

Moritz Wessler, *Thoughts on a Big Bird*, 'Sam Anderson', *Mousse Publishing*, Milan, 2017THOUGHTS ON A BIG BIRD
— MORITZ WESSLER

The work of Sam Anderson, which consists primarily of sculptures and installations, is as multifaceted, contradictory and difficult to grasp as the existential circumstances of life around which her practice revolves. In *Big Bird*, the exhibition presented at the Kölnischer Kunstverein, epoxy clay figures, such as a kneeling woman, a rider, or adolescents fishing, coexist with sculptural collages—made of feathers, wood, flowers, or grasses—that are structured according to specific yet elusive criteria. Works among this latter group—often described as “abstract”—are widely divergent in character: while some seem to suggest at least the rudiments of a story, others provide little basis for a narrative reading.

Texas, 2014—its title alluding to its shape—is a work that resists any definitive interpretation. This assemblage consists of a dark brown, irregularly cut piece of found leather with a group of unrelated objects clustered near its center: a colorful chess piece, a dried grapevine twig, a metal heart, pieces of glass and wood, and rolls of cardboard. *States*, 2015, offers somewhat more potential for associative trains of thought. On a piece of leather, nine wooden objects—some found, some created—accompany a small pepper shaker holding a long, curving blue feather. Their linear arrangement is reminiscent of industrial architecture. The sculpture *France*, also 2015, hints most insistently at a narrative. A hand-made wooden form, again suggestive of architecture, is set on a piece of pale gray leather; a frog skeleton, dabbed with delicate shades of pink, lies in front of the form in a peculiar manner: its back legs are extended while its pectoral limbs are crossed in front of its eye sockets, within which we can recognize metal forms suggestive of flowers. When looking at *France*, and other of Anderson's works, it becomes clear that historical surrealism's significance for her is not insubstantial. A human gesture carried out by a frog in front of a sketched architectural background points to a scenario that lies beyond reality and could be borrowed from a dream. Although *Texas* and *States* are also indebted to surrealism, their comparative indecipherability makes them more reflective of the late offshoots of the movement that pointed in the direction of a new, more abstract formal idiom.

The figurative sculptures mentioned earlier evoke a different strain in the art-historical traditions: the art of avant-garde European sculptors of the first half of the twentieth century. Despite their links to earlier models, Anderson's works are clearly anchored in the present through their forms, attributes and

contextualization. The exemplary *Rice*, 2015, depicts a young woman kneeling on the ground, her hands resting on her thighs and her eyes fixed on an unknown point in front of her. She is dressed in fashionable dungarees that match her modern haircut. Her pose, which can be interpreted as meditative, commands the space surrounding it. Despite its modest dimensions, the sculpture powerfully fills its environment.

A 2014 group of sculptures depicting adolescents trying to catch fish with the help of poles is equally arresting.¹ The figures on view in the exhibition sit or stand on the top edges of three identical pedestals whose rectangular inner recesses contain fine, light-colored sand. The pedestals are not just bases but an integral formal and narrative element of the works, their contents standing for the fluidity of water and alluding to the process of waiting for success. Compared to *Rice*, these figures—likewise dressed in dungarees—are depicted in a stylized manner, particularly their faces. The stylization, like the nonchalance of their poses, in no way diminishes the air of tense expectation that they convey.

The fusion of art object and substructure that informs the fishing women appears as well in a series of objects Anderson created in 2015. *Rows*, *Talley*, *Liz*, and *Boats* all present arrangements of objects and figures on low white bases reminiscent of billiard tables. In *Rows*, four identically sized wooden balls occupy the four corners of the tabletop. While three of the spheres have been left unarticulated, one has been painted in shades of red and blue and decorated with thin black wooden sticks that reduce its resemblance to a miniature globe. Between the spheres, more or less at the center of the tabletop, dried stalks of grain have been inserted into a grid of small round openings. Despite the abstract passages of *Rows* that recall those of *Texas* or *States*, the regular and rhythmic pattern of the plants inspires associations with an agricultural field.

Whereas landscape and nature emerge as a theme in *Rows*, in *Liz* the focus is on the human being, or at least corporeality. The dominant element of this work is a pair of pool cues that hang down over the edge of the table. Having been broken at approximately the same point and their fragments reunited with electrical tape, the cues resemble bent human legs. Apart from this element, which inspires the construction of a narrative, the other objects in the piece are significantly harder to read or interpret: a colored ball rests in the middle of the table, which

is sprinkled with sprinkled with sawdust, and three wooden elements suggesting either floral decoration or insect bodies perch at the corners of the rails.

