

Time, decay and a skewed mimesis - On the art of Rose Eken

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'An object is both itself and not-itself, at the very same time'.

Timothy Morton ¹

My first encounter with Rose Eken's art was at a bar. Actually the bar was Rose Eken's art. And not just the bar, but every piece of interior too, from ashtrays to beer kegs, booze bottles and bar stools. Everything was created in 1:1 scale - a bit out of sync with reality, but still highly realistic. The bar – and everything else – was constructed from cardboard, glue, paper and magic markers, along with an endless supply of patience. You felt dizzy, even without the aid of alcohol, as the room was crooked and strange to occupy. Like a replica of reality that looked the part, but didn't quite fit.

The bar was a part of Rose Eken's solo show at Copenhagen's Overgaden, entitled *Time Out of Mind* (2010).

That same summer (2010) I met the artist for the first time at her studio above the Føtex supermarket on Vesterbrogade in Copenhagen. A meeting I will not soon forget. Mainly because of the overwhelming sensation of entering a universe filled to the brim with tiny cardboard figures and made-from-scratch doll houses, staged as hotel rooms or bars, including pool table, bar and beer bottles - all miniaturized – and heaps of gear, like cardboard, glue, wire and duct tape. The overwhelming sensation wasn't simply caused by the number of miniature pieces, but also by the obvious time and process behind each and every one of them. And ever since, when coming across a Rose Eken piece – I have tried to uncover one thing: why? What are these tiny worlds and these hoards of realistic ceramic sculptures really all about?

Lets start out by examining what Rose Eken's pieces depict.

Beer and flowers

Beer cases, liquor bottles, microphones, speakers, guitars. At one end of the spectrum you find Rose Eken's obvious fascination with a typical masculine universe consisting of bikers, musicians, rock'n'roll, backstage and bar life. The opposite end reveals a more feminine world. A beautifully arranged table with a flower vase, a fruit bowl and a full meal served - everything in approximately 1:1 scale ceramics. Kitchen utensils too have been mass-produced by Eken's patient hands. Clay shaped into knives, colanders, frying pans, scissors or rolling pins. Then glazed and painted as true to life as possible. Part of the piece, *Kitchen Confidential* (2017), is - for example - a wall with hooks for the utensils, where they hang ready for use, but in reality useless. The content of a lady's handbag has been carefully recreated in *Lady's Handbag* (2015), where everything from passports, money, mints, sunglasses, iPhone, lipstick and a chocolate bar has been copied in ceramics. All items arranged with a sense of coincidence, suggesting the bag was turned upside down and emptied in a swift move. Despite the massive headcount, the objects are connected by their presentation.

Effortlessly, she oscillates between the spectrum's masculine, tough universe and its more particular, feminine counterpoint, assigning them equal attention. Eken doesn't seem preoccupied with the gender-specific, but rather the stories of lives lived told by these "stages". As in *The Lunch*

(2015), where the table is neatly set with blue fluted porcelain and a landscape of schnapps, bitter, a half full ashtray and bend beer bottle caps. On the plates: open face sandwiches, fully stacked as prescribed by Danish tradition. You can literally sense the scenario that just played out at this table.

All these tableaux, be it the dinner table or the contents of a lady's purse, are effectively witnesses of a life lived. A situation in progress, now frozen inside an artist's work. It is a classic still life strategy to propagate the fragility of the moment in scenarios, as Eken does when she stages her work.

Also falling under that category is the aptly named *Still Life With Flowers And Fruit* (2017). A dinner table straight out of a classic still life motif but created in ceramic 3D. The flower arrangement is the main character, placed centrally on the table impersonating the famously opulent bouquets by Ambrosius Bosschaert (1573-1621), while the rest of the table is occupied by a large fruit bowl containing pink grapes, a wine decanter, plates, glasses, onions and lemons and a half-eaten radicchio lettuce.

