Dirk Staschke Making Arrangements

Article by Colette Copeland

URING THE MID-LATE 1990s, THE BEAUTY DEBATE continued to rage throughout the contemporary art world. Exhibits such as the Whitney's Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art, ARC Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris' La Belle et La Bete (Beauty and the Beast) and the Hirshhorn's Regarding Beauty as well as seminal texts such as Dave Hickey's "The Invisible Dragon", Elaine Scarry's "On Beauty and Being Just" and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe's "Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime" addressed the contested and politicized notions of beauty in art. Critic Dave Hickey wrote about transgressive beauty - the act of evoking pleasure through discomfort. It is through this lens that I engage with the work of ceramicist/sculptor Dirk Staschke. His sculptural tableaux perform the act of transgressive beauty. Encompassing the duality of craving and aversion, beauty and the grotesque, Staschke's latest ceramic/mixed media works at the Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia seduce the viewer with their lushness, while exploring themes of excess and consumption. The exhibition title Making Arrangements offers

multiple possibilities for interpretation. The word 'arrangements' alludes to the history of still life



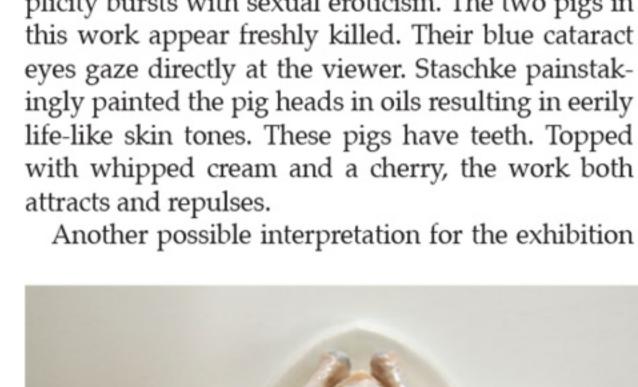
painting, specifically vanitas paintings from Northern Europe in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Characterized by sumptuous displays of flora, fauna and food, artists such as Dutch painter Abraham van Beyeren (1620-1690) infused the vanitas paintings with rich allegorical and religious symbolism. Best known for his banquet still lifes, Beyeren's paintings signify life's temporality and the emptiness of pleasure. Dirk Staschke's works Commemoration and Bounty both celebrate and subvert the vanitas still life tradition.

advocates both a tribute to and a discomfort with the perverse plenitude. Similar in subject matter, the work *Bounty* revels in its refined opulence. Lacking the gluttonous excess present in Commemoration, the composition's simplicity bursts with sexual eroticism. The two pigs in this work appear freshly killed. Their blue cataract

fate, while the other seems less resigned, perhaps

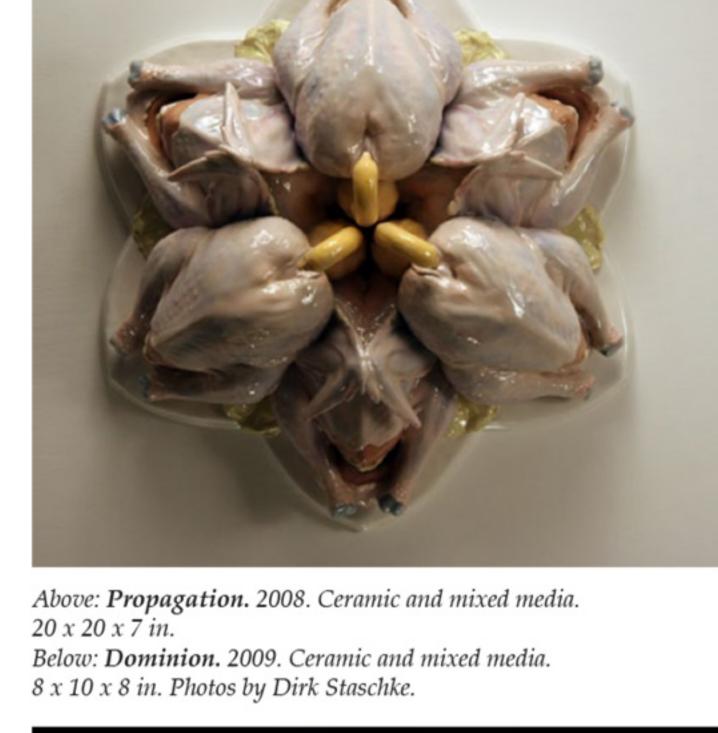
a bit melancholy. The word 'commemorate' means

