is the moment when Julia's art jumps in: She hollows the plush animals, soaks them in clay, winds them around the cut and chipped ceramic figures, fires them "all in one" and (presupposed that they did not explode in the kiln) places them in sometimes comfortable, sometimes awkward, fragile positions. What might seem as destructive or even iconoclast gestures, are liberating acts, acts that uncompromisingly free the homey and domesticated animals from their freezing status of condensed human caresses, from their former human possessions, needs and biographies. The objects again merge into a state of material transition. As mentioned above, also after the firing process, they continue to exist in infinite forms of becoming, in shape and surface, and in the ways they relate to each other in the installation settings.

Plush as a touchy material is crucial here. In James J. Gibson's terminology, its exclusive affordance is to be fondled, to be possessed by caress. Thus, from the perspective of pre-Socratic philosophers like Thales or Anaximander who understood soul as a relational entity, which manifested in the ways things are handled, Julia's art is an art of driving out, of liberating (animal) souls from their human possession: an art of ek-stasis. The only moment her objects become uncanny, is when we enter as viewers, projecting our former caresses (and cruelties, of which this text did not speak) on them. The fire demon might remind us of this.