

HYPERALLERGIC

Unpacking the Contradiction in Quiet Ceramic Tableaus

Sarah Rose Sharp

June 3, 2015



*One of Marie T. Hermann's sculptures against William Morris' "Blackthorn" wallpaper at the Simone DeSousa Gallery
(all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted, all images courtesy the artist and Simone DeSousa Gallery)*

DETROIT — How many points of conflict can be contained in a delicate arrangement of ceramic objects? The newly christened [Simone DeSousa Gallery](#) hosted a special conversation between artist [Marie T. Hermann](#), whose solo show, *And dusk turned dawn, Blackthorn*, is on display in the main gallery, and Glenn Adamson, visiting from New York as the director of the [Museum of Arts and Design](#). Hermann and Adamson have an easy rapport, the product of a nearly 10-year relationship based on professional interest and mutual admiration. It only stands to reason; Adamson is well known for his seminal reflection on the role of craft in contemporary art making, *Thinking Through Craft* (V&A, Berg, 2007), and Hermann is a remarkable conceptual artist, who, in her mastery of the ceramic form, creates work that is simultaneously challenging and deeply personal. This particular body of work very elegantly holds in its matrix a number of conflicting aesthetic and conceptual elements, which were broken down over the course of the discussion.

SIMONE DESOUSA GALLERY
444 W. Willis, #112, Detroit, MI 48201
313.833.9000 | simonedesousagallery.com

The conversation initially focused on the show's name, which reflects Hermann's love of evocative and slightly mysterious titles, ones that have a "hint of something beautiful, but also have a hint of melancholia." Hermann used this body of work to explore her interest in a moment in time when things change, ruminating on the quality of light during the transitional moments of dusk and dawn that effectively drain a room of color and depth, reducing dimensional objects to flat line drawings. The eponymous "Blackthorn" is the name of the [William Morris](#) wallpaper which lines the walls. Adamson commented on the forest-like density of the ornamentation, which by design creates the feeling of an intimate and separate space — emblematic of [Morris's utopian ideology](#) — and is used with great purpose by Hermann to provide contrast to her extremely Minimalist, mostly bright white stoneware and cast resin pieces, whose shapes jump out from the dense floral and green background in a manner that reduces them almost to outlines. This examination of the relationship between Modernism and nature is at the core of *And dusk turned dawn, Blackthorn*, but is also quite personal to Hermann. Her Scandinavian upbringing was set within the prevalingly Modernist environs of Copenhagen, punctuated by regular family vacations to a centuries-old farmhouse, one room of which was papered in the same Blackthorn motif chosen for the gallery.

Hermann is an animated speaker, prone to laughter, gesture, and an endless series of facial contortions as she ponders answers to questions. Her eyes light up in describing the miraculous nature of this wallpaper — such a contrast to the stark minimalism in her childhood home. Still, for all its fairytale trappings, Hermann pointed out that the wallpaper features everyday wildflowers in repetition, a natural fit with her interest in "the ordinary moments, the not-spectacular."



Marie T. Hermann (left) and Glenn Adamson (right) at Simone DeSousa Gallery

SIMONE DESOUSA GALLERY
444 W. Willis, #112, Detroit, MI 48201
313.833.9000 | simonedesousagallery.com

It is not to be overlooked that Hermann creates the shelves herself — Platonic, Modernist forms, thick white rectangles that also look quite domestic. Subtle hints, like the presence of a small puddle that looks like spilled liquid, but is, in fact, an intentionally fired pool (“You really must all go and see the puddle, by the way,” Adamson enthuses), alert the viewer that the framing device of the shelf — operating in Hermann’s mind much like a formal frame on a painting — is also a construction of the artist. She sees shelves as an endless source of inspiration, a kind of staging ground for, “Objects placed together momentarily in time, before they move on,” and this contrast between the temporary and the static forms another sense of conflict within Hermann’s collection. In myriad ways, she attempts to capture objects in transition — juxtaposing the rigid aspects of the fired stoneware with the delicate tears in their form, an imperfect line of glaze, or a trembling pancake of peach latex as it hangs over a thin ceramic stem. Even the rare instances of color in Hermann’s pieces may be transitory, with some of the resin cast objects literally fading in intensity over time.



Marie T. Hermann's ceramic sculptures resemble bowls and brains

Adamson commented that this focus on the flattening effects of waning/waxing daylight on the color and form of the pieces also affects a transitional state between two- and three-dimensional objects, an illusion that he likened to drawing with objects.

“I never draw,” she says, pausing for one of her characteristic facial twists, “I do in my head, but not on paper. It just never felt natural to me to draw. I like arranging things in my studio; a lot of time is spent moving and looking and adjusting.”

SIMONE DESOUSA GALLERY
444 W. Willis, #112, Detroit, MI 48201
313.833.9000 | simonedesousagallery.com

“Maybe arrangement has too low of a status in the concept of art,” muses Adamson, going on to underscore the importance of arrangement in the daily practice of curating, as well as the artistic process of assemblage as practiced by Duchamp, Mondrian, and artists in the ‘60s.

Hermann cherishes this open-ended practice, celebrating the notion that everything remains in flux until the gallery opens. “They are not fixed objects because we move, and objects move,” she declares. To hear Hermann speak is to understand her deep intentionality, which contrasts with the kind of offhanded nature of her arrangements, which seem to radiate with the suggestion that these objects are “just here right now” — yet another paradoxical spoke in the wheel. “All of her choices are very specific, but sort of indistinct,” says Adamson. Taken as a whole, Hermann’s show looks like a kind of anthropology exhibit from a race of Minimalist aliens — forms that seem close to the domestic objects in our own homes, but made blanker, more unrecognizable. “There’s something kind of impersonal about them,” remarks Adamson, yet there are clearly personal aspects to Hermann’s work.



Installation view of 'Marie T. Hermann: And dusk turned dawn, Blackthorn' (photo by Tim Thayer)

Ultimately, the far-ranging discussion between these two friends and colleagues raised as many conceptual conundrums as it addressed, but these questions are a pleasure to contemplate in the very soft atmosphere Hermann created to surround her very difficult objects. Just as she values the moment in time when a transition takes place, it is incumbent on the viewer to invest the time it takes to unravel the contradictions in these quiet, powerful tableaux.

SIMONE DESOUSA GALLERY
444 W. Willis, #112, Detroit, MI 48201
313.833.9000 | simonedesousagallery.com