

The Logic of Sentiment

By Justin Novak

In “The Mediation of Ornament,” Oleg Grabar suggests that we consider the motifs and patterns of the decorative arts to be “intermediaries.” They may seem to serve merely as embellishment, but he likens them to “catalytic agents, or code carriers in genetics or biology.” If this is true, then Marianne Nielsen is engaged in some genre of cryptology. Her work invariably displays a savvy manipulation of coded vocabularies of form, and a talent for magnifying the slippage between a symbol and its traditional meaning.

Over the years, traditional ornamentation has in various ways been appropriated, distilled, deconstructed and subverted by contemporary artists. Yet none of these strategies aptly describe Nielsen’s methodology. She deftly identifies constituent details and tactics of decorative arts traditions and methodically isolates them in order to study their semiological DNA. The aesthetic conventions are scrutinized, but the evidence is inconclusive. Nielsen’s creations are purposefully enigmatic, and therein lay their strength.

The miniaturization of nature has long been a prevalent strategy in the decorative arts, and Nielsen pushes it to an extreme with her “Mountains.” This series consists of objects that could fit comfortably within the confines of a kitchen windowsill, and it brings to mind Susan Stewart’s observation that the miniature “presents a diminutive and thereby manipulatable version of experience, a version which is domesticated and protected from contamination.” Nielsen’s mountains do not appear as a continuous landscape, but rather as separate modules. Each form in the series is distinct, but the variations amongst them hover uncannily between visual memory and Jungian archetype. Geological formations blur into stylistic conventions, which in turn blur into nostalgic associations. The idiomatic variations and the dramatic shift in scale coalesce into a pleasurably disorienting artifice, which is only accentuated by the Fiestaware palette of colors.

If there is something telling about the tradition of stylizing, revamping and tidying up of organic forms until they’re dutifully aligned and unwaveringly uniform, then there is added significance in their translation into ceramic materials. We take for granted the time-honored custom of coating representations of flora, fauna and human tissue in a vitreous glaze, which is primarily hygienic in function. But surely there is an intriguing psychology at work in this impulse to replace the porous nature of human tissue with an impenetrable veneer.

In “Hair,” a recent series of wall pieces, Nielsen confronts you with a relief of the back of someone’s head where you might have expected to find their face, and the resulting effect is not unlike that of Renee Magritte’s “La Reproduction Interdit.” The reduction of a figure to the mere suggestion of hair certainly adds to the disconcerting impact of the piece, but its poetic resonance hinges on the impossible suspension of sensory logic that underlies the translation of tenuous strands of hair into solid mass. This is of course a convention that is commonplace in the realm of figurative sculpture, but stripped of narrative context, Nielsen frees the object of status judgments. One might imagine the hair to have been sampled from a Renaissance altarpiece by Andrea Della Robbia, but it could just as easily evoke a Lladro figurine from a contemporary bridal shop.

One might be predisposed to read Nielsen’s objects as dry dissections of ornamental formulas, but a purely intellectual digestion of the work is inevitably pulled off course by its aesthetic allure. Artists are often inclined to mock or exploit the quaintness of Nielsen’s subject matter. It is the realm of country homes and second hand shops, and it is a language that we think we know all too well. But Nielsen tugs at the interwoven threads that make up this mundane artifice, and she unravels them. She exposes their operative nuances, and then she dares us to decipher them. What we discover in the process is that the vernacular of sentimental objects has always been infinitely more complex than credited.