

CAROLINE SLOTTE | CLOSERNÄRMARE



I'm standing in a door opening. It's dark in front of me. I can't make out how large the room is. A dim light is visible in there. The light falls upon various types of objects, but everything is vague, unclear. I'm drawn to the light, drawn into the room.

I walk up to the point of light, and place my face close to it. Something happens as I view the objects – the haze disappears, colours brighten. Eventually, one of the objects becomes so clear that I can grasp it. I lift it up, feel its weight in my hand, its surface under my fingertips. As I do this, more of the room emerges. A light that was not there previously is switched on, and new objects become visible. The contours of the room become more defined.

But I'm alone in here. Those standing outside can't see what I see, they can't get close enough. So I start speaking. I describe what I see as precisely as I can: the details of every object, the room in its entirety, and the relative position of everything in it. The more I speak, the more enthusiastic I become, for it is as though the connections between the objects become increasingly distinct as I speak – as though everything in here is linked, and all I need to do is to look around carefully.

While I have been speaking, the room has become full of light. I can move around freely. There are still some areas of shadow left, as always in a room, but in the open areas there is no longer anything to stumble on. I can either stay here or move on. The room now belongs to me.

Blue & White Landscape
Multiple (blue)
Ceramic second hand material,
openings cut using
a rotary tool
2008



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Blue & White Landscape
Multiple (white)
Ceramic second hand material,
openings cut using
a rotary tool
2009



I'm sitting at my Grandmother's new, round dining table. It's new because she has just moved from her house in the country to a small flat in the city. The chairs are new as well, with upholstery. From where I'm seated, I have a clear view of the kitchenette. Grandmother is treating us to a little something. Always a little something. And always the small plates. Each of us gets one. All of them with the same landscape. I quickly turn the plate so that the landscape is positioned in the right direction. It shows a man fishing, water, trees, clouds – flowers along the edges. We never talk about the images on the plates.

OBJECTS AS KEEPERS OF MEMORIES

Objects from our private sphere evoke emotions, and connect us to our history. They are tangible reminders of that which has been, of our own life's history, of one's family's past, and of our cultural, historical background. Thus even the most insignificant of items can constitute a key to the past, a key to an inner meaning. The poetry in everyday objects, with all the memories and narratives that these objects bear – this is the starting point of my project.

I have explored this theme both practically, through my own artistic work, and theoretically, through working with my own texts and those of others.

The questions I have posed can be characterized by a sense of openness and curiosity. They have at times been easy to answer, at times impossible. But the point has never been to find solutions to clear-cut problems, but rather to reside in this theme, to occupy it as one would a room. And furthermore, to study this space like an explorer would – not in search of answers, but as a means of sounding the terrain, of rendering the territory more distinct. Of owning it.

ON THE PROCESS

Central to my work as an artist is the reworking of existing objects. I manipulate found objects, primarily ceramic utility items, so that they take on new meanings. The tension between the recognizable and the enigmatic, the ordinary and the unexpected occupies me. I work directly with the ceramics by cutting, sculpting, sanding or joining together. The work process thus becomes a way by which I can, through physical intervention, pose questions to the material itself and point to the narratives inherent in the objects.

During my time as a research fellow, it has been essential to provide enough room for the artistic process. It has been important for me to avoid directing the work to an excessive degree, and to instead remain sensitive to that which emerges in the studio. I believe in a state of focused attention, and that sometimes one can go far simply through careful observation.

My goal regarding the written part of my project has been to delineate an area, to reveal and illuminate a thematic room that, despite my residing there since early on in the project, still seemed obscure to me.

While working with my own texts, my attitude has been one of attentive listening, curiosity and acceptance. I have experimented with several different genres of text, where autobiographical text fragments enter into dialogue with more discussion-based, thematic expositions, and have juxtaposed concrete work and process descriptions with poetically charged voices. All this in order to provide the language with the freedom it needs to do justice to the complexity of creativity. "Intimacy" has been a key word, and the text in this publication can be seen as a close reading of my creative process. I have endeavoured to retell courses of events that normally exist outside the sphere of language, processes that take place in silence. I have sought an expression that accurately conveys what I mean, that coincides with my inner language, the voice of my unarticulated thought.

