

Sculpture Magazine

Mai/juin 2021, par Joyce Beckenstein



Fragments of Interest:

A Conversation with Marion Verboom

by Joyce Beckenstein

Complexly layered in thought and process, Marion Verboom's works inhale cultural histories in order to exhale new-era imagery. By turns minimal, architectural, organic, and ornamental, her forms shape contemporary time into a fresh visual alphabet and run it A to Z through mythic narratives—from Aztec gods to the progeny of Zeus. Using materials and methods as archaically authentic as they are technologically experimental, Verboom deftly molds, casts, and hand-finishes clay, bronze, plaster, resin, and acetate until media and meaning become inseparable.

Goudea,
2012.
Ceramic,
40 x 40 x 40 cm.

Galerie Lelong



NICOLAS BRASSEUR, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE PULP

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marion verboom



THIS PAGE:
Clairevoie,
2018.
Acetate and plaster,
190 x 130 x 20 cm.

OPPOSITE:
Axe,
2018.
Acetate and brass wire,
100 x 90 x 10 cm.

Joyce Beckenstein: Your works are extraordinarily layered. How did they evolve?

Marion Verboom: In the beginning, my sculptures were very heterogenous. They dealt with architecture, Minimalism, geology, and archaeology. I was experimenting, but I wasn't well informed about many of the materials that I was using—everything from steel to transparent resin. Although some good sculptures came out of this experimental stage, the later works represent the gestation of much research, struggle, and informed experimentation. So, my work did not evolve in terms of process in a linear way. Later, one idea did lead to another.

JB: Could you talk about that?

MV: For *Charte* (2012), for instance, I wanted to represent the crenellated surface of a seashell and

how it mirrors the motion of water. I made shell forms from layers of clay and arranged them on top of each other, shaping them into wave-like designs. When I finished, I had a lot of left-over clay. Clay is a sediment, and I decided to use this extra material to create an architectural form replicating the interwoven structure of sediment. *Loess I* (2012), a series of clay pillars of differing heights, has such a geologically inspired pattern. Then I wondered if I could layer archaeological time into these geologically based forms. The resulting "Achronies" series (2016–ongoing) consists of columns made from a variety of natural and manufactured materials. They represent an amalgam of archaeological vocabularies, arranged as totems and steles recalling the evolution of human existence. These columns stack and can be rearranged in new sequences.

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THE RING: NICOLAS BRASSEUR, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE PULL: / OPPOSITE: NICOLAS BRASSEUR & ANTOINE VAN DER SCHULDE, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE PULL



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JB: Your work was recently featured in the group exhibition “Infinite Sculpture: From the Antique Cast to the 3D Scan.” How do you merge traditional processes with contemporary ways of working?

MV: My idea is to create a proteiform work, something expressive of the mutable, changing world surrounding us. It relates to a utopian idea that I learned about during a residency at De Ateliers in Amsterdam.

My project required me to constrain complexity and growth within a geometrical volume—a limitation that encouraged me to concentrate on how evolving forms emerge, as well as on how material and imagery grow and develop a new language of forms. Casting allows such permutations and encourages different elements to coexist, and I have created a whole collection of plaster casts. From them, I’ve made proof castings with tinted plaster, resin, and cement. I like to use plaster or resins because they enable me to coax varied layers of mass and color to interact in ways that change the substance of the material. For example, the color and wood effect in *Cornucopia* (2016) is created through a combination of acrylic resin and rusting iron powder. I used the same combination in the “Achronies” series.

JB: What made you favor acetate? Not many artists work with it.

MV: You’re right. Acetate is seldom used to make art, but it is one of my favorite materials because it is strong and transparent. It’s a bioplastic made of cellulose, mostly used as a substitute for tortoiseshell, ivory, and bone in eyeglasses, umbrella handles, and hair clips. It’s expensive, and the commercial goods made from it don’t hold up all that well over time. I discovered how to work with it during a six-month residency at LVMH Institut des Métiers d’Excellence in Italy, where the company Thélios manufactures designer sunglasses. I was surprised when they invited me to experiment with it and welcomed the opportunity to bend in a new direction.

