



Supreme scale and sensuality - sculpture through the lens of Mille Kalsmose and Alicja Kwade

"What do you see?" "What do you feel?" Alicja Kwade and Mille Kalsmose seem to keep asking their viewers through works that are currently on view in Denmark at Charlottenborg and Horsens Art Museum respectively. Large-scale works that combine metals like iron and bronze with ore rocks and delicate details made of gold or silk are like a (long awaited) wake-up call for the Danish institutions and their visitors. The two female sculptors managed to create a true sensual stimulation, a receptor arousal; we are encouraged to seek and to adopt a new way of perception. It's an artistic call to see the world anew, still true to its objects but no longer to its dogmas.

You had my curiosity, now you have my attention

I cannot be there in person; I live in Hong Kong where the art scene is alive and blooming, thriving differently than what I am used to seeing in Denmark. Still curious about what is happening back at the old continent, I do keep an eye on the Danish art and cultural calendar. And around lunchtime in Hong Kong, the newsletters scheduled to reach the European audiences in the morning start popping up in my inbox. Almost automatically, I scroll through them (admittedly, mostly for the sake of the images). And something new and interesting unexpectedly pops up on my desktop. I see big, untamed sculptural works in a whole different scale, built with a diversified selection of materials and a whole new intensity.

"Where in Denmark is this even possible?" I think to myself...

These snippets were a true trigger for my curiosity. Last time I experienced sculptures and installations of a similar format in Europe was in sunny Münster, where the fifth edition of Skulptur Projekte almost entirely took over the city. Urban spaces and open-air natural landscapes became sites for works by Claes Oldenburg, Nairy Baghramian and many more. The pieces were fantastic... not only sights but full-blown



Alicja Kwade, 'DrehMoment' (2018), 'Parralelwelt (Ast/ AntiAst)' (2018). Kunsthall Charlottenborg 2018. Foto: Roman März. Courtesy the artist, KÖNIG GALERIE, 303 GALLERY, kamel mennour.



Mille Kalsmose, Conscious Matter, 2018. Horsens Kunstmuseum. Foto: Jacob Steentoft.

experiences. These sculptural constellations (some of them did feel like earthly versions of cosmic constellations) were not only stimulating for the eye but for the entire body.

And suddenly Charlottenborg and Horsens Kunstmuseum respectively become sites for an unraveling of the sculpted matter. I really see a celebration, an elevation of what sculpture is and what it does. Neither Alicja Kwade nor Mille Kalsmose is afraid of exploring and challenging the materials that they choose to work with. They bend and weld pieces of iron and copper, they aren't afraid to solder, they get dirt under the fingernails and probably sore backs and arms too from all the lifting and melting. Their passion is clear and it's contagious, and I find it incredibly enriching and inspiring to see.

The combinations of rocks with metal structures in works like "Conscious Matter" by Kalsmose in which the artist included iron ore rocks from an iron mine in Canada, and "Out of Ousia" by Kwade where a robust concrete wall is combined with stones, mirrors in metal frames as well as found tree branches, are both extremely strong in a way also provocative compositions. "Conscious Matter" makes me think back of the *cells* created by Louise Bourgeois, as these could be interpreted as limiting, even suffocating, but on the other hand, the cell structure was there to keep the viewer away, almost as if this unwelcoming skeleton



Mille Kalsmose, *Conscious Matter* (detalje), 2018. Horsens Kunstmuseum. Foto: Jacob Steentoft.



Mille Kalsmose, *Conscious Matter* (detalje), 2018. Horsens Kunstmuseum. Foto: Jacob Steentoft.



Mille Kalsmose, *Conscious Matter* (detalje), 2018. Horsens Kunstmuseum. Foto: Jacob Steentoft.

was protecting something vulnerable in the centre of the cell; shielding the precious from any unwanted gazing or attention. "Out of Ousia" on the other hand, which was presented as a part of *Unlimited* during Art Basel in 2016 for the very first time, is Kwade's way of challenging our rather fixed spatial perception. The artist splits the space of the artwork in four, and by using mirrors she is playing with how much of the installation the viewer can grasp visually, and how much can be accessed physically.

