



Where Confection and Illusion Collide

A Review by Judy Seckler



Facing page and sidebars: *Confectional Façade*. 2011. Ceramic. 8.5 x 4 x .83 ft.
Above: *A Consuming Allegory (Detail)*. 2011. Ceramic. 6.5 x 5 x 3 ft.

AFTER WINNING THE JOHN AND JOYCE PRICE AWARD OF Excellence at the *Bellevue Arts Museum (BAM) Biennial 2010: Clay Throwdown!*, ceramics sculptor Dirk Staschke was invited to mount a solo exhibition as part of his prize.

Less than two years later, *Dirk Staschke: Falling Feels a Lot Like Flying*, debuted at the museum between 1 March and 27 May, 2012. Staschke's nine pieces reverberate with the artist's ruminations on how eating passes from desire to cultural excess. Curated by Stefano Catalani, director of Curatorial Affairs/Artistic Director, the exhibition's title plays with the idea that sensations may appear similar while representing different aspects of the human condition.

Staschke's work falls into two distinct styles: (1) Tableaux featuring glossy, photo-real banquets of desserts embellished with gold serving trays and (2) matte pastel combinations of fruits and vegetables often spilling out like cornucopias. The initial group of works packs the greatest punch because it is hard to resist the sensuous pillows of whipped cream and the realistic sugary icing that beckon visitors closer. The presentation of this *faux* food all but drowns out the softer sculptures located at the farther end of the gallery.

Confectional Façade is a confectionary tower piled high with assorted bas-relief cakes, pies, croissants, chocolate rolls and éclairs that is centrally located between the two galleries dedicated to the exhibition. Staschke's meticulous technique is a marvel of sweet desserts stacked like a wall nine-feet high and balanced precariously like a house of cards. His playful

use of words as well as images poses the thought: Confectional sounds a lot like confessional. What sins are waiting to be discovered?

Staschke is much more involved with pristine presentation than Claes Oldenburg, an earlier sculptor famously associated with building huge replicas of food and other everyday objects. Staschke furthers the conversation by making his works visceral illusions. The dessert tower seemingly sits on a traditional wooden table but when one walks around the elaborate sculpture the entire back is flat, nondescript, unglazed and without adornment.

The architecture of Staschke's sculpture is like a movie set, where only the façade of the structure has a clear cut narrative. The textures and colours associated with each confection are exacting and generate fleeting moments of beauty and excess. Staschke has said that he draws inspiration from Dutch and Flemish Vanitas still-life painting. Vanitas, a Latin word, means 'emptiness' and holds forth that earthly life is meaningless and vanity is transient. Through the artist's hand, a tension exists between the surrounding conspicuous consumption and the realisation that gastronomy gives way to a hollow aftertaste.

Does stuffing the senses contribute to greater satisfaction? Staschke's viewpoint is steeped in the pessimism of our age. This theme extends to another work titled *Harvest's End*, shaped like a reverse cornucopia.



Facing page, top: *Harvest's End*. 2011. Ceramic and mixed media. 7 x 3.5 x 3.5 ft.
Facing page, below left: *No Strings Attached*. 2011. Ceramic. 4 x 3 x 1 ft.
Facing page, below right: *Propagation*. 2008. Ceramic and mixed media. 1.67 x 1.67 x .58 ft. Photo by Sayaka Ito.
Left: *Wishing Well*, *Knowing Otherwise*. 2011. Ceramic. 6.5 x 4 x 4 ft.
Above: *Cake (Detail of Wishing Well, Knowing Otherwise)*.

A pastel group of gourds and pumpkins are mounted perpendicular to the wall. The fruits and vegetables channel in to an abstract branch shaped like a tusk or horn with a delicate, colourful bird perched at its end. The image is disturbing on several levels. A tree in nature has branches that are attached to a trunk. Staschke's branch/tusk/horn has no such context. The appendage is attached ambiguously to the wall.

Staschke's intention to distort nature could have its roots elsewhere. The tusk/horn arrogantly commands the space like an animal trophy. Many a hunter has mounted his spoils on the wall for all to see. While artworks of clay are normally attached to the ground or the wall, this sculpture aggressively punches through space and leaves us with the uneasy feeling that all could come crashing down any minute. Plus, any illusion to a horn of plenty is fleeting. That is not to say that Staschke is without moments of lightness and humour.

Decadence and earthly pleasures are the ideas that swirl around his *Wishing Well*, *Knowing Otherwise*. This *tour de force* in clay recreates a multi-tiered banquet for the senses. In the same tradition as tea sandwiches and pastries served elegantly at teatime at a five-star hotel, Staschke has handbuilt and glazed clay to resemble luscious cakes, banana splits, éclairs and ice cream sundaes that sit on gold cake plates, platters and servers. Many of the desserts are finished off with bright red cherries dripping in syrup.

Beauty's superfluous nature is frozen in time in Staschke's unforgettable sculpture. Who has not gazed longingly when an orgy for the eyes and

mouth stood before them? While decadence and earthly pleasures take precedence, it is understood that decay and destruction lurk around the corner.

Staschke makes use of *trompe l'oeil* in the sculpture *Propagation* to pursue other expressions of excess on a smaller scale. From afar, the sculpture looks like a six-pointed medallion anchored to the wall. On closer inspection, six chicken carcasses (plucked and ready for cooking) are arranged geometrically in the tradition of Islamic art. Gourds have been substituted for chicken heads.

Staschke plays continuously with our preconceived notions of what art should be. From a distance, perfectly rendered chicken skin appears as just another imaginative texture. Close up, the eye adjusting to the supermarket-ready chickens, registers, at times, joy, shock or sorrow at the collapse, decay and fleeting nature of life. The artwork on display shifts back and forth from pleasing the palette to a commentary on wastefulness.

Staschke's meticulous technique lets us enjoy the sensual surfaces of clay, leaving the door open to discover its other layers. The world offers up possibilities but just as easily presents dangers, disappointments and mortality. The best artists capture these diverging thoughts in arresting packages through varying degrees of levity and darkness. Dirk Staschke earns a place among them.

Judy Seckler is a Los Angeles-based magazine writer, specialising in art, design and architecture. (www.judyseckler.com) (www.twitter.com/judyseckler). Her previous two reviews for *Ceramics: Art and Perception* were *Making Fun: The 67th Scripps College Ceramic Annual* and *Brad Miller: Primordial Algorithms* (Issue 87/2012). All photos courtesy of the artist unless noted.