to honour. The duality present in this ceramic work





Commemoration is comprised of two pig heads elegantly placed on a platter, surrounded by cabbage



the lavish display suggests an abundant celebration. Upon closer examination, one notices the decorative ribbon woven throughout the elaborate arrangement is in actuality – entrails. The voluptuous organic forms of the eggplants, gourds and split papayas elicit a sexual connotation. The pigs exude uncanny human-like expressions. One seems content with his title, Making Arrangements is the reference to weddings and funerals and the relationship to food in these cultural rituals. Whether celebrating life or death, food serves as the nucleus, functioning as a source of sustenance and comfort. Food also serves

leaves, calla lilies, dogwood flowers, split papayas,

eggplants and cucumbers topped with a richly deco-

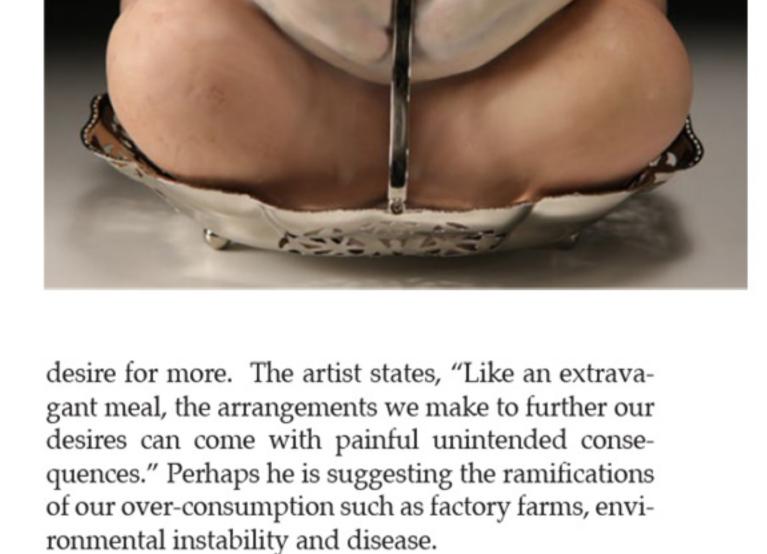
rated cake. Beautifully and meticulously sculpted,

are condoned and accepted as part of the traditional ritual. Staschke's ceramic/mixed media works Propagation and Stagger examine the gluttony and greed inherent in our culture. In Propagation, six ceramic chickens sit on a starshaped platter. Layers of oil paint fused with resin result in a hyper-realistic chicken complete with delicately blue-veined, pebbly skin. Innards removed,

