



Risky Play

Sanné Mestrom

Words by
Andrew Yip

Photography by
Jennifer Leahy



Name: Sanné Mestrom.

Born: Heerlan, Netherlands.

Lives: Blue Mountains,
New South Wales.

Known for: Sculptures
that draw from art history
and culture to explore our
experiences of being in
the world, psychology
and emotion.

In her own words: 'I think
that being Dutch and being
raised with De Stijl as my
cultural background has
informed me ... Modernist
Dutch culture was always
part of our lives'.

I am fortunate to visit Sanné Mestrom's studio during a transformative phase of her creative practice, which is to say that I rudely interrupt her in the middle of a truly monumental move. Surrounding me are 60 cubic metres of sculptures, industrial manufacturing stations and building materials all in the process of being rehoused and rebuilt. In the middle of the studio, an archipelago of work benches, tools and plywood in various states of deconstruction orbit a large drill press and band saw. The doors of metal storage cupboards swing on their hinges. Cleaning supplies and packing tape are in vogue. Everywhere are boxes and boxes of carefully ordered screws, bolts, drill bits, widgets, gizmos and essential doohickeys.

This place exists somewhere at the intersection between warehouse and *wunderkammer*. Peeking left I see the offcasts and moulds of previous projects. Around a corner, a fiberglass maquette of a body in downward dog presents its derriere. There's an aisle devoted alternately to Ryobi tools and camping equipment. Weaving their way through all this, and by a well-worn treadmill (unplugged), Mestrom and her carpenter Carl discuss the progress of shelves and storage of her own ingenious design, as well as plans for an external awning to provide a ventilated space for working with chemicals. Parked in the driveway is her venerable Ford ute, which does for school bus, daily drive and studio assistant.



It's a new site for Mestrom's studio, this time a deeply personal one, in the village of Hazelbrook. Like other Blue Mountains villages, Hazelbrook reserves its gems for the curious. To get there we take a left off the Great Western Highway at the Ampol, just before Hazelbrook Chinese Restaurant and the Wikileaks Café. A series of winding ups and downs through cottaged streets, past gums and trampolines and we arrive: here, nowhere. West of us is Mount Hay and the Grose Valley. Looking east, if we squint, we can see the highway.

Mestrom has settled here by a circuitous route via Heerlan, Netherlands where she was born, Auckland and Melbourne, where she began her arts career. A move followed to Sydney, where she is senior lecturer at Sydney College of the Arts and more recently to the Blue Mountains. Here she has laid down roots. I can see that her Hazelbrook studio-house is less a renovation project than a *gesamtkunstwerk*, or 'total work of art'.

Inside the house proper, Mestrom has been busy. The beginnings of a large wall drawing greet me as I enter. Nooks and crannies are filled by her sculptures. They are lived-with works of art and furniture that range from the miniature to the monumental: bricolage, whittlings, figurines, white metal casts, bronzes, plinths, stools and a three-metre-tall fiberglass woman which, when connected to the mains, becomes a lactating fountain. The house cascades down a hillside in a series of stairwells and landings. Out back, the garden drops steeply through a tangle of vines and ferns. Mestrom talks excitedly about her plans to transform it into a sculpture park.

Mestrom is an inveterate collector – of curiosities, memories and mementos. A bower bird. An alchemist. She has a second studio in her home too, for working with small sculptures and found objects. Scratching around I pick up a spoon she has whittled. Its handle is cut into a sawtooth pattern, its bowl carved with a low-relief face on its convex side and scored with a cheeky emoticon on its interior. She shows me a pair of man-and-wife salt and pepper shakers she picked up at a magpie market, neatly turned and painted. 'I had this one shelf where I would arrange and rearrange interesting shapes to inspire my work,' she tells me. 'Toying with the shakers' mechanisms, she muses, 'the colours could inform a series of small drawings. Look at the shapes and the patterns'. Next she hands me a set of wooden spice jars made in India. 'When I see something like this, I have to have it.'

On the wall are modernist masks that she has made accompanied by a whiskered head salvaged from a Chinese lion dance. Nearby is a mounted Delftware plate marking the marriage of her grandparents Jacques and Uilly, hand-painted with a couple sailing a boat beneath two doves, pointer hound at the prow. I sense that she carries the past with her, not as a burden, but as material. *Vaart wel en voor den wind* the plate says. Sail well and before the wind.





