

Baby needs a new pair of shoes
by Helena Julian

In April 2022 I visited **Tim Hollander** in their studio in The Hague, where they are working on the final steps for the upcoming group show titled **Shoeglazing at Dürst Britt & Mayhew**. For our conversation, Hollander has set up a temporary installation of shelves and platforms to display a selection of works. They explain that its final form will simulate a footwear store, somewhere between a generic high street shop catering to all ages and sizes through a variety of brands, and the more high scale boutiques, where the preference is to name designers instead of brands.

Visiting Hollander's studio, I am reminded of days spent in Brussels in my early twenties. Walking from central to north, I would often pass by a shoe boutique on Rue Dansaert. The shop itself was tiny, but I remember the street side being a most attractive sight. It had a renovated curved art deco glass vitrine, and brass handles on the door. A selection of shoes was lined up diagonally in extension of each other, as if they were perched cross legged at restaurant tables. There was never a mention of their prices in the vitrine. To estimate, one would have to look closely at their materials and forms; buttery soft leathers, block heels made of wood, a curving of the heel and tip that could only be handmade. Between the recurring brown and black leathers there would be hints of colours and shapes that would remind you of how very contemporary their selection was. The selection was highly covetable, inspired by sentiments such as "those would be so comfortable" to "I wish I was the type of woman who could wear those". I would do a lot of window gazing, I wouldn't even call it window shopping. This was a shop for buyers who knew exactly what they could afford. The few times my curiosity overruled any realistic thought of purchasing designer shoes on a student budget, the shopkeeper, a chic Belgian woman in her forties, would welcome me in a way that was a perfect balance between cordial and indifferent. And then, after a few moments of eager and meticulous browsing, the dreaded question: "Can I help you with something?". Followed by the habitual answer, delivered casually to disguise any sort of discomfort: "Not right now thank you, just looking around." She of course allowed it. A mutual understanding that doesn't need to be discussed further. I was not the first person to covet her selection. It is an accepted way of saying: "I will not be purchasing anything today, but please be assured I really like your shoes."

Subsequent years brought different desires and different budgets, and moreover, online shopping. The recollection of shoe shopping in person reminds me of a most personal interaction. Being helped by a shop keeper who suggests you take a seat, while they fetch the other shoe in the back. The act of opening up laces and zippers for you, taking out the tissue paper. The item of a shoe spoon, with its extremely narrow functionality as an object, only helping a foot into a leather shoe. And how the shoehorn's material

would indicate all you need to know about the shop, whether it was in plastic, brass or horn. To be asked by a stranger to wiggle your toes, while they press down on your foot and ask if the shoes fit comfortably.

Hollander explains that memories such as these played an important role in the conception of this exhibition. There is a shared recollection of footwear stores, but also of display structures in museums dedicated to contemporary fashion or historical garments. In both these contexts, tools such as shelves and pedestals are employed to gear attention to a shoe as an object of desire. The intent to form a collection of these objects, was where this show was initiated. Hollander tells me that the exhibition as we see it today was more of a mental collection for the last two years, and additionally, an image folder on their iPhone. While traveling and visiting exhibitions, they kept encountering shoes in different artistic contexts. In a way this is a common experience for those engaging with the arts; the prompt of seeing patterns across different artistic practices. Sometimes these patterns can be as explicit as circulating around a concrete object. Do you remember that phase when we saw many ventilation systems as artworks in exhibitions? Or the time where a group show would often have one artist creating a fountain? It's rather inconclusive how these patterns of a similar form or material arise. Much like seasonal trends in fashion, there might be certain shared interests and tendencies that proliferate through artistic practices, whether they are consciously inspired by each other or less so. And purely by existing in shared contexts, a wider phenomenon is perceived.

In its most transparent intention, a group show involves different works that are thematically linked or ask similar questions, but with different material outcomes and different answers. In a way, Shoeglazing subverts this intention, by bringing together a range of works that are formally aligned but have a diverse intent. The selected artists arrive at the object of a ceramic shoe, but have asked different questions to initiate their process. Establishing this shared instrument, it allows us to look beyond material and medium, towards an exploration of objectives. While there is a more substantial presence of ceramic works in visual arts in the last ten years, we can also notice the rise of casting everyday objects in ceramics. The appearance of an abundance of ceramic shoes, might therefor be a sub-category of a sub-category. The ten contributing artists have either worked with ceramic shoes before, or have presented fragments of shoes and garments in previous works. The selection thus bridges existing and newly commissioned works. And in this selection, as Hollander highlights, the factor of affinity and style isn't unimportant, similar to what a selection made by an actual shopkeeper might be.