In their works, both artists also chose to incorporate rocks with surfaces that combine the porous with the polished: an "impossible" contrast organically created by nature. The natural gleam of the rocks can only be sensed evasively, depending on the lightfall in the room. And the closer we get to the stones, the more present they feel, as if they were there *actively*, not as passively placed objects. In Kalsmose's works, the rocks are marked with visible signs of biochemical erosion; their mere looks serve as a testimony of passing time. Yet, time here is different from the notion that we know (and invented), it is rather presented and addressed as a *full realm*, larger than what we know and are capable of associating with through our everyday lives. We are on the way into bigger time realms that transgress the human existence; time that was before humans came and will continue long after the human extinction.

Suddenly we see the irony in the human efforts and energy dedicated to grasp, understand and document the passing time and the cycles of Nature. And we become aware of the insufficiency of man-made notions and concepts. And that is why an encounter with works by Kwade and Kalsmose is so refreshing. Neither of the artists have the need to define or introduce or use notions; they are not trying to frame og dogmatize anything. In fact, the opposite happens as the two sculptors create space for the works to unfold; unveil beyond their materiality as well.



Alicja Kwade, 'Out of Ousia' (2016), 'Parralelwelt (Ast/AntiAst)' (2018). Kunsthall Charlottenborg 2018. Foto: Roman März. Courtesy the artist, KÖNIG GALERIE, 303 GALLERY, kamel mennour. Collection of National Gallery of Australia.



Alicja Kwade, 'Out of Ousia' (2016), 'Parralelwelt (Ast/AntiAst)' (2018). Kunsthall Charlottenborg 2018. Foto: Roman März. Courtesy the artist, KÖNIG GALERIE, 303 GALLERY, kamel mennour. Collection of National Gallery of Australia.



Alicja Kwade, 'Out of Ousia' (2016), 'Parralelwelt (Ast/AntiAst)' (2018). Kunsthall Charlottenborg 2018. Foto: Roman März. Courtesy the artist, KÖNIG GALERIE, 303 GALLERY, kamel mennour. Collection of National Gallery of Australia.

I would if I could

And I do wish Copenhagen and Horsens were in closer proximity to my current location. Right now I can only be imagining this physical dominance that the works would have had over me. On the other hand, I am imagining myself approaching these works and already knowing that these wild looking materials are caught; they are modelled and sculpted. A clash between an overwhelming scale and known material... And I start thinking about the notion of the sublime introduced by Immanuel Kant who spoke about looking at and living through natural phenomena bigger and wilder than oneself, yet observing these form a safe place where the reigning wild forces of nature would not be able to reach (and harm) one.

Like the voyaging nature, the works by Wade and Kalsmose are far from static conceptually. What I found exceptionally interesting is the fact that both artists work with familiar objects that are assigned new meanings and claim a new, undefined identity. Alicja Kwade plays with coal pieces as if they were golden bars, and Mille Kalsmose arranges found elements of antique wood and plaster stucco in anthropomorphic constellations. A subtle, yet significant way of pointing towards a disruption of the commonly accepted order.

First of all, we see materials we are not used to seeing (at a museum) - *coal is mean for grills, right?* And we are encouraged to let go of all the prior knowledge that we have about the various materials that we meet in the exhibition. Instead of thinking about what coal *is*, we are encouraged to think of what it *could become*. Or of what it has not become yet. Immobile materials are presented as being in a constant state



Mille Kalsmose, Re-
Programmed
Relations. Foto: Jacob
Steentoft.



Mille Kalsmose, Re-
Programmed
Relations. Foto:
Jacob Steentoft.



Mille Kalsmose, Re-
Programmed
Relations. Foto:
Jacob Steentoft.

of becoming. Kalsmose speaks of everything consisting of vibrations; even the things that seem at a standstill, in their very essence are particles (of stardust) that constantly vibrate and maintain their certain places in the universe solely because of electromagnetism. And I guess it is right if you ask a physicist, but where does art come into the picture here?



