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ART

Artist Maria Bang Espersen's Latest Work Explores Inequality in the Danish Welfare State



Western Denmark-reared artist and Glassell CORE artist-in-residence, Maria Bang Espersen, who has new work currently being exhibited at the Glassell's 2019 Core Exhibition, focuses her work on the overlooked and harmful effects the Danish welfare state has on beneficiaries who are non-native to Denmark, people who are not a part of its native culture's hegemony. Her works currently focus on the way Denmark mismanages its welfare-state benefits when it comes to dispensing them to non-native Danish, the nation's "ghetto plan," and the resulting erasure of factual histories.

The perception of Denmark from the outside is that it is a social utopia, a place where all members of society receive identical benefits from the government. Espersen's work resists that oversimplified notion and questions, through unidentified interviewees, if Denmark's social infrastructure provides as graciously as it presents itself to. It's a statistical fact that non-native born Danes and their offspring often receive disparate treatment when it comes to the benefits, education, accessibility, and civil rights dished out to them by the Nordic welfare state.

Through her sculptures, ceramics, and repurposed pottery, Espersen corrodes nationalistic histories back to their true root. Her research, exemplified in bodies of work in her National Costume series, has proven that many tales of nationalism were falsely built and falsely idolized. This work aids to her current body as it inspects orders of power that grow from novelized histories. Overlooking our actualizations, social



With an undergraduate study at The Royal Danish Academy focusing on glass sculptures, followed by a graduate program at the California Institute of the Arts, the artist has always dug her way into a world of physical presence. And in the Core program, she has arrived to work in a multi-media dimension of architectural landscaping. Some of Espersen's early works look like meticulously layered taffy and half-breaths blown into fossilized bubbles. It's drastically different, but befitting to her other works sitting atop tabletops. Her other sculptures look like archaeologists ripped ceramic plates from reddened earth in a 1984-esque alternate reality, crumbled rebranded truths from an age of disfiguring nationalism.

Espersen's sparingly decorated studio, which sports a decidedly Danish feel, is piled high with ceramics in the shape of garden gnomes, plates, doll houses and cups. In one corner, there's an earthenware dollhouse that looks like it's sided in sandpaper. The roughness from the house, however, comes more from the crashed UFO-looking ceramic plates loaded into each face of the house than from its sandpaper-recalling texture. The cracks ripping up the bottom of the house recall the historical fabrications perpetrated by nationalism.

Espersen's current work is refined without being minimal, and it does not distract the viewer with unnecessary ornateness. The artist analyzes her materials by origin, and she adapts them to inspire their new histories.



sculpture background into play by building out the wooden boxes the screens are mounted in. She mentioned that, even in a mixed-media approach, she was still a sculpture, alluding to the panels encasing the screens.

The piece, “When you’re in the middle of,” showcases the stratifying effects caused by the ways Danish socio-politics provoke and marginalize the “other,” or non-ethnic Danish. The montage is filmed in five different locations in Denmark and showcases exclusionary social housing, presenting it as government-ordained ghettos.

The artist hopes the piece will bring awareness to the close-to-her-heart issue. In my studio visit with her, the artist discussed the difficulty people face when they move to Denmark and the hurdles that non-westerners, or non-ethnic Danish people, have jump through, a triathlon of sorts, just to receive their promised benefits. Espersen proposes to viewers of her art that there can be a united resolution for Denmark’s current socio-economic problems, one that can only be achieved if one is aware of the problem. Her belief translates universally — that lawmakers and people in positions of power are responsible for how life is divided and promulgated, and that there must be a careful and truthful depiction of our shared histories through the propaganda and language we pen, as they contribute to defining the history that affects our future.

Espersen’s work, along with other Core artists, will be on view at The 2019 Core Exhibition at Glassell from March 21 to April 25.





By Aubrey F. Burghardt

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