Acetate is a wonderfully disruptive material. You

can melt it in acetone and then cast it or pour it over a structure. You can achieve a variety of transparencies, from opaque to translucent or matte, and the range of possible colors allows you to imitate natural pigments and combine them with manufactured tones. *Imago II* (2018), *Boca* (2018), and *Clairevoie* (2018) show the range of possibilities that I discovered. They are particularly apparent in *Gufu* (2018), which combines acetate with ceramic, plaster, brass, and glazes. This juxtaposition of materials allows me to play with light and color, combine textures, and merge contemporary and ancient processes that are beautiful in their blended effects and mysterious in their echoing of cultural histories.

JB: Just as you layer materials and processes, you also layer genres, from architecture to sculpture and painting. Architectural forms play an important role in much of your work. Did you start out wanting to be an architect?

MV: I was born in Pays de la Loire, France, surrounded by castles and churches. Since childhood, I have been fascinated by their strong, mysterious, and muscular volumes. I went to a variety of schools after deciding to study art, including the École des Beaux-Arts de Paris, Bauhaus University in Weimar, and Hunter College in New York. I believe that architecture is the most accessible art form because it challenges time and destruction—architectural elements are often all that is left of an extinct civilization—but I have the spirit of an artist, not an architect. I need solitude and enjoy being in my studio. In determining my creative path, I did not want functionality, laws, or scale to constrain me. Ten years ago, I began my sculptural practice by drawing and mapping. I hung large sheets of paper on the wall and mapped out geometrical forms—fun, non-functional virtual spaces based on the works of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux and Jean Jacques Lequeu, neoclassical “visionary architects” who imagined fictional constructions. I’ve also been interested in the exuberant effects of *rocaille*, an ornamental technique of the Rococo era

Loess I,
2012.
Ceramic, 7 columns,
70–180 cm. high.

■ marion verboom



THIS PAGE:
Installation view of
"Gesh," The Pill
Gallery, Istanbul, 2016.

OPPOSITE:
Extrait,
2013.
Tinted plaster,
80 x 80 x 5 cm.

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that inspired much French folk architecture. It influenced my architectural "fantasy" installation *Cartouche* (2013), which I constructed from mortar and steel deep in the forest in Meuse.

JB: How did these visionary influences lead you to sculpture?

MV: When I start to think about a sculpture, I begin with the geometric foundations of architecture. This becomes the canvas for my organic and imaginative forms. *Cornucopia*, for example, began with a horizontal wooden beam spanning two adjacent walls. I covered the beam with a sculpted decorative motif, a profusion of luscious fruits. In *Le Métamorphe* (2017), the architectural "beam" exists as negative space between a net-like expanse of ephemeral materials, such as raffia, clay, and cardboard. This rendition reinvents the solid beam as a vulnerable form. For *La Nouée* (2014), I used the same technique that I used for *Cartouche*, but here, instead of serving as a frame for the landscape, the architectural form is dominated by sculptural vegetation and human figures.

JB: Your layering of geologically inspired elements and natural forms often includes references to human anatomy. *Mondmilchs* (2012), for example, consists of imposing columns that suggest anthropomorphic limbs dripping organic matter. Could you explain the thinking behind some of these works?

MV: *Mondmilch* means "moonmilk" in German. Moonmilk is a soft speleothem (a stalagmite formed by minerals contained in the water dripping inside caves). Though the *Mondmilchs* are strong monumental sculptures, they were inspired by the organic movement of water and how it plays with the elegant forms of an 18th-century Rococo fountain that I've always admired in Paris, on Rue de L'arbre Sec next to Chatelet. Anthropomorphism wasn't my initial intention. I specifically wanted to represent a sequence of dripping motions to replicate the phenomenon of a speleothem inside a cave. To do so, I replaced delicate Rococo materials with the tough industrial products used to install roof tiles—a mixture of linen oil with polystyrene and fibers. When I installed the series in "Agger," a 2012 exhibition at 40mcube in Rennes,

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■ marion verboom

Installation view of
"Ester," Galerie Jérôme
Poggi, Paris, 2018.

I thought it looked very cartoonish, almost Pop. It always surprises—and thrills—me when viewers bring other perceptions to my work.

