

Fräulein Talents: Sally von Rosen – Sculpting What Words Can't Express

In Sally von Rosen's sculptures, bodies seem caught in a moment of becoming. Suspended between movement and stillness, her works explore the emotional and material life of objects. We talked about philosophy, vibrant matter, and the strange agency of sculpture.



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Helena Alge: How did you get into art? Was it a conscious decision, or more of a gradual process?

Sally von Rosen: Since I grew up around art and the theatre, I spent a lot of time with different types of artists and what I saw was anxiety, trauma, and melancholia which made me think that I do not want to be an artist. I was in a way working against it, wanting something I thought then was different, I chose to study philosophy. In the end I realized that art was the only subject I was interested in. While researching aesthetic experiences and come to the understanding that only thinking about it was not enough, I then actively decided to make art myself.

You come from a creative background – did that shape you early on, or did your path into art develop more independently from that environment?

Of course I am influenced in my work and informed by the way I grew up but the choice I made was completely my own and has ever since then been that. I have a strong feeling that my art is something I will never stop doing.

What interests you most about sculpture as a medium in general?

I like the possibility of monumental scale, and the way its connected to how the body moves, that you can move around it, and the materials I choose, that it can basically exist forever.

You studied philosophy before going into visual art. Has that way of thinking shaped your artistic practice – and if so, how?

It shapes to a certain extent how I think about art, the experience, and meaning of objects. And in the end philosophy played an important part in how I entered my artistic practice.

Are there any artists or movements you feel particularly drawn to?

Vital Materialism, Grotesque Realism, and the Baroque.

At Fräulein, we're especially interested in female perspectives: Which women, artists, thinkers, or people in your personal life have shaped you and your work?

Last year I only read biographies of artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Grace Hartigan, Barbara Hepworth, Helene Frankenthaler, Lee Krasner, Dorothea Tanning, Francois Millot, and Leonard Carrington. It helps understanding ones own role as a female artist, the importance and obstacles of it.

What does your working process look like? Do you usually begin with a clear idea, or does a work develop through the material itself?

What makes an artist's work genuine, I think, is that they work with what they know, which should be their lived encounters, emotions, memories, and dreams. It's important that it is their own, and that's how it is for me. Movement and showing emotion in the body were imprinted on me early. The first drawings of a new sculpture are often for me just arrows or siluettes, pointing in the directions of the supposedly moving limbs, and not many other lines. This is after I've seen the visual of it in my mind. I don't know exactly what sparks certain images. Sometimes these new visuals very suddenly appear just before I fall asleep. The drawing can't show me what it fully is, but the hands with material in them can.

When you're working, do you listen to music, podcasts, or audiobooks? And if so, what has been playing most in your studio lately?

Tchaikovsky and Ligeti.

How long does it usually take for one of your sculptures to come into being, or does it vary completely from piece to piece?

It depends. But usually a few months at least, sometimes I make multiple at the same time but that doesn't necessarily prolong the process. Some sculptures I've been thinking about for years before I finally start sculpting on them.

Your sculptures often feel as if they are just about to move, even though they remain static. Is that tension something you consciously work with?

I enjoy seeing them as if they're about to move, but I also think it's just the way I sculpt.

Do your sculptures have a kind of inner life for you?

Yes.

So you sometimes catch yourself personifying them?

I think they're alive, in a different way from us.

Many of your figures are headless. Is that a conscious decision, and if so, what interests you about that form?

A head defines often what a creature is, if it has four legs without a head it can be many things, but if one then adds a specific head then the head determines what it is. Continuing without a head often opens for more associations.

In your work, you engage with Jane Bennett's concept of vibrant matter – the idea that matter is not passive, but possesses its own kind of agency. What draws you to this way of thinking?

I'm very interested in the transference of emotions, from artist to object to viewer. If looking at a sculpture gives you multiple responses or different associations that might not even fit together, it means you want to continue thinking about it. The sculpture can become a place for projection or reflection. It stays in your mind, and I like that if you get that far, those feelings can involve more than the personal as well, for example, the material and the atmosphere. I think that if an object can evoke these complicated emotions in other people, there must be something more to it than simply existing because we experience it. That gives the object a kind of agency in my mind, and I like the way Bennett writes about agency and affect concerning objects.

How strongly does this idea influence your work?

It influences the way I think about art and objects but not necessarily the work itself, as that is more intuitively part of me.

Your works are often described as "dark" or unsettling. Is that a reading you can relate to?

Yes.

Is there something you wish people would read differently in your work?

No, I have no such wishes. I enjoy individuals' different reflections and their memories, whatever those might be, that appear when encountering the work, and that the sculpture can be a catalyst for these experiences.

Is it important to you that your work is understood, or do you want it to remain consciously ambiguous?

No, it doesn't have to be understood, but I think it should evoke feelings in you even if you don't know what that is yet.

Do you have a personal relationship to your finished works, or do they detach themselves from you once they're completed?

They switch, move, and change into different relationships. Child, friend, stranger.

Is there a particular feeling or reaction you hope to evoke in viewers?

The possibility of feeling two things at once. There needs to be some contradictions in the work and these contradictions generate affective intensity while undermining fixed categories of identity, body, and subjectivity, which in general I think we have to challenge.

Has your work changed since receiving more visibility and attention?

I always create what I want, otherwise it won't be good. Some forms reoccur, but that's because I'm not finished with them yet.

What are you currently working on, and is there anything we can look forward to in the near future?

To only mention the next three months: my first public artwork, Asta, will be installed in central Stockholm, and the inauguration ceremony takes place on the 16th of June. Thereafter, I'm participating in an exhibition at Pace Gallery Berlin, which opens on the 3rd of July. Following that, I will complete a five-week residency at Villa Lena Foundation in Tuscany, Italy, and take part in CHART Art Fair.