

Remembered Rooms: Rose Eken

By Francesca Gavin

“Our things in our hands must be also equals, also comrades...” wrote the Russian artist Alexander Rodchenko in a letter from Paris in 1925. His statement has become a rallying cry against capitalist consumption. Almost a century later, the boundaries between the thing and ourselves, between object and subject, have becoming increasingly unstable. Looking at Rose Eken’s ceramic installations and miniature sculptures it is impossible not be aware of the thingness of things. Here, art objects are not only stand-ins for the ‘real’ thing but also bring up questions of memory, identity and emotion.

Much of Eken’s work examines the representation of things. Objects are miniaturized and clustered together in huge numbers. They seem to multiply and fill space. They are at time repetitive but always individual - lovingly detailed and haphazard at the same time. Eken’s desire to create the world in miniature was something that she has been working on throughout her practice - studying at the Edinburgh College of Art and later at London’s Royal College of Art. For her degree show, she recreated past home and living spaces from memory in cardboard and masking tape. These shoddy versions of reality were photographed and projected. “You had to reassemble each interior space yourself. This idea of memory and relation to space, and how we inhabit spaces in many different ways, is still what I’m focused on.”

At this point in her practice, clay has become her central material of choice - though she also works with embroidery and bronze, among others. “Clay is such a dumb material. It’s really clumsy and heavy. It’s a tactile thing. We all played with clay when we were little kids. Clay can become the thinnest, finest china. It has this span, which I find fascinating”.

The scale - the smallness of Eken’s things - are something that came natural to the artist since she first started making art as a child. “It was a way of controlling the whole scenario somehow,” Eken explains. “You could clearly see that they were made from wire, cardboard and masking tape. I guess it’s the same that I do with the ceramics. It’s about building an illusion and making it collapse at the same time”. Even though her pieces are often very small, she often displays them in these massive, almost overwhelming installations, with up to 800 elements. She is interested by “the idea of unfolding something - taking something small and making it monumental by repeating it or making a lot of something and suddenly it gains mass”.

Eken often works in multiples - as she notes “I’m very bad at making one of something. There’s always three, always a series.” 100 guitars. 100 drum kits. 10 bar stools. The repetition of making these objects has become part of her process. “Everything is time consuming so I thought of how I could take that idea to the extreme?” However, each of these replicated objects has a different sense of character and many of the pieces are improvised. “I tend to find things or look at images of something, then I walk away from my computer and I make it. It’s very much my memory of the thing. That’s sort of where the un-preciseness comes in. It becomes more open that way.”

The pieces she creates are often modeled from well-used objects. Discarded beer bottles. Cigarette butts. Used paint pots and brushes. Her world is filled with leftovers things. “I guess

what we use tells a lot about us as people, about our history.” The spaces Eken depicts reflect her own creative history. She left school at 16 and worked as a stage technician in the theatre and later created lighting designs for bands. “When you're a technician you are always in these spaces when they are empty, before and after the gig or before or after the audience comes in. All the stuff that is left on the stage tells a story about what happened. I guess that is what we do. We have all these things that surround us that tells something about who we are and what we are doing. There's a lot of story in that and that fascinates me.” Although the human body itself is absent, the objects we surround ourselves with become a stand-in for actual humanity. The human is everywhere, without being directly shown.

The artistic process does involve research and accumulation of resource material. For her 100 drum kit project, Rose Eken contacted real drummers asking for images of their drum kits, which were specifically and laboriously remade. “It's super nerdy. It took ages to find images of all these and find out which cymbals they use and blah,blah. That was fun, but it was also pretty crazy.” For her artist studio project; ‘Tableau’ she contacted numerous artists including Cecily Brown, Erwin Wurm, Richard Coleman and Wes Lang to send images of objects in their studio space. The installation was not a representation of her own space or even a single artist's space. Instead it was a conglomeration of many studios, many identities. The result was intimate and personal, while being a statement of artist's identity and process in a wider sense.

Other projects just emerge from an innate approach to looking. “I have a very visual memory. I remember colors and spaces and stuff that other people don't necessarily notice. I'm not very organized. I collect images in folders on my computer and have sketchbooks but can't find the right thing anywhere...but I do have a lot of photos of random, weird stuff.”

The installation process is also something that is a huge part of Eken's approach. She always responds to each space specifically when creating her environments. It is not unusual to find little objects in forgotten corners of an exhibition space. “I like this idea of a piece that you don't really notice or think it's something that's been left and that it has always been there. A nail in the wall, for example. Things like that I find funny.”

She plays with imperfection. Her sense of shoddiness is intertwined with ideas, not just about the limitation of materials, but also concerning the narrative. “It's exactly that idea of building up an illusion and making it collapse at one and the same time. Within that sketchiness you suddenly allow for things to happen, you allow for imperfection, you allow for other ways of reading and understanding what you see,” she contemplates. “It's about setting a scene and then making other people finish the story. It is other people's memories that interest me and how they associate with objects.”

Much of Eken's work seems to be based indoors, in rooms drawn together or categorized by their usage. The kitchen, artist's studio, the band rehearsal space. To Eken, the interior is the best reflection of humans. “That's where we leave objects. Where we buy objects and surround ourselves with all these things to somehow express to other people who we are.” Although she is influenced by everything from Picasso to Pop Art to folk art, Eken's installations form a fascinating reworking of the history of the still life - the most ‘interior’ of art genres. There is an element of trompe l'oeil in her pieces. She twists the 17th century Dutch idea of vanitas. That everything - objects, beauty, wealth and life itself - will pass.