Alicja Kwade, 'DrehMoment' (2018), 'Parralelwelt (Ast/ AntiAst)' (2018). Kunsthal Charlottenborg 2018. Foto: Roman März. Courtesy the artist, KÖNIG GALERIE, 303 GALLERY, kamel mennour.



Mille Kalsmose, Made In Time. Horsens Kunstmuseum. Foto: Jacob Steentoft.

Cancel the framer; the artists disrupted the structure

I used to think of Denmark as too... static. Also in the Danish art world and in the institutions, I missed room for experimenting. At this moment, based in Asia I look over at an active deconstruction of this fixed, cultural frame that once felt so limiting.

Not only do Kwade and Kaslsmose make us think of objects and ourselves as individuals as non-static beings, but the two artists go as far as challenging the force of gravity! "DrehMoment" by Alicja Kwade and "Made in Time" by Mille Kalsmose are both monumental structures that incorporate matter from the underground suspended from or placed on highest levels of the respective installations. The viewers are invited to walk around and beneath elements that are usually stepped on. Quite literally, what is "up" and "down", is reversed.

The viewers are invited to reflect on what this (man-made) reversal may mean. What *physical* significance do we give to the possibility of elevating the underground matter above human level? And what



Mille Kalsmose, Cosmic Family (detalje), 2018. Horsens Kunstmuseum. Foto: Jacob Steentoft.



Mille Kalsmose, Cosmic Family (detalje), 2018. Horsens Kunstmuseum. Foto: Jacob Steentoft.



Mille Kalsmose, Cosmic Family (detalje), 2018. Horsens Kunstmuseum. Foto: Jacob Steentoft.

symbolical significance do we give to the fact that matter is now crowning above human beings? And why this need to manifest an annihilation of gravity? Is it a symbolical break from the established, *male*-made order (since gravity was “discovered” and first studied and documented by Newton)? Gravity is what keeps us on the surface of this planet; it makes it possible for the industrial high rises to stand unwaveringly, it makes it possible for our world (the capitalist, urban, globalized world) to stand undisrupted. Gravity is indeed the force that has made it possible to erect the unwavering, the high, the ... *phallic* structures.

And out of the sudden, we hear Kwade and Kalsmose say: “This is it” as they build a new order on and of their own repealing one of the essential earthly laws.

... does it mean chaos then?

Not at all! Both exhibitions are very well curated. “The Shape of Us” by Mille Kalsmose unfolds like a long journey, a story of multiple chapters where each and every installation opens up for new, nonlinear understandings of concepts of time and space, simultaneously encouraging the viewer to dig deeper into multiple layers of (personal as well as collective) consciousness. The exhibition is characterized by a beautiful fluidity welcoming all thoughts and feelings. Kalsmose’s artworks insist on having space on their own but they manage to create space too. Then, in “Out of Ousia” by Alicja Kwade, I see waves. I see an exhibition that captures, an experience of and from different perspectives/levels.

The two sculptors work with notions of time and space, and the unwavering of the concepts and their capability to be measured and documented is challenged in both exhibitions. The artists question the accepted (and no longer stimulating) understanding of the world around us and its phenomena. What



Alicja Kwade, 'DrehMoment' (2018), 'Parralelwelt (Ast/AntiAst)' (2018). Kunsthal Charlottenborg 2018.
Foto: Roman März. Courtesy the artist, KÖNIG GALERIE, 303 GALLERY, kamel mennour.

Kwade and Kalsmose present for their audience is indeed a *stimulation*; well curated and intelligent, appealing not only to the eye but to the viewers' full bodies and minds alike.

"What do *you* see?" "What do *you* feel?" they keep asking.

And unlike what our schools, institutions and laws have always been telling and teaching us, there is no right or wrong answer. "The Shape of Us" is there for you to float around, and the waves of "Out of Ourasia" are there to cradle you.