

Liv Zachrisson – malleable material

An artistic career brings with it a wealth of possible dialogues, small starting points that can grow over the decades. Addressed to the world as on a display surface, an artist's production is handed over to the viewer with all its hypothetical understandings, languages and changing contexts. But perhaps first and foremost, these ongoing dialogues in an artistic oeuvre turn in upon themselves as works that mumble and whisper to one another, gathered in a common course. In time a need may arise to gather up all these strands and look back. Some things can be observed and summed up with ease; others remain a feeling, but all the same can function as a reliable driving force.

Indwelling in the material

Liv Zachrisson works with traces of existential and mental experiences as they have taken up residence in the body as special kinds of memory. They are precipitated as a variety of idioms and media: sculpture, painting, photography, video, drawings and text – at times they form parts of the same work as composite installations. She is preoccupied by a rooting in the material; how this register of visual manifestations encounters different textures, surfaces and depths. Beneath it all lies the will to tell a story – something she does through the material.

The mutability of a given material is a general feature for Zachrisson, something that suggests emotional nuances and conceptual interpretations. The material takes the form of the body and symbolic figures that incline towards abstraction. She makes use of the rhythm in repetition and the structures that arise in variations on a motif, played out in the alternations between motion and stillness. What in itself may appear fragile grows stronger in the repetition.

Soft mat, transformations in wax

The connotations of wax are manifold – it buzzes with bees and salutary warmth, a protective, organic layer associated with primary needs. Beeswax is made by honeybees when they build honeycombs. But wax also comes in industrially made versions. Many artists have made use of it as meaning-bearing material which both links us with and separates us from nature. Jasper Johns built up his charged painting surfaces with the aid of encaustic, an ancient technique where beeswax is mixed with pigment. Eva Hesse included wax in sculptural conglomerates of brittle bodily sedimentation. In a more theatrical setting we find Matthew Barney's staged props in wax, characters in ingenious drama. The wax encapsulates something, and seems to stop time such that

the thing itself is made tactile and soft, and yet not statically tangible. The wax transforms by its very nature. It makes strange, muffles the sound.

Liv Zachrisson's first experience of wax sculpture was from her time at the Academy of Art, and wax as a material has faithfully followed her since. There she came into contact with language as form, symbolism and the conceptual. It was a matter of exploring and using the inherent character of the material in processual thinking. When Zachrisson began working three-dimensionally with wax and foam rubber as a core, she saw an arsenal of possibilities. She cut out shapes in foam rubber and painted them with industrial wax in different colours. Explorations over the years have involved dripping, melting, modelling, cutting and casting. She has juxtaposed wax with steel figures, and in the course of time also video images. From synthetic wax she later progressed to beeswax, and as natural material it all began to vibrate in a different way, with a different materiality.

The fire, the flame

A turning point in her production arose with the sculpture *white* (1990), which embodied Zachrisson's shuttling between fragility and strength, the fixed and the mutable. At that time she was greatly inspired by Anish Kapoor, preoccupied with the inner life of the material, its inherent power and mystery. The materiality in *white* consists first and foremost of paraffin wax in combination with synthetic wax, a product from crude oil – flammable and toxic in vaporous form. Even in the solid form of the wax there is slow viscous motion over a long period of time. In a rise towards a peak, a kind of flame, the base grows outward. This flame moves onward in other works. In *white* Zachrisson has dripped wax which builds up the form, and then attaches it to the floor in the gallery space as part of the display – welded, so to speak, by its malleable material, dripped out over the floor like a site-specific parasite. The whiteness in the material attracts greater impurity. Over time the in principle clinical element absorbs into itself its surroundings, including dust and dirt, and in a way reflects ideals becoming tainted. The reality of things forces its way into the flexible, malleable material.

