

SOME THINGS LAST A LONG TIME

There's no way of knowing what comes after life, but that never stopped anyone from asking. Rose Eken has been asking the question — or some form of it — for many years, although it took many people (me included) a while to realize it. Consider her early sculptures and installations which memorialized the detritus left behind the processes of songwriting and performance: among the most poignant are glazed ceramic sculptures of open bottles of beer, half smoked cigarettes, and drumsticks laid down as if just about to be picked up again. These lifeless objects exist in the long wake of moments of intense aliveness. Meanwhile, the music plays on.

Over the past few years, Eken's work has tracked a period of global grief and mourning which has been uncannily echoed by events in her personal life. Whether due to prescience or tragic happenstance, her art has become ever more relevant to our contemporary era. In the early months of 2020, before Covid entered most our lives, Eken made the ambitious installation *NYC Ghosts and Flowers* (2020-22), a handmade memorial of a handmade memorial, commemorating New York musical and literary subcultures that existed, approximately, from the 1950s to the 1970s. Though the installation is entirely plausible, instantly recognizable as the type of ad hoc public shrine that sometimes appears when an idol has died, is it also an impossibility, its offerings not specific to any one figure, band

or even time period. Jack Kerouac's book *On the Road* (1957) rests beside cassettes of *The Velvet Underground & Nico* (1967) and Sonic Youth's *Dirty* (1992). When Eken finally exhibited the work in 2022, she added some items commemorating a close friend who had recently died.

NYC Ghosts and Flowers isn't meant to make strictly historical sense. Instead, it makes sentimental sense, as an outpouring of love and devotion to a time that was mostly over by the time Eken was born, and a place that she would not visit until much later in life. The 300-odd sculptures that constitute the installation are made entirely of glazed ceramic, a material that has been a mainstay of Eken's practice since the late 2000s. Fired clay is a miraculous substance in many ways, as evidenced by its endurance through history, but mimesis is not its strength. Every element of this work, whether it is a record sleeve or a bunch of flowers or a book or a candle, no matter its level of detail, has quite obviously been hand-fashioned from clay.

I find it profoundly moving to think of Eken's fingers pressing and smoothing each of these objects. (She abjures the use of rollers or other tools that might lend her sculptures more even surfaces.) It is not only the invested time that lends her work potency — although the devotional motives of her painstaking labour, and her mantra-like tendency towards serialized produc-

tion, are important aspects. On this, I think of a significant precedent: Mike Kelley's *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid and The Wages of Sin* (1987), a two-part work made from found handmade dolls and blankets stitched together into a wall-hanging, and an accompanying table holding a half-melted mass of novelty candles. Where Kelley's work alludes to the unbearable burden of generational debt, Eken is often found to be repaying debts to those who would never demand it: to idols and to friends, but also to entire communities and subcultures.

Eken repays these personal debts not just with time, but also through material and hierarchical transformation. Most of the things Eken memorializes were never made to last: by lovingly remaking them in clay, she renders them both more and less vulnerable. Glazed ceramic will survive more or less forever, if you look after it. A paper flyer, or a cigarette butt, or cardboard packaging, or a plastic cup — all these things can survive being kicked around on the floor, but their chances of being cared for long-term are slim to non-existent. The cultural category of 'ephemera' usually refers to mass-produced print media that was not designed to be preserved; Eken widens that category to also include some things usually considered 'works' (books, records) and other things usually considered just trash. All of this is woven into the tapestry of her artefactual landscapes, which demand our care.

What does it mean to reconstitute trash as fine art? To remake something low-grade and proletarian — like a Budweiser bottle or a skateboard or a full ashtray — as an object worthy of display in a gallery? Or to glaze images of butt plugs onto a vase? Eken's choices are steered by the transgressive, hierarchy-defying ethos of the punk and metal genres that she represents in her work. Which makes her ironic deployment of posh media (such as needlepoint and embroidery) all the more satisfying. But when Eken transposes the worn drumheads of famous drummers onto silk, stitch by stitch, she does so not just for the cheap frisson of class transgression. She invites us to consider these two creative techniques in parallel: the piercing

of the needle as an analogue to the beat of a drumstick; the latent violence in the marks left behind; the repetition and the rhythm; the noise and the silence; the speed and the slowness.

Through this process of translation, Eken reveals hitherto unnoticed truths about both sides of the deal. The material does this in sometimes surprising ways. When you fire clay, for example, it shrinks; while Eken makes her clay versions life-sized, by the time they come out of the kiln, they have reduced in scale by 10-15%. Her sculptures therefore seem to recede in the rear-view mirror of our mind's eye, subtly removed from our time-space continuum. Through her imperfect renditions of the objects in *NYC Ghosts and Flowers*, she highlights qualities in the missing originals, as well as the unique aberrations of her remakes.

Eken's work clearly draws on the art historical conventions of vanitas still life painting and the memento mori. But she goes way beyond the moralistic finger-wagging that those forms traditionally took ("Remember, you must die," is how *memento mori* is translated) and especially with their scorn of supposedly fleeting sensual pleasures like food and music. These things are not fleeting, Eken says. They endure beyond the moments of their consumption, in memories and in ephemeral documents of their existence. They live long after their moment has passed.



POST SCRIPT

Back in the 2000s, Rose and I both lived in London, and were part of the same group of friends. We liked a lot of the same music and together we saw a lot of unforgettable gigs: Scout Niblett in a tiny room in Camden; Bonnie Prince Billy at a folk venue where everyone sat on the floor; Tom Waits' 'Black Rider' at the Barbican; Jeffrey Lewis after the first Frieze Art Fair; and, above all, the now-late, eternally-great Daniel Johnston, who inspired the title and direction of this essay. When I compared my recollections of these events with Rose, it turned out that we remembered them differently, and, it seemed, some we might not have attended together at all. Nevertheless, for me, those incredible performances remain as hardened and as brittle in my memory as fired clay.