Traditionally, the still life found its form in 16th century Holland. The motif was initially created to display wealth, an abundance of food and wine and magnificent flower arrangements. Eventually these niceties became too much and traces of decay and negligence found their way into the still life paintings. Fruit rots and wine gathers fruit flies when left unattended for a day – a genre dubbed *Nature Morte* or “dead nature” in French. Despite the voluptuous fruit and beautiful flowers, the subject matter of the motif is invariably concerned with the merciless passing of time: *tempus fugit*. In time the vanitas symbols became more and more direct, with hourglasses and skulls being included. All three of those symbols – the flower, the skull and the hour glass, could even appear simultaneously, as in Philippe De Champaigne's *Still Life With a Skull* (1671), and express, in no uncertain terms: the inevitable demise of life.

Is likeminded symbolism at play in Rose Eken's pieces? With her borrowing a title from still life tradition, permanently linked to vanitas symbolism and the constant challenging of beauty by the cruelty of mortality?

Looking at Eken's production as a whole, it almost always refers to situations and time-specific events. Touring paraphernalia from the world of music (beer crates, drum kits, cables and microphones) or, as in the case of her latest ceramic installation, a dinner table awaiting its guests.

In other words, it is not the singular object, but the installation in its entirety that reference something that takes place over time and, collectively, creates a sense of life and movement. In the case of Eken's pieces, “The still life” is *charged* with life.

How do you freeze time? How do you arrest it inside something specific and heavy and hold it there in between a then, a now and a future? Clay seems to fit the bill. It is both limber and heavy and can be burned into permanent shape.

Walking through the National Museum of Denmark you will soon discover that clay has been used for millennia, decorated and embellished, neatly and beautifully with stamps and patterns. From ancient Greece to Danish rural Stone Age. The history of clay is especially connected to the practical objects of house keeping. In addition it is a material well known to kids from arts and crafts experimentation. A living, malleable and at the same time heavy and dull material that rarely acts as elegantly as intended.

Rose Eken works with clay in a paradoxical state between embracing design and detaching herself from it. Passing through her hands it turns into countless everyday objects immediately recognizable to us all. Still it appears a little stiff, crazy and crooked because the clay shrinks a little when being burned, and because the paint makes objects look like images, only in 3D.

Turning our focus back to the specific situations (reeking of atmosphere and life lived) constructed by Eken, there seems to be no doubt. At its core, Eken's work is not about beer or kitchen culture, music or the culinary arts. It is about time. The constructs capture a specific mood remembered by and relatable to all: youthful memories from a concert, yesterday's dinner, lunch with family. Experiences charged with equal measure everyday life and memory, identity, sociality, presence and intoxication. It is these moments that attract Eken and make her attempt to capture and maintain them by way of embroidery, papier-mâché or ceramics. Here the world stops momentarily in her hands. Before it pulses on.

Magic realism

In Timothy Morton's book *Realist Magic – Objects, Ontology, Causality* (2013), the first chapter is titled "Like an illusion". In it he describes an interesting paradox regarding objects – "them being there and not being there". Morton starts off by listing pop songs that seem to be, indefinitely, referencing each other, dealing with things that are no longer. The songs become sort of aesthetic shapes capsuling absence, loss and illusions. He writes that it is much harder to lose a fantasy than to lose a thing. And all this reminds me of Eken's pieces. They too deal with collective fantasies, with social highlights. With intoxication, ecstasy, togetherness, the conclusion of events, the vanishing of things – now captured and held ceramically in essential, scene-specific artefacts. A phantasm frozen in its current shape.

