

'The game between screen and material'.

An interview with Rachel de Joode

By Joost Bergman

Rachel de Joode's sculptures contain an enormous wealth of printed and 'real' materials. Her collage-like sculptures are situated on the border of two and three dimensionality and demand the utmost from the viewer due to their ingenious construction and detailed execution.

To begin with the title of the exhibition, 'Mingle' – is it meant to be merely descriptive?

The title refers to the 'conversation' between different elements. An important part of my work is the dissolution of hierarchical structures: the material, the viewer, the maker, the space, all elements are equally important and mingle. Every object 'acts' equally: a print, the ink, the frame, the floor, a pedestal, a sculpture, and even I, the artist in a sense has the potential to become another thing (to merge). But also the act of playing; materials have agency; I act, the materials act. Further more it can be seen literal: materials melt: paint is smeared, dripped or poured, the canvas is cut, torn or crushed. Clay, pigments, resin, glue or paint are poured over and unite to form one image. The title is meant to be playful.

How do you work, where do you get your ideas from and how do you select your images? As a viewer, you 'travel' a lot, thanks to the diversity of forms, images and associations - a journey with an excess of uncertainties, memories, you name it. These various visual elements literally provide new angles of approach every time.

I mainly occupy myself with the Internet, that is where I work, in the screen, that is where it all starts. At the same time, the material appeals to me. I look at things because of their material effect, not only their communication with us, but with each other and their mutual context. This happens in the studio or just 24/7 in daily life where I look at the materiality and potential of different materials. Art history also plays an important role. As do questions that I like to answer from different points of view, such as 'what is art? what is an art object? what is an artist?'

Visually, it usually starts with an idea of a work in a space, an installation photo. To me, making an exhibition is like making a work of art. I often use (I visualise) the documentation as a basis for making the physical object. Then I make a sketch of the space with the work 'to be' made in it. I try to transport the immersiveness and playfulness of the virtual into the physical space. And in this way to liberate the works from the screen. Nowadays, many more people see art on screens than in museums. The gallery has long ceased to be the primary

exhibition space: that function has been taken over by the Internet. I am interested in the game between the material and the virtual. In other words, in digital thinking that expresses itself in analogue forms. So I am looking for a way for the visitor to enter this virtual space, to feel the dimensions, to enter the stage, as it were. For example, in the film *The Truman Show*, (with Jim Carrey, 1998) one of the last scenes invites the spectator to look at the film set, Truman's reality, from different angles. What is reality and what is not? In my work, this is often expressed in the form of a trompe-l'oeil for which I like to make use of photographic elements.

The first thing that strikes me about your sculptures (which I think you call 'things') is the meticulousness with which they are made and, consequently, the call to consider everything very carefully - in terms of detail, texture, colour/tone, gloss etc., right down to the connection with the supporting parts that are needed to keep the whole thing upright. In short, you are someone who also seems to value pure craftsmanship. Do you do everything yourself? How do you master all those different techniques?

Sometimes I work with an art producer in Berlin, the city where I have lived and worked since 2006. But I do a lot myself. I think it is important to play, to just do it, to keep trying, to keep fiddling with things. The amazement about the properties of the material itself is an important motivation. (It's funny that you speak of pure craftsmanship, I often feel like a total 'Do It Yourselfer', a mentality that sometimes frustrates me a bit. However, I find the tension between the handmade and the machine-made particularly interesting. The craft aspect activates the work in a certain way and also adds a certain degree of authenticity. Therefore, as far as I am concerned, traces of the human maker can be safely shown.

This creates images that are a fascinating mix of all kinds of visual material. To what extent are you consciously aiming to unsettle the viewer? Or is the back of your mind also occupied with making an attractive and balanced image? Or is there a multiplicity of objectives?

Disruption yes, a multitude of objectives too. I find the game of disruption important. The associations and assumptions of the viewer play an important role in this. I like to break through such patterns of expectation. For example: is it a painting, a collage or a sculpture...? But I also like to break down the comfort of recognition (the stereotypes within art). That keeps the spectator's eyes alert. Breaking with the different dimensions is, of course, also a form of disruption. But a harmonious and aesthetic object as an outcome is also important to me.

You used to make digital collages on the computer that were printed out, but now that no longer produces a final product, but material to continue working with. In your most recent work, you paint over the photo prints and you bend and distort the sheets of dibond that serve as a support. Are you constantly looking for new solutions, materials and presentation methods?

Yes, if I were to do the same thing over and over again, then the amazement would disappear. And surprise is precisely what drives me. Secretly, I would often like to do the same thing all the time, but I have an inner urge to always want to discover something new. I embrace that quest, although it can sometimes prove a bit tiring, for myself that is.

In the exhibition, there is a work in which a breast milk storage bag appears. Are you interested in the material, its appearance or is it a consciously personal, biographical layer?

At first glance, the work looks like some kind of aluminium construction, but it is actually a plastic ziplock bag filled with thawing breast milk. I cannot deny that this work has a biographical layer. However, I use the milk bag first and foremost for its aesthetic value. The fragmented pictures of paint, fingerprints, clay, cloth etc that recur in all my works are in close connection with me, are an extension of myself (there are body or fingerprints on it, I make gestures). The same applies to the milk bag. I see no difference between them. I have already spoken of the hierarchisation of the meaning of material and visual elements, and the possible loadedness of this object is for me just as loaded as a blob of paint on a canvas. I am actually trying to encourage a different way of looking, categorising and contextualising.

I was thinking of Chamberlain's work with discarded car parts and, with a wink, wanted to comment on this by enlarging and dynamically manipulating my 'discarded' material, my breast milk. This is also a contrast to Chamberlain's very masculine work. With this work, I take over and appropriate it completely. In my own way, with milk.

Despite, or precisely because of this multitude of associations that you could associate with your work, your work has, I find fascinating, a very individual face. Are there nevertheless artists you take as an example or whose work you admire?

Lynda Benglis, Laura Owens, Mika Rottenberg, Louise Bourgeois, Hanna Hoch, Kurt Schwitters, Marcel Duchamp, Letha Wilson, Kate Steciw, Franz West, Camille Henrot, Lily van der Stokker, Jean Dubuffet, Sarah Lucas, Betty Woodman, Florian Meisenberg. These are artists I like to look at now, nothing is constant and neither are my interests.

In articles about your work, there are frequent references to (neo) Dadaist expressions such as making collages, mixing art forms, playing with reality and the absurdity that sometimes resulted from that. To what extent do you agree with this comparison?

The use of photographic fragments as a means of art originated in Dada. The Dadaists attacked traditional art by means of photomontage. Artists such as Hannah Höch, Kurt Schwitters, Max Ernst or Marcel Duchamp used photography and photo collage/montage, contrasting and juxtaposing meanings to emphasise their message (often also political).

I work within this Dadaist and surrealist tradition of using photography (photographic fragments) within art. I make digital collages, use fragments of photography and this often creates a nonsense narrative, in a Dadaist sense. I play with literal representation, meaning and materiality. Translated into the now, I question the new medium, the screen. I transport the immensity and playfulness of the virtual into physical space. In turn, I liberate the works from the screen and place them (back) in three-dimensional reality.

I play with enlarging and reducing, the 'painting of the painting' and the tension between object and painting surface. The boundaries of the art object itself are thus tested by the inclusion of the literal and at the same time the uncontrolled, in the sense of Dada.

You once said that your work balances between 'the physical and the virtual', that sounds very contemporary. What makes that typically contemporary?

I think that my work can very well be viewed on the screen. The expression in a physical form (a painting, a print) plays on the one hand less of a role because of the virtual and on the other hand one craves more for the material. I think that this game between screen and material, these different frameworks (the screen, the space) are 'places' where we as humans nowadays go in and out all the time. And that makes it very topical for me.

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