The impetus for the written part of my project lies in the notion of the written word's capacity to reduce the distance between the viewer and the artwork. The role of the written word in the project has expressly been to increase accessibility, to steer the visual, concrete result closer to the viewer and, at the same time, closer to myself.



From the series *Going Blank Again*
Ceramic second hand material,
sandblasted and sanded down
using a rotary tool, final
sanding by hand
2010

We have had the same sofa group throughout my entire childhood. It consists of a two-seated sofa, two wide armchairs and a coffee table. The sofa group gives a powerful impression. It probably weighs a ton. The sofa and the armchairs are clad in a dark-brown, velvet corduroy fabric, with broad stripes. A little too broad for it to feel pleasant to run one’s fingers across. It mostly tickles or scrapes depending on the direction the fingers are moving. There is no upholstery on the armrests. They are made of wood, a soft wood with dark veins. All the corners are rounded off. A thick layer of varnish, yellowing with age, covers the wood. The varnish has started to crack. Some edges have been worn down revealing the raw wood underneath. Shiny, round, brass fittings, resembling a coin with a groove in the middle, mark the joints of the furniture. Fingertips moving over the wood, over cold, thick varnish, can rest on the brass fittings, cool off there, one finger at a time.

The coffee table is in the same style. Varnished, yellowed wood with dark veins. The table is full of scratches – we have had it for ages. The scratches have acquired a patina. The tabletop is a living landscape of old, dark lines and light, fresh marks. It is a good table, appropriately low and very stable, but with enough space to lie under it. The underside of the table is left unvarnished. Sometimes grime collects along the edges. Someone has been under the table with a pencil. Distinct lines – are they letters or just scribbles?

Whenever the table is mentioned, the same anecdote is brought up – of how I fell off of it as a child. I didn’t manage to lift my arms in time to break the fall, and my teeth went through my lower-lip as I made contact with the floor. I have no recollection of the incident. But the scar is still there. Apparently, I bit clean through.



From the series *Knick Knacks*
Ceramic second hand material,
reshaped and sanded down
using a rotary tool, final
sanding by hand
2008

TAKING AN OBJECT AND STAYING WITH IT

Objects in themselves interest me. As objects in space, in time. I look for the core of the object, its essence so to speak. I grind down, peel away, reshape. As if by doing so I could gain access to the true inner being of the object, its soul. Not because the objects are alive, but because they, as we ourselves do, exist in time and space, and that some aspect of this existence rubs off on them perhaps, just as it rubs off on us humans. As if particular atmospheres, courses of events and durations of time could be contagious.

The value of objects interests me. I closely examine that which is considered valuable, and even more closely that which is seen as worthless. Rearranging these attitudes, elevating the low, making the worthless valuable, appears both surprisingly easy and immediately satisfying. For it is as though by simply spending a lot of time with an object, I can increase its value. Naturally, I also do something tangible to the object. I reshape it. But this action is not the only thing that makes a difference, that causes the object to change. There is something more to it. An increase in value that seems to depend on the amount of time spent reworking the object.

Why is it that a rapidly achieved transformation is perceived differently than a gradual one? What do these working hours do? The hours do not, after all, cost anything. Time is not something we own. Time flows towards us all like a gift.

Could it have to do with something as inestimable as care? That a transformation simply takes place when something is treated well? Through the act of caring, one encourages others to do the same: Look – this is valuable, because I treat it as such.







From the series *Collection of Stains*
Ceramic second hand material,
pattern engraved on reverse of
plate, details stained with food
substances
2009



COHERENCE

I seek consistency, a kind of inner logic in the transformation that the object undergoes. I strive to retain the suggestions that exist in the material, so that the presence, the associations, and potential narratives that every object holds are not drowned out or concealed. The objects that I make are therefore not primarily about me and my own personal history.

The objects that constitute my raw material are anonymous, they possess a life history that is unknown to me. They could be about anything. My works can thus be seen as proposals, as sketches indicating one of countless potential stories.



My Grandmother lived alone in a large house in the countryside. We would drive out there in the summer, dressed in our Sunday best – flowery skirts and white blouses. The car was sweltering. Lupines grew at the side of the road.

The house stood alone, framed on three sides by a thick pine forest. In front of the house the forest had been cleared, a meadow now stretched all the way down to the river.

