

Sanné Mestrom, *Body as Verb*

Glenn Barkley, *The Um of Bitter Prophecy*

Sullivan+Strumpf, 8 April-8 May 2021

To see these two exhibitions, Glenn Barkley's *The Um of Bitter Prophecy*, and Sanné Mestrom's *Body as Verb* is to enter into the world of tangible things: designed, crafted, fabricated, mediated, and situated. As if a tonic from over a year-long diet of virtual objects and digital ghosts, the works in these exhibitions were replete with the weight of matter and the deliberateness of touch. While also showing the fruits of considerable labour, the works wore the remnants of effort and industry lightly, for what they all shared was an open invitation to the viewer to be involved, specifically in terms of jokiness and play. For Barkley, the effectiveness of the work was in the ineffectiveness, so to speak of display, insofar as the work craved company in rooms, on shelves, on desks—an imbrication into life. For Mestrom, the work called for the body in its obvious and its subtle formulations: to see, to feel, but also to impose itself, as if the works were incomplete without a body beside or on it.

Her title, *Body as Verb*, takes from the therapeutic adage that love is a verb, where in the case of the 'body, the suggestion is to surmount the passive into the active, to transcend appearances, and to enter the realm of physical encounter at all levels, from innocent touch to sensual caress. Mestrom practice for the last decade or so has been firmly devoted to bridging such relationships, which has included trying to find an active solution to the perennial problem of public sculpture as the blight (turd is the blunter word) on the landscape. Mestrom's public works seek a nexus between elements and viewer, where for instance, the time and location of where you stand has a direct bearing on the meaning of the work, which anticipates the movement of sun and moon. More recently, she has probed the possibilities of using the rich idiom of modernist sculpture as possibilities for creative interaction, especially by children. Who hasn't, after all, as a child wanted to clamber over a bronze Henry Moore figure? And Hans Arp lovingly referred to his later biomorphic forms as 'concretions', that is, concentrations of the natural environments they were intended to inhabit. Mestrom conveniently asks, as both woman and mother, why not incorporate the body into such considerations? The sculpture is an emanation of both place and body.

The exhibition space was densely littered with thick, undulating and truncating forms that had a deliberately hard-hewn texture as if wrought from weathered, old stone. The centrepiece was a recumbent, as opposed to reclining, female figure. It was a thick massed form on low cylindrical supports, its extremities severed or blunted, the head raised perpendicularly

superadded with a mask in bronze patina, the features crude and solemn. This solemnity pervaded all the works without in any way descending into pomposity. Rather, they seemed to be saying that these forms were of a piece with countless objects lost from early antiquity from no culture in particular but belonging to a time when ritual objects mediated between the living and the world around them. Such objects were inscrutably mute unless they were adjusted or manipulated in certain ways. Thus, this was an object not just for passive contemplation but for contemplation while being sat on.

More in this vein was a squat, brown, rock-like female form, distantly related to the Venus of Willendorf but cut at the shoulders to provide a flat circular support, unmistakably stool-like. Or a vaguely simian or golem-like form with thick stocky legs, offering a similar disk, in readiness for something else to be added to it. Despite the heaviness of the forms, the impression was not ponderous but lyrical. Made to look like hewn of clay, stone or metal, like the golem, they were ready to spring to life, not for havoc but pleasure.

The same can be said of countless ceramic figures in Barkley's breviary: bodies morphing into pots and urns and back again. The smaller works, littered across ledges around the room, were as if derived from a Lilliputian garden in which the only constant was a metamorphosis from body to object. With their bright and lively glazes, all these things were imbued with a tender quality, each of them redolent of a story.

In the centre of the installation were a variety of earthenware urns, their base colour white, striated in texture, and festooned with shapes and excrescences in primary and secondary colours. The series of seven all began with the title, *dreamingjustcomesnatural covid pots*,* suggesting that the various nobs outgrowths were enlarged parts of a cellular form that had then been domesticated into a non-threatening decorative object—the deadly virus transmuted to become a lovely household form.

Barkley's work is consistently informed by the need to make objects that defy quick and easy categorization, using humour as a means of slippage to disarm the viewer to make the work enter into his or her daily and possible intimate life. It is an instinct that guided the three paintings, including *citizens with birds*,† a rebus-like compilation of simplified shapes arranged like cut-outs on the surface, very much like the suspended motley worlds in a child's nursery.

Greeting the viewer to the left of the space was a denim jacket and jeans, embedded throughout with all manner of fine ceramic embellishments. It was something of a ceremonial object on which were written dozens of stories. As in all displays of clothing, the first question is whether it is to be worn, or who wore it and for what purpose. The absence of a body is pregnant to its meaning. In this regard, this quirky, uncompromising and satisfying ludicrous

outfit was of a piece with the works in the gallery below. All the works made similar demands on the viewer, namely, to see and inform the faculty of sight with the body, inviting obstruction and engagement.

It was for this that these works were a welcome antidote to the immaterial images imposed on us for so long.

Adam Geczy

* Title in lower case, all one word

† Title in lower case