

## *Leftovers*

As I approach the wall of glass at the front of RMIT's Project Space I know immediately that I am looking at Sanné Mestrom's sculptural work. Her deft and distinctive tampering with the modernist legacy is evident in the way the figurative disappears into libidinal abstractions. At first glance, *Leftovers* is a sculptural investigation that elegantly employs formal qualities such as scale, material, line and movement, but sitting at the centre of this exhibition is a process of engagement with other artists. The show consists of a congregation of sculptures that utilise the scraps from the studios of artists that Mestrom knows or admires. The gallery's second smaller space (Spare Room) offers a witty but complex insight into the aspirations and processes that underpin her project.

In the main gallery, Mestrom colonises the reworked studio detritus that shapes *Leftovers* with her distinctive use of interior and exterior—the spaces in and around the objects and the way positive and negative interplay within the sculptural base. Extending the idea of the plinth, Mestrom has created ceramic objects that are artworks in themselves, but also perform the function of presenting these scrapings from collaborating artists' studios. Both as a utilitarian and aesthetic strategy, these abstractions contribute to the sculptural encounter. The room is full not crowded due to her deft use of mass, weight, transparency and air. Titles such as *Dear Mira* or *Dear Lizzy* and *Dear Clive* acknowledge the generous contributions of the artists.

Rather than relying on a wall text to explain the process, the complexities of the project are revealed in Spare Room as an archive of correspondence between Mestrom and the artists and artists' representatives who she politely approached requesting contributions of studio scrapings. The intricacies of process are clearly revealed and the provenance of each work is stated. Less immediately apparent, but equally important, is what is illustrated by these communications: relationships of support, collegiality and complex networks on the one hand; power, hierarchies and marginality on the other. Mestrom wrote to artists she knew personally, to influential players she had briefly met and to gatekeepers who run the galleries that represent internationally acclaimed artists (Bruce Nauman, Tino Sehgal, Joseph Kosuth to name a few). Their replies enable the viewer to assemble the pieces of a puzzle that give us a picture of which artists' remnants became sculptures and why. This tranche of charming, polite, uneasy and revealing emails adds a temporal dimension to the project and brings into view the business-end of contemporary art, making clear how much of an artist's time gets spent at the computer rather than in the studio.

This trail of correspondence places the work within the relational field, but also provides an intimate view of the artist herself – warm and chatty with friends; polite, formal, cap-in-hand and maybe tongue-in-cheek when communicating with the artistic elite. Each letter follows the same form and describes how the proposed artworks will be used for her exhibition as finalist in a ceramic competition in the rural town of

Shepparton.<sup>1</sup> Mestrom personalises and alters these communications but never censors what would appear to be a parochial ambition when attempting to make contact with artists of international renown. I don't know whether to laugh or squirm as I read her charming letters to big-gun galleries such as Hauser and Worth, Marian Goodman and Gagosian to name a few. In her missives, Mestrom is asking for contact with artists like Roni Horn, Martin Creed and Barbara Kruger, so that she may access their 'artist's scrapings'—the discards that have no further value in their own respective studio spaces. The responses are polite and helpful, but do not bear fruit as sculptures in this iteration of the project. It is through the generosity of Australian artists that the sculptural elements of her show come to fruition.

*Leftovers* is clever to its core in the way it reveals the value of social bonds forged through relationships and collegiality. It adds to the field of art made from waste and associated ideas by probing how the value of crap that lies around an artist's studio might be re-assigned. Mestrom challenges the way we understand collaboration and authorship but also offers an intimate tribute to the artists that have shaped her own creative, aesthetic and intellectual development.

I cannot imagine a man developing a project like *Leftovers* or writing these kinds of letters. As well as pushing the outside the edges of sculpture and socially engaged practice, Mestrom's exhibition is also an astute reflection on the position of women in contemporary art.

**Dr Julie Shiels** lectures in the Art and Public Space Program at RMIT University

---

<sup>1</sup> 2015 Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award at Shepparton Art Museum is a \$50,000 prize awarded to one of the 5 selected artists. The biennial Award is the premier Australian ceramic art prize.