If *Liz* offers the potential for associative thoughts through its hints, abstractions, and interpretive gaps, at first glance *Talley* seems considerably more intelligible and concrete. A young woman, wearing a dress and riding side-saddle on a donkey, tries with a certain urgency to draw attention to herself without entering into direct dialogue with viewers. Propping herself up with both hands on the donkey's back, she ignores the reins, despite the movement on the part of the donkey that is suggested by the traces of finely ground pepper strewn behind its hooves like the tails of comets.

Abstract and narrative tendencies again converge in *Boats*, the fourth piece in this group. Contained within expanse enclosed by the table rails, a gently rolling sea of flour and chalk bears two stylized wooden ships. The vessels' movement is suggested by pieces of hay projecting from under their sterns. A ball at the center of the "sea" is supported by a fine white mesh painted in shades of light pink and inscribed with Cyrillic letters. Wooden and metal rods of varying thicknesses, projecting here and there, can be read as cautionary sea markers.

In considering the figurative sculptures and the abstract material collages, it is not always possible to draw clear boundaries between the two groups. Despite their openness, these outlines help orient us in approaching the artist's work for the first time. Another subcategory within Anderson's work consists of sculptures based largely on objects she has elevated to artworks, with minimal or no manipulation. This group includes *Hotel President Moscow*, 2013, formed of a found terracotta figure, broken in several places, that depicts US pop star Michael Jackson as a skeleton, lying on a tattered towel imprinted with the name of the hotel. Anderson has not altered the towel or the clay figure—the traces of damage and wear are the result of the history and the ultimate fate of all things; the element of chance only increases the intensity of this image of death.

Pregnant Kiwi Skeleton, 2015, is another example of Anderson's works based primarily on found objects. This sculpture consists of an unaltered replica of a kiwi bird skeleton resting its head on a wooden cylinder stained white. A remarkably large egg that Anderson has also, almost imperceptibly, painted a pale white, is inserted into a cavity under the ribs.

The image efficiently reminds us of the power dwelling within nature, as well as the inexorability of the cycle of birth and death.

Though these various articulations suggest distinct realms within Anderson's emerging corpus, special significance must be attributed to the relationship between object and space, a concern that runs throughout her oeuvre. The works play with proportion and, in the context of the exhibition, interact with the scale of the surrounding architecture. Within this framework, every form of monumentality is negotiated, a process underscored by the fragility and expansiveness of much of Anderson's art. Visitors have a bird's-eye view of the works, which Anderson arranges alongside one another, without hierarchical distinctions, to form a complex universe that forms part of, and distinguishes itself from, ours. Through the combination and fusion of dissimilar objects, she evokes particular interrelationships and tensions that further heighten the elusive effects of the pieces, permeating her project equally with existential questions and conceptual elaborations.

Paralleling the sculptural work introduced here, Anderson also regularly creates films, which are represented in the Kölnischer Kunstverein exhibition with *Endless Love*, 2015. This approximately fifteen-minute work is based on contemporary stock footage, sequences from the 1979 Western *Heartland*, and recordings made in 2015 in New Zealand during the filming of a horror movie. While the stock footage, featuring bold images and saturated color, adheres to the aesthetics and promises of advertising, the faded footage of *Heartland*—in which the artist's mother plays the female lead—points to bygone memories of a time embedded within an even more distant past. The more recent documentation of the shooting of a film is centered

on the artist's mother as well. Parts of it are composed of out-of-focus and jittery images, like those of amateur films, that record an intimate family interaction within a semi-public space; during these sequences, the fraught psychological relationship between parent and child emerges in just a few essential moments. The various film sequences are accompanied by voice-over excerpts from Eugene O'Neill's 1956 family drama *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Anderson's own commentary, and bits of wisdom from her mother. The images and texts in *Endless Love* merge into a complex audiovisual collage, which, detached from its roots in the artist's biography, can be understood as a metaphor for all hopes and yearnings.

As in the sculptures, objects, and installations, Anderson's preoccupation in her films is with the foundations of individual as well as social identity. Her works deal in a richly nuanced manner with the themes of birth, life, and death, as well as the conventions, expectations and rituals that can be traced back to them. Along with her personal experiences, stories from her social surroundings find their way into the works, and it is also possible to discern art historical, literary, cinematic, and musical influences. At the same time, her articulations—regardless of the art form or genre they might belong to—are never without ambiguity; instead, they function as a point of departure and stimulus for diverse lines of thought. Along with their artistic concision, the openness of Anderson's works plays a substantial role in its quiet power. In the exhibition *Big Bird*, her creations coalesce into a manifold narrative that seems equally true to and remote from life.

1. The work's titles are: *Eyai Fishing #1*, *Eyai Fishing #3* and *Eyai Fishing #4*.