

DECEPTIVE FRAGMENTS

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In 2017, when Ian Kiaer came to visit the permanent collection of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, I was quite surprised to see him stop before the *Nude in the Bath* by Bonnard, and to hear him declare with a big smile that this painting was one of his favourite works of art. Whether deliberate or not, it was a reminder that Kiaer is not just a sculptor preoccupied solely with volume and form. He is also fascinated with the complex colour arrangement that comes from the realist system of impressionism, which Bonnard had led towards dream and enchantment, through the fragmentation and shimmering of colour and form.

With cubism, the concept of sculpture expanded in such a way that the word was rendered almost meaningless, encompassing everything that is considered a sculpture nowadays – a work within space, ranging from direct cutting to social sculpture, from the ready-made to the sound installation. But this dematerialising of the three-dimensional form has not worked equally in both directions: not everything has become sculpture, and sculpture remains something whose presence for the gaze is like a question or a necessary counterpoint. While it appears to open up the space into a boundless body, it also reveals its own mobility, instability, and fragility.

Ian Kiaer's pieces present themselves as open arrangements, consisting of recovered elements that are placed directly on the ground or fixed to walls. There are no showcases, no frames. The elements interact within a space that is only limited by the dimensions of the location in which they are exhibited. They respond to one another through material, colour, outline and drawing. The materials are rough, and often worn-out. Shapes, materials and colours fully come to life within the spatiality of the room. Their trivial nature is heightened even if the space in which they are placed is not necessarily a white cube. Kiaer also likes to include the pre-existing, architectural elements of the exhibition space – such as a plinth, panelling or a radiator – any architectural feature that is itself the trace of a past intention.

Kiaer arranges, brings together, or casts aside elements because of their colour, their materials, but also because of their history. Where there is a choice of colour, the choice is always of a faded one, rendering him a painter with his own distinctive palette. Viewed this way, Kiaer becomes a painter-sculptor, using form and colour with a delicate sense of balance, wherein one accompanies the other – with colour giving more presence to form, or where form is the means to contain colour.

The arrangement is discreet, or at least gives the appearance of discretion. These sculptures are integrated within the space, as if they had been placed there unintentionally, mimicking biological functioning, like plants whose rooting depends on chance fluctuations of wind and soil. Through the gaze, the sculpture grows, transforming it into an artwork whose existence is much stronger than other more spectacular works. Kiaer's sculptures exist to mark a place, in the manner of uncertain and fragile small memorials that are nevertheless graves – or, more precisely, cenotaphs – devoid of bodies but saturated with memory.

The utopias to which Ian Kiaer refers over and over are themselves the clues to a truth that is both more simple and profound: as in Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds*, the work is a surrogate for something the viewer is looking for. With Poussin, it is the frightening and comforting discovery that death exists even in the best of worlds. With Kiaer, it is that beauty, utopia, and dream are concealed within the most simple elements. The discovery is the result of a joyful journey or redemption: in the second life provided by the exhibition, reused materials appear to meet their true blooming – it is a light and playful truth.

The themes present in the work often refer to utopias, ranging from the Tower of Babel to the visionary architectures of modernity. Each sculpture

is like a memorial in a cemetery of utopias which, over years of exhibitions, has been scattered in the wide and fragmented field of galleries, art centres, collections, and museums. Each is a reminder that something existed or appeared but was unable to remain. Each constitutes the fragile remains of an ancient and joyful civilisation born from optimism but whose aim, like the Tower of Babel (a key theme in Kiaer's work), has remained unachieved because the goal went far beyond what could be provided by the society who envisioned it. In Kiaer's work, there is a desire to recreate worlds that belong to the generation born after 1968, those who have the lingering feeling that utopias aren't entirely illusional nor impossible, and that one way or another it might be necessary to attempt to give shape to them. It is a form which is more poetic than well-reasoned, more allusive than encyclopaedic. And, with a heavy sense of irony, this form would have to be disappointing at first sight – looking like nothing else (and inevitably, like everything else), and belonging neither to its own time nor even to the field of art.

By imitating physical decomposition, or by indicating this direction, Kiaer's works present themselves as a piece of fruit at peak ripeness, intended to be eaten as soon as possible. The work as a whole deals with this sense of urgency. It is not only ruins that are represented, but also the affirmation of traces in this *in extremis* representation of reality. This provokes the heightening of the viewer's attention, which is wonderfully contrasted with the work's discreet and restrained nature. The work speaks about the end of great utopias, but it does so as if whispering a secret.

Kiaer plays with parallel, orthogonal, and vanishing lines. He sometimes adds an architectural feature in the form of an evocative rough model, altering the scale in order to affect the reading of the artwork. This is perhaps also an ironic way to overthrow hierarchies. The fact that these works lend themselves so easily to imagination points to a minimalism, as well as to the austere, metaphysical and rough surrealism of Frederick Kiesler's environmental sculptures.

