

Naomi Tannhauser: Plastinography

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US-born (1956) artist Naomi Tannhauser's new works, all in Plasticine, look as though you could hold them, touch them with your finger-tips as though reading them with your eyes. What is it in these paintings (not sculptures) that fuse the senses of sight and touch, combining what the eye gathers and what the hand working the material creates? The answer lies perhaps in the actual substance, in Tannhauser's opting, surprisingly, to paint in Plasticine – a material that brings us back to childhood, a time when the different senses were closest, less separated by the outside adult world.

We've all been there of course, in our own childhood or in that of the children around, prodding, shaping the colorful sticky material with our fingers to our heart's content, creating and destroying on and on. And, like children, before we can identify the shapes and name them, Tannhauser's Plasticine-painted surfaces invite us first to a tactile, pre-comprehension experience. Perhaps unlike art works done in more "serious" materials, whose technical creation may be less obvious, the experience of looking at this artist's works arouses the familiar almost physical feeling of taking bits of Plasticine out of the wrapping, rolling them in our hands, our fingers forming them into shapes, sensing the smell and texture of that time. And just like with children Tannhauser gives many of her works names and titles: Sailing to Israel at five, Wooden glider on father's table, Lost spectacles suddenly found. Sometimes she even adds to her random subjects (seemingly random but in fact displaying recurring motives and a fabric of associations between the figures and objects) a short story, a kind of anecdote or bitter-sweet confession – whose biographical juxtaposition lends the works added authenticity, compelling in its simple sincerity.

It seems that the random eclectic variety that characterizes the artist's subjects, suggests that this is an endless series of creations, in which every detail of her life or that in her close vicinity could serve in its turn as a subject – from the most everyday household objects to portraits of friends and family. Tannhauser seems to be picking out pieces of her life and environment and painting them, first sketching, pencil on cardboard, then using Plasticine like a color study capturing the subject's essence without the need for further treatment which may impinge on the flow and primal vitality of the painting. By this approach which appears so naive and direct, the artist's choice of presenting her work and life in Plasticine – a childish, as-it-were amateur material – seems predictable. But a more penetrating look reveals it to be a layered and subversive work of art as far as her ostensibly naïve subjects are concerned. Indeed, despite their intimate-diaristic nature, a deeper reading of the span of themes and their accompanying texts shows how the artist also relates directly or otherwise both to the same discriminatory perspective of women artists and their artistic creation in the history of Western art. Thus the choice of Plasticine turns out to be a critical, in no way ingenuous one, tackling an age-old tradition of social and professional discrimination against women artists, a tradition that directed them to create art as a hobby for domestic and decorative purposes, employing simple materials.

Moreover, since the works here happen to be paintings, the artist's choice of Plasticine as her medium again turns out to be historically and technically very bold. Plasticine, of the type closest to what we are most familiar with, the invention of an English art teacher called Harbutt at the turn of the 19th century, was meant to serve as an educational aid safe for his sculpture students, certainly not for high art – certainly not for painting. Tannhauser however uses Plasticine quite flatly, as in classical two-dimensional painting (in which she has wide experience) and not for relief making nor for sculpting, in fact consciously defying the material's "natural" properties and contravening the three-dimensional representation for which it was intended. Thus these Plasticine paintings take shape in all their detail and figurative precision not as the innocent sequel to

working with the much-loved, colorful and malleable material we know from childhood, but as a technically sophisticated craft that broadens and challenges Plasticine's expressive potential.

Plasticine, as said, has but a short history, and works using it in an original way are still a rarity in contemporary art where, on the face of it, traditional criteria have been rejected and any material is legitimate. Take for instance Jeff Koons' monumental sculpture *Play-Doh* (1994–2004), or the giant Plasticine paintings by English artist Henry Hudson, after William Hogarth, critically exploiting Plasticine's "low" status as unprofessional, and challenging conventions and concepts that distinguish "low" aesthetics or kitsch from present-day postmodern "high" aesthetics .

In this regard an even more important Plasticine contemporary art work is the conceptual grey, greasy and condensed Plasticine ball *Yielding Stone* (1992) by Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco – which is meant to pick up litter and road imprints as it rolls down the street. Interestingly Orozco's work, while presenting itself as a monochromic conceptual agonized object (unlike the colorful works of Koons and Hudson) brings out Plasticine's vulnerabilities even more intensely, and is more akin to the works of Tannhauser.

Indeed, Plasticine and its treatment can stimulate physical sensations: its texture, its oiliness and the warmth it creates, its submission to kneading – all reminiscent of the human body, rendering it perfectly suited for works exploring the body at different ages and stages, a recurrent theme throughout Tannhauser's oeuvre (not only in Plasticine), in particular the aging of her own body. The pieces of Plasticine in some works become a kind of live skin composed of smooth or rough layers seeking the touch of a hand no less than the look of an eye; skin that represents the artist's own body's continuation; and like the body, Plasticine does not last forever. And because the material is also impermanent its adoption perhaps brings with it the most significant subversive layers of these works insofar as creativity and the story of art. Work in Plasticine endows Tannhauser's

paintings with a very real tactile dimension of intrinsic anticipated transience. This being so, the works cast doubt on how we conceive the act of creation as an expression suggesting the permanence and decisiveness of art. Tannhauser's Plasticine works remind us, while within "Herstory of Art ", that the importance and energy of the experience belong to the present, the moment of the image, in the here and now.