It was a beautiful two-story house. Yellow and well-proportioned. At the front stood a spacious glass porch that served as the main entrance. We used to sit there during the summers, treated to coffee and juice, strawberries and ice cream, seated at a large table with a tablecloth made of crocheted lace. The old windowpanes distorted the light causing the world outside to undulate in synch with our movements. To the sides, one could just make out the dark forest. Over time, the porch was transformed into a storage space. Upon entering, we would walk in a line along a cleared path through the middle of the tightly packed glass prism.

Also indoors, beyond the glass porch, the house gradually became cluttered with things. It was like stepping into a cave. Rooms crammed with furniture,

lamps and knick-knacks. The wooden floors were covered with several layers of rugs, the tables had double layers of tablecloths. Along the walls stood bookshelves and corner cupboards, clothing and linen closets, small tables and chairs arranged in rows. On all flat surfaces lay heaps of newspapers, folded clothing, piles of books, potted plants, woven baskets and ceramic bowls, plastic bags containing half-finished handicraft projects, large sculptures in plaster and smaller ones in wood and glass, decorative cushions, bundles of letters, photographs, important documents and old shopping lists, small mirrors, boxes of stamps, reading glasses, reservoir pens, vases with meadow flowers, dead flies.

A wide, creaking staircase led up to the second floor. Up there the ceiling was low. There were fewer things there, but it was darker and dustier. The children's old bedrooms lay upstairs. This is where I found the box.

A varnished, reddish-brown, wooden box with drawers – a wide one at the bottom and two narrow ones at the top. The knobs on the drawers had fallen off leaving tiny yellowy-white plastic plugs. There was something missing from the top of the box. A small mirror perhaps.

I chose the box that time when we were allowed to take an item each.

Drawings in the standard A4 format did not fit in it. The drawers were too small for letters as well, but it was the largest object I dared take.



From the series *Under Blue Skies*
 Ceramic second hand material,
 glaze removed using a rotary
 tool, final sanding by hand
 2009

FRAGMENTS

I wanted to make a series of plates where only the sky remained. The blue clouds, neglected, offhandedly applied in areas of the image that otherwise would have been empty, would for once become the main focus.

So I sand away the surrounding areas. But as I work along the edges, gradually approaching the white area of sky, I notice that what I erase does not actually disappear. Instead, a contour emerges that emphasises the removed area. The contour compensates for all the missing information. One can, admittedly, discern the sky with its blue cloud tufts, but what is even more distinct is the silhouette of the removed areas – a church, a bush, a tree, a flowery border.

In the fragments that are left, it is the edge that dominates. The spared section's outer limit, the boundary to the erased areas attracts the gaze like a magnet. It is that line that we read, that is where information is gathered. Time and again the gaze follows the edges of the fragment. The clouds in the middle are taken for granted, barely noticed.







From the series *Unidentified View*
Ceramic second hand material,
sandblasted, sculpted and sanded
down using a rotary tool, final
sanding by hand
2009



DETAILS

I have chosen a detail. It is a building depicted in blue on a white plate. The building is fictitious, imaginary, as are the trees, the water, the clouds in the sky and the flowers along the edge. The cobalt blue print lies beneath a thin layer of transparent glaze.

The plate originates from a Belgian factory. I read the stamp, “Made in Belgium, BOCH F ES, La Louviere, Fabrication Belge”. The image is a transferred copper engraving, a technique that, when it was first put to use, revolutionized the decoration of industrially produced ceramic items. Large amounts of ceramic wares could now be decorated in a short time by just a few people, and this meant that even cheaper utility ware could be decorated.

The engraver who created the copper plate for this print was most probably employed at the factory specifically for this purpose. The model for the image would have existed in the form of a newly purchased original motif, an imported template perhaps. Or then there were only old worn-out printing plates to refer to, and the engraver simply had to interpret the motif as best he or she could. We do not know who created the engraving for this specific item. Nor do we know what he or she was thinking when the image came into being. What we can be certain of, however, is that someone has

put a considerable amount of thought into it. Every detail in the motif, every line and dot is carefully engraved, one after the other.

I follow the lines of the detail I have chosen. Some are clear, sharp in their print. Others are faint, with blurry edges here and there. In some areas the cobalt has flowed out into the surrounding glaze. In my mind I render the pictorial elements three-dimensional. I allow the facades of the houses to emerge, the spires to reach for the skies. I see the room disappear in the small windows. I see the roofs of the houses bulge and the stairs fold. I do this until I know the shape, until it is as though I could hold it in my hand and run my fingertips over it. Then I can repeat it.

