

Sanné Mestrom



Sanné Mestrom: The Image, the Object, the Plinth and the Frame

Helen Hughes

Sanné Mestrom is concerned with the life of art historical images. Her installation-based works, which seek to explore the formal tropes of painting through sculpture, often meditate on the way an art object or image traverses realms, such as from two- to three-dimensionality; protean memory to fixed form; singular masterpiece to generalised style. Her investigations into the lives of art objects and images are always tied to their framing devices: cultural, curatorial and art historical, as well as physical. In Mestrom's work, the significance of an image or object is nearly always formally commensurate with its support, whether a frame or a plinth. Indeed, in many cases the framing device is inextricably entwined with that which is being framed.

For source material, Mestrom typically sifts through the canon of 20th-century modernist art history, selecting and repurposing iconic objects and images to examine the cultural, psychological and emotional significance attached to them today. She is interested in the way the tropes of high modernism move and morph between different historical and cultural realms. Her work critiques the authentic modern by plotting the trajectory and proliferation of these tropes and drawing them into the current moment, analysing and playing with the ways in which they lose and gain value and meaning over time and in different contexts. In *Large Reclining Nude* (2012), for instance, the female nude alluded to in the title (after Matisse) takes the form of a low-lying, white-tiled table upon which further clusters of loosely anthropomorphic objects are placed. Here, Matisse's original muse undergoes drastic transformation to become a utilitarian object: she forms the conceptual, visual and physical support for Mestrom's contemporary iteration.

The Bell Curve (2013) reprises this archaeological approach to modern art to explore the nexus between the perception and representation of reality, a concern at the core of Mestrom's practice. By focusing on the muted still lifes of 20th-century Italian

artist Giorgio Morandi and on Picasso's iconic 1937 painting *Weeping Woman*, *The Bell Curve* draws a parallax arc between these two major figures — both of whom approach the same theme of describing reality, though via wildly different pictorial languages. *The Bell Curve* establishes and then tests the tension between these two practices. It comprises five sculptural compositions based on Morandi still lifes and a towering, 3.5-metre-tall aluminium fountain sculpture that spills tears from a large bronze eyeball, based on Picasso's violently fragmented and ill-hued painting of Dora Maar.

For Mestrom, the relationship between seeing, being and depicting is enunciated most poetically in the famously minimal still lifes of Morandi. The most radical of these comprise a single pencil line that adumbrates neither an object nor its space, but rather sketches their point of differentiation. The severe aesthetic reduction in Morandi's still lifes point the viewer away from the subject matter and towards the act of seeing and depicting, of describing reality and meditating on form. This, of course, is also the effect of the fractured or ruptured picture planes of Picasso's cubist period.

Musing on Morandi, Mestrom presents five black, skeletal steel plinths, atop of each a matte white platform with a perpendicular blank backdrop — like miniature stage sets on stilts. Echoing the transformation of Matisse's nude into a table top, Morandi's frame here becomes Mestrom's plinth. These stages display a selection of ceramic objects whose forms are drawn directly from Morandi's still lifes. The ceramic objects are unfettered, neutral, understated; formal exercises, they are rendered non-functional — no longer hollow vessels but mute objects. They are left uncoloured and unglazed, and are lit so as not to cast long, theatrical shadows but to be bathed in an even light absorbed by the matte surfaces of the objects and their backdrops.

The stage-like plinths function as both sculptural supports for the ceramic objects and as frames that relegate the objects into a type of fixed two-dimensional composition. In so doing, Mestrom tightly braids the formal tropes of painting with

those of sculpture through their respective support systems. One result of translating Morandi's two-dimensional objects into the third-dimension, however, is that the horizon line used in painting to orient an object to its space here radically unhinges the objects from a single, stable representation. As viewers walk around and between Mestrom's sculptures, the lines of the skeletal plinths shift and the stage-like backdrops continuously reframe the objects they house. The compositions are perpetually undone, destabilised with each step of the wandering viewer.

The sculptures, then, based on and named after Morandi's still lifes, literalise the gesture of depiction that describes and constructs the real. This is how Mestrom preserves the direct address of the object, what she describes as its 'honesty': her still lifes are not representations of still lifes; they are still lifes. Similarly, her *Weeping Woman* fountain does not represent a weeping woman, it is weeping. By extension, we can see that this is how Mestrom prisms images and objects from art history to ensure their hold on the contemporary moment. She creates an experience of the work that is grounded in seeing and being physically present. Her references to art historical objects and images thus demand our critical attention in the here and now.

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