

Dirk Staschke

Making Arrangements

*Article by
Colette Copeland*

DURING THE MID-LATE 1990s, THE BEAUTY DEBATE continued to rage throughout the contemporary art world. Exhibits such as the Whitney's *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, ARC Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris' *La Belle et La Bete (Beauty and the Beast)* and the Hirshhorn's *Regarding Beauty* as well as seminal texts such as Dave Hickey's "The Invisible Dragon", Elaine Scarry's "On Beauty and Being Just" and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe's "Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime" addressed the contested and politicized notions of beauty in art. Critic Dave Hickey wrote about transgressive

beauty – the act of evoking pleasure through discomfort. It is through this lens that I engage with the work of ceramicist/sculptor Dirk Staschke. His sculptural tableaux perform the act of transgressive beauty. Encompassing the duality of craving and aversion, beauty and the grotesque, Staschke's latest ceramic/mixed media works at the Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia seduce the viewer with their lushness, while exploring themes of excess and consumption.

The exhibition title *Making Arrangements* offers multiple possibilities for interpretation. The word 'arrangements' alludes to the history of still life

Bounty. 2008. Ceramic and mixed media. 15 x 24 x 10 in. Photo by Dirk Staschke.



painting, specifically *vanitas* paintings from Northern Europe in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Characterized by sumptuous displays of *flora*, *fauna* and food, artists such as Dutch painter Abraham van Beyeren (1620-1690) infused the *vanitas* paintings with rich allegorical and religious symbolism. Best known for his banquet still lifes, Beyeren's paintings signify life's temporality and the emptiness of pleasure. Dirk Staschke's works *Commemoration* and *Bounty* both celebrate and subvert the *vanitas* still life tradition.



Stagger. 2009. Ceramic and mixed media. 20 x 16 x 16 in. Photo by Dirk Staschke.

Commemoration is comprised of two pig heads elegantly placed on a platter, surrounded by cabbage leaves, calla lilies, dogwood flowers, split papayas, eggplants and cucumbers topped with a richly decorated cake. Beautifully and meticulously sculpted, the lavish display suggests an abundant celebration. Upon closer examination, one notices the decorative ribbon woven throughout the elaborate arrangement is in actuality – entrails. The voluptuous organic forms of the eggplants, gourds and split papayas elicit a sexual connotation. The pigs exude uncanny human-like expressions. One seems content with his

fate, while the other seems less resigned, perhaps a bit melancholy. The word 'commemorate' means to honour. The duality present in this ceramic work advocates both a tribute to and a discomfort with the perverse plenitude.

Similar in subject matter, the work *Bounty* revels in its refined opulence. Lacking the gluttonous excess present in *Commemoration*, the composition's simplicity bursts with sexual eroticism. The two pigs in this work appear freshly killed. Their blue cataract eyes gaze directly at the viewer. Staschke painstakingly painted the pig heads in oils resulting in eerily life-like skin tones. These pigs have teeth. Topped with whipped cream and a cherry, the work both attracts and repulses.

Another possible interpretation for the exhibition



Above: *Propagation*. 2008. Ceramic and mixed media. 20 x 20 x 7 in.

Below: *Dominion*. 2009. Ceramic and mixed media. 8 x 10 x 8 in. Photos by Dirk Staschke.



title, *Making Arrangements* is the reference to weddings and funerals and the relationship to food in these cultural rituals. Whether celebrating life or death, food serves as the nucleus, functioning as a source of sustenance and comfort. Food also serves as a cultural symbol, denoting social class and economic prosperity. Weddings and funerals are occasions where extravagance and over-consumption are condoned and accepted as part of the traditional ritual. Staschke's ceramic/mixed media works *Propagation* and *Stagger* examine the gluttony and greed inherent in our culture.

In *Propagation*, six ceramic chickens sit on a star-shaped platter. Layers of oil paint fused with resin result in a hyper-realistic chicken complete with delicately blue-veined, pebbly skin. Innards removed,



Discopia. 2009. Ceramic and mixed media. 29 x 16 x 12 in. Photo by Dirk Staschke.

the cavernous hole trimmed in a layer of fat resembles a mouth with teeth. Ready to devour or be devoured? Staschke sculpts the original chicken in clay. Next he makes a master mold, which allows for reproduction or propagation of the chickens. The technical process further emphasizes our culture's

desire for more. The artist states, "Like an extravagant meal, the arrangements we make to further our desires can come with painful unintended consequences." Perhaps he is suggesting the ramifications of our over-consumption such as factory farms, environmental instability and disease.

