

## DANIEL DEWAR & GREGORY GICQUEL

by Zoë Gray (from 'Dewar & Gicquel. Crêpe Suzette',  
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Just what is it that makes Dewar & Gicquel's work so different, so appealing? Their multiform process walks a fine line between the sublime and the ridiculous. It is permeated by visual hyperbole; everything is overstated and simultaneously left unsaid. This is part of an approach they describe as "experimental simplicity." Whether carving a life-sized motorcyclist in clay, naked except for his helmet, or weaving mock Peruvian tapestries and presenting them with oversized panpipes, Dewar & Gicquel take delight in breaking the rules of what is an acceptable subject for sculpture. They revel in the kitsch, in the grotesque, in flirting with bad taste, taking pleasure – for example – in presenting melted ceramics together with a tapestry gibbon in the pristine space of their Paris gallery. Commissioned by a collector to design his tombstone for the Montparnasse cemetery, the duo decided to carve a reclining figure from black sandstone. In the tradition of Christian funerary sculpture of the middle ages, they are creating a gisant. However, instead of an idealized portrait of the collector, this sepulchral effigy will be a deep-sea diver, his flippers standing up in the air as he lies in an attitude of eternal repose. With typical insouciance, they plan to present the work as their entry to the Prix Marcel Duchamp 2012, a prize instigated and funded by private collectors.

Despite such dry humour, with this duo we are far from the glib one-liners of mainstream contemporary art. The seriousness with which they take their sculptural practice forces us to take it seriously. Words such as "passion" and "commitment" are seldom used in contemporary art criticism, which seems to have acquired a cynicism across the board, rendering everything ironic, every reference a pastiche. They are words, however, which I dare to use when writing of Dewar & Gicquel's work, which at times takes on an almost Sisyphean dimension. Why decide – as they did together with Wilfrid Almendra in 2000 – to carve tools out of steel, producing after hours of toil objects that closely resemble shop-bought ready-mades? Why weave an epic twelve-metre-long tapestry from roughly spun wool, featuring a mammoth and a poodle? Why spend weeks, months, working with tons of raw clay in the forests of Brittany to produce rudimentary animations lasting just a few seconds? The answer has something to do with stubbornness and is certainly not without irony. Yet it seems primarily motivated by their fascination with material and with process, and driven by the pleasure that they find in working with one another.

Their work is never delegated to another producer, because for Dewar & Gicquel there is no separation between the making and the thinking. "The technique or medium is the reference point that allows us to have quite a lot of freedom in how the subjects are going to be organized together, and what sort of U-turns are going to happen later on in the process," they said during a recent public discussion, continuing "And as we're working as a duo, having a single medium is a way of knowing what we're doing". During the same talk, I put to them the observation made by art critic Richard Leydier that in their practice "the idea is to make works not objects." They refuted this distinction, saying "There is no difference between the process of making and the object – there is a pleasure in both those things. There's the pleasure of having something appear, in its apparition." Whether the work appears from direct carving into a block of stone or glass, or emerges from their purpose-built kiln, this excitement of making is tangible.

No matter which technique they adopt, Dewar & Gicquel are entirely serious about their craft, which is another word that I use with cautious deliberation. For a long time, perhaps from the demise of William Morris (1834-1896) until just a few years ago, art and craft were unhappy bedfellows. The autonomy of the art object promoted by Modernism, Minimalism's evacuation of the trace of the making, the slow but eventually widespread acceptance of conceptual art and the associated dematerialization of the art object have combined to give short shrift to artists interested in craft. Yet recently there has been a resurgence of craft both within the field of contemporary art and in Western European society at large. While on a superficial level, this could be dismissed as an eco-fad, a passing fashion, it is connected to an increasing awareness (or rediscovery) of where and how our products are made.

In art and design (and in curatorial practice), we can observe not only the re-emergence of craft-based practices but also a re-examination of the notion of craftsmanship. One of the figureheads of this critical exploration is Richard Sennett, a sociologist and ethnographer who has written extensively on capitalism, labour and material culture. In 2008 he published the highly influential *The Craftsman*, motivated by a desire to know “what life was like for ordinary workers within the machines of contemporary capitalism.” Sennett discovered that the shift of emphasis from doing work well to doing it efficiently has led – in his analysis – to the loss of a sense of agency. In searching for an alternative, he struck upon the notion of craftsmanship, arguing that it offers continuity between pre- and post-industrial times. For him, craftsmanship is anything that involves a literal connection between the hand and the head. “Making is thinking” is Sennett’s guiding principle, a phrase I adopted as the title of the group show at Witte de With that included several works by Dewar & Gicquel. Their recent solo show at Galerie Loevenbruck was gleefully titled *Ceramics, wood carvings and tapestries 2011*, the inclusion of the date further underlining the artists’ subversively anachronistic choice of practices.

