

N O R W A Y

A N N E B R I T T Y L V I S K Å K E R

The pulsating whirlpool of life

Buon Natale, Pompeian Tentions,
2002/2003, H approx. 100 cm,
Valentines Royale Porzellan

As we enter the spacious exhibition room our eyes seek rest – instead of which they are confronted with an enormous challenge. No matter where we look, pieces of work clamour for our attention. It takes us time to get used to this welter of different impressions. Individual groups of work stand opposite each other in an apparent chaos. One of them stands in the middle, on the floor of the large room, grouped around a low central figure. The figures are so close together that it is almost impossible to distinguish one piece of work from another. Four pieces are situated on a low window sill; another four are to be found on the bench of a tiled stove, and through the open door we can see a large group arranged in a circle, also placed directly on the floor.

Figures by Helene Kortner

The figures of Norwegian artist Helene Kortner almost leap out into your face. They force themselves upon you, bursting with energy, twisting and noisy. Kortner creates visual attacks you simply cannot ignore. – We are in Porsgrunn, where she was born, in the Meissen of Norway. To be precise, we're in the Porsgrunn Porselen Fabrik which is celebrating its 120th anniversary with a dazzling array of exhibitions – and with a display of the work of 39 year-old Helene Kortner.

Buon Natale, Pompeian Tentions,
2002/2003, H 100 cm,
Valentines Royale Porzellan





The Sunset Polonaise, 2004, H 100 cm, Valentines Royale Porzellan

Then the figures start to come alive: like flowers in baroque pots, succulent expressive figures from sumptuous bases – difficult to interpret. Other items seem familiar, almost endearing to start with: such as an embryo, a large pair of eyes, a smiling mouth, a puffed-up skirt, small stubby hands with spread fingers – and then suddenly the picture fades away and changes completely. It becomes a theatrical mask and sea-horses that are looking at each other; it becomes gently waving sea-grass, corals and pearls – and also empty, bloody eye-sockets, cheeks streaming with tears, mouths opening and screaming without making a sound. "Il Penziona Senza Nome" is the title Helene Kortner has given to this exhibition. A title that immediately transports us to an entirely different location, to a setting that reminds us of southern temperatures and different characters, of shouting, pulsating life and wild laughter, of harmless flirting, of roaring jealousy. We feel drawn into an enormous drama and we are unsure if we are witnessing a comedy or a tragedy. The figures play with each other and against each other, like actors on a stage – but what role do we

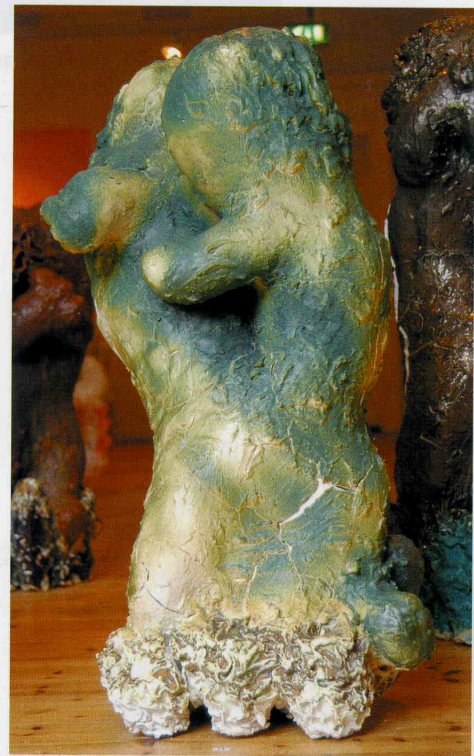
play? Are we co-actors, or are we the audience? Are we involved, or are we outsiders? – Or are we all these things together at the same time? –

Until now I have avoided using the word "sculpture", the reason being that Helene Kortner herself uses the term "figure" or "figurine" to describe her pieces – another word for the figurative bric-a-brac we collect in our own homes. Neither does Kortner talk of "installation", preferring to use the word "formation" instead, considering it to be more open and allowing things to grow, to re-form themselves, to re-assemble. – Sculpture and installation, that would be far too pretentious and restricting for Helene Kortner. Besides, it isn't the world of art which inspires her most of all. Nor is it the exclusive collections of Meissen, Staffordshire or Porsgrunn. Instead, she loves cheap kitsch, sparkling souvenirs, mass-produced items of bad taste that you will never find in a museum or an antiques shop.

