ENVISION WITHOUT COMPROMISE

SALLY VON ROSEN
BY ANGELINA MAMOUN-BERGENWALL

ENVIRONMENTS WITHOUT CONDITIONS

On the day of her public sculpture's unveiling in Stockholm, artist Sally von Rosen joins writer and curator Tessa Praun in conversation to discuss her evolving practice.

BY MAGNUS EDENSVARD

Nearly three-metres-tall, Sally von Rosen's bronze sculpture "Asta" was commissioned by the city of Stockholm to inaugurate a new public sculpture platform. Embodying a series of eloquent contradictions, the sculpture's antler-like form appears abstract at first, yet gradually reveals limbs, bums and other bodily anatomies. The heavy mass seems almost weightless at times, but continually shifts as the light, and the viewer's vantage point changes. Despite the dark bronze patina and inanimate materiality, the work remains inviting, if not irresistibly tactile.

On the day of its installation, Beyond Noise met with the Berlin-based artist along with writer and curator Tessa Praun. As the sculpture was carefully lifted into place by crane, it settled perfectly into position on first descent. Across the square, a traditional 12-metre-tall Midsummer maypole was being raised at the very same time, entirely by chance, lending the day an unexpected air of ceremony.

By the time both "Asta" and the Midsummer pole had been secured in place, the clouds had parted and bright sunlight broke over the square. Through the conversation, Sally reflected on the origins of Asta and her fascination with fragmentation, movement, public space, and materiality. The discussion also considers what it means to live inside a vocation that chooses you, rather than the other way around, and the quiet determination required to dedicate one's life to making art.

TESSA PRAUN How would you describe the sculpture for anyone who hasn't seen it yet?

SALLY VON ROSEN I work with bronze. It's very suitable for being outside, and something I enjoy with this material is that you have to be soft with it, and you have to be violent with it. It can handle those contradictions, and it can last nearly forever. It's actually very interesting to me to hear what other people see when they look at it. Someone might say, "That's a scorpion." Someone else might say, "No, that's a horse." I say, "Yes to both, but you know it's also kind of pregnant." When I was starting this particular sculpture I was looking at the history of equestrian statues in Stockholm, because some of the first public artworks, especially the large bronze sculptures, were equestrian; kings and their horses. Of course, I wanted to create something different, something that is both more me and more dynamic. So I made this thing that is standing on two legs, and then from there I think that people get a bit confused. "Is that the butt, is that the arm, is that the tail?" There are two legs, then a third leg going up in the air, and a tail swirling in a way. It's also supposed to have this circular movement, so that when it's there on a round plinth you walk around it.

TP Do you ever know yourself what the sculptures are, or do they stay open for you too?

SVR I have my own thoughts about what they are and what they seem to be, but I don't think that determines what they are, my decision does not have to be the correct or only one.

TP Your works often have an inherent fragmentation, they seem to pull in different directions, as if they're caught in the middle of becoming something else. Yet they're made in bronze, one of the most permanent materials we know. What interests you in that contradiction?

SVR I'm drawn to the fragmented body conceptually, and I think there's also something in the process of working with bronze that gets returned in the thematics of the work. Fragmentation is a good word for it, it's essentially different body parts put together. I also have a history of working with, or seeing different art forms, and I think that gets imprinted onto my work. I grew up around the theater in Gothenburg, my mother was a ballet dancer, my father was an opera singer, and my grandfather was a painter. I painted with him from very early on, and also spent a lot of time with my grandparents out in the forest. It was the middle of nowhere and in the winter the pipes would freeze so we had to do all these survival techniques. I think these things, and growing up with a lot of artists, gives you access to certain complicated emotions. It's like human, nature, animal, and then dealing with complicated emotions and kind of putting all that together. This also informs my work today, of course. If you are an artist you work from your experiences, memories, dreams, and encounters. So this is a big part of it.

TP Let's talk about how you started making art. I know there were a lot of artists in your family, but becoming one yourself was not your first choice.

SVR My grandfather was a very tortured artist with a lot of anxiety, he wouldn't want to go to his own openings, that kind of thing. As a child a lot of what I saw, when it came to making art and being an artist, was that everybody was melancholic, or a bit depressed. I thought, 'I don't think that's a good idea.' I remember my mother saying, "Okay, you need to choose what you want to do after gymnasium." I said, "I don't want to be an artist." So I chose to study philosophy in Gothenburg instead, which is not necessarily that different, and that later led me to art.

I was the youngest and also the only woman in the class. I tried everything, but then in the end I found that aesthetics was the most interesting, so I wrote my BA thesis on aesthetic experiences. That's when I realized, okay, it's not enough to think about it, I need to do it myself, so I switched and started the preparatory art school. It's funny, I was studying philosophy thinking art would get me down, but actually philosophy got me down. When I began studying art, I started to feel much better and then from there I got into a masters programme in fine arts.

