

Mona Naess Staging the Awful and the Beautiful

Article by Gudrun Eidsvik

WORKING FROM A CONCEPTUAL STANDPOINT Naess pushes the boundaries for a new look at porcelain as part of a process based art.

The two projects *I can feel it in my Tangles* and *Varia`tio dele`ctat* are series in which the artist explores the fragility of porcelain against a robust context. In both artworks, after being created, the work becomes part of a larger story and a new process.

I can feel it in my Tangles is a photographic documentation of the ceramic land art project *Tangles by the Sea* 2006. The project showing ceramic shapes submerged in ocean water has been located both in China and Norway. The photos, taken over time, show the alien porcelain objects emerging from the dark water with the tide. The objects appear mysterious and can remind us of tangled rope, snakes or strange waste.

I Can Feel it in My Tangles. 2006. Porcelain. 60 x 80 cm (photo). Photo by Mona Naess.



These sculptures create a perceptual ambivalence between the clean-cut, esthetic and the rawness of nature. Here the beautiful versus the awful is brought to the surface, surprising us with its contrast. Pushing these boundaries, Mona Naess says that she finds it stimulating to mess things up while working on her projects. The titles of the photographs are derived from taking the exact longitude and latitude of the piece where the photo was taken.

The context and placement of the work in various locations in the world shows flexibility. This supports the conceptual aspect of the work and opens it up for reflection of that which is authentic and the location of the artwork. Heidegger explored our relationship to space and place. He wrote about our relationship to our surroundings and that our treatment of our surroundings says something about us. "Man's relation to locations and through locations to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling." (Heidegger, *Building, Dwelling, Thinking, Poetry, Language, Thought*. Harper and Row, 1975. New York & London. p. 157.)

The lack of human presence strengthens the

impact of the work. Naess works with the interaction between nature and work. Nature's cycles are a part of the piece as the work appears and disappears in it. The sculptor and photographer Hamish Fulton's *Walking Journey* inspires Naess. Here, Fulton's journey becomes the actual artwork and time, as well as change of time, interacts with the expression of the work. The event becomes the artwork. Like Fulton, Naess' work is also process based. This combination of land art and documentation of the ever-changing artwork can also be seen in connection to *object trouvées*. The alienating placement of the objects plays with our preconceived notion of what porcelain is and its uses. It gives a nod to many genres in art history for instance Meret Oppenheim's fur covered cup, saucer and spoon from 1936. Like Oppenheim, Naess challenges our perception of that which is familiar.

Our need for comfort and the known is brought to the surface in both of Naess' projects. It is about building up and tearing down as well as our need to find safety in the changing world.

This is described in John Berger's description of home: "Home was the centre of the world because

I Can Feel it in My Tangles. 2006. Porcelain. 60 x 80 cm (photo). Photo by Mona Naess.



it was the place where a vertical line crossed with a horizontal one. The vertical line was a path leading upwards to the sky and downwards to the underworld. The horizontal line represent the traffic of the world, all the possible roads leading across the earth to other places... the starting point and, hopefully, the returning point of terrestrial journeys"

