

**Martin Bodilsen Kaldahl:**

***Probing the Floor, Sniffing the Air***

May 5 - June 17, 2023

Opening Reception with the artist: May 5, 6 - 8pm

HB381 is pleased to announce *Probing the Floor, Sniffing the Air*, an exhibition of new sculptures by Danish ceramicist Martin Bodilsen Kaldahl (b. 1954). This is the artist's first solo exhibition in the United States. Kaldahl, now Professor Emeritus at the Royal Danish Academy, has been exploring a recurring theme over the last decade: the knot as a spatial figure. His works are open visions, often sparked by everyday incidents which are sketched on paper or recorded on a smartphone, an "endless stream of latent possibilities." These ideas settle over time; when Kaldahl begins the actual making process the potential of the sketches gradually unfolds as the works emerge before him. Kaldahl's work is non-narrative but strongly emphasizes the importance of scale and the capacity of the form itself to transfer emotional content through the interaction between the work, the space, and the viewer. Although highly individual, the works also appear as a sequence — one directly referencing the next, a set of connected gestures in a repetitive action evoking familiar imagery and sensation.

Glenn Adamson has contributed an essay, *An Even Newer Laocoön*, for the exhibition catalogue, excerpted below:

"When confronting the work of Martin Bodilsen Kaldahl, the Laocoön, and all the things that have been said about it, come immediately to mind. Kaldahl, like [Clement] Greenberg, speaks of the 'energy deriving from the direct physicality of the works' as being of primary importance...

To understand how Kaldahl manifests this dynamic, it is helpful to know something of his process – for him, as for most ceramic artists, making and meaning are inextricable. His signature tube forms are actually not coiled (like pots, or snakes), but rather extruded. This accounts for their consistency, which approaches that of pure geometry. Having produced a clay cylinder, he cuts it up at odd angles, and then repeats the procedure, until he has a quarry of units, varying somewhat in length and shape. Then he builds, joining the components together in a semi-random sequence. The angled face of each cut, placed against another, produces a slightly unpredictable vector. As he works, joining one unit to the next, 'starting in one corner and letting it develop on its own,' as he puts it, the work finds its own shape. The process is totally continuous, such that it actually traverses Kaldahl's sculptures from one to the next. He is constantly resupplying, creating a stock of shapes and drawing from it, the basic technique ramifying endlessly, as in the operations of a genetic code. Sometimes, as in the majestic five-part wall mural that serves as a centerpiece for the current show at HB381, he groups his sculptures in sets, as if to emphasize this principle of ongoing flow.

When Kaldahl first began working in this way, in 2012, he had a couple of questions in mind. The first was about intuition. Having worked for many years as a studio potter, he was well aware of the advantages of having an established vocabulary, but also the limitations that this could impose. (Greenberg would have understood.) Gradually, beginning in the late 1980s, he abandoned the standard functional shapes of his chosen discipline, 'getting rid of a lot of stuff that had gotten in,' and worked more sculpturally, more abstractly. This new exploratory direction left him curious about the nature of exploration itself. 'What if I could make a doodle, half conscious?', he asked himself. 'Could I do that slowly, over a week or a month?' The answer was yes: the tube-based works, which he refers to generally as *Spatial Drawings*, do indeed have the improvisatory quality of a rapid sketch. Often he works out them out in advance, roughing out a format in pen and ink. But this is only ever a starting place: by introducing the element of chance, he has been able to let go of his own authorship to some extent, reacting to his compositions rather than controlling them. At the same time, he has been able to ensure coherence both within each sculpture, and across the body of work, by virtue of his focused technical repertoire.

The second question that Kaldahl posed himself was more cerebral, and harder to answer definitively. He was interested in ornament, and how he might complicate its relationship to form. This is a great topic for a potter, a concern that he shares with many others – in his own native Denmark, one might think for example of the great midcentury ceramic designer Axel Salto, and Kaldahl's contemporary Morten Løbner Espersen. Like them, Kaldahl was eliding the conventional distinction between the 'body' of the object and what is applied to it. Yet his tubular forms presented an unusual solution, or rather, a set of open-ended possibilities. While their internal repetition does set up a pattern – a hallmark of the ornamental mode – there is also a neutrality to them. Tubes, after all, are most often encountered as infrastructure, whether in the plumbing of a building or the blood vessels of the human body. And as he has worked with this vocabulary, he has found himself emphasizing that pragmatism. The sculptures have gotten less classical, less figural (a bit less like the Laocoön, in fact) and more like feats of engineering. At their most extreme – the densely populated *Orange Accumulation*, from 2021, is an example – they come across as self-propagating, as if Kaldahl were channeling forces scarcely under his control...

That brimming potential, in the end, is perhaps the key trait of the *Spatial Drawings*. The exposed faces of their constituent tubes make them seem inquisitive, or perhaps vigilant. They reach directly upward, probe the floor, sniff the air. Made of clay, they nonetheless have the psychological presence of animate things. Ever since the Laocoön, with its churning bodies and serpents, sculptors have tended to seek vitality above all other qualities – while their works may be forever still, they live in the mind. Kaldahl is no exception. His practice has a life of its own, a logic at once relentless and uncertain by nature. Each sculpture is one moment in an unfolding experiment: a step into a flowing river of creativity, always there for him, yet never the same twice."

Kaldahl graduated with an MA in ceramics and glass from the Royal College of Art, London. His work will be the subject of a retrospective at the CLAY Museum of Ceramic Art, Denmark, in 2024. Kaldahl received the prestigious Annie and Otto Johs. Detlefs Ceramics Prize,

awarded to ceramicists of extraordinary excellence in 2017. His works are represented in many public and private collections, including the Victoria & Albert Museum, London; Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris; Kunstindustrimuseet, Oslo; SKMU Sørlandets Art Museum, Norway; Röhsska Museum, Gothenburg; Designmuseum Danmark, Copenhagen; Trapholt Art Museum, Denmark; CLAY, Museum of Ceramic Art, Denmark; MIMA, Middlesborough, UK; Diane and Marc Grainer Collection, Washington DC; Annie and Otto Johs. Detlefs' Foundation, Denmark; Aller Media, Denmark, among others.