

An Even Newer Laocoön: Martin Bodilsen Kaldahl

Consider the Laocoön. One of the most famous sculptures of antiquity, the work depicts an unfortunate Trojan priest, flanked by his two sons (portrayed, curiously, at smaller scale). All are wrapped in the heavy coils of giant sea serpents, sent by the gods; the snakes have crawled up from the depths, and will soon pull the trio to a watery death.

Neither an expression of transcendence, like the Winged Victory of Samothrace, nor an emblem of graceful perfection, like the Apollo Belvedere, the Laocoön seems to stand for complexity itself. It may be a Greek original or a Roman copy – that matter has never been settled – and was discovered in 1506. Michelangelo watched as it was excavated, and it exerted a powerful influence on his own sculpture and painting. But a work so convoluted, so anguished, was bound to attract more than admiration. John Ruskin disliked its “contemptible tortures.” The German philosopher Gotthold Lessing, in an essay inspired by the sculpture, drew a distinction between visual art and poetry, viewing the former as trapped in permanent stasis. Much later, Clement Greenberg, the dominant art critic of midcentury abstraction, would invert that argument in his influential essay “Toward a Newer Laocoön.” Art might be fundamentally non-temporal, he wrote, but this limitation was actually intrinsic to its power: “For the visual arts the medium is discovered to be physical; hence pure painting and pure sculpture seek above all else to affect the spectator physically.”

Now, this historiography would seem to have little to do with ceramics – a medium that could be described as extravagantly temporal, a kind of poetry in its own right, registered through the accumulated imprints of making and firing. But when confronting the work of Martin Bodilsen Kaldahl, the Laocoön, and all the things that have been said about it, come immediately to mind. Kaldahl, like Greenberg, speaks of the “energy deriving from the direct physicality of the works” as being of primary importance. One could further say – extending Greenberg’s response to Lessing – that Kaldahl’s works are like models of time itself. Temporal flow is usually understood as linear, something you can clock. Experientially, however, it slows down and speeds up, and loops upon itself. In our waking hours, memory intertwines with direct perception. At night, the dream state makes its elusive passage through the mind; everyday temporal laws are suspended. And when we consider time as a social phenomenon, what we see is true multiplicity: each person, each place, each culture keeping to their own rhythm.

This complex subjective flow, it seems to me, is what is captured in Kaldahl’s sculpture. To compare it to the Laocoön is not just to notice a visual rhyme – though it is indeed

striking how much his conjoined tubes resemble the antique sculpture's sinuous serpentine coils. His works also evoke the most famous words written on the ancient sculpture, by the pioneering art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (quoted by Lessing): "As the depths of the sea remain always at rest, however the surface may be agitated, so the expression in the figures of the Greeks reveals in the midst of passion a great and steadfast soul." An artwork may be perfectly still, yet still convey a maelstrom within.

To understand how Kaldahl manifests this dynamic, it is helpful to know something of his process – for him, as for most ceramic artists, making and meaning are inextricable. His signature tube forms are actually not coiled (like pots, or snakes), but rather extruded. This accounts for their consistency, which approaches that of pure geometry. Having produced a clay cylinder, he cuts it up at odd angles, and then repeats the procedure, until he has a quarry of units, varying somewhat in length and shape. Then he builds, joining the components together in a semi-random sequence. The angled face of each cut, placed against another, produces a slightly unpredictable vector. As he works, joining one unit to the next, "starting in one corner and letting it develop on its own," as he puts it, the work finds its own shape. The process is totally continuous, such that it actually traverses Kaldahl's sculptures from one to the next. He is constantly resupplying, creating a stock of shapes and drawing from it, the basic technique ramifying endlessly, as in the operations of a genetic code. Sometimes, as in the majestic five-part wall mural that serves as a centerpiece for the current show at HB381, he groups his sculptures in sets, as if to emphasize this principle of ongoing flow.

When Kaldahl first began working in this way, in 2012, he had a couple of questions in mind. The first was about intuition. Having worked for many years as a studio potter, he was well aware of the advantages of having an established vocabulary, but also the limitations that this could impose. (Greenberg would have understood.) Gradually, beginning in the late 1980s, he abandoned the standard functional shapes of his chosen discipline, "getting rid of a lot of stuff that had gotten in," and worked more sculpturally, more abstractly. This new exploratory direction left him curious about the nature of exploration itself. "What if I could make a doodle, half conscious?," he asked himself. "Could I do that slowly, over a week or a month?" The answer was yes: the tube-based works, which he refers to generally as *Spatial Drawings*, do indeed have the improvisatory quality of a rapid sketch. Often he works out them out in advance, roughing out a format in pen and ink. But this is only ever a starting place: by introducing the element of chance, he has been able to let go of his own authorship to some extent, reacting to his compositions rather than controlling them. At the same time, he has been able to ensure coherence both within each sculpture, and across the body of work, by virtue of his focused technical repertoire.

