

## Between pleasure and prohibition

*“The man who handles an object with indifferent fingers, with clumsy fingers, with fingers that do not envelop lovingly is a man who is not passionate about art.”*

Edmond de Goncourt (1)

By Dominic van den Boogerd

### 1. Sculptissimo

“Sculptissimo” is the light-hearted title of Amsterdam artist Hans Hovy’s first solo museum exhibition. This word does not actually exist but, if it did, it would mean something like the superlative of sculpture. Hovy is, first and foremost, a sculptor. Even when he turns his hand to drinking glasses, wooden necklaces, or tulip vases made of red stoneware, he thinks and works primarily as a sculptor. With “Sculptissimo” he is revelling in the celebration that is sculptural art, with high spirits and a sense of humour. (2)

The core of the exhibition is a group of eighteen works that have an obvious family resemblance. All the pieces are made of white alabaster and pink soapstone, are around the same size, and are presented on identical pedestals of white painted wood. The sculptures have the soft colours of meringues; tasty and tempting. Their plump, rounded forms are reminiscent of sausages, sea anemones, buttocks, sweets. The forms show the influence of sculpture that Hovy admires: the early work of Alberto Giacometti, pieces by Alexander Calder, Hans Arp, Richard Tuttle. Another source of inspiration that is of at least equal importance is provided by *Donald Duck* comic strips, particularly the stories drawn by Carl Barks in the 1950s and 60s for the Walt Disney Studios. (3)

The main section is made of alabaster, a white stone that is quarried in large chunks. The alabaster is sanded, but not polished, and so retains its powdery surface texture. This type of stone has the interesting property of allowing light to shine through it, and Hovy makes full use of this translucency. Pieces such as *Dreaming of a Better World* (2013) and *Inside Beauty* (2013) have openings that offer a view into the very interior of the sculpture, where mysterious events are taking place, with languorous tongues, fiddling fingers and swelling spheres. These scenes are only partially visible. Gently glowing in an enchanting twilight, they leave much to the imagination.

The interior and bulging elements of the sculptures are mostly made from soapstone. Soapstone is smooth and has a greasy feel, and its relative softness makes it easy to cut.

Many windowsill figurines of swans and dwarfs are carved from soapstone. Hovy chose this material when he wanted to place a pink tongue inside a white alabaster girl's head – a sculpture that was never completed to his satisfaction, but which did provide the impetus for the Sculptissimo series.

For us, the viewers, the discovery of the interior of the sculpture is a slightly unnerving surprise. What at first appears to be a charming exterior then suddenly invites us to peep inside. The openings appeal to voyeuristic tendencies with an obvious erotic dimension. The visual temptation urges us to touch, to caress, as if the fingers want to feel what the eyes can see. There is always a brief moment of hesitation before we decide to touch something, but when we look at these sculptures the temptation to touch is powerful and hard to resist. The imagined encounter of hand and stone arouses tantalising expectations of sensuality, tenderness, softness – sensations that belong to the realm of touch. This is frustrating, because looking is permitted, but touching is not. Pleasure is paired with prohibition.

## 2. Sculptramics

In his splendid book *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, British ceramicist Edmund de Waal writes about his feeling for pots: "I can remember the weight and the balance of a pot, and how its surface works with its volume. I can read how an edge creates tension or loses it. I can feel if it has been made at speed or with diligence. If it has warmth. I can see how it works with the objects that sit nearby. How it displaces a small part of the world around it." (4) Everyone who is familiar with ceramic techniques will recognise something in these words.

In 2014 Hovy began a series of ceramic works which, mindful of the primacy of sculpture, he calls "sculptramics", a conflation of "sculpture" and "ceramics". He has since completed around forty such pieces. They are made of red chamotte clay and glazed with a translucent white, with the red shining through in places. The vase-like forms, some made up of several stackable elements, are slightly out of plumb, a little wobbly. The bulbous masses are at times reminiscent of flabby bellies.

As the ceramics are highly fired and glazed, these "sculptramics" can function very well as flower vases. They were, however, not designed for functionality. It is, for example, difficult to pour the water out of some of the vases. A vase by Hovy is a balance between sculpture and functional design: a collector's item in a display case (and so the function of the vase is suspended) but still usable. This places the works within the Dutch tradition of ceramic tulip vases that goes back centuries, combining practical use with decorative display.

