



WorkingCraft Hero, 2012 Photo - Henrik Gowers Lindal

Nils Erichsen Martin

"Scientific formula" fosters unique, figurative ceramics open to interpretation

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SteelMen2, 2003 photo - Glenn Hagbru



Nils Erichsen Martin isn't one to shy away from a clear message, but his work differs somewhat from his words if one takes his artist statement describing his early training in classical art into consideration.

In regards to childhood artistic activities, he states he "felt equally competent doing either" drawings, paintings or sculpture.

The prodigy child that these words frame wasn't one to linger within the comfort zone of familiar art formats. As student in the late 1980s at the department of ceramics at the National Academy of Craft and Art Industry in the capital of Norway, he ventured beyond the figurative and connected with clay. And in so doing, he says of himself to have "found my niche and I have been using this formula ever since", which the clear-cut formulation of how his artist statement reads.

The formula used throughout the years since his graduation has been one where he combines wall-hung reliefs with drawing and two-dimensional imagery and a knack for optical distortions. These he himself refers to as "cubist drawings".

The silhouettes of the reliefs themselves are abstract figurations, or "images synthesized", as Martin puts it. His way with abstraction of the human figure is a particular feature of the so-called formula and present in all his work, be it the raised reliefs or the two dimensional drawings.

The latest development of his formula entails moving from raised figures in the reliefs to free standing pieces whilst keeping the distinctiveness of these "synthetic" figures. They somehow



CrankTop1, 2019 *photo - Andrew Barton*



CrankTop4, 2019 photo Andrew Barton

hint at modernist paintings of a Fernand Léger, whose work from the early 20th century was both colourful and brash for that time.

The forcefully polychrome is a key feature of Martin's works also, and they make for a vivid object on any wall. Yet these pieces rarely come across as loudmouthed and attention-seeking. Rather they demand closer inspection before giving away much of what they have to offer in terms of statements. Martin has a polymath's take on imagery, and the complexity with which they are composed is one reason for their seeming reclusiveness. Average image consumption nowadays isn't about complex, abstract cubist drawings rendered three-dimensional before it is superimposed layer upon layer! So – either way you may look at them, these works do not easily give themselves over – not even to a scrutinizing gaze. Add to this that the sources from which Nils E. Martin collects motifs and draws inspiration are somewhat cloistered realms of contemporary society. A lot of his ideas stem from encounters with dubious internet forums and social media platforms and other areas of the internet that the average public in art galleries is unaware of, or otherwise would be uncomfortable with.

With YouTube's rise to fame and the new role of its video

channels to hatch global celebrities, Martin, together with his teenaged daughter, spent hours watching a reality show. This self-conscious binge watching was first filed as a guilty pleasure. Yet instead of switching off the show, he brought with him to his studio its two main characters: grown men whose popularity stemmed from crisscrossing the world and venturing out in the wilderness bereft of any modern comfort. The quintessentially macho man from a bygone era was thus set against the digitized virtual entertainment culture of today, and Martin's formula was put to work on this dichotomy. Yet his works are a far cry from the ways of these self-styled "machos". Rather, with their high level of perfection, the wall pieces of Martin display a kind of delicacy and attention that reflects another tradition of ceramics than that of some household names, like Peter Volkous and his likes. This painstaking attention given to execution both of details and of the overall composition also lends his works an aura of industrial flawlessness – and for some perhaps even a degree of impersonality. But if so, it is only on the surface of things.

During the span of his career of some 20 odd years, Martin has dug into his past and youth and the then sub-urban culture

of a new street style expressed in fashion and music, and in skating – clad, as often as not, in the all-penetrating irony of the 1990s. That kind of irony and self-irony is testament in his works until today, but it is here nevertheless also a lived story being told. It is his own life being researched alongside subcultures of today. The artistic statements also speculated in a way of seeing the world through the art: "I see myself as a scientist, researching into the different aspects of how to perceive form."

His latest work is called Crank top, and consists of four free-standing figures. The pieces are built with a chamotte clay of pink hues, readily associated with light skin colours. Crank is the name of this clay, which is of English origin. It has very little shrinkage and is well suited for sculpture, especially for those that care for the minute details and strive for surface perfection so as to make use of it as a canvas or drawing paper.

"Crank" has many and varied meanings today. It originates of course from old Germanic, with the sense of weak or sick, and it was used about epilepsy. Today nevertheless it is often used also in the sense of an eccentric person with a zealot character, or an outright misanthrope. According to modern etymology it also designates amphetamine. The word is frequent also in ceramic culture and industries. Here it carries such a wide range of meanings that presumably the viewers' perceptions when looking at these pieces become altogether incalculable.

The works are festive to the eye and immaculately executed and a pleasure to contemplate, so one needn't necessarily analyse them to any such point though. But I dare say that they make for an unusual pleasure, particularly in the field of ceramics. The perhaps most alluring element of Martin's universe, or say his formula, is that there's always room for a quick retreat from any one interpretation, since the works most are so often cleverly permeated by this jocular quality of his.

Another important trait of the new Crank top figures, one also in line with his formula, is that they form a group. Martin thus introduces a logic of cartoon strips, and his whole oeuvre thereby signals an affinity with comic books – as the serial element is vital, and one he adopted early. Thus the individual works both repeat and contrast each other. The pieces read as part of a story, but they also somehow bask in their very own, peculiar, visual grammar, so to say. We sense them offering certain clues that would enable us to untangle their mysterious and quaint looks, if only we could untangle the baroque rebuses, or perhaps call out the prank? This perhaps is his scientific challenge to the settled notion of what is, say, drawing, ceramics, reliefs, painting or sculpture. And it is a challenge to whoever is looking.

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Nils Erichsen Martin (1969) holds a M.A. in Arts and Ceramics from Oslo National Academy of the Arts (or the Norwegian National Academy of Craft and Art Industry/ SHKS, in 1993). Since then his works have been purchased by various museums and other public collections in Norway, and he has had a total of seven solo gallery exhibitions. His taking part in group shows in and outside Norway counts close to 20 exhibitions, held world wide in ten different countries. He also has had several commissioned public works in Norway. Currently he is on a ten-year national grant for established artists, and several other grants and art prizes have come his way. His works combines detailed drawings that are made with oxide pencils on layers of porcelain that sit atop mould pressed stoneware reliefs. His latest works count also freestanding sculptures, albeit with his signature design of abstracted figures intact. For his latest work, a group of four pieces, he built with a clay body named Crank, a skin toned clay suitable for sculptural work and the precision in execution he never lets go of. His annual production counts on average some 4-6 pieces.

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Crank Top 2, 2019 photo - Andrew Barton



Dave Canterbury's Apology

photo - Jeppe Gudmundsen-Holmgreen Courtesy ClayMuseum