The second question that Kaldahl posed himself was more cerebral, and harder to answer definitively. He was interested in ornament, and how he might complicate its relationship to form. This is a great topic for a potter, a concern that he shares with many others – in his own native Denmark, one might think for example of the great midcentury ceramic designer Axel Salto, and Kaldahl's contemporary Morten Løbner Espersen. Like them, Kaldahl was eliding the conventional distinction between the "body" of the object and what is applied to it. Yet his tubular forms presented an unusual solution, or rather, a set of open-ended possibilities. While their internal repetition does set up a pattern – a hallmark of the ornamental mode – there is also a neutrality to them. Tubes, after all, are most often encountered as infrastructure, whether in the plumbing of a building or the blood vessels of the human body. And as he has worked with this vocabulary, he has found himself emphasizing that pragmatism. The sculptures have gotten less classical, less figural (a bit less like the Laocoön, in fact) and more like feats of engineering. At their most extreme – the densely populated *Orange Accumulation*, from 2021, is an example – they come across as self-propagating, as if Kaldahl were channeling forces scarcely under his control.

This said, there are other variables in play that humanize Kaldahl's works. Most obvious in this regard are the glazes that sheathe their surfaces, applied in layers to arrive at an intense saturation. By his own admission, he is more a formalist than a colorist. He chooses hues, he says, "to back up what is already there." If his compositions have the individuality of different people, the surface color clarifies the mood they happen to be in. At the same time, the subtle movement of the glaze – which pulls away slightly from the protruding ribs of each joint – reinforces the impression of structural integrity. Most of Kaldahl's works are monochrome, a clear allusion to modernist sculpture (the painted works of Anthony Caro, for example), though he has also experimented with a two-tone effect in which warm, unglazed terracotta alternates with a luminous black. He describes this as a kind of "built-in ornament," in the sense that the pattern occurs as he builds the piece, rather than being painted on after. Like the contours of the form, it is generated randomly.

More or less. This is an important caveat: Kaldahl is an extremely skilled maker, and by now he has developed considerable expertise in his self-invented technique. As he constructs a piece, allowing it to assume its unique stance and gesture, he is certainly not working blind. The process is basically responsive, but he can exert control on the shapes by imposing greater regularity, and to some extent predict the course they will take. He has also created digital renderings as a means of studying his pieces' behavior, often ending up with compositions that could not be constructed physically (in virtual space, gravity is not a factor, while in real life it is all-important), which give

him clues for things to try in real clay. Occasionally a specific motif strays over from these 3D visualizations, as with the pulled-out “tongues” that articulate a work like *Stack* (2016), one of his terracotta works; these protrusions had their origins in digital play, the ease with which he could make and manipulate a torus shape on-screen.

In a related area of compositional investigation, Kaldahl has sometimes defined his tubular structures by abruptly cutting them at the perimeter. This decisive crop is, if not necessarily digital, then at least photographic in feeling – though it also recalls the paintings of Piet Mondrian, as if we were looking at one part of an endless grid, a potentially infinite (but visually absent) expansion. Conversely, he has also introduced hollow half-domes and tree trunk-like shapes at the core of his sculptures, from which the tubes emerge and curl around, sometimes coming to a dead stop in mid-air, sometimes re-entering whence they came. Like the cropped works, these hollow volumes with their truncated appendages, which include the feet on which they stand, conjure an inward “opening to absence,” as Kaldahl says. “Something could have continued toward you in space.”

That brimming potential, in the end, is perhaps the key trait of the *Spatial Drawings*. The exposed faces of their constituent tubes make them seem inquisitive, or perhaps vigilant. They reach directly upward, probe the floor, sniff the air. Made of clay, they nonetheless have the psychological presence of animate things. Ever since the Laocoön, with its churning bodies and serpents, sculptors have tended to seek vitality above all other qualities – while their works may be forever still, they live in the mind. Kaldahl is no exception. His practice has a life of its own, a logic at once relentless and uncertain by nature. Each sculpture is one moment in an unfolding experiment: a step into a flowing river of creativity, always there for him, yet never the same twice.