



*Lady with Green Stripe, 1905* Sanné Mestrom, 2013 marble, steel, timber found objects

## The Internal Logic: Schindler Sanné creates new habitat for endangered moderns.

Sanné Mestrom creates art's equivalent of an ecosystem and each individual work is comprised of numerous competing parts that jostle with each other for the opportunity to grab just enough air and nutrients to cling to life. She champions Art's endangered species.

The fundamentals of art that have been abused, mutilated, tortured and wrongly imprisoned flock to Mestrom like refugees to our shore. These, she mothers back to life with all the care and consideration they dearly deserve. Like anthropologists and the inquisition, she can only ever interpret through the ears and eyes of her own time and culture.

At the core of Sanné Mestrom's work is an understanding that modernism was not a simple reductive progression from spotty realism (Impressionism) towards an ultimate final bland abstract statement. She seems to appreciate that there were, in fact, two equally viable modernist approaches. One typified by Picasso, Matisse and Morandi, (all referred to in this exhibition) who chose "traditional" subjects including the still life, portrait and standing figure. Each artist then interpreted their subjects according to their own modernist bias; we could describe this approach as a newness or modernism of content. As an aside I do have to admit that one of the only artworks to ever give me goose bumps was a small painting of a bowl of apples by Courbet at the National Gallery in London. It still puzzles me, there is nothing original about the subject, there is no apparent narrative, it makes no great leap forward in re-evaluating what can or cannot be art, but all the same, the more I look at this humble little effort the more I can see that here was an artist writing the history of his time on the day that it occurred. Maybe Courbet just gave us the living Courbet on that day and the magic in his bowl of apples is that through them, we can comprehend immortality.

Devotees of the other path saw the primary role of a modern artist as being an inventor of new looking art forms, avoiding anything that had been seen before and purging art of any traces of its past. It was a comprehensible process that appeared logical, objective and was easily arguable. It completely suited the Americans in their vigorous push to create a national world ranking artistic presence after World War 2.

The only American works referred to by Mestrom in *Internal Logic* are *Black Painting 1959* and *Black Painting 1963* by Frank Stella and for them she reserves her harshest and most disrespectful criticism. Stella was an extremely articulate artist who, in the remarkable Emile de Antonio 1972 documentary, *Painters Painting: The New York Art Scene 1940-1970*, stated that Jackson Pollack took on Picasso (implying that Pollock knocked Pablo clean out of the ring) and all that Frank and the newer American artists had to do was take on Jackson. An unambiguous statement about a competitive art made up of domino like components that would fall one after the other.

Mestrom's version of *Black Painting 1959* shows she completely understands Stella's criteria but criticises them by taking them forward on their own terms. Spitefully witty, the cold hard edge of Stella has become a hand woven object made with undyed wool, an example of traditional craft and popular retro décor: the ubiquitous Scandinavian Rya rug.



*Black Painting 1959* Sanné Mestrom, 2013,  
unspun, undyed woolen tapestry

By singling Stella out as a major contributor to modernism's dead-end proposal driven demise, Mestrom seems to be siding with the idea that art is just one of the ways that human beings make personal sense of the world they find themselves in.

The process that took Sanné Mestrom to this point is most instructive, trained as a painter she avoided all the strange values that are often espoused in Sculpture departments. These include weird ideas like; stone is an old fashioned material that is totally unsuitable for contemporary use, or any art made before Minimalism is not worth looking at and worst of all, the totally illogical, craft should be avoided. Even the history of contemporary or modernist sculpture that is most regularly taught bears little resemblance to truth. In many ways the absence of a formal sculptural education has given Mestrom carte blanche to do whatever she likes and it is this portrayal of personal freedom, liberation and inventiveness that greets us in this exhibition.



*Still life with nine objects 1954* Sanné Mestrom, 2013 ceramic, steel.

I suspect Mestrom is one of those artists who genuinely needs to make things with her own hands and knows the value of manipulating material because it continually offers up alternatives and even brand new ideas.

Choosing well known paintings as motivators for sculptural invention can be fraught with danger for the unsuspecting artist as it gives reviewers (and viewers) the opportunity to self-aggrandise through their knowledge of art history - which in reality means that the artist provides people with a reason not to look at the work on hand. Mestrom negotiates this deftly because in the cases of works pinched from Picasso and Matisse her versions are so far removed from the originals that they stay intact in our memories.

This is true of the largest work in the exhibition, titled, *Weeping Woman* (Picasso) gushing water from a bronze eye; it splashes tears wherever it is placed, to me owes a lot more to an Alexander Calder “stabile” than Picasso. It also shows the advantage of not having a normal sculptor’s education. Most sculptors who had conceived a huge aluminium work like this would automatically opt for a homogenising surface treatment, like the vastly overdone David Smith style swirly, light catching, angle sander stereotype. Mestrom makes no such mistakes and simply lets us see the truth of its manufacture, finger prints, rivets and all. This is most refreshing as it gives new meaning to Henry Moore’s, “Truth to materials” quote. Lurking in my mind is a thought that this work is, in fact, a slightly, “woe is me”, sobbing Sanné self-portrait walking in its courtyard with exactly the same gait as the artist herself.

The direct, honest Truth to Materials and processes approach is the glue that holds this exhibition together. It is there with everything that Mestrom does, from the fabulously sensitive and thoroughly beautiful clay constructions, based on equally calm Morandi's, to the mother and daughter Stella weavings and on to her seductive use of finely crafted marble (Matisse's *Lady with green stripe*), a la Arp or Brancusi.

We are always surprised by the twists and turns that art makes, we can rarely predict what is going to capture our attention next but one of things that is almost guaranteed, is that the last thing you'd ever expect to see is exactly what we get. Many or even most of the current crop of sculptural fashions are simple presentations of things masquerading as art, like the pre-occupation with taxidermy and hyper-real waxwork models.

Mestrom on the other hand seems to have found art's great op-shop, a great barn of a place, stacked to the roof with long forgotten ideas, refugees from the time when American art and artists, to validate their own achievements, brutally bludgeoned everything and anything that smelled even remotely of European culture. These poor strays of accumulated wisdom speak languages that we often do not wish to understand. Things get lost or altered in translation. The generation gap is so great, that all Mestrom can do, is care for these great grandparents using the values of her own time.

These encounters with The Masters of High Modernism have certainly payed dividends for Sanné Mestrom. Fossicking she finds an exciting, bargain price, Picasso top, she wears it for a day and wonders if she could make her own. Whilst making the pattern for it she notices that she's made something like a Calder as well (most important: nothing is more exciting than two for the price of one deals), and on it goes, discovery after discovery.

There is one extraordinary thing about this exhibition that I have never seen in my life before. Over the course of little more than a year Mestrom has invented four totally different and original bodies of work, each enough in themselves to sustain most artists for a lifelong career. There are the delightfully irreverent marble heads, capable of working on just about any scale. Similarly there is the clay still life works and the natural fibre wall hanging/rugs, all perfect and extendable. The set of small slot-together bronze Picasso/Calders set up on a low table top are possibly a light hearted dig at Caro's table sculptures but their implications are profound. To get a closer look at them I got down to their level and discovered that the table had become a plaza inhabited by very engaging monumental public sculptures. They were probably little cardboard studies for the "Weeping Woman".

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Clive Murray-White 2013