Helene Kortner isn't the only artist to be attracted by everyday junk. During their training Irene Nordli and John Roger Holte also shared this predilection. If we look over-



Isola Dei Fiori, 2004, H 25-100 cm, Valentines Terracotta



Healed Anger (Tarantella), 2005, H approx. 100 cm, Valentines Royale Porzellan



Golden Glow and Blind Companions (The Sunset Polonaise), 2004/2005, H 100 cm, Valentines Royale Porzellan



Blind Companions with a Guardian Angel (The Sunset Polonaise), 2004/2005, H 100 cm, Valentines Royale Porzellan



Gelati (Il Penziona Senza Nome), 2005, H 50 cm, Valentines Royale Porzellan

seas, then of course the name Jeff Koons automatically comes to mind. They are all somewhat similar to Helene Kortner. Just like Koons, she enlarges the bric-a-brac so that it is impossible not to notice it, as it foists itself upon us. On the other hand, Irene Nordli remains faithful to the original formats, although she does join the details together – for example, in "Misfits" – so that peculiar monstrosities are born out of safe, familiar things, not exactly unlike what we find when we look at Helene Kortner's work. Yet both Nordli and Koons make use of irony. Kortner, however, describes her figures as "banal" and would never apply irony to them. As with the work of John Roger Holte, her pieces are immediate, without any filter, and appeal to all the senses. This is the sign of a naïve and honest pleasure typical of a new generation of artists who are not bored with life or who surround themselves with irony by way of protection.

Nordli, Koons and Holt use the formal language of kitsch, with a smooth, glossy, fine finish. Yet Kortner's expression is far from pretty or ornamental. Rather, it is rough and brutal, verging on the vulgar. She plays with contrasts and uses a wide range of means of expression to entice us into her world. The figures vary in size. Gentle surfaces stand alongside ornaments marked by deep relief structures; precisely demarcated areas of colour stand cheek by jowl with dripping, bleeding glazes; monochrome figures are placed next to multicoloured work, and dark features are placed next to light and very brightly coloured items.

Her new pieces are made entirely in porcelain, constructed painstakingly and according to the rules of tradition, formed slowly by her hands. Only then does she really start to explore the material. The artist does everything the textbooks tell us not to. For instance, she constructs pieces that are abnormally tall and inflicts cracks on them by

working with a blow lamp. The acquired theory of porcelain is tossed aside and challenged.

Let's cast our minds back nine years: after she had completed her studies in 1995 Helene Kortner took part in an exhibition at Bergen academy of art. It was possible to walk around classical white vases placed on the floor, pretty creations standing on a highly polished metal disc. The walls of the vessels were thick, portly, yet at the same time greatly varying in form and with handles on each side. They were unglazed and had a stoneware core on which porcelain slick was applied and thoroughly "massaged" into the surface. The surfaces were delicate and vibrant. – What has happened to Kortner in the intervening nine years?

At first sight it appears she has gone from one extreme to the other, from the timeless classic to the almost manic baroque. Yet on closer inspection similarities become evident. The vases of 1995 are – just like the new figurines – placed opposite each other, as though in mutual dialogue; energy and dynamism evolve out of this juxtaposition – which would not be the case if the pieces stood alone. In both, the past plays an important part, this feeling that the work has been existence for a long while, of being both old and new at the same time.

The main difference as I see it lies in the way the interior and exterior are shown, in the way the things are enshrouded or laid bare. Helene Kortner has long been interested in marine archaeology. She is fascinated by the way a form changes in water, how it slowly "grows", thus creating a new expression. It is as though a thing is "dressed", and the concrete element becomes a core concealed from view – yet it is still there! Similarly, a smooth, neutral external surface is quite capable of concealing pulsating life within. Helene Kortner says her vases "need



Il Penziona Senza Nome (view inside the exhibition), 2005, H approx. 30-50 cm, Valentines Royale Porzellan

to breathe", that they are personalities, just like living creatures. It isn't difficult to find a body and soul within them, a living face, a challenge. Helene Kortner has started to mix old and new projects and to show them conjointly. She would like to do this even more and to create a kind of mixture of forms where all her work comes together. It would be easy to imagine this as a plain, straightforward summary, with the development having come full circle. However, this would be a quite erroneous conclusion. Instead of comparing Kortner's development to an animal that has managed to catch its own tail, it resembles much more closely a spiral: the spiral touches her starting point and draws her into a new, whirling stage of life.

Photographs: Helene Kortner, Thomas Tveter, David Wien

About the author:

Anne Britt Ylviskäker is an art historian. Since 1996 she has been the chief custodian of Vestlandske Kunstindustrimuseum in Bergen. Among other things, she was director of the research and exhibition project "Spotlight on Bergen – ceramics from 1950-2000".