

Art & Stories

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Interview with Cajsa von Zeipel

It's a sunny day in New York in the middle of November. The sky over Downtown Manhattan shines corn blue, the leaves of the trees glow golden, the facades of the freshly renovated Redstones contrast in warm red.



"This is a color spectrum that should inspire artist Cajsa von Zeipel," I tell myself as I stand at the door of her studio on the Lower East Side, ringing the bell. The Swedish-born sculptor has lived in her adopted home in New York for eight years, where she has just moved into a new studio. Here, in a spacious, loft-like factory floor, the 38-year-old artist creates her oversized, color-intensive plaster sculptures, in which she deals with topics such as feminine provocation, sexual identity and gender equality. Long ago, her works have found their way into large private collections such as the Rubell Foundation as well as into the repertoire of international museums in Stockholm, Zurich and London. Cajsa von Zeipel is also represented in the art collection of the Estrel Berlin with her work "My Feminine Energy". We take a seat on a black leather sofa in the 60s style, surrounded by floor-to-ceiling shelves from which a colorful hodgepodge of household items, rolls of cloth and toys well up, and water pistols, vibrators and synthetic hair wigs lie harmoniously next to each other until Cajsa processes them into a new sculpture. The interview can begin.

Cajsa, your last name sounds very German. Are your ancestors of German descent?

The name comes originally from Belgium, then my family came to Germany and after they went to Sweden.

And now you live in New York. What brought you here?

I came to New York in 2013. Sometimes life changes because of boredom ... In Stockholm I saw no perspective anymore, although I liked the place. But when it came to my creativity, I felt I had to move. I was already three years in the Swedish art scene, I pursued my master's at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm, I had my first exhibition at the Gallery of Andr h-Schiptjenko, but I didn't want to cage myself. I was supposed to stay in New York for six months. And it wasn't an option to move here for full time. But after four weeks I met Sophie, who is now my wife. I went to the first opening of her gallery. She is also from Sweden but has lived here since 1998. She is very much American. And now it's been nine years, which is really insane. (laughs)

Was it your childhood dream to become an artist?

I grew up in the art world because my mom is a curator at the Gothenborg Konsthall. The artists came to our house. I was never scared of art, although I still had respect. You don't have to be able to draw to become an artist. So I decided to become a technical artist, doing everything myself. My father was working for the community, improving recycling and environmental things. He taught me that you stop when you feel you are done.

How did your artistic career begin?

I mainly worked with room-filling installations in Stockholm, always asking myself how to move someone. My installations had an embracing and inviting character. Nevertheless, I wanted people to remember my work, and it's less important if you remember it as good or bad, as long as you remember it. I didn't want to be ignored.

Was there a certain key moment when you decided to do sculptures?

In Stockholm, I was a club kid. The people around me, that scene was very much about appearance, style and body image. I then studied for a year at the Stdelschule in Frankfurt. My experience in Germany was not the best. Partly, I was working on a new project about starving myself. Striving for excellence, getting into the bones ... I was fascinated and caught up in that, but I wasn't seriously obsessed. It was more like an art project. I documented what was happening to me and my mind. I tried not to eat. And that had an impact on my body. I realized that I could see my knees and their structure better. One can say I studied my body like an object. I did this for eight months; however, I realized that I had to get out of it. I went back to Stockholm, finding myself in a styrofoam workshop, and all of a sudden, I knew what a knee looked like. I got addicted to the idea of breaking the pattern I was already in. I started to sculpt the bodies I was interested in having.

The sculptures are always thin, perfect bodies, so to speak. Why do they seem to be provocative and sexualized?

Because I am a lesbian (laughs). The sculptures reflect my attraction to the female body even more. They are objects that can create questions. I grew up with the feministic discussion, asking myself how to be a good and how to be a bad girl. I have always been very keen on not creating victims; they are sisters or warriors. So the provocative side of them reflects their assertive attitude. According to our rules, they are successful, that's why they are thin. The female aspect always has an essential impact on me. Men might be pleased with what they see, but I don't care. The male gaze is very annoying to talk about. If it were a male artist doing my work, I would despise it.

But isn't there a certain contradiction in this?

Respect is needed, and that's what I try to do with my sculptures, even though I play with the borders and constantly question myself: What's acceptable and what is provocative? I prepare them and then they are off. I am not holding hands with the piece any longer, in the sense of explaining their moves and meanings. This is where I let them out to the world. Now you have to do your thing. I love the impact of art, being one thing for one person.