I work in low relief on a white plate. I sand down the background, giving the detail something to grow out of, a thickness to consist of. I work at length on very small areas, going over the detail time and time again. I examine every part of it, all the small elevations and depressions, all the lines and dots. I know when the work is ready. I see it. It is when the detail is flawless, absolute. When I can scan it with my gaze and everything is there. And at that moment, it is as though the work process has always had this specific goal: that we, the object and myself, have now arrived.





From the series *Unidentified View*
Ceramic second hand material,
sandblasted, sculpted and sanded
down using a rotary tool, final
sanding by hand
2009



The lamp in the corner is yellow, almost orange. The lampshade is huge, enormous. The fabric is nubby, intentionally so I would guess. It's that type of fabric. The shade stands on a tall wooden foot. The same varnished, yellowed wood with dark veins as everywhere else in the house. The foot of the lamp is lathed, it has a few curves, sphere-like shapes of wood on the centre post. The lamp is switched on and off by pulling a string. It is thin and white, made of some synthetic material, with a knot at the end. The little cone that would normally sit on the end is missing, and has been for quite some time apparently. The knot has turned hard and greyish, as though covered with glue. The lampshade sways a little whenever the string is pulled. Did I mention that my mother still uses that lamp?

From the series *Knick Knacks*
Ceramic second hand material,
reshaped and sanded down
using a rotary tool, final
sanding by hand
2008

TO PERCEIVE A CHANGE

I work with objects as image surfaces. Although my main interest lies in objects – and I insist on the three-dimensionality of a normal A4 sheet of paper as well – most of my interventions take place on the surface, they are constructed around a rearrangement of the object's pictorial, two-dimensional information. The transformation is there to break with the expectations and disturb the habitual way of looking. I do what I do in order to call upon a new form of consciousness, to inspire in the viewer a more observant gaze.

I seek a state of heightened attentiveness, both with regard to my own art and in the encounter with that of others. Consequentially, the focus is not primarily on the objects themselves, but rather on the effect the objects have on me.





From the series *Going Blank Again*
 Ceramic second hand material,
 sandblasted and sanded down
 using a rotary tool, final
 sanding by hand
 2010

TO RENDER EMPTY

This is a farewell. We have reached the end of the road. I empty the surface, erase everything. This will be the final gesture, the last one possible. After this, there is no going back. I erase everything that constitutes the image, everything that means something, all coloured surfaces, lines and dots. All that remains is the whiteness, the background and the empty space in and between the pictorial elements. Everything that does not say something. That which is not.

A vague premonition guides me. The premonition tells me that what remains will have something to say. That it is, in fact, not possible to erase “everything”, and thereby render an image empty. Some story or another will automatically become visible. The remaining white areas will reveal themselves as truly meaningful. This is my theory. But what sort of story will it convey? What will it be about? About emptiness, absence? Loss? Will it be easy or complicated to interpret? Sophisticated or banal? What do we read into the residue, the leftovers?

There is a sense of sadness to it all. Because I know this material. I know it in the same way one knows the face of a friend. It is not a knowledge acquired through the study of books, of printed facts.



It is a knowledge based on direct observation over time, to the point where every detail is familiar and predictable. I know the varying quality of the prints, every nuance of the blue, the sharp and the blurred. I can estimate at a glance the thickness of the glaze and the weight of the ware. I can anticipate the slight separation between the body and the glaze in low-fired ware, where thin flakes suddenly chip off, and how the clay surface is completely smooth underneath.

From the series *Going Blank Again*
Ceramic second hand material,
sandblasted and sanded down
using a rotary tool, final
sanding by hand
2010



I keep a lump of butterscotch in the wide, bottom drawer of the box. The other two drawers are empty. The butterscotch is the only thing in the box. I'm saving it. It is going to last for a long time.

It is the winter we stayed at Grandmother's place. That winter when we all slept upstairs in her attic. We kids in the bunk bed, mine is the bottom one. I keep the box under the bed.

The lump is huge. I made the butterscotch myself. Cooked the cream, butter, sugar and syrup together into a thick, chewy mass. Why it ended up as a lump and not a crispy flake or square I don't know. Perhaps I held the butterscotch in my hand when it was still soft and squeezed it, kneaded it into a lumpy brown ball. It has long since hardened, become shiny and transparent. One can look into it as though it were polished amber, or coloured glass.