Historically, to become a skilled craftsman required obedience, to follow the rules of one’s forefathers within a particular tradition or guild. Dewar & Gicquel are disobedient in the subjects of their craft while being faithful to the techniques. In their various projects, they set out to master various skills, but it is in the creative misuse of a technique that their work finds its resonance. They stress that it is important for them to work in sessions, intense periods of production where they labour uninterruptedly on a process. The intensity of these sessions is essential to the outcome, as is the continuity of carrying out a regular activity. “We get ourselves in very complicated situations and need to be in session-mode to be able to solve the problems that emerge. You don’t master a skill in one session, but over many years. What comes out of a session are the uncontrolled accidents.” This is very close to the process that Sennett describes when he writes “There is nothing inevitable about becoming skilled, just as there is nothing mindlessly mechanical about technique itself.” He contends that “all skills, even the most abstract, begin as bodily practices” and that “technical understanding develops through the powers of the imagination.” Sennett continues: “Skill development depends on how repetition is organized [...]. As skill expands, the capacity to sustain repetition increases [...]. There are ‘Eureka!’ moments that turn the key in a practice that has jammed, but they are embedded in routine.” This embedding is the conversion of information and practices into tacit knowledge. According to Sennett, “In the higher stages of skill, there is a constant interplay between tacit knowledge and self-conscious awareness, the tacit knowledge serving as an anchor, the explicit awareness serving as critique and corrective. Craft quality emerges from this higher stage, in judgements made on tacit habits and suppositions.”

For Dewar & Gicquel, what emerges from this higher stage – which evokes the meditative or even monastic element of their often-repetitive process – is not craft quality, but sculptural quality. While they are interested in the possibilities offered by certain techniques or media, these techniques and media are not the end-goal of their work. For example, with their ongoing series *Mixed Ceramics* (2011 onwards), they are employing the same effects that a professional potter might use, in terms of glazes or firing techniques, yet the results are a world away from the perfectly turned pot. In talking about their recent animations, they underline that the animated gif file is just a medium, and that they are not working in the field of animation, but in the field of sculpture. For them, it is all about moving clay around and seeing how sculptural an image can become. For example, when speaking of *Bump* (2012), a sequence of three photographs animated to suggest a pile of clay growing out of the ground, Dewar & Gicquel describe it as “an allegory of sculpture, of our history as practitioners.”

Why this insistence that the work is about sculpture? I see this emphasis as being part of a wider dynamic in contemporary art, which is seeing a return to specialization and is witnessing a renaissance of interest in sculpture in particular. Introducing their recent book *Sculpture Unlimited*, editors Eva Grubinger and Jörg Heiser affirm: “Despite of all the difficulties and confusions, an interest in the history of sculpture seems to be experiencing a revival, which includes a return to traditional techniques and production methods, and may even appear strangely radical and new in our age of the internet and simulation.” They ask “Is it at all possible to expand towards the inside, towards the history of sculpture?” Their choice of the word “expand” makes reference to Rosalind Krauss’s 1979 essay ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field,’ which has long been considered a cornerstone in thinking about sculpture.

In it, Krauss analyzed the expansion of the notion of sculpture to include the fields of architecture and Land Art. In one of the essays in *Sculpture Unlimited*, titled 'Revisiting the Expanded Field,' critic Vivian Sky Rehberg explores the legacy of Krauss's arguments: "Sculpture has long ceased to adhere to its limits as a materially-bound, self-sufficient, three-dimensional form of representation, with its own particular set of conventions of structural coherence. Krauss's account of sculpture's shift from medium (or the material and technical supports for artistic practice) to field – which 'provides both for an expanded but infinite set of related positions for a given artist to occupy and explore, and for an organization of work that is not dictated by the conditions of a particular medium' has influenced art historical and critical writing about sculpture since she published her essay in *October* magazine." However, Krauss has recently declared that it is her "conviction as a critic that the abandonment of the specific medium spells the death of serious art," and has called the post-medium condition a "monstrous myth." Rehberg writes: "She advocates a reinvention of the medium in order to reclaim 'the specific from the deadening embrace of the general' and to recuperate a kind of autonomy that grows from an intimate understanding of a specific medium's own plurality." Krauss argues that: "it is only via the specialization in a single medium that artistic truth can be revealed."

