

"Combinatory play seems to be the essential feature in productive thought." - Albert Einstein

"Language is fossil poetry." - Ralph Waldo Emerson

ORDER: A WHOLE NEW WORLD!

There is an expression in the snow-covered mountains of Norway. "Dig down in time", it runs: tunnel your way out before the avalanche. The legend has been adopted by Norwegian journalists, among others, to state a truth forgotten in haste: To understand what is going on, dig down into the archives, expose the foundations. Familiar phenomena skirmish on the surface. Their behaviour may not appear to make sense, but they are drawing attention to themselves, signalling deeper unrest. Expose the root, and inexplicable or superficial activity yields up its secrets. Embracing the threat, you begin to dig your way out of the darkness.

PART I

1. THE LAY OF THE LAND

Each new landscape that springs into being buries the one that went before it. Veronica Brovall's work is engaged with the hunt for what is hidden, drawn on by the instinct that there is more to "reality" than any existing image or account of it. In her sculptures, Brovall applies scale like a magnifying lens to the evidence as it appears to her, probing its surrounding history and uncovering its secret architecture.

Brovall's sculptures are born into a wasteland coded with references and stuffed with dead-ends. Rejecting as a trap the invitation to disentangle those things, she cuts them loose and harvests them as material. Necessarily, the materials are familiar, domestic and manufactured. Assembling them, she disengages them from their present forms – tyre, chair, plaster bandage – and the superficial context that holds them there, to elicit their natural origins – oil, metal ore, earth – and reveal a secret "geology" of experience.

Traumatic experience leaks into its surroundings, which in turn disgorge their horrors in the only way they know – as visions, delusions, and hallucinations. In the installation, HOME TUNNEL, a house is overrun by a labyrinth of PVC tunnels, its couch covered with knives. A car with tunnels leading out of it is barred at the ends with the tools used to dig them in DIVORCE I and II. A car crashes into the living room (DOMINATE); and the dining table and chairs are covered with toothpicks and bamboo spikes (DIVORCE I).

2. GIANTS AT LARGE

Out of this landscape, strange creatures emerge, not quite human. Their bodies are missing limbs or are only parts, fossils, or suggestions of a human shape. Papered over with brick or wood textures, or covered in polythene, they arm themselves with gestures – a bared back, a clenched fist, and other cartoonish displays of strength. They are large, pumped-up, extra-flexible: abstractions.

In KNOCHENBRUCH [*BONEBREAKER*], a figure assembled from armour plates that masquerade as body parts, shows itself to be an exoskeleton with no soft centre to protect. Suspended on fine threads, it grasps at auto spares like someone surprised naked making a grab for their clothes.

In GENERATING BRICK (and other sculptures), figures spread fleshy buttocks to mark out and guard the sculpture's perimeter. Offering their tails for a kicking, they keep their heads buried and protected. Sex is a diplomatic weapon. "Fuck you!" their asses say, while imploring "... fuck me?" They want it all ways.

Trailing ribbons of asphalt, arms that seem to have crawled out of an oily swamp, attach themselves to the boxy body of DAY/NIGHT URZEIT [*PRIMAL TIMES*], headlights held in their fists. The sculpture is split into two sections. Passing between them, you notice that the inner walls are thickly covered with feathers. Nested among them, fans noisily blow air. Deeper still, are shiny skeletal figures like fossils in rock.

3. TANGLED ROOTS

How to locate and inspect something hidden? Not missing it, you are unable to seek it out. Brovall's sculptures act out the problem of this initial investigation, promoting their own strategy for understanding. It's hard to say what that is because it announces itself in the doing. Some might call it instinct or cunning. Others, inspiration. I suspect Veronica would say energy. But at all costs, the strategy is exclusive. It rubbishes all others. "My order threatens all orders": the title of one of her early exhibitions.

WÜRZEL-FÜLLUNG [*ROOT-FILLING*] I and II, Brovall offers sculptures that frame this problem, creating a sort of imaginative map for its solution. Figures cover in the undergrowth, their smooth wood-papered heads and bodies enmeshed in the roots of a thorn-covered tree they appear to bear on their backs. Alone or in pairs, they balance on their hands, one leg unnaturally bent, a big toe stuffed in their own mouths or their mate's. They seem unable to break ground for fear of being wrenched out of their entanglement and the autistic circuit of need it binds them to. Beneath the cultivated, prickly exteriors that go about on the surface, there are primal denizens of a world that goes unnoticed.

