

## Helene CALLESEN

DEATH stands above me, whispering low

I know not what into my ear;

Of his strange language all I know

Is, there is not a word of fear.

Walter Savage LANDOR (1775–1864) (1)

The English poet Walter Savage Landor speaks about a language that is lacking a word. Yes, despite this absence, the poet hears low whispers. This capacity to listen to one's intuition characterizes Helene Callesen oeuvre, which whispers and pulses CLAY. Callesen is passionate about the innate characteristics of clay. She finds and excavates the clay she uses, and has been on several study trips to investigate different clay cultures – both historic and contemporary. The artist uses this material in many unique ways – as a sculptural material, drawing and painting medium. In her work, this material appears to emanate life, as it drifts, heaves, and sweats with vitality.

### Clay on Paper

The bulk of Callesen's works on paper feature earthy hues, although the artist occasionally adds 'synthetic' highlights. While highly refined and delicate, these drawings maintain a robust anchoring in geological forms. Callesen notes:

Clay is not just clay. There is no end to the different types of clay. The chemical parts of clay are different. Clay bodies also differ because of their histories, depending on the way they have been treated, naturally and culturally.(2)

Over the past three years, she has developed a variety of processes of applying clay onto paper, which coaxes out 'small gifts' provided by nature – glittery flecks, ochre, or another element. The artist acknowledges the agency of clay and explains,

In my work I have a curiosity for finding and using the expressions that is found in a certain types of clay. I take a step backwards and let the clay surprise me with the expressions that that comes from my different kinds of treatment. (3)

### Sculpture

Helene Callesen's sculptural works explore questions of origins and the human condition. She often deals with dialectical themes – light and darkness, heaven and earth, body and spirit, life and death. Her research is anchored within European art history, particularly Nordic visual culture, which from the early 1900s adopted a secular, existentialist approach to art, frequently bordering the tormented. Her various membranes – full and sweaty; empty and ghostly; evoke the life cycles of man and nature; of birth, death and, most importantly, regeneration.

Wendy Gers, 2016

1 Landor, W. S. Cited in English Poetry II: From Collins to Fitzgerald. Vol. XLI. The Harvard Classics. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14.

2,3 Callesen, Nikolaj. 2015. About the Work of Helene Callesen. Unpublished Text. 28 September. 3 Ibid.