Whilst I strongly doubt that Dewar & Gicquel would claim to be revealing "artistic truth" through their sculptural practice, I believe that they are cultivating an "intimate understanding" of their medium's plurality as a way to seek some form of artistic autonomy. In speaking to them recently, a word that keeps coming up is "liberating." Having a large amount of raw material to hand in the studio or at their site of production is something they describe as "liberating," as it enables them to continue working without interruption. Their aforementioned sculptural sessions are an organization of their time that frees them from the constraints of their own processes, allowing mistakes to happen. And working in large, open spaces is also something that unshackles their practice. In the past year, Dewar & Gicquel have been particularly exploring the liberating possibilities offered by the rural. Initially interested in the countryside primarily for practical reasons – the affordable space available as soon as one leaves urban areas – they have recently started to treat the idea of the rural as a free space that they can conceptualize as they wish. With the clay animations made in Brittany in early 2012, not only did they exploit the potential of the rural site as a place to get things done, but they also transformed the rural into a cultural reference within the work. Building on earlier figurative pieces that featured animals, the artists now brought animated life into their subjects, sculpting two pigs and their piglets feeding in a mass of clay, or creating a piece of rural psychedelia with their ram and its multiplying horns.

While their pragmatic use of the rural as a space of production continues, so does their exploration of what the rural could mean within the work and for its reception. For example, as part of a residency at Les Arques in rural France this summer, they established the Centre Culturel Les Arques, a self-proclaimed, temporary art centre in an unused stone barn. The exhibition that they initiated there – titled *The Magic Porridge Pot* – presented the work of the artists invited to take part in the residency together with the work of local artists and artisans, all of which revealed a kind of freedom inspired by the exhibition's Arcadian setting. Dewar & Gicquel's choice to immerse themselves in nature seems to be emancipating them from the polite constraints of urban society and of the art world. Never backwards in coming forwards when it concerned presenting unorthodox work in unexpected media, they now also seem to feel free to touch upon touchy subjects, such as sex. When I asked them why sexual imagery had recently started appearing in their work – in pieces such as *Saddle* (2011) featuring a protruding phallus, in the latent fetishism of *Riding Boot* (2011), and most graphically in the clay orgy that appears in their animation *Legs* (2012) – they simply asserted that being naked in the countryside is liberating (whether they work in the nude is left tantalizingly unsaid). On another occasion, they claimed that the sexually charged imagery was not even about sex, it was about sculpture and was inspired by spending a lot of time in the sculpture galleries of the Louvre. They argued that the pile-up of copulating backsides that we see in *Legs* are not the legs of real people but are forms carved from clay for the camera, and therefore it is not sex that we are witnessing but sculpture. Whatever the reason behind it – and I do not want to start playing the Freudian analyst – it is clear that Dewar & Gicquel's extended foray into the countryside is inspiring a bawdy streak in their work that is reminiscent of Chaucerian tales of Merrie England.

Alain de Botton evokes the pastoral pleasures of a pre-industrial society in his recent book *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*. In analyzing the complicated systems of transport logistics today, he writes: "Two centuries ago, our forebears would have known the precise history and origin of nearly every one of the limited number of things they ate and owned, as well as the people and tools involved in their production. They were acquainted with the pig, the carpenter, the weaver, the loom and the dairymaid." De Botton continues: "The range of items available for purchase may have grown exponentially since then, but our understanding of their genesis has diminished almost to the point of obscurity. We are now as imaginatively disconnected from the manufacture and distribution of our goods as we are practically in reach of them, a process of alienation which has stripped us of myriad opportunities for wonder, gratitude and guilt." In their critical, rural, passionate practice, Dewar & Gicquel seem to have hit upon not only a rich seam of imagery and ideas, but also to have found their connection to the materials and processes that inspire them. Acquainted with the pig, the carpenter, the weaver, the loom and perhaps even the dairymaid, they are imaginatively and physically connected to the manufacture of their work more than ever before. And – if you will forgive the hyperbole – this offers us myriad opportunities for wonder.