For Hovy, working with bare hands and concrete materials is one of the finest aspects of being an artist. Although he regularly collaborates with technical specialists such as bronze casters and potters, he likes to keep the production process in his own hands as much as possible, all the more so because the original plan often has to be adapted several times during the creation of the piece. He thinks by doing, and what he does provides more food for thought. He works on a scale that allows him to adapt and move his sculptures by

himself. Hovy once earned his living as a restorer for the municipal museums in Amsterdam, refurbishing antique objects and pieces of furniture for institutions including the Amsterdam Historisch Museum, the Stedelijk Museum and Museum Willet-Holthuysen. His technical expertise can already be seen in his earliest works, for example in his sculptures in the form of imaginary board games. The streamlined game pieces, loosely modelled on, for instance, curling stones, and the playing tables, some finished with felt or inlaid woodwork, are evidence of Hovy's craftsmanship.

### 3. Small Sodom

A common thread running throughout Hovy's oeuvre, which, in addition to alabaster sculptures and ceramic vases, includes work in bronze, ebony and glass, is the tension between temptation and restriction. Sculptures in the "Sculptissimo" series have striking names such as *Little Secret*, *Licking*, *Wanting* and *Sodom and Gomorra*, titles suggesting eroticism and forbidden desires. They reinforce the physicality of the sculptures, the ambiguity of some of the forms. Sometimes the artist skims past the dark recesses of the soul, his work offering a glimpse of a world of perversion and fetishism that is as enticing as it is unsettling.

Surrealists like Balthus and Bellmer knew all about such things. Bellmer, for example, created a life-size female doll in order to give physical form to "the dizzying heights of passion", as he put it. *La Poupée* (1935) consisted of individual body parts that could be combined in endless variations. The artist photographed the doll many times, in its entirety and in detail, in a range of locations, in different positions and in various stages of undress, evoking visual stories about seduction, mutilation, masochism, a kind of anatomy of desire. André Breton described Bellmer's bizarre brainchild as "the first and only original Surrealist object with a universal, provocative power".

Hovy knew Bellmer's photographs from *Gandalf*, a Dutch underground magazine from the 1960s. (5) In Bellmer's drawings, which he saw at a large exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, he recognised the same strange mixture of attraction and repulsion. (6) All sexual desire is tactile by nature. Touch, writes Edmund de Waal, is "a kind of sensory innocence." (7) Innocence and beauty belong together, merging in the object of desire. In Bellmer's work, this desire took on obsessive traits. In Hovy, however (note ironic titles such as *Small Sodom*), the lust is put into perspective, defused, reduced, as it were, to the level of a child's game. In that respect, his work differs from the sexually explicit sculpture of, say, Sarah Lucas, who positions herself provocatively within the debate about femininity and sexuality. Hovy, steering clear of symbolism and advocating ambiguity, prefers understatement and tongue-in-cheek jokes.

The suggestion of dark passions in combination with disarming playfulness, a children's version of the proverbial Sodom and Gomorrah, characterises the exhibition at the Gemeentemuseum. The artist recognises a distant kindred spirit in the now largely neglected Elie Nadelman (1882-1946). This Polish sculptor worked in Paris, where he

became acquainted with Picasso and Duchamp and exhibited Cubist drawings, before emigrating to New York in 1914 and becoming a great collector of American folk art. He took inspiration from handiwork and naive home crafts, but without violating the principles of classical sculpture. The results are unique: attractive, but not in the traditional sense (just as ugliness can be alluring); credible, and yet not to be taken entirely seriously. This paradoxical nature is typical of the sculpture of Hans Hovy, an artist who balances on the tightrope between innocence and taboo.

#### Notes

(1) Cited in Edmund de Waal, *The Hare with Amber Eyes. A Hidden Inheritance*, Chatto & Windus, London 2010, p. 50.

(2) The exhibition is a continuation and extension of the exhibition of the same name at Galerie Onrust, Amsterdam, 18 January to 22 February, 2014.

(3) Hovy makes reference to a comic strip that was first published in 1956 in *Uncle Scrooge Comics* in the United States. In "Land beneath the Ground!", Donald, Uncle Scrooge and Huey, Dewey and Louie meet the Terries and the Fermies, two rival tribes who live underground. By rolling themselves up like bowling balls and crashing into one another, they cause earthquakes beneath Scrooge McDuck's money warehouse. These metamorphosing fantasy creatures made an indelible impression on Hovy. In Barks's superlative comic strips, Donald is the ordinary man on the street, battling his way through life's disappointments with desperate optimism, with his three nephews as the Greek Fates.

(4) Edmund de Waal, p. 16.

(5) The alternative cultural magazine *Gandalf* was published from 1964 to 1971 and helped to break taboos in the Netherlands. The satirical texts, nude photographs and erotic drawings were light-hearted and humorous. Writers including Gerard Reve, Jan Wolkers and Simon Vinkenoog contributed to the magazine.

(6) The exhibition "Hans Bellmer: Anatomie du désir" was held at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, from 1 March to 22 May, 2006.

(7) Edmund de Waal, p. 50.