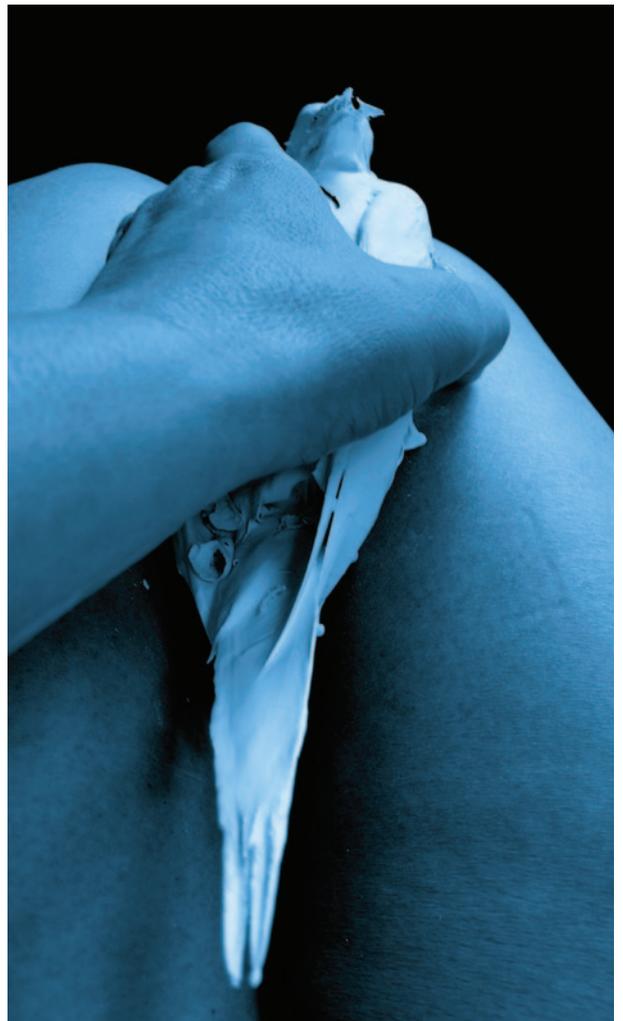
John Berger, *And our Faces, my heart, as brief as Photos*. Writers and Readers. London. 1984. p. 54.

Working with her art enclosed in nature, Mona Naess has also used the results from various climate research as a background for her work. The artwork, gives associations of climate change and the consequences it has for the globe. Her new project "Varia `tio dele `ctat" (Latin: all change is good change) is a work presented in stages. First a dead bird is dipped in porcelain, then burnt, leaving only the porcelain casing of the now gone corpse. The imprint of the bird becomes reminiscence of a fossil. The texture and

traces of the bird strengthen the feeling of something real. There is an authenticity in the work because it is not created by an artist in the traditional sense by copying the natural, but rather the artist here acts as a helping force where bird meets porcelain. Nature meets art. Here Naess uses her work to explain something that has to do with a life cycle. The porcelain work becomes a vessel and reveal something we can not see.

The writer Hami Bhapha defines the *beyond* as an in-between space where the artist wants us to venture, and while there, to engage with the art, which at first appears to be lacking in coherence. Bhapha suggest that we recognize the *beyond* as a vital domain that marks the beginning to the complex task of interpreting our time and its relation to a time past. Again, Mona Naess takes photographs of the project's development. The photographs become a study of the birds broken casing.

Varia'tio dele' ctat. 2007. Porcelain. 40 x 76 cm (photos). 20 x 30 cm (installation). Photos by Mona Naess.



Presented in photos the artist holds the fragile porcelain imprint of the bird in her lap, breaking the casing and releasing the shape and its content.

The work "Varia 'tio dele' ctat" consist of three photographs and one installation with 25 fragments of porcelain. The lighting in the pictures is a clinical blue, reminiscence of the blue-green light used in an x-ray.

The way these fragments are displayed in a museum-like or archeological way makes us think of a dying species. Of a collection of nature, and of trying to preserve it. It suggests the increasing number of lives, both human and animals, being shaped by global migration and displacement.

In the tradition of art by accident, Naess explores the destruction of material and reconstruction of form into new stories.

The photographs themselves nod in the direction of still-life tradition where all objects have a meaning, symbolizing something else. However, in this context the conceptual is the main focus. The fragile burnt porcelain, a made material, comes into dialogue with the organic natural of the bird. This brings to the surface, the idea of strong versus the fragile. Naess stages her stories and by displaying the work in photographic form she takes the three dimensional into the flat two-dimensional.

Some skeptics may say that taking a picture of a creature is the same as taking the creature's aura. Here the opposite takes place, the image of the object document the fleeting moment, keeping it alive.

The change from real objects to photographic image of the object is strengthening the feeling of momentary art. In Mona Naess' work we experience the frozen moments in the ever-changing natural world.

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Mona Naess, a Norwegian artist, is currently studying for a Master of Fine Arts degree at The Oslo National Academy of the Arts, Department of Ceramic Arts. All photos by Mona Naess.

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