This mode of installation within open spaces requires a solid understanding of spatiality. Kiaer deals with a three-dimensional surface, with the close association of ground and wall. His pieces are thus rooted in the modernist tradition of Russian avant-garde corner sculpture. In 1914, Vladimir Tatlin discovered Kazimir Malevich's displays in the places where icons used to hang in the corner of a room (in the 'beauty corner' of peasant houses) and, inspired by these, Tatlin constructed a series of corner, counter-relief sculptures. Kiaer takes up this three-dimensional device by combining two walls joining in a corner and, most of the time, the wall and the floor.

While his components present the same raw force as Tatlin's elements (which were borrowed from the rough visual vocabulary of cubism), Kiaer uses them with a very different intention. He appears to set them up in anticipation of an upcoming event. The relationships between elements happen in the mind, as if viewers had to accompany them with their gaze, caught in a movement of empathy. Folded, delicate, and sometimes driven by a slow breathing movement, each work is like a sleeping beauty. The visitors walking into the exhibition hall of the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris would tiptoe around the peaceful Collection Room 14, without saying a word.

Each element bears the marks of the passage of time. Kiaer uses items that are no longer consumable – or off the market – employing an aesthetics of recovery and waste. This art form, made with poor means, is anchored in the political lineage of Kurt Schwitters, and lends the material a specific quality. As the colours used are more often than not faded, so too are the components almost always worn-out. Where elements are new, it is only because the material or fabric is fragile or brittle and needs to be replaced, like polystyrene or gauze. In his world, the new does not exist.

Each element follows a dramatic line that joins the artwork together, and this architecture acts like a glass pane on which a light rain shower beats down. The interest in utopian architecture lies in its existence as an ideal which remains unfulfilled. It is the expression of a dream of form suited to a new situation, and one that initially appears as a serious hypothesis for an earthly paradise. The artwork has the appearance of a theatre in ruins that is visited by giants, and breathing new life and movement into the work through apprehending it is a melancholic undertaking.

The works even have the kind of slightly disenchanted humour that leaves the protagonist somehow out of place, as with *Gilles* by Jean-Antoine Watteau. In a coded world, shyness does not make the subject disappear, but allows it – by the grace of its naivety – to overthrow the situation and prevail.

The selection of the pieces, and their arrangement with millimetre precision within the space, evokes the economy of poor objects of Joseph Beuys. But the message in Kiaer's work is never as tragic as in that of Beuys. Perhaps this is because, for Kiaer, the tragedy of the incommunicability of experience is not as substantial. His works call for an art of resistance, capable of standing up to the violence of history. His method involves the precise examination of the materials' behaviour and contents. Respiration and breath are major constituents. They express a life pulse, a way of taking it into account according to the

spaces and their volume. A life here is seen as simply the result of a historical discontinuity, one that the artist stages by producing these sorts of ruin-bodies that encompass both individual and historical experience, its own history and that of its species, its ontogeny and its phylogenesis.

Like fictional characters, the chosen objects end up imposing their own script, one that consists of things that are said but not heard, that are transmitted but impossible to repeat. Some works do not open up as easily. Looking at them, loving them, and even identifying their original materiality, is not enough to understand them. They are located exactly halfway between sculpture and painting – between the reality of the former and the representation of the latter. However, this in-betweenness does not add both sculpture and painting together, doubling the importance of the work through a clever, strategic positioning. Rather, a breach is formed, wherein reality and representation both fight for our gaze.

This shift from image to reality is achieved through an intentional discrediting of the image and the rise of the material presence of the work, and the antidote to the continuously renewed advent of the Foucauldian generalised disciplinary society. These works are models of disobedience: as did Schwitters' assemblages, they lie in the Dada heritage, in their praise of foolishness. But Kiaer moves the subject away from the social structure of the individual towards society. Unlike the works of Tatlin or Malevich, no new worlds are created, and in their place are the bombastic yet delicate traces of dreams that failed to reach completion or that have remained in their impulse state. These traces are pathetic but ultimately sympathetic. All are Warburgian remnants of ancient beliefs, figures of euphoria and failure.

Kiaer's works form dwelling places, where viewers seem to be dismembered, opened up by the shape of the work that follows them in their movements, and perhaps even in their thoughts. Their presence lingers as a thought that could not be cast aside.

Their being stems from the fact that they too appear to be looking at us from within. They are both the extended body of the artist and his gaze: they all stare at the viewer, at the exhibition or museum visitor, with playful insistence, as if to play hide-and-seek with their own appearance. The political belief acts like acid: spectators are left only with their bones. Bonnard's *Nude in the Bath* is a similar sarcophagus, in which one takes in light, and with it that sudden self-conscious jolt of knowledge of one's being-in-the-world. Because, ultimately, this is what Kiaer's work is about. He makes us experience the presence of death in existence, and the presence of life in what no longer exists – and this is the very foundation of the aesthetic experience.