The sculpture is allegorically rich, but what's interesting is the choice to show the "whole". In their totality the figures, as they extend themselves above and below ground, are a vision of the possibility of complete understanding – the "full root" hypothesized in the work title. Like the black monstrosities that give form to the phantoms of the fear and confusion that leak out of failures of knowledge or understanding in Brovall's earlier works, they are storage vehicles for unreality – which also, strangely enough, is the world as it actually "is", whole and resolved.

PART II

4. COMPOSITION AS EXPLANATION

Even as the problem is composed, the explanation is set in motion. COMPOSITION AS EXPLANATION is the portal from one phase of Brovall's work into the other and back. The idea within it reaches out to her earlier works, root-hugging incubuses, labyrinthine cars and homes with aggressive furniture as well as the later series it belongs to to hold both in its embrace.

The piece itself is made of twisted hula hoops bonded to a broken office chair with burnt asphalt, and held together with screws. It takes its title from a 1926 lecture given by Gertrude Stein. Another talk by Stein, 'What are master-pieces and why there are so few of them?' is also widely published. Veronica suggested that I read both. I was frustrated. Stein speaks of genius, but exhibits none. Her thought seems to commune only with itself – like those figures sucking their toes. But this is precisely the point: talk is always without substance because it is necessarily enslaved to the communicative function it is designed to fulfil. Because there is no matter, or 'material' to the talk, the talk itself becomes material, something that happened, waiting to be made use of.

Works stand for themselves, apart from the artist's instructions. When the work is truthful, she disappears: Any notes she may have to give can only restate what already is, rebuilding in language what the works do themselves. My job then, is to do that in her place and, achieving it, demonstrate the works' independence of her. Naturally, I may fail, but that would be neither the fault of the artist, nor of the work, but my own act of seeing. But of course, the fault may also be yours.

5. RESURFACING

REPLACE REPINE is a metal frame fitted with disposable plastic cups, wrapped in plaster-soaked bandages. The cups are plugged with asphalted roofing felt, pared into strips and braided, draped over the sculpture, then burned with a gas-torch. The work is a furnace in which natural resources are revealed, as textures bond and exchange, and forms are shed and adopted. The plastic holders which gave the sculpture its original form shrivel to leave behind a

scorched plaster-cast as the new body. The asphalt intruder is incorporated like a dripping prosthetic, bio-engineered into the structure. Its weak points cauterized, it gains mass and strength. The result is a suit of armour, forged out of scar tissue. A brilliant patchwork sutured by its own transformation. LEBENSTREPPE [LIFE-STEPS] show progression as tarred and tangled with sticky black ribbons strung over a fragile frame of squat, tubular podiums. In PORTRAITS AND REPETITION, air becomes ballast and weakness, strength. The inner tube of a tyre is filled with concrete top become the base for a bust-like sculpture of plaster and chicken-wire.

On the plaster shell of these later works (2009-2010) is stencilled: "I was here" in bright colours, filling up the white space. Aggressive self-assurance becomes a meditative mantra. The graffiti surface reveals language to be another texture, a tattoo on the skin of the work, a layer applied like any other. As each layer incorporates the one before it, the whole is changed locking all materials into a ceaseless struggle – each its own order, each entirely significant, each overthrowing the next. Graffiti has another function. The sculptures, new beings forged in the artist's studio from the experience of being in the world, are dressed in street clothes. Their passports stamped, they are sent out into the outside world of skate parks and alleyways, underpasses and the all the world's abandoned playgrounds where they play unnoticed among the legends written by lovers and other vandals. Which is where it all begins.

6. SHIFTING LANDSCAPES

The titles of Brovall's works' are a list of instructions for seeing actively – seeing by digging. Her sculptures populate a different world from the post-cultural wasteland many accept as the one they live in – a place stitched together from discarded references. A place that doesn't exist.

Just as it makes sense no sense to speak of one kind of rock "referring" to another, Brovall envisions an artistic landscape where no work refers outside itself. They can only be made to give up their secrets, by scrubbing off the manufactured edifice, returning them to their elemental state, confronting one with another and travelling down through the layers they conceal. They cannot be traced out of the threads of art history; they are only grasped in their material reinvention.

Just as manufacturing processes dump materials all over the earth's surface, while volcanoes spew up rocks and flatten villages from beneath, culture churns up references. Some of them rise to the surface to produce new materials. A diffuse charge binds all together. Intimately related, they aggressively state their unique DNA. True artworks never refer to each other, because they follow (their own) nature. Culture is the terrain they negotiate. They pursue their own investigations. You are invited to do the same.

Sam Williams, Berlin, January 2011

