

Playground

Artist and composer, ph.d. Rune Søbting has written the exhibition text to Ragnhild May's solo exhibition in the gallery:

A giant recorder, a home video of children dancing, a shoe that balances in the air supported by thin stiletto heels. The Danish artist Ragnhild May works with a wide range of media and formats including objects, print and video, installations, performance, and audio-works. Despite the diversity of formats her work maintains a clear sensibility and focus on materiality as experienced from a human sensorial perspective. Like several artists of her generation, May's artistic practice is founded on performativity. What ties the various expressions together is not to be found in a world of abstract signs, but rather in the playful and curious exploration of the relationship between human bodily presence and the objects that surround us. Often this exploration revolves around motifs found in everyday phenomena thematizing the frames that shape us as individuals.

A recurrent element in Ragnhild May's works is the musical instrument. In her works one finds ingenious instrument-designs as well as redesigned instruments. The flute is transformed into attire or modified in magnificent proportions. This exploration of the figure of the instrument unites interests in technology, the performative, and the sculptural object. At the same time, the dogmatics of playing a music instrument is foregrounded along with the fantasies and ideals of music associated with gender, body, and performativity.

In the exploration of the relation between the individual and her surrounding world of things, one finds the echo of a prominent theme in art history: that of the relation between the observer and the work as an object. For instance, in what is considered as phenomenologically based art, there has been a focus on the meeting between the observer and the experienced object. The work is here considered as something that enables an immediate, spontaneous, and bodily-anchored significance emancipated from bias and norms.

However, in Ragnhild May's work this aspect is addressed from a slightly different angle. In her works one finds the theme of a body that doesn't fit in and is not in harmony with its surrounding. The body that is addressed in May's works is awkward, clumsy, out of balance and out of itself.

The most prominent example of this could be the stiletto shoe that towers on something that resembles flower stems. With its prominent reference to the fairy-tale motif of the lost shoe that can only fit one, the work opens for an image of a situation where the dream of being chosen and recognized entails a painful adjustment to what is essentially an alien object.

Another example is a home-video of a group of children who dances, sings, and mimics in a conscious play with the media's image reflection. The videos depict the innocent space of the children's play as an exception from and, at the same time, a premonition of a reality dominated by judging gazes and a social order introduced and amplified by the ubiquitous presence of the mass-mediated image. The work encircles a tension in the interplay between the playful, the exploratory and unrestrained and norms and ideals for gender and controlled behavior, meaning and understanding.

The objects we encounter in the works are far from dead or neutral, rather they spill over from a surplus of signification. They are testimonies of bodies that ideally could engage with them and the

fantasies and ideals about how one could interact with them. As such the encounters with objects that are staged in Ragnhild May's work take the form of a clash between dreams and reality, an unresolved tension that reveals the deviations and curiosities that define us as individuals in the moment. Bodies are not just the crux for a spontaneously experienced harmony with a surrounding environment.

The apparent tension, inherent in the experience of objects in May's work, is at its most explicit in relation to a musical instrument. Appropriately the word 'Play' in the title of the exhibition connotes a double significance of play as in children playing and playing an instrument. An instrument is designed for a particular practice, one needs a skill that can be trained and mastered. The instrument hides its own potential and its expressive force that the interaction might reveal. However, the untrained is left helpless and clumsy in front of the instrument object.

There is something immediately recognizable and elementarily human in the depicted clash between our physical limitation and a fantasy about an ideal harmony that is related more to comedy than to tragedy. But as all good comedy, this clash involves an experienced pain.

Ragnhild May's work reveals a poetry and a drama hidden in everyday objects, and with that also a thematic focus on the latent violence, that is part of everyday experiences and that helps shape us as individuals. As such, the objects reveal a tension in how we as individuals are between our fantasies and ideals in our experience of being too small, too big, too human. In her works May puts focus on a tension that is an inherent and essential part of everyday human experience – yet proves to be both magical and adventurous once we focus on it.

Rune Søbchting, January 2022