

LOVING THE ALIEN

on the glass art of Hanna Stahle

Friend or foe, trick or treat, dream or reality? In the work of Hanna Stahle, polar opposites blur into an obscure dream state, a surreal netherworld somewhere between the vaguely familiar and the perfectly unknown. In the *Pleased* series, a group of silver gloves appear from out of the wall, seemingly offering semi-transparent, glowing blobs to the spectator. With their three fingers, the hands hardly seem human at all; their load could be anything from an alien foetus to a valuable gift or some kind of toxic waste.

Do they come in peace? The reference to science fiction is obvious, but whether it is of the utopian or dystopian kind remains open. If Hanna Stahle were to actually make a movie, it would probably be set in a high-tech laboratory, a post-apocalyptic landscape or perhaps in a mechanical workshop. She is drawn to places that are devoid of people, she says, desolate, uninhabited, but still filled with meaning and traces of human activity.

Consequently, Hanna Stahle is not a big fan of art's white cube, but prefers to interact with her audience in a public space. She doesn't shy away from controversy; any kind of reaction will help her understand her own work better, she claims, and might push her in a different direction in the future. She has yet to work in set design, but nurtures an interest in architecture and has recently finished a large public commission of a silver cloud for a prison wall in Sala, Sweden, together with her husband Mårten Medbo.

Originally trained as a sculptor, Hanna Stahle works in the manner of a conceptual artist, preferring open-ended, associative work. She reserves the right to be unfaithful to any medium, working in ceramics as well as rubber, metal and video. She started experimenting with glass after seeing an installation by visual artist Kiki Smith in Stockholm's Moderna Museet in the early 90s and cites contemporary artists such as William Kentridge and Jane Alexander as sources of inspiration.

What fascinates her about glass is its organic quality, how gravity and centrifugal force influence the final result, and how chance is just as important a collaborator as the experienced glassblowers in the studio. No matter how much you prepare, she says, it never comes out quite the way you planned it. One thing that is constant, however, is the way glass reflects light – especially when coated with silver – and this is one of her main reasons for working in the material.

In the case of the gloved hands, the faint light from within the objects contribute to their other-worldly quality. As individual pieces, they embody a kind of helplessness; they seem fragile, lost in a hostile environment. As a group, however, they become somewhat threatening, the search party preceding some alien invasion. This kind of ambiguity lies at the heart of Hanna Stahle's artistic project; the objects form relationships with each other, narratives that can be rearranged and restructured in countless different ways – a rebus, as it were, without a fixed solution.

Bo Madstrand

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