In a number of pieces after this Zachrisson has worked with the ability of the wax to appear at one and the same time hard and soft, substantial and yielding. Several of these pieces involve different tableaux and combinations of material logics, dimensional relationships and rhythms. In this too an interest in certain selected basic motifs is demonstrated, such as the flame again, and the conflict between light and darkness. In the installation *YELLOW* stylized wax figures with heads of flame appear (shown at the RAM Gallery in 1995). These bearers of fire were contrasted with video images of water projected on the floor. In *tableaux vivants (living pictures)* (2006) we see a

juxtaposition of video and objects. The work, which filled two halls at the Vigeland Museum, consisted partly of a low plateau with yellow birds, modelled and cast in wax, a form revived from *YELLOW*. The bird as a copy of itself at the same time had a graduation in the colouring. In the next hall a video image of a giant hand was projected; it opened and closed slowly; a flame suddenly rose up from the palm of the hand – not a transient bird in the hand, but an unflinching, potentially destructive basic element. This made manifest the hand's relationship to the sculptures, its conceptual shaping of the birds. At the same time the down-to-earth position of the hand seemed to be brought into play, tangentially to mysterious actions.

Beneath the cloth

Liv Zachrisson began her education at the Academy of Arts and Crafts, where she studied textiles, very soon adopting an experimental approach. She and her fellow students explored fibre and surface in an unorthodox and processual manner. Zachrisson tore cloth, sewed it together, and worked further on it with heat, starch and vaseline. Alongside this she painted with large sheets of canvas. The inspiration came from among other things Mark Rothko's spiritual colour field paintings but also from artists on the Norwegian scene with whom she was in close contact, like Bente Sætrang and Zdenka Rusova. Zachrisson's textiles hung from ceiling to floor, with an increasing use of textile objects. She worked on the soft material and shaped it into abstract spatial forms. She had a high level of activity and in the last half of the 80s she exhibited at among other places the Textile Triennial, UKS (Young Artists' Federation) and Kunstnerforbundet (the Artists' Federation). A need to develop her artistic language took Zachrisson onward to the more formal and sculptural orientation of the Academy of Art.

The close relationship with textiles, the knowledge and experience she has built up also typify Zachrisson's relationship with other materials. Often textile elements have appeared in her installations, in videos and as sculptural objects. In later works the textile element has been more about communication and action and therefore takes the form more of metaphorical, symbolic entities – as part of the circle of motifs rather than a true physical presence. In the materiality, there is a connection for Zachrisson, also indirect, with presence and existence.

The textile as an approach to other states – as protection but also as a link to something mystical and meditative – marks the use of the material in the exhibition *I listen beneath the cloth* (shown at the SOFT gallery in 2015-16). Freedom to use a complex reservoir of forms, expressions and motifs was clearly evident here, with reference to processes in the studio. The collage composition of the exhibition consisted of among other things drawings, paintings and photography mounted on the wall, but also

leaning up against it as pictorial objects and picture surfaces. A soundscape of recited texts and a buzzing sound came and went. There arose a loose synthesis of underlying drama and condensed energy. The work was about listening – to the world and to oneself. The vulnerable underlying tone was made specific, among other ways in a stylized photograph where she was enveloped almost spectrally in a veil. The cloth of the title became a skin or membrane between an external world and an inner space which signalled a wish to listen inwardly. This cocoon filters and assuages. The person beneath is temporarily inaccessible.

The textile as idea and feeling, limitation and alternative, makes me think of René Magritte's Surrealist painting *Les amants* (1928). Two lovers kiss, each of them with a white piece of cloth over his or her head; the kiss becomes a moist textile in the mouth. The material changes appearance radically, and the figures appear as sculptures in a different material. A series of dry-point prints by Zdenka Rusova from the end of the 1960s, showing women's profiles, is another parallel. The heads appear under veils, from the anthropomorphically abstract to the Renaissance-distinct, and create a peculiar rhythm between mainly melancholy and introspective appearances, at times bizarre with macabre suggestions.

The atmospheric framework in Zachrisson's work can be melancholy and involve processual experiences of dark shades, incarnated in wax and textile as materials – always in flux and constantly malleable. The experiences that these materials involve also add resonance to her works with drawing, text, sound, painting, photography and video – all part of a composite totality. Fragments from nature appear as flotsam, untethered and as personal driftwood. If the place where Zachrisson locates herself and the viewer can be pinpointed, it is the forest that suggests itself. Here the darkness is deep, but there are also flashes of light in "...the forest that I am".

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