As Morton writes:

'Things are there, but they are not there.... Withdrawal isn't a violent sealing off. Nor is withdrawal some void or vague darkness. Withdrawal just is the unspeakable unicity of this lamp, this paperweight, this plastic portable telephone, this praying mantis, this frog, this Mars faintly red in the night sky, this cul-de-sac, this garbage can. An open secret'.ⁱⁱ

It is exactly this "open secret", Rose Eken's pieces circle, wedge into, attempt to approach. Rose Eken's ceramics (and early cardboard pieces) are also "like illusions" miming all the shapes, figures and objects we are familiar with – from ashtrays to fruit, beer crates to colanders – but are not that: they are not *like* illusions, they *are* illusions. Morton continues: "*Objects then are both themselves and not-themselves*".ⁱⁱⁱ In the same way, Eken's ceramics are what they seem and yet nowhere near. They are an *image* of the world and simultaneously part of the world as an object, and it is that duality – of nature and status – that makes them captivating. They are a phenomenological survey of "the world of things", becoming a distorted image of something we recognize *plus* something more. For what is the core of an object? Its essence? And how has the essence been removed when you make a ceramic copy and the object becomes something different? Eken is attempting, through the recreation of accumulated objects, to hold onto something that's slipping out of her hands. It is not about the object in itself. It is all about the lived life.

The avant-garde and the mysterious

This strategy – taking an object of this world and recreating it figuratively on canvas or even just using the object itself, is not new. It is related to the historic avant-garde. It is true avant-garde strategy to simply take everyday life and use it, including all the unpretentious junk we consume in

life – blow it up by using its shape and say: “these are not a pair of stilettos”, “this is not a microphone”, or whichever object Rose Eken (re)creates. There is an inbuilt tip of the hat to the young avant-garde and, yes not least, to a subtle humourist like René Magritte (1898-1967) who employed a strategy similar to Eken’s, only by putting oils to canvas: to paint an object, a pipe for instance, then writing “this is not a pipe”, or by other means underline the fact, figuratively, that art is not reality, it mirrors reality – a strategy designed to shake up our thoughts and stop us from confusing the two. Magritte himself formulated his strategy like this: ‘my art is a systematic effort to obtain a surprising poetic effect’. In Magritte’s paintings the exact shape of an object is left intact, whereas its purpose is changed to a point where the object is forced into a different context – surprising and often humorous. Magritte’s intention was always to illuminate the mystery of this world – through our ordinary lives. By using the everyday tools of ordinary life, sometimes in skewed scale, the mystery becomes clear to us: the mystery of life and the objects we surround ourselves with.

Similarly, Eken’s toilsome recreation of everything between heaven and earth, from a girl’s paraphernalia, like Chanel make-up to stilettos or a musician’s gear, is not about the objects themselves. Like Magritte’s pipe-painting, it is not about pipes and smoke but rather the function of art. Obviously it can be tricky, initially, to think further than the specific object you see, because you – like myself at that first summer encounter – become fascinated by the method and the, practically eccentric, number of objects and the time invested in producing them (which also is a key dimension in Eken’s oeuvre), but what is their individual meaning? Do they *only* create meaning in staged settings? Not necessarily. Not if you view every piece in the light of an artistic avant-garde strategy, wherein everyday objects are meaningful in themselves. Also as works of art.

Time as a symbol

Post financial crisis; time has become a factor with enormous symbolic meaning. A nomadic time and its on-going state of availability, is transformed by Eken into something that demands physical presence - over time - both in creating the pieces and decorating them, but also experiencing them. As it was done in ancient Greece with images of sex - people in physical positions, acutely and ecstatically present. In Eken’s case by depicting what the object is in the real world. She doesn’t paint elaborate patterns on her sink or ornament her work coat with ceramics. Instead she recreates the original as precisely as possible - to create an illusion, to get closer to reality or to transform the real and useable object into a useless depiction of itself. Rose Eken’s pieces also contain a subtle criticism dealing with our daily accumulation of things. She is resisting time by recreating the world. A logic of repetition, somehow cancelling time by creating objects immune to their real-life counterpart’s inevitable demise: we get to enjoy the flowers and the fruit a little bit longer.

ⁱ Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic – Objects, Ontology, Causality*, 2013, p. 27

ⁱⁱ Timothy Morton, *ibid.* pp.16-17

ⁱⁱⁱ Timothy Morton, *ibid.* p. 27