as a cultural symbol, denoting social class and eco-

nomic prosperity. Weddings and funerals are occa-

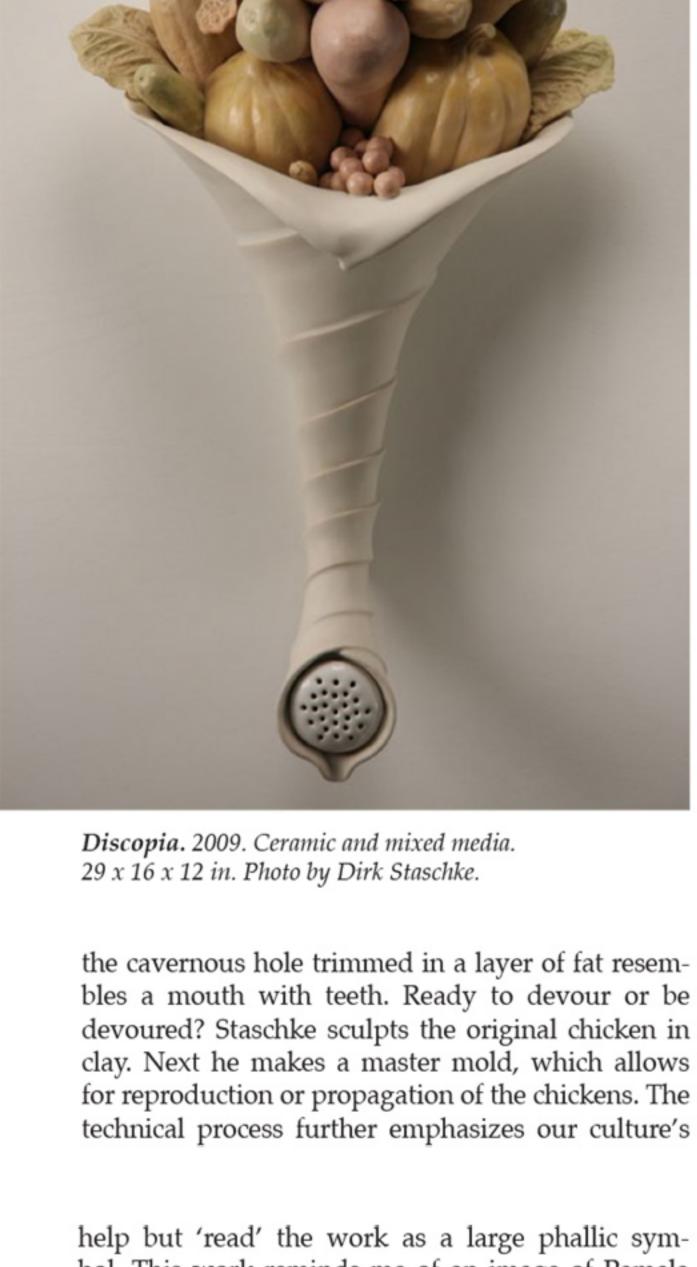
sions where extravagance and over-consumption



pastries. Contingent upon the teetering support of mass-produced empty calories, the lone object

Stagger depicts a precariously balanced china

teacup, perched on top of mountainous layers of



bol. This work reminds me of an image of Pamela Anderson entitled, Stars Caught Chowing Down -

Pamela Anderson has breakfast in Malibu on April 1, 2009. Anderson symbolizes the epitome of excessive cultural consumption. I am not speaking about her as an individual, but what she represents iconically - idealized beauty gone awry. Staschke states that people consume ideas as well as products and that eating becomes a metaphor for material consumption. Caught with her mouth wide-open in mid-bite, this

image of Anderson could serve as Hickey's advertisement for transgressive beauty.

hand. At once beautiful and grotesque, the work speaks to the transience and mystery of life. It relates to the vanitas paintings, which featured human skulls as a symbol of death. In a conversation with the art-

ist, I find out that this is his favourite work. As he describes it, "It's the dot on an exclamation point". I consider the possibility that this is his most autobiographical work to date. Premonition challenges us to confront our own mortality as well as our tenuous relationship to nature.