The only way to eat the lump is to place the whole thing in your mouth and suck. It is uncomfortably large. The rock of butterscotch barely decreases in size. When I put it back, it immediately sticks to the inside of the box.

THE INTEGRITY OF THE MATERIAL

The field of contemporary visual culture that interests me, and that I see myself as being part of, I have chosen to call material-based art. With this term I refer to a practice that takes place in the intersection between a material-based and concept-based approach, an art practice in which the combination of these two perspectives causes productive and challenging work.

For me, everything starts with the material itself. The material is the point of departure. It chooses the direction, presents the content, dictates the course of action. I work with the material both as idea and as matter. As substance – both on a conceptual and a concrete level. In this manner the history and traditions, the cultural and economic implications, as well as the possibilities and limitations of the material all play a part in informing the piece.

Regardless of the material one chooses to work with, there is always something given from the start. One can, of course, choose to ignore the suggestions inherent in the material and use it to shape completely independent visions. But my interest lies in art that operates within the limitations set by the material itself, allowing the creative process to arise as an internal dialogue, in a discursive space in which the material constitutes an important interlocutor.

In material-based art of this kind, we find a self-conscious distance with regards to execution, a kind of balanced friction that arises as the artist's intentions, visions and potential messages meet and take into account the conceptual integrity of the material. It is an area that comprises everything from works that merely indicate a conscious choice of materials, to works that focus solely on the material as its primary content.

For me, choosing a point of departure based on a material involves letting the work process take the form of a discussion. It is a question of adopting certain restraints, of restricting oneself. My main reason for doing so is that I experience it as intellectually challenging. I assign myself a task, and that task is to follow the path staked out by the material itself, to allow myself to be led.

My challenge lies in relating to and staying within the territory defined by the material, while simultaneously striving to ensure that whatever I do, my contribution, achieves a new position, makes a difference in the perception of the field. So that the objects that I create position themselves on, and thereby make visible, a new conceptual plane within the marked area.

From the series *Damaged Goods*
Plastic plate stained with coffee,
pattern engraved with
paper knife
2009



From the series *Damaged Goods*
Plastic plate, pattern engraved
with paper knife
2009



If I thought it was possible, if I thought I could explain.

Then I would write about how the objects we live amongst and the rooms we reside in establish themselves in our consciousness, inhabit our memories and become a part of us. I would write of how they stay with us, as images, tableaus. Of how they take on meanings, become associated with a sentiment, an atmosphere, with important or insignificant events. Or simply exist without any specific meaning at all.

I would write about how our journey through life, our movements in time and space, alone or in the company of others, remains with us in the form of faintly resounding echoes. How objects and places, as well as people, become familiar and dear to us. And I would write of how the places we once knew, but never returned to, give rise to the most distinct images. Over time, the memories that are left in peace lose their connection to reality, become symbols, signs. Thus we all bear within ourselves a collection of dimly illuminated tableaus, without which our existence would be unbearable. Of what real use they are to us, is not entirely clear.

So if I thought that it was possible to describe, that I could explain, then I would write about all these images within me – I would say that they are who I am. And that I therefore constantly carry with me a low coffee table in varnished beech-wood, a far too pink wallpaper, a gravel path with sharp stones, a Volkswagen smelling of gasoline, a brass corkscrew in the shape of a fish, a pale yellow house with a plaster façade from the post war era, a lump of butterscotch in a box, a gymnastics outfit in blue terry cloth, a saucer with a grey landscape on it, a potato cellar with an earthen floor, a staircase with a scratchy brown carpet, a beach with thick, warm sand, a sofa group in brown velvet corduroy, the rusty wreckage of a bus, a blue velvet waistcoat, a playground surrounded by terrace houses, a ditch full of nettles, a backyard with a tall white fence.

This is what I would write about if I thought it were possible, if I thought that someone could understand.

This publication has come about as part of the artistic research project [Second Hand Stories](#) at Bergen National Academy of the Arts, Dept of Specialized Art, 2007–2011. My intention has been to give a personal insight into the creative space in which the artistic result of the project has emerged. The publication's visual material consists of completed works as well as images of objects from various experimental stages of the 3-year fellowship period.