

**Kitchen Stories — on Marthe Elise Stramrud**

**By Rhea Dall**

There's an unapologetic nearness in Norwegian artist Marthe Elise Stramrud's (b. 1984, Kristiansand) approach to making stone- and earthenware. A direct and joyful presence, as when working a dough. Knowing things through doing. Meeting the material, listening in, attending to it. It's a way of dealing with time. Not running after it. But being in it. With it.

Sociologist Richard Sennett's 2008 book *The Craftsman* essentially sketches out how, as he states in his foreword, "Making is thinking"—and what is lost in society when crafts disappear and the hand and head disconnect. While naming the "craftsman" could easily lead one to think from the perspective of the (male) laborer in the (wood or metal) workshop, in Stramrud's new ceramic works—centered on vessels or mugs glazed in bright colors—the focus is the kitchen. Looking at it from the outside it almost feels too evident: that this place is the ultimate workshop or studio. It is, after all, almost every party's epicenter. A place with a certain pull. A place where ideas are born. Stramrud's new series of stone- and earthenware are all made for this space, dedicated to it, celebrating it. The series is a love letter: making utensils for the laborer in this particular workshop, caring for him/her/they/them as they care for others.

Stacks of bowls, hooks for hanging the kitchen towels, stables of cups, make up her artworks. Assembled in groupings, the piles align the singular strokes on each item turning them into faces, eyes, ears—or paint the picture of a jar. As a puzzle, the works come alive when becoming a collective, two plus two makes five, forming a larger creature or image. Meanwhile the singular artworks are made to be put to use. They are foreseen in service of soups, salads, i.e., carrying other things. To be used (and enjoyed) IRL. In the kitchen. It's the avantgarde dream of making life and art meld together. At once an image (when stacked together) and a tool (when torn apart) these ceramic works create an ongoing rhythm of back and forth. Persistently connecting the zone of images and display with their real-world use. It's political. It's feminist.

And indeed, the kitchen is a place many a feminist artist has discussed. Starting from the 1980s and 1990s, the German heroine, Rosemarie Trockel, has continuously employed stove burners or hot plates in her image making. Looking from afar like a perfected abstract round shape on the wall, up close the visibly real hot plates reference the (female) workspace of the kitchen. They thus playfully parody minimal industrial artworks, such as the endless series of perfected boxes of Donald Judd, by pointing to the fact that most industries create things with a "function" that, in turn, reassert or facilitate our lives and their politics—the many hot plates, leading the mind to the kitchen (and it's presupposed female labor). In another iconic example of "kitchen works," the 1975 video piece *Semiotics from the Kitchen* by Martha Rosler, the grand dame of American feminist art caricatures the rules or semiotics of what a "traditional woman" should do and how to employ the kitchen.

There is no such mockery in Stramrud's work. Like in many feminist waves after Rosler, the work functions actively as an agent against any tiresome or lonesome systematic work. Its criticality lies in how it turns the kitchen space into the belly of the beast, the epicenter of our parties, the palace of fertility and fruitfulness, the place for (Bacchus') lush fete, the best place to be, and the place to

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work, not just a place for the hand but where the hand and head meet. Stramrud makes the kitchen a privileged space, and with this, its worker a privileged eye and mind. It is only the happy chef who will discover the full dancing glyphs and pictogram-like people populating the bottom of the bowls.

In the vivacious lightness of the colors and the naïve, almost unfinished clay shapes, Stramrud nods to peers like the recently deceased Betty Woodman. Through her yearlong labor with ceramics, Woodman created a whole theatre of the domestic, most of her artworks being somewhere between images and user items. Between flatness and depth. Coming from photography, these are questions deeply embedded in Stramrud's work. As are also the generative concept of "developing" an image. As the analogue dark chamber moves the image from negative to positive, the kiln develops the colors and textures of the ceramic glaze, depending on resembling features such as chemic mixtures and time, as well as the (specific) temperatures. This is a process always including a certain element of chance. Firing is always out of control. Seemingly equally unruly, dancing across the vessels, motifs of stenciled flowers, legs, eyes, red lips, stripes, and trees make up narratives in all directions. Stramrud's works can be read horizontally, left to right, on either bowl, when assembled across the cups or jars, upwards, downwards, and on the innards of the objects. Using a white base of porcelain slip, on which the strokes of water-drenched raw pigment become almost airy, watercolor-like in texture, she defies the often-dark undertone of the fired clay. Each object is a playful staging of a narrative, a place for a new trial, an impromptu sketch, a surface for immediacy and humor.

It's also a piece for passing on. Each of her recent clay works can do something, support someone outside itself. In this sense, these works are generous creatures. Little warm beings. Little helpers. They aid you. Or aid them/him/her. Unlike much artwork, they are made with the world in mind. This generosity also applies to their process of making. If many a ceramicist works with her/his/their mixture of clay and glazing as if it was alchemy—birthed via secret manuscripts and rituals—Stramrud's witchcraft is open source. It is undisclosed. Her book of recipes is for everyone to see. Every new clay piece gets a new number, with a description of its process. Her more than 800 ceramic items (and counting) make visible the ceaseless artistic work—the many hours of labor, often invisible in a conceptual practice—that manifests itself in the swirling number of items, most of them made to be held and to hold other things, to cross-pollinate, to give more than you can take. The "how to" is part of the work, neither hidden nor something individually owned. The molding hand is part of the piece. Whether clunky stencils, fingerprints, sgraffito, or raw brush-strokes, these traces tell us about the making. Not perfection. But process. As if an ecological drive to use "everything," the small, ceramic hooks or hangers for kitchen towels were literally glazed by the end of the day with leftover slip still on the brushes—the "drying-off" deciding the abstract coloring on these tiny objects. Every little piece is part of a chain of development, a family tree or a growing cartel of polyamorous and seductive sprouts.