Stagger depicts a precariously balanced china teacup, perched on top of mountainous layers of pastries. Contingent upon the teetering support of mass-produced empty calories, the lone object



Cataclysm. 2009. Ceramic and mixed media. 21 x 18 x 10 in. Photo by Dirk Staschke.

of refinement's stature seems dubious at best. Lasciviously oozing custard and crème, the sickly-sweet *éclairs* and donuts appear to be sliding off of their plates. The paradox lies in the fact that the sculpture is solid. Suspended in its careening form, the pastries look cemented together with a creamy, confectionary glaze.

Staschke employs a similar technique in *Cataclysm*, where a tower of croissants, *cannolis*, *pirouettes*, cupcakes, ice cream and brownies slope off-kilter, on the verge of collapse. Supporting the tower are two black forest cakes covered with shiny red glazed cherries. The same cherries drip from a piece of pie at the top of the sculpture. From a distance, one cannot

help but 'read' the work as a large phallic symbol. This work reminds me of an image of Pamela Anderson entitled, *Stars Caught Chewing Down – Pamela Anderson has breakfast in Malibu on April 1, 2009*. Anderson symbolizes the epitome of excessive cultural consumption. I am not speaking about her as an individual, but what she represents iconically – idealized beauty gone awry. Staschke states that people consume ideas as well as products and that eating becomes a metaphor for material consumption. Caught with her mouth wide-open in mid-bite, this image of Anderson could serve as Hickey's advertisement for transgressive beauty.

The only work in the exhibition not related to food is entitled, *Premonition*. An arm (*sans skin*) extends from the wall exposing red tendons and muscles. A taxidermied white-eared *bulbu* bird perches on the hand. At once beautiful and grotesque, the work speaks to the transience and mystery of life. It relates to the *vanitas* paintings, which featured human skulls as a symbol of death. In a conversation with the artist, I find out that this is his favourite work. As he describes it, "It's the dot on an exclamation point". I consider the possibility that this is his most autobiographical work to date. *Premonition* challenges us to confront our own mortality as well as our tenuous relationship to nature.

The strength of Dirk Staschke's work and the exhibition as a whole resides in the artist's ability to create a symbiosis between the conceptual and technical aesthetics. The sculptures resonate beyond the art object, asserting themselves in a dialogue which questions the social/political culture in which we live. Contextualising the work within our current

economic and political climate, I think of Obama's words from his Presidential inauguration, "To those nations like ours that enjoy relative plenty, we say we can no longer afford indifference to the suffering outside our borders, nor can we consume the world's resources without regard to effect." Obama has called upon the nation to sacrifice, eliminating wastefulness. Dirk Staschke's work reminds us of the consequences of our desires.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Viso. Olga M. "Beauty and Its Dilemmas", *Regarding Beauty*, Smithsonian Institution, 1999, p. 97.
2. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/623056/vanitas> http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/nstl/hd_nstl.htm
3. Artist statement, gallery press release. www.wexlergallery.com
4. Artist statement, gallery press release.
5. Phone conversation with Dirk Staschke on 7 April, 2009.
6. Quote from President Obama's inaugural speech. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/28751183/page/2/>

Colette Copeland is a multi-media visual artist whose work examines issues surrounding gender and contemporary culture. Ms. Copeland writes for *Exposure Journal*, and *Afterimage Magazine*. For seven years, she wrote a quarterly column for *Fotophile Magazine* and contributed to *The Photo Review*. In addition to her other activities, Ms. Copeland is the Chairperson of the Mid-Atlantic Region of the Society for Photographic Education. She lives in Media, Pennsylvania US with her husband Ian and her children Camille, age 15 and Cole, age 10.

Premonitions. 2008. Ceramic, taxidermied bird and mixed media.
13 x 24 x 8 in. Photo by Dirk Staschke.

