

Veronica Brovall – Wear the Heat

Natasha Morris

“What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images...”¹

Sculptures in fired otherwise pristine white clay are dirtied with pinks and greys. They appear like casts taken off a fractured bone; in having been used to mend and support they are now cut away and discarded themselves. There is a sense of ‘the ghost in the shell’ – a phantom manifestation - in that whatever human presence was once behind, or inside, these casings it has now left or decayed. Indeed, one of Veronica Brovall’s preoccupations is anatomy, but her approach to form is wedded to abstraction. Are these figures, seemingly suspended in some kind of dance macabre with limbs twisting and outstretched, male or female frames? There is a dynamism here in the apparent movement of Brovall’s almost bodies, they stretch, strain and pull, but it is arrested: not caught in a delicate moment but suddenly encased in stone as if paralysed under the gorgon’s stare.

As the well-known idiom warns, ‘If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen’. Brovall’s latest exhibition title instead urges us to stay in the flames. Her concept is one of accepting discomfort, not running from urgency but instead facing it head on and even marinating in whatever hellfire we might find ourselves in. There is a sexiness to her phrasing, ‘wear the heat’, conjuring a *When Doves Cry* picture of bodies covered in each other’s sweat. Wearing heat is in fact what she expects her every material to do, from steel to ceramic, which must emerge from the inferno of the kiln. When the process is finished, however, they become cold to the touch in their final iteration. Heat is a transient moment to be endured or embraced.

Many works appear as instruments, either disconcertingly medical or back alley. Thin, twisted bars of metal with jagged protrusions mimic the improvised tools of a backstreet dentist or abortionist. Carbuncles of rusted rods, like a nexus of golf clubs bent out of shape through the heavy blows of vandals, fizz with a strangely masculine energy. There is a rawness to all her works that is uncomfortable, a forthrightness in dealing with their potential ugliness that is both refreshing and repulsive. *Daily Flesh* straddles the line between being inviting and unwarranted, taking the form of a kneeling behind and topping it with two whipping tongues. These are not the romanticised pots created by rotating between the thighs of housewives or spinsters. They are more likely to be churned from a pottery wheel with a prostitute or anarchist at the pedal.

“Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;

1 T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland* (1922) - Part 1 ‘The Burial of The Dead’

I will show you fear in a handful of dust.”²

Brovall’s works are so robust you feel that they are more akin to breezeblocks, needing a sledgehammer rather than a clumsy touch to break them to pieces. The artist exploits the subversive potential of ceramics to its muscular extremes, challenging the gendering of the art of pottery as a feminine and domestic craft with every chaotic and hefty sculpture she produces. To this she adds utilitarian and corporate objects fraught with the symbolism of physicality and masculine pride: buckets, dumbbells, men’s suit ties. This is not to say that her works read as straightforwardly ‘masculine’. Any references to masculinity don’t exactly show its performance as a success; there is a sense of the crisis of manhood, ridden with aggression, guilt, shame and trauma. There are dual elements of the male and the female at play in every work, married together by an overriding sense of ‘Nordic Noir’ in their fractured, wounded and aggressive countenance. Torsos are separated from the rest of the body without any Classical sensitivity, limbs are akimbo in postures of either lust or torture, any protrusions are fraught with immediate visual parallels to entrails or broken bones. Nearly every work is a ‘broken’ shell where you can see straight through to the other side. In the final stages of her process, she consistently uses a clear glaze of her own invention, allowing the ‘skin’ of the ceramic to show beneath the surface – a vulnerability glimpsed swelling under the hardness.

Despite pastel paint in shades of bubble gum pink dripping down the elegant limbs of works such as *Wear the Heat* and *Body Angle*, Brovall’s approach to femininity is consistently indelicate. Sometimes, a crushed black metal is added to the transparent surface glaze, adding a certain glamour but also a seediness akin to a flash of fishnet stocking. *Daily Flesh*, *Swallow DNA* and *Exude* appear as sister works in their rounded surfaces that are also moulded with multiple buttock and udder like protrusions. It is no coincidence that the appendages of the latter work are created out of containers usually used to whip cream. Seemingly stuck in some timeless post-apocalyptic wasteland, Brovall’s breasts are somewhere between the pneumatic chest plates of cyborgs and the stone mammaries of ancient fertility sculptures. They crawl with ferrous, coral-like drips as if they have been dredged from the bottom of the sea, mementoes from a past civilisation that is at once primal and futuristic.

“...where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.”³

There is a constant tension between life and stasis. References to the organic are more in the vein of petrified wood than verdant branches pulsating with life. Each work could be fashioned from industrial and utilitarian materials, at odds with the delicate process of creating form out of smooth but volatile wet clay. It is no coincidence that although she is a Swedish native, Brovall lives and works in Berlin, a city forever melded to its association with divisive bricks and mortar. In Brovall’s case, T.S. Eliot’s beguiling line *Bin gar keine Russin*,

2 *ibid.*

3 T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland* (1922) - Part 1 ‘The Burial of The Dead’

stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch may as well be *stamm' aus Schweden, echt deutsch*.⁴ Alongside a Scandinavian straightforwardness, her work is doused with a kind of Germanic, Isherwood-era brutalism oddly concordant with the visceral feeling and taste for destruction that underpins her technique.

Brovall's work is never obtuse and uncompromising. Symbolism manages to be laid on thick yet is not instantaneously readable. The eponymous work *Wear the Heat* greets us with legs spread-eagled. The smooth surface 'skin' may look invitingly wet, and limbs may be positioned like a multi-armed goddess, or are they contorted into the sorry geometry of a Swastika? Are these statements of censure or playful accidents of form? Stood in front of creations that would be at home in Eliot's ever ambiguous inter-war *Wasteland*, Brovall too leaves us guessing.

4 *ibid.* Original: I'm not Russian at all, I'm from Lithuania, really German