

Interview with Mille Kalsmose

One day in November, while most of Denmark was going through the motions of yet another chaotic and partly unappetizing celebration of materialism, better known as “Black Friday”, what was simultaneously happening in the heart of Aarhus was an opening up to light minimalist elegance – at the vernissage of AroS museum’s new exhibition, “Cool, Calm and Collected”. The exhibition’s title stems from a Rolling Stones song, which revolves around being just like this – cool, tranquil and self-assured. Three descriptive words that concisely encapsulate the essence of Scandinavian aesthetics. “Cool, Calm and Collected” is a group exhibition built up around the top artists in Danish contemporary art right now.

The exhibition spreads itself out across the whole of AroS’s second story and as you move down from the museum’s distinctive white spiral staircase, the first thing your eye meets is a small mirror-like balloon created by Jeppe Hein. It's hanging so neatly and operating almost like a teaser for the exhibition you’re about to meet. Your sense of interest is stimulated, and you take the remaining steps at a somewhat quicker pace.

Then it’s standing there: *Tribe - my survival*, a three-part sculpture series by Mille Kalsmose. The work is standing there and exulting, almost as if it were aware that this is the guests’ first meeting with the exhibition. A mascot for Danish contemporary art – beautiful, elegant, deep and reflective.

Just a few days after my visit to AROs, Mille Kalsmose and I made an appointment to meet and talk about the exhibition, about what is happening in her life and about what perspectives for the future look like. In the e-mail correspondence leading up to our meeting, the time of the meeting was changed a couple of times, either because of *The Whitney-this* or *Art Basel Miami-that*, which only goes to show that Mille Kalsmose is not only a busy but also a sought-after lady. And when you are finished reading this article, you’ll understand why.

I have just pressed the doorbell to Mille Kalsmose’s beautiful home and studio in Hellerup when she pulls up into the driveway behind me. As she discloses, with a smile, that there are delicious supplies for our meeting in the trunk of her car, she exudes gusto and surplus energy – an energy,

a sense of humor, and a surplus that she manages to maintain throughout the course of the interview.

We sit down. We help ourselves to the refreshments. And then we start the interview as if it were a perfectly ordinary conversation – that’s evidently the way it pans out most naturally for both of us.

Tribe - my survival

Barbara Pollack, a freelance art writer and art critic for The New York Times, has previously described Mille Kalsmose’s work as something that can be understood and resonated on several levels and across different cultures. Pollack believes that Mille Kalsmose has found the perfect balance between the universal and the individual. Quite precisely, her sculpture series, *Tribe - my survival*, corroborates this in the very best way. That which was the start of the sculptures’s genesis was a discovery. Saying this with Mille Kalsmose’s own words, “she found gold”. What may very well have been old templates for parts of a leather bag’s pattern suddenly appeared before her one day in New York City while she was busy looking around for work materials. These templates later came to fashion the inspiration for the various silhouettes that constitute *Tribe - my survival*. At first glance, the templates caught her interest because they almost had a shape like a face. But the longer she ruminated over them, the more aspects there were that came to the surface. In the process itself, where the template presses down into the leather over and over again, in order to form identical indentations, Mille Kalsmose drew a parallel. On one level, the process could be seen as a family that propagates, with genes being passed on. But on a different and maybe deeper level, the process could be seen as a rebirth, as an existence that returns again and again. A copy that, nevertheless, sometimes falls to different sides. *Tribe - my survival* can be seen not only as a family but also as a timeline of existence.

Works created with a high degree of consciousness

At a tender age, Mille Kalsmose lost her mother to suicide. She explains that for a long time after this, she was gripped with a strong sense of missing something very much – she felt that she was alone. This feeling changed after the work with *Tribe - my survival* and after having had the finished piece standing in her home, inside a room, for a certain time; she no longer felt a sense of loneliness. I ask whether this might be so because her work with creating the piece can have

elicited a therapeutic effect. But that's not how Mille Kalsmose has experienced this. She has ascribed so much consciousness to the sculpture that, for her, it has thereby become as real as everything else. A human being is a vessel of consciousness and energies, just as the sculpture series, *Tribe - my survival*, surely is.

Mille Kalsmose's craft radiates minimalist beauty, thoroughness, and an eye for details. For her own part, she maintains that she has just as much a career in the non-physical as she has in the physical. Everything that Mille Kalsmose creates has been created with a strong spirituality, and this is something that can really be sensed.

Some years ago, she made a series of paintings that portrayed five women and five men, each of whom have an impact on her or who made some impact on her at that time. The portraits were supposed to be seen and understood as self-portraits – “*They see me. Therefore, I am. Their gazes make it so that I exist.*” At that time, she experienced that people had difficulty following her thoughts. But through installation art, her world of ideas finally came into its own. Mille Kalsmose speaks about an inner and an outer world, where the one, in her optics, is just as real as the other. And this gives rise to a breakdown of dichotomies – in fact, she describes this as “the dichotomies’ fall”. If you want to see fundamental changes, it's important to refrain from repeating processes. No, you've got to start from a whole different place.

Art that is deep and reflected, as it adorns

For Mille Kalsmose, it is extremely important that there be a strong balance between the masculine and the feminine in her works of art, which is why she particularly likes working with metals. Metal as material is firm and raw and it poses a strong contrast to the fragile and organic. Just as the physical human shell is placed opposite the inner psychological person, metal stands as a frame around the fragile and delicate substance. Mille Kalsmose takes pride in squaring accounts with the view that the fragile is something negative and with the view of the feminine as something weak. She's not afraid that the depth of the work will not become manifest if the work simultaneously has a beautiful surface. If one harbors the view that the one excludes the other, this is a misunderstanding – a strong and intelligent woman can also be found with red lips and stiletto heels.

Works of art that create themselves

One of Mille Kalsmose's most recent installation works has been named *Re-sounding Organs*. As a point of departure, Mille Kalsmose knew that she wanted to work with algae and that she wanted to add sound to the work. She describes the work process itself as highly intuitive and primarily a matter of 'just doing'. The work basically created itself; she was simply the instrument through which its energy was manifested. The sonic aspect of the work has been developed in collaboration with one of Denmark's leading brain researchers and is a sound that can be used in treating chronic pains. Inside ordinary speakers, the sound can almost not be heard with the human ear. However, when it is connected to the work of art, it takes on an overwhelming force. *"The work gives life to the sound; the algae were the first to give life to us. One is merely an instrument that helps to create something that subsequently propagates itself further. One just has to be the hands, and to make room for it to unfold" ... "Creating art is a privilege beyond all limits."* – Mille Kalsmose.

Art Basel Miami, The Whitney, ARoS – but the dream is directed toward Horsens

There is no doubt that Milles Kalsmose is currently experiencing a certain period in her career where she is being tugged at from people close and from people far away, a period where she is getting a lot of well-deserved attention. But if you ask her what she's dreaming about then her reply, spoken with a little smile on her lips, is that she would like one day to return to the town of Horsens for a little while and contribute something to the city. *"How nice it would be to be Horsens' Hans Christian Andersen,"* she adds, and laughs.

translated by DAN A. MARMORSTEIN