TP We've talked before about the idea that objects can almost have a will of their own. Is that something you're trying to tap into?

SVR Yes, that's a lot connected to me studying philosophy, particularly Jane Bennett. She talks about 'thing-power' and the intentions of a work, but also the effect of agency in general, and the way in which an object can exert so much emotion in people. I have had moments when somebody comes up and tries to explain how they feel about a work. They'll say, "I want to run away from it, but I also want to take care of it." I think, 'Of course, there must be some kind of transference of emotions from me working with a piece, spending a lot of time with it, and then the work having to live on its own.' But how can that work? Technically it's a dead object. This also links to new materialism and object-oriented ontology.

I find these ideas interesting to read about, but then I'm also thinking a bit more loosely about it too. Things like how an object I've created can stand by itself, for people who don't know me, or why I'm doing what I'm doing. It can live there, on its own, and give something to another person. They have these clear emotions, or they don't understand what it is, but they still want to continue thinking about it. I think that's a successful work.

TP Has a sculpture ever surprised you?

SVR I made a two-meter-long wall sculpture a couple of years ago, first it made me laugh and then cry. It kind of looks like a coffin, but also a landscape, and maybe a navel to me, although the shape is rectangular. I sculpted it from under and inside it, like through a hole that's part of it. I only showed it once however, and then I kept it for myself.

I'm intrigued by how your practice moves between very different contexts–from galleries and museum spaces to outdoor public commissions like this one, situated directly in the public realm. How does working in those different environments influence the way you think about sculpture?

SVR Public sculpture is something I've been wanting to do for quite some time, and the thing that I appreciate so much about it is that anyone can walk past and see it. Of course, galleries are one part of showing work, and they're important too, but only certain people attend galleries. With something being outside in a square, anyone can walk past it.

TP Yes and that brings me to the aspects of performance, scale and movement in your work. Your sculptures seem to be twisting, stretching or balancing, even though they're completely still. Where does that sense of movement come from? And how physical is the process of making them?

SVR I think, somehow, that sculpture and performance are not that far apart. I have also worked with performance, and I studied performance art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. In the studio I was thinking about that, especially early on, because I felt like I was having a wrestling match, just me and a big square of styrofoam.

Now, with the heavier works, I need another person there to help hold the work, and then with different parts of the process too, like the welding. I make models first, and I always make these completely by myself. They are smaller in scale, in sizes that I can handle, and they're made from light materials. That also connects to collage at the beginning, because I was making silhouette drawings on styrofoam, creating flat squares that then get twisted, broken and put together again like a puzzle.

Then I start taking off and adding materials, and that's part of the model making. It starts with styrofoam, then it's fiberglass, acrylic resin, epoxy clay, maybe some plaster in there too, some wood or metal, whatever is needed. From there we either make a mold or scan, and then we work with foundries when we need to, as we can't cast, for instance, bronze in my studio.

Often the pieces get cast, and then I get them back to the studio and it's like different body parts, basically. You have to then put them together again. You always create your own problems that you then have to fix.

In relation to how your practice has evolved, 2023 marked an important turning point, as you left part-time work in Anna Uddenberg's studio to focus entirely on your own practice. What led you to that decision, and how has it shaped the way you think about being an artist today?

SVR There are different aspects to making this choice, of course. I think, as with many jobs, there are some parts that are really frustrating, and some parts that are about having an obsession. I can't do anything else at this point, and I don't think I ever will.

I remember I had a studio visit from a class from my preparatory art school who were coming to Berlin, they were students who were maybe ten years younger than me. We had a bit of a conversation, and there was a point when they asked, "But can you actually do it, is it possible?" You get that question and there are two answers. One is, "Yes, of course, if you work really hard and remember that the point isn't about doing everything perfect all the time, it's more about not stopping." I think that's the classic way to answer, and it's also very true. The other answer though, and I don't think everyone wants to hear this, but it's, "If you can do something else, do that, because if you're not in this all the way then it's very difficult."

This is something I exercised myself. I tried not to be an artist, I even tried studying philosophy. Then when I started my Masters it was a feeling of, 'Okay, absolutely. I'm going to work with art, and that's it.'

TP What keeps pulling you into the studio, day after day?

SVR It's definitely the way that I have to exist. Otherwise, I don't think I would keep going. I went through this process of going away from art to try to keep my sanity, but then found I had to go back to art to keep sane. Part of that is about how you need to live your life. There are choices, and there are also sacrifices that you sometimes have to make. In a way art can be a very lonely profession, even when you're working with a lot of people, talking to a lot of people, it still all begins in your head.





Opening page and this page Sally wears jacket and trousers by MIU MIU.





This page Coat and skirt by MIU MIU. *Opposite page* Coat by TOTEME.

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