

Fiona McPeake: Subject and Material

The paths of fine art lead from completely concrete themes and subject matter, taken from outward reality, to abstract and sometimes ephemeral creations which exist in their own sphere, in their own “harmony parallel to nature” (Paul Cézanne). This is the usual representation of the development of fine art since the middle of the 19th century and can refer to the personal growth within the work of numerous artists. This popular model can also be applied to Fiona McPeake’s sculptures of the last two decades.

From this perspective the starting point would be the masks which Fiona McPeake has created for the characters of Commedia. She has in fact started from this tradition, but developed these masks further into characteristic, expressive faces which take on a life of their own. Particularly in their individual physiognomic details they represent both the playfulness and the stereotypical nature of this theatre form, but transcend it and develop a rather enigmatic, primordial existence.

In the next phase of her work Fiona McPeake continued this tendency and created the series of “Anatomia”: at first glance these sculptures appear like preserved organs of the human body: teeth, ears, vertebrae, brains. But only at first glance! These objects create a slight shudder, a shudder as we experience in old anatomical university collections with the medical specimen floating in formaldehyde; they evoke anxieties of operations and malformations, of mutilations and manipulations, which we carry within us and try to keep below the surface. However, Fiona McPeake has built into her “anatomical” objects quasi a realism trap, because they are exactly not just that which they make the fleeting observer believe in the semidarkness of the exhibition space. They are not human organs, preserved and thus made immortal, nor are they exact replicas like the wax mouldings in teaching collections. They only play with the possibility to portray something familiar, even fearful, but seen in a different light or from a different point of view they escape immediately this momentary interpretation.

Perhaps “OXO”, the “Bull’s Head” from 2009 was the culmination of the “Anatomia” – and yet it transcended them, also because its frame of reference concerned an animal and not a human being. Forced into a nature-hostile cubic form, the animal mass, thus deformed in an artistically fascinating as well as horrifying way, refers inevitably to the folds and fissures of the brain. Its geometric orientation would make it a completely abstract sculpture were not the two quasi ready-made bull’s horns added which pertain to a “real” animal. Thus the object is finally yet connected again with our reality. Since Pablo Picasso’s legendary “Bull’s Head” from 1942, the genially succinct combination of a bicycle saddle and a handlebar, there are in the history of art only a few variations of the theme that are so extraordinarily convincing.

Of the latest sculptures of Fiona McPeake some connect with this tradition, they evoke for example animal heads in a sun burnt Spanish landscape, but a further step towards abstraction is unmistakable. The folds and fissures leave the tempting yet uncertain sphere of the anthropo-or biomorphic associations and advance potentially into the realm of pure, abstract form.

However, up to now all our considerations ignored a decisive factor which facilitates a real understanding of the work of Fiona McPeake: the material. For a long time this factor has been treated in a rather peripheral way in the art historical analyses of artistic works. Only the fundamental research by Monika Wagner (Hamburg University) has in the last few years given the material its deserved position as an independent medium of meaning and expression of contemporary art.

All the sculptures referred to here consist exclusively of tanned animal hide, apart from very few additions of metal, sometimes due to requirements of structural stability (and naturally the horns of the “Bull’s Head”). Leather is the material of her masks of *Commedia dell’Arte* and the of the objects of the “Anatomia” series, made of leather is the “Brain” of the “Bull’s Head”, made of leather are also the imposing hanging or sack like objects, reminiscent of textiles, which have recently arrived from Fiona McPeake’s studio.

Fiona McPeake has increased more and more her virtuosity in working this material, and has arrived from a more rustic, woodcut like form of the masks to an artistic shaping of the leather. Whilst the material was earlier still the significant medium for the expression of the masks, playing with the affinity between the reality of the animal skin and the (suggested) human skin (as is the case, but in an even stronger sense, with the sinister presence of the “anatomical” objects), it now appears to have become an (almost) autonomous subject – which takes us back again to abstraction.

There exists hardly a dimension in which Fiona McPeake has not probed in depth the potential and limits of the material: leather. The way ahead could lead equally “back” to the direct representational as well as to complete abstraction, as used in works which respect their material - like distillation or dissolution.

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