The strength of Dirk Staschke's work and the

exhibition as a whole resides in the artist's ability to

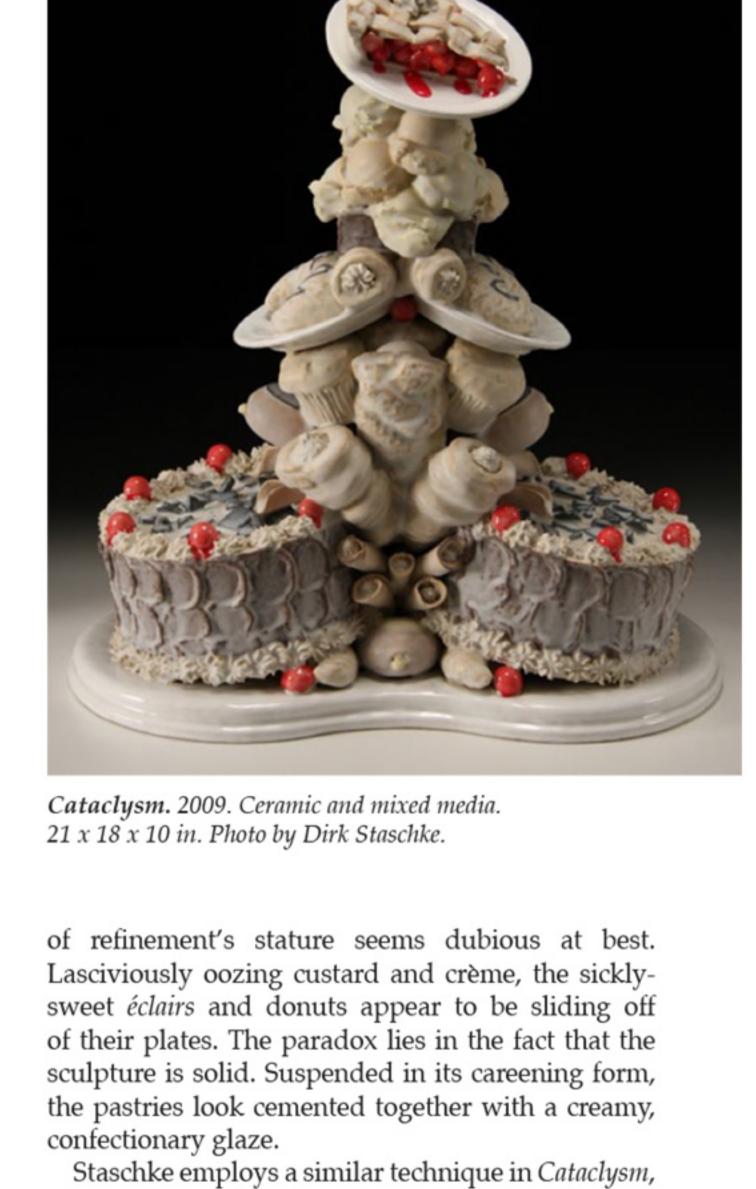
create a symbiosis between the conceptual and tech-

nical aesthetics. The sculptures resonate beyond the

art object, asserting themselves in a dialogue which

questions the social/political culture in which we

live. Contextualising the work within our current



black forest cakes covered with shiny red glazed cherries. The same cherries drip from a piece of pie at the top of the sculpture. From a distance, one cannot economic and political climate, I think of Obama's words from his Presidential inauguration, "To those nations like ours that enjoy relative plenty, we say

world's resources without regard to effect." Obama

where a tower of croissants, cannolis, pirouettes, cup-

cakes, ice cream and brownies slope off-kilter, on

the verge of collapse. Supporting the tower are two

we can no longer afford indifference to the suffering outside our borders, nor can we consume the

has called upon the nation to sacrifice, eliminating wastefulness. Dirk Staschke's work reminds us of the consequences of our desires. FOOTNOTES: 1. Viso. Olga M. "Beauty and Its Dilemmas", Regarding Beauty, Smithsonian Institution, 1999, p. 97. 2. http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/top ic/623056/vanitas http://www.metmuseum.org/ toah/hd/nstl/hd_nstl.htm

Colette Copeland is a multi-media visual artist whose work

Artist statement, gallery press release.

4. Artist statement, gallery press release.

5. Phone conversation with Dirk Staschke on

6. Quote from President Obama's inaugural speech.

http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/28751183/page/2/

www.wexlergallery.com

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examines issues surrounding gender and contemporary culture. Ms. Copeland writes for Exposure Journal, and Afterimage Magazine. For seven years, she wrote a quarterly column for Fotophile Magazine and contributed to The Photo Review. In addition to her other activities, Ms. Copeland is the Chairperson of the Mid-

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