

Intelligent Artifice

Lean in close to the leaf. Close enough to warm it with your breath. Now reach out, and oh so gently, touch.

Still cold.

For this is glazed porcelain, not actual plant matter – a fact you knew well just by looking, yet were somehow drawn to test. Such is the invitation of Marianne Nielsen's works, which beguilingly update, to present-day conditions, the tradition of *trompe l'oeil*.

It's always been a misnomer, that phrase. The eye is hardly ever really fooled by such feats of artistic verisimilitude. The pleasure is not in being tricked, but rather, in entering the charmed circle of an illusion, experiencing the duality of an object that is not what it pretends to be.

In Nielsen's case, this complex pleasure is further extrapolated into the dimension of the hyperreal. In detail, the resemblance her works bear to actual vegetation is eerily persuasive, and obviously based on extraordinarily close study. Taken as a whole, however, they are profoundly divergent from everyday experience. Certainly, you will find nothing like them on a forest floor.

If Nielsen makes a cluster of elder twigs, for example, their leaves will have precisely the serrated edges of the real thing, with veining picked out on the front and back sides, and the exact pliancy of the genuine article, at once fleshy and papery. But the leaves will be arranged in a perfect furl, forming a single, contiguous surface sheathed in luminous yellow-green-gray glaze, a palette derived from geology rather than biology.

A single hosta leaf, similarly, will feel at once like something plucked from a garden bed, and from art gallery wall, equal parts René Magritte and Frank Stella. It will be folded over like origami, so as to form a striking, striated silhouette. The absolutely vertical line of the leaf's sharp midrib is visible within the enclosure. The warm brown coloration of that rib is of course that of the clay peeking through, and it finds a perfect correspondence in the leaf's thinned edges. Through this careful compositional orchestration, a trivial thing is transformed into an icon for contemplation.

Even in these initial, cursory encounters with Nielsen's works, their dichotomous effects become clear. On the one hand they are quite modest, self-effacing to the point of

being stealthy. At a time when so much contemporary clay shouts across the room (and across the whole of the internet), her works beckon you with the softest of murmurs. On the other hand, once Nielsen does have your attention, she grips it tight. This has long been true. Even before she developed her current, awe-inspiring ability to mimic natural forms, she was making objects that linger in the memory: a single blushing apple, neatly bisected into two bowls; amorphous shapes with the luxuriant texture of animal pelts; coiled vessels whose strong silhouettes make them look like refugees from an optical illusion. Across this wide expressive range, she has consistently achieved a transfixing combination of preternatural elegance and technical legerdemain.

There used to be a word for this particular configuration of virtues: *artificial* (in Danish, *kunstig*). In the Renaissance, the term could be applied to anything ingenious and well-made – so that, for example, when Walter Raleigh wrote up his voyage up the Orinoco river through what is now Venezuela, in 1595, he praised the indigenous people for the “very artificiall townes and villages” they built up in the trees. A century and a half later, Samuel Johnson defines the word “artificial” in his pioneering dictionary as *made by art, not natural; artful, contrived with skill*, though also noting its other, more recent connotation: *fictitious; not genuine*. All these definitions, as it happens, fit Nielsen’s work perfectly. So much so, in fact, that her *faux* flowers and leaves challenge us to rethink what it is to be “artificial,” in the present day. At a time when emergent technologies, frighteningly unaware of their own power, promise a future of frictionless and instantaneous operation, she offers an exactly contrary set of values. Call it *intelligent artifice*, hard-won, patient, and poetic.

At a time when, as they say, “content is king,” she has created a body of work conspicuously devoid of subject matter, instead exploring the realm of primary material experience. As her fellow artist Peder Rasmussen remarked in 2008, “she is of that rare kind who wants nothing at all, apart from working with the phenomenon of ceramics.” Or, as Nielsen herself says, “what you see is what you get.”

Yet if her naturalistic motifs seem, at one level, to be merely the pretext for Nielsen’s formal investigations, the current state of nature at large is an inevitable context for understanding her art. To be quite clear, she does not intend to make a statement about climate change. Her work is far too private, too intimate, to be understood as political in that sense. Rather, as she puts it, “my perspective goes much further back,” that is, into the fundamental relationship that people have to the environment. This is what she meditates upon, prompting us to do the same: reflect on the kinds of looking, the strategies of possession, that articulate the nature/culture divide.

In this regard, it's crucial to note that Nielsen's process centers on an act of dislocation, like that one might encounter in an old herbarium or the cabinet of a natural history museum, but even more extreme due to the total lack of context in her manner of display, scientific or otherwise. A further distancing is enacted by the rendering of fleshly plant matter in hard ceramic. As in the celebrated glass botanical specimens of the Czech father-and-son Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka – which Nielsen's delicate creations somewhat resemble – there is something both compelling and unsettling in this substitution. She makes permanent what had been ephemeral, one diminutive monument after another, arresting the cycle of perpetual renewal – that, as she notes, "is what I kill when I make them."

This gesture of negation is all the more significant, given that Nielsen's chosen iconography is so firmly established, in circulation for so many centuries. Leaves and flowers, carefully observed, symbolically charged: this is the repertoire of medieval tapestries and illuminated manuscripts, of Renaissance portraiture, of historical decorative arts. Occasionally, she does pointedly allude to those traditions, as in her *Leaf Crown*, which features two rings of foliage reaching up and down. There's a clear reference, in this case, to the laurel wreaths of Roman emperors, and the acanthus capitals one finds atop classical columns. But the essential strangeness of her composition, that of talons grasping at empty space, situates the work in a mental landscape all its own. No work of Nielsen's reads all that clearly as metaphor, but this one could perhaps be construed as a representation of the human will, always imposing itself on nature, and just as routinely revealing its own inadequacies.

That reading would be consistent with a key instinct that Nielsen has about our relationship to nature: as much as we may buy and sell and subdivide it, as much as we may transform its shape and extract its resources, it remains to some degree alien, and therefore inalienable. "You can't own flowers," she points out. "You may have them in your garden, but you can never fully own them." The very appeal of a blossom, indeed, is defined by that quality of remoteness. A similar point, as it happens, was made by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790). He described a cut flower, like a tulip, as an emblem of the "free beauty of nature," but noted that it could only have been seen as such once isolated from its intrinsic biological function: "Hardly anyone but a botanist knows the true nature of a flower, and even he, while recognizing in the flower the reproductive organ of the plant, pays no attention to this natural end when using his taste to judge of its beauty." (Jacques Derrida, in turn, critiqued Kant's idealism as part of his deconstruction of the autonomous work of art... but that's another story.) This dynamic is exactly what's at stake in Nielsen's artifice. It is elaboration of the simple idea that acts of looking are already transformative, and

potentially destructive. She slows that process way down, almost to a dead stop, the better for us to feel its vast implications.

"It's odd that, even when almost everything is presumed to exist on a spectrum, we still talk about deception as though it's binary," the critic Jackson Arn mused in a recent piece for the *New Yorker*. "Illusion mixed with disillusion can be more intoxicating than either." It's a good point, and remarkably apt in relation to Nielsen's work, which is fictive precisely in the way that literature can be: a not-quite-faithful gloss on the world, which allows us to see things aslant, and therefore, somehow, more clearly. She is a miniaturist, operating at the trim scale of a poem, rather than a novel, or even a short story; this quality of compression makes her creations all the more potent, and poignant. On the surface – and what surfaces they are! – her works may seem to be about nature. In fact, they are perfect specimens of craft, that most human of phenomena, probed to its deepest root.