



DIRK STASCHKE

by Nastia Uoynouskaya

As we walk down the street, read a magazine, or surf the web, we are being told to want. Attractive images play with our fancy, baiting the saliva of desire for new shoes, kitchen appliances, or what-have-you—all to wet our palates as we gaze upon the potential objects we could acquire.

In his sculptures of overwhelming material excess, Vancouver-based ceramicist Dirk Staschke explores the mechanisms that underlie human desire. When we allow ourselves to give in to our impulses, the longing for material wealth can have dire consequences—not only for our life priorities, but our interactions with other people and the environment.

"I think material excess is caused by desire and desire is the root of most unhappiness," Staschke explained in an interview. "It is something that I personally struggle with from time to time."

Like the advertisements that constantly invade our visual field, Staschke's sculptures are impossible to

ignore. Many of them towering over six feet tall, they fill the viewer with not only temptation, but with fear and awe. Staschke is sensitive to the network of emotions and impulses that the sight of overwhelmingly tantalizing objects evokes.

Drawing from the *vanitas* still lifes commonly painted during the Northern Renaissance, he explores the push-and-pull effect of these displays of excess, oscillating the viewer between longing and a gut feeling of aversion. Staschke's sculptures bring the stuff of Dutch masterpieces into the three-dimensional realm, making such luxurious displays of fruitful harvests and fat livestock seem tangible.

"By referencing the *vanitas* still lifes in my work I am interested in relating their meaning to our contemporary culture," said Staschke about his use of these timeworn motifs. "Originally, the *vanitas* paintings admonished the viewer for accumulation of material wealth for religious reasons... I am also intrigued by the inherent contradictions of *vanitas* art that require the enjoyment of beautiful

ABOVE: "Commemoration"
LEFT: "Cluster"



objects while simultaneously forewarning the viewer to be ware of material desires."

Staschke's sculptures, too, create such a tension. His compositions are made up of myriads of objects, each one rendered with realist precision but arranged in ways that could only be fantastical. The sumptuous pastries, ripe fruits, and fresh vegetables appetize the viewer, but the otherworldly, delicate accumulations they are found in generate a sense of uneasiness. These contradictory feelings force us to reflect upon the nature of our emotions, putting into question whether the desire we feel can possibly lead to a satisfying conclusion, and whether we actually need as many things as we desire.

At just over eight feet tall, as the sculpture "Confectional Facade" is a decadent display of pure excess—a glutton's daydream. Towers of pristine plates brimming with cakes and pastel-colored scoops of ice cream (dripping with syrup and decked out with delicate frosting designs) lean against each other at physically impossible heights. They appear to be on the verge of toppling over, defying the physical laws we sense intuitively.

However, as the title of the piece suggest, the alluring pastries are just a facade. Staschke did not build them to be viewed from 360 degrees, creating a flat work that only shows enough to be convincing from the frontal view. The apparent falsehood of this desert tower points to the hollowness of greed and material desire. The ceramic pastries do not ultimately come to form part of our world; their perfection is revealed to be too good to be true.

Through this Escher-esque pastry architecture, Staschke mixes desire with fear—the ingredients of the emotional poignancy of his work. "I think it comes from the perceived instability of the piece," he explained when asked about the contradictory feelings his sculptures provoke. "I have had people tell me they are afraid to be near it."

While this fear and discomfort comes from the physical impossibility of some of the sculptures, some of

ABOVE: "Consuming Allegory"
OPPOSITE: "No Strings Attached"



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Staschke's works feature elements that border on the grotesque despite their polished beauty. Dead fowls make regular appearances in his compositions, hanging by their feet in an eternal slumber or propped up among swollen squashes and leafy greens. The realist execution of these animals draws out their beauty while also pointing to a haunting reality — while these animals are coveted for their flesh and considered to be fine foods, they are also carcasses that represent the physical reality of death.

Before coming into his preoccupation with food, Staschke would sculpt figures, often with dwarfed, severed or constrained body parts.

"[I'm] not necessarily resisting the harmoniousness but the idea that [the body] is perfect," Staschke commented. "Any ideology applied to the body usually has dire consequences. Religious, gender based, aesthetic ideals, etc."

In an attempted to give the viewer a more personal relationship with his sculptures, he transitioned to recreating food, as it allows the viewer to relate it personally to her or his experience instead of considering the identity of the subject. While the shift in subject matter seems radical, Staschke maintains its continuity because food and the human body are intimately intertwined.

In addition to the strong conceptual foundation of his work, perhaps its most striking feature is its craftsmanship. The sculptor begins his ambitious pieces as small sketches, making adjustments to his original designs as he builds his forms, some made by hand and others taken from plaster molds. To create the many textures found in his pieces—from the matte surface of a vegetable's skin to a raw chicken's slimy, featherless veneer—he carefully plans the way different glazes will interact with the clay's surface, exposing or revealing color and dripping in the right places.

Through the technical prowess of his work—mimicking the real so vividly he is able to transplant us into a world of fantasy, or perhaps transpland a fantasy into our world—Staschke allows us to access a tiny margin that separates powerful, contradictory emotions. His work transports us into a space between desire and fear, and leaves us to meditate there as we lose ourselves in the impossible. ♦

OPPOSITE: "Confectional Facade"
ABOVE: "Premonition"