Alternatively, anthropomorphic elements, such as hand shapes, can be deliberate features in my work. *Goudea* (2012) is based on a figure of the Mesopotamian King Gudea (c. 2144–2124 BCE) in the Louvre. The great builder of civilization holds his hands clasped in a physically impossible position, suggesting a cube. My challenge was to open those squared hands and geometrically rethink their shapes. The resulting sculpture is made from two ceramic fragments that can easily be detached and reassembled to form a cube.

JB: For *Gufo*, you set a small gilded owl into a niche within an intricately textured column. When did you begin to incorporate mythical narratives into your work? What others have you used?

MV: When I was doing my residency in the Dolomites, my studio faced a sumptuous mountain landscape. There I was, a Paris-based artist immersed in nature for the first time; *Gufo* came from hours spent contemplating large panels of rock formations, gazing at the "hidden animals" that I imagined to be carved within them. It arose naturally from this meditation because it also recalls carvings of birds in Roman Catholic churches. *Noeud* (2018) represents a very simple knot believed by the 19th-century scientist Peter Tait to describe the atom as it evolves in the ether. I liked the idea of representing cosmogony. This work unites zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, and architectural elements in a single, looping ceramic form. My latest elevation sculpture, *Tectonie* (2019), embraces Zeus mythology and features an *omphalos*, a symbol for the navel of the world. The funnel shape included in this assemblage was inspired by an Etruscan artifact representing the uterus, a symbol of fertility. It resonates with the *omphalos* in an interesting way and gives a strange balance.

JB: Even stranger bedfellows inhabit *Spaltung* (2018), where Giotto meets an Aztec fertility god. How did you manage that?

MV: I've been fascinated with Giotto ever since I first saw his frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, with their courageous interpretation of perspective and placement







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of human figures against backgrounds of mountains, trees, and cities, all translated at the same scale. *Spaltung* represents another way I found to layer material and myth. It was specifically inspired by Giotto's *Jonah and the Whale* and by an ancient mask of the Aztec god of fertility, Xipe Totec. Priests paid respect to him by dressing in the skin of sacrificed humans. Masks convey many levels of physical and psychological texture and meaning—they explore personal and ancestral identity, the inner and outer self, truth and lies, our mythic and contemporary beliefs, life and death.

JB: Who among more modern artists has influenced you?

MV: Giovanni Anselmo was the first. When I was 17, I had to do a talk about *Untitled (Sculpture That Eats)* (1968), which consists of a piece of rotting lettuce inside a geometric boulder. I was impressed by this strange but honest use of materials. It's an almost disruptive combination, and taken together with the title, it brings the work to life as tragicomic Shakespearean theater. I

had hoped to enroll in a class taught by Robert Morris when I attended Hunter College in 2007, but it was filled. I was amazed that the space around his volumes was more important than the volumes themselves. His works reminded me of a city where the circulation of air and negative space define the built environment.

JB: Your seamless and intuitive merger of cultural, historical, and geological data; your shift between formal and narrative elements; your mixing and (re) matching segments of works, as in “Achronies,” makes me wonder: How much does this intellectual flexibility owe to your coming of age in a digital era? Does technology impact how you see the world and interpret it through your work?

MV: Navigating the Internet is a bit like pulling Ariadne's string through a labyrinth of the unexpected. It's a way to get immediate information and keep curiosity alive. I did much of my research for “Achronies”—a series that builds fragments of interest—by scrolling through Internet files. I discovered mysterious rocks, read about the lives of scientists, and found information about a hidden church in Italy that I will someday visit. But I finalized those studies by reading books or traveling on site in order to delve more deeply into details and avoid misinformation.

JB: What has your work with all these elements, from mortar to myth, taught you about humanity?

MV: I like to research the past because I learn how humanity has evolved: how people used agriculture, lived side by side with animals, built houses and communities. I've also pondered what went wrong, what we lost and what we gained. The world today looks unbalanced to me. I sense that we've lost the equal playing field we once shared with nature, and that is very scary. I hope in my work to choose some salvos from the past and spin them into a more hopeful future. I want to help find a more respectful way to be on this planet. I want to do this for my work, and I want to do this for future generations. ■

Marion Verboom's work is on view at le Carré, Centre d'Art Contemporain d'Intérêt National du Pays de Château Gontier, May 29–August 29, 2021.

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