Verena Blok shows her Red Heels alongside a ceramic handbag and a photographic print, together alluding to the household of a relative in her home country of Poland. Copying the red slipper into its ceramic form, Blok pays homage to femininity within traditional gender roles, pays attention to the materialisation of domesticity and shows

an appreciation of the women around whom these subjects revolve. Similarly in the realm of private lives, **Arash Fakhim** pulls from his memories of plastic home and bathroom slippers, encountered at friends and family in Iran. In Shoeglazing, the flimsy plastic soles meet their ornate ceramic counterbalance. In a more chunky register of form, **Afra Eisma** perceives her ceramic shoes as a container for her larger sculptures. They signify a close connection to the human, the bodily, while their bright candy coloured glazes might invite the viewer to reach out and caress. For **Dorota Jurczak**, too, a shoe never appears without the implication of a limb. Her fascination for shoes started with a series of drawing of legs and shoes for internet magazine Kaput. When **Koen Taselaar** turned to ceramics in his practice, he referred to how he first learned to draw; by trial and error and simplified forms. Taselaar's shoes belong in a range of everyday objects the artist has previously conceived out of clay, such as ashtrays resembling a smoked sausage. A few of **Kim David Bots'** single Lost Shoes are selected, which for him implies a narrative possibility. Wearing only one shoe implies an absurd narrative arc, a staging of a small scene where the shoe is either already lost or in the process of being lost. In their series Making it fit, various characters from **Caz Egelie's** performative practice are reduced to their essence; a sculptural identity of a shoe. Characters then become able to slip in and out of shoes as they do in and out of roles and identities. In a similar manner, **Ola Vasiljeva** refers to a performative event that might have taken place previously, leaving behind its traces. Vasiljeva's works appear as the outlines of shoes, a highly suggestive appearance. **Michael Portnoy** contributes ceramic shoes from his speculative fashion line URGENT, where tactical sneakers and composite sandals carry extensive titles that are often a call to action.

Affiliating these various works through a system of display is one of the ways that this exhibition refers to the body of work Hollander has previously formulated. In past exhibitions, such as *When Attitudes Become Multiform*, developed in 2017 for the Jan van Eyck academie, they will often attempt to obscure the boundaries between the installation of the exhibition and the individual works, between design and art as competing strategies, and moreover between their own position as an artist, curator and exhibition designer. Producing these reflections in a wealth of forms, from installations, sculptures, text based works and publications, Hollander now adds the craft of ceramics to their signature. Surrounded by the various results of this venture in their studio, Hollander explains that there is a certain immediate appeal to working on a simplified form such as a shoe once it no longer serves the intent to be worn. Imagine a block of clay, where one gradually sculpts a tip on one side, and an opening on the other. A shoe in its most rigid form appears. No longer needing to fit, the form can now expand into the most wondrous imagery.

Graduated with works that engage with institutional critique, responses to conceptual art, and that have a significant graphic formal language, working with ceramics provided Hollander with a genuine opportunity to regain

an eagerness to formulate new work. While their previous works often came into existence through multiple steps, from conceptualising, designing, to having work produced by external parties, the turn to ceramics allows for a more direct and integral approach. Personal observations were always part of the works of Hollander, now they dare to involve observations outside of the realm of art. Hollander explains that they experienced a growing discrepancy between personal interests and what they could express through their practice. The desire to take more liberty with gender representation, for one, became formalised in an interest in taking more liberty in wearing certain garments. The work (*Binary Rejecting*) *Triplet Boots* is a firm affirmation of its intent, while other times the objective exudes from the shoes' inspired form or its title; its fluidity, and most of all, its suggestive force.

Here also the relation between the object of art and the object of a shoe becomes clear, in that they are both equally objects of desire as they are objects of expression. We see shoes being worn as markers of communities, as markers of identities. If a conscious choice of wearing certain garments, whether it is called fashion or style, is a spectrum of expression, selecting shoes might be its ultimate challenge. For it to be understood as such, we need that expression to be read through shared cultural coding. If identity and gender are a construct, we might be held accountable for each and every performance of that construct, be it through acts or through materiality. Wearing a certain shoe says as much as not wearing a certain shoe: a sneaker under a wedding gown, combat boots with no combat in sight, strappy sandals in the workplace. Or, less commonplace: Kim Kardashian wearing 50 dollar Pleaser heels underneath Marilyn Monroe's 1962 robe at the Met Gala in 2022, Cardi B deliberately choosing Louboutins over Manolo Blahniks, making her allegiance to new money over old money clear, or A\$AP Rocky asserting to his listeners that he wears gold Margiela's without laces. Shoes might be the way we literally navigate this world. They give us height or keep us grounded, hips might sway or strides might be long and supple. They allow us to do manual labour, or merely sit pretty. After all, shoes are a metonym for their wearer. Stepping into certain shoes, is contemplating stepping into a certain identity. While the tale of Cinderella and her glass slippers has been reformulated over time, it becomes clear that the act of wearing a certain shoe is a promise of transformation. Whether this is directed at more fluid gender representations or social mobility, belonging to a community or enabling a code to be perceived. Dreaming about shoes is said to signify the desire to think about one's future. Through the medium of the ceramic shoe we might receive a cue to consider the intentions behind these seemingly mondain accessories, and to consider that everything we desire, materialises in one way or the other.

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