We sit in her lounge room on a teal, mid-century sofa, where our conversation is sprawling. She nurses the morning's cold coffee and forgets my tea until nudged. In her absence I survey her bookshelf. She has seemingly every book written about Picasso. I see also Matisse, Morandi, Gormley, Carl Andre, Judy Chicago as well as more recent titles on Lindy Lee and Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran. It's easy to see parallels in Mestrom's aesthetic, which incorporates the flowing lines and mannered bodies of 20th-century forms. 'I think that being Dutch and being raised with De Stijl as my cultural background has informed me,' she says. 'Modernist Dutch culture was always part of our lives.' Her practice is no mere pastiche though. On her bookshelf I also see many of the ideas that shape Mestrom's philosophy on play, performance, feminist critique, all of which she overlays on the canon to bring modernist political legacies into question. Then there are books with titles like *Erotic Art of the Masters*, the catalogue from the Art Gallery's *Nude* exhibition and – more my speed – *The Second Book of General Ignorance*.

All of this gives context to Mestrom's exploration of sculptural form. She tells me about her fascination with Henry Moore's *Reclining figure: angles* 1980 in the Art Gallery's collection – how she would run her hands over the reclining woman and want to lay on her to warm up on cold days. Yet Moore and institution keep this figure monumentalised, up on a plinth and at a distance, and it's this distance between male representation and female experience that Mestrom attempts to bridge in her own sculptural practice. She recognises the nude for its complexities and contradictions. 'I'm interested

'I'm interested in the female body, all the power that it holds as a mother, which comes from an erotic space. They're these kind of opposing worlds, but the source is the same ...'



Sanné Mestrom *The Offering (Nyotaimori Reclining Nude)* 2021, concrete, bronze, 65 x 115 x 170 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales, purchased with funds provided by The Barbara Tribe Bequest 2022 © Sanné Mestrom, photo © AGNSW, Jenni Carter

in the female body,' she says, 'all the power that it holds as a mother, which comes from an erotic space. They're these kind of opposing worlds, but the source is the same, so I'm interested in that lineage.' Although these ideas are still percolating, she's currently co-curating a show with five female sculptors called *Sexual Tensions*.

I see more now in her work *The Offering (Nyotaimori Reclining Nude)* 2021, recently acquired by the Art Gallery and now residing in the sculpture garden of the new building. It's a garden set that takes the form of a concrete and bronze woman – not a reclining odalisque so much as a dancer daring the limbo. Five concrete and bronze stool-plinths surround it. They're monumental but organic, formal but a bit spontaneous. I see it now as an invitation, open arms. Sit, relax, take in my warmth, mount my plinths, stay a while. For the next five or ten you're the work of art, enjoy.

In recent years, Mestrom's horizons have broadened to encompass placemaking on a grand scale. She recently completed a commission for Geelong Public Library, a large deconstructed figure lying back on which visitors can crawl, climb and slide. At the heart of her public practice is the idea of 'play beyond playgrounds'. 'I find playgrounds really limiting for kids' holistic wellbeing,' she says. 'Essentially as a society we're siphoning them off to these outdoor play pens. There's this idea that this is the kids' terrain: the kids live here while the real world happens outside.'

This is a philosophy of play as placemaking. Mestrom wants to break down barriers between communities and environments to create adaptive-use public spaces that cater to more than the economic needs of the 'productive consumer'. She envisages kids as active citizens, agents of the city. I'm reminded of urban sub-cultures like skating and parkour that view all the world as a stage.

These ideas are at the heart of her current project, a play-based revitalisation of Melbourne's Docklands. An essential part is building a sense of community ownership, and her project development will involve running a series of drawing workshops with local school children 'where we talk about ideas to do with place, and their drawings and dreams will be engraved into the final bronze sculptures so that they actually have ownership over the site'.

I ask her how she defines spaces for play and she corrects me: it's the kids who show her. 'The kids tell me what the patterns of play are, in terms of creativity, hiding, cubbies, crawl throughs, horizontal obstacle courses. Every time they play they tell me what they want.' Her sculptures simply build in affordances for experimentation. There are subtle cues in the scale of the elements. Everything derives from multiples of 200mm, which she calls a 'child's dimension' – big enough to balance on or, when doubled, to slide down or climb on.

Mestrom's urban future is not one without risk. Monumental projects require planning, consultation, construction and oversight. She has built a support structure to allow her to do this: 'I've got my fabrication team, which consists of my concrete guy, my bronze guy, my architectural design team and engineer, who I work with at the back end.' But playing with risk is actually central to Mestrom's design philosophy, particularly encouraging kids to engage in risky play where they are able to make their own decisions about physical boundaries. 'The misunderstanding of the benefits of risk prevents these adaptive-use public space environments from happening,' she says. 'People think that risk is something to be avoided for children. Whereas I say the complete opposite, that opportunities for risk should be generated, because risk is essential to child development.' Children, adults, one and all. I sip my tea, take another look at *The Offering* and calculate the odds of landing a kickflip between plinths.

—
Andrew Yip is an art historian and artist

