

Metaphysical Materiality