The women in your sculptures are mostly young ...

... they are even a little younger than me. One can say that the sculptures age with me. They are definitely connected to what's happening around me. My last pieces have been very much about the female body being pregnant ... I am now 38 and we are thinking of having a baby.

You live with a woman. How does that affect your art?

My wife gives me daily feedback, and of course, she shapes my art. She is straightforward in her feministic point of view. But when I once had the idea to pump up my lips, my wife said, if you do it, our marriage is over. (laughs)

What? Your lips look perfect ...

Why is it such a big deal? It's always just me. I like this kind of contrast ... maybe it's a trait of mine that shines out through this. And also, it's because I love teeth. (laughs)

Regarding the sculpture over there, she had not so much luck with her teeth ... Also, she has a disturbing facial impression. Is it meant as a contrast to her perfect body?

I don't want to create people that please.

The sculpture is carrying a Louis Vuitton bag. Do you have an issue with designer items?

Of course, it's not real (laughs), but honestly, the fashion brands are stealing a lot from artists, so I think it's nice to steal back a little. (laughs)

What do you think of Kim Kardashian then?

I am one of the few people who don't follow her (laughs), but she is very influential in how she has changed the view on curves in breaking norms with her body. That's very cool. Women are encouraged to embrace their hips and curvy bodies. Very much thanks to her and her family. Praise that.

Checking out your Instagram account „Futuristic Lesbians“, I saw that your sculptures now started to speak ...

The dialogues are important to build a sidekick for the sculptures and to protect them from their nudeness. The next step is to make the sculptures move.

You have started your account quite late.

A few years ago, I felt a bit tired of Facebook, and I didn't want to touch it anymore. I can sound very straightforward, but there is another side to that. And I ask myself, am I missing out on a lot? Sometimes it's good to isolate your tasks. But especially since the Covid pandemic, I can somehow connect with people via Instagram.

Has Corona influenced your art or working process in a certain way?

Yes, it has. Mainly because I am a workaholic, and the pandemic gave me space to dwell in the studio. So the last two years have been very intense. I always hang up last minute. Things got postponed, but this was good for me because I got extra time to spend with the pieces. I never had this experience before.

Tell me about the creating process and the materials you use ...

I started out doing everything by myself. I know what a body looks like, so I shaped the silicone for my plasterwork and styrofoam myself. Silicone is the perfect material; it's glittering and transparent, and I love to use it. I then got a bit fed up with my own signature; I wanted to be more surprising. I still do certain parts myself by casting body parts of my friends, but meanwhile, I create most of the elements with mannequins, which I short up into smaller pieces. It's mostly a mix of female and male mannequins ...

Male mannequins, really? But they never appear in your artwork, right?

I tried to integrate gay men a few times, but it didn't turn out well. The male mannequins are suitable because my sculptures are bigger than real bodies. That's why I use men, although I sometimes have to sort pieces off. (laughs)

The shelves in your studio look like a department at Woolworth. Where do you get all the items?

I love shopping at Target and other big stores. A few years ago, I did a show in London in Soho, where you find many sex shops. So I spread down in the sex shops, and I started using vibrators and other sex toys, but also kitchen utilities. Sometimes, while working on a sculpture, I shift through the shelves and look for a color theme, like these sunglasses combined with a lamp, a massager, a wig, and so on. I like to buy sports equipment or stuff for aquariums or horses. Sometimes I think, this is an exciting piece, even though nobody else really knows what it actually is. But it amuses me. I find ways to have fun in the studio. And it wasn't always like this.

What do you mean? Was it stressful because of the pressure to succeed?

It came more from my own expectations of what I should do. When I walk through an expedition, the pieces talking to me have nothing to do with the chosen materials. I am searching for a place where I feel honest with my work. But in fact, I have a passion for collecting items. That's a family issue (laughs). I remember when my sister and I did a kind of an inventory at my grandparents' home, gathering 25 candle holders and carpets ... It was an unbelievable mess of things from all periods. I feel very much at home with lots of items, although my mom always wanted me to clean the piles everywhere in our house.

And what would you have become if you hadn't become an artist?

Maybe an interior or a fashion designer ... or a shrink. Psychology was one of my favorite subjects in school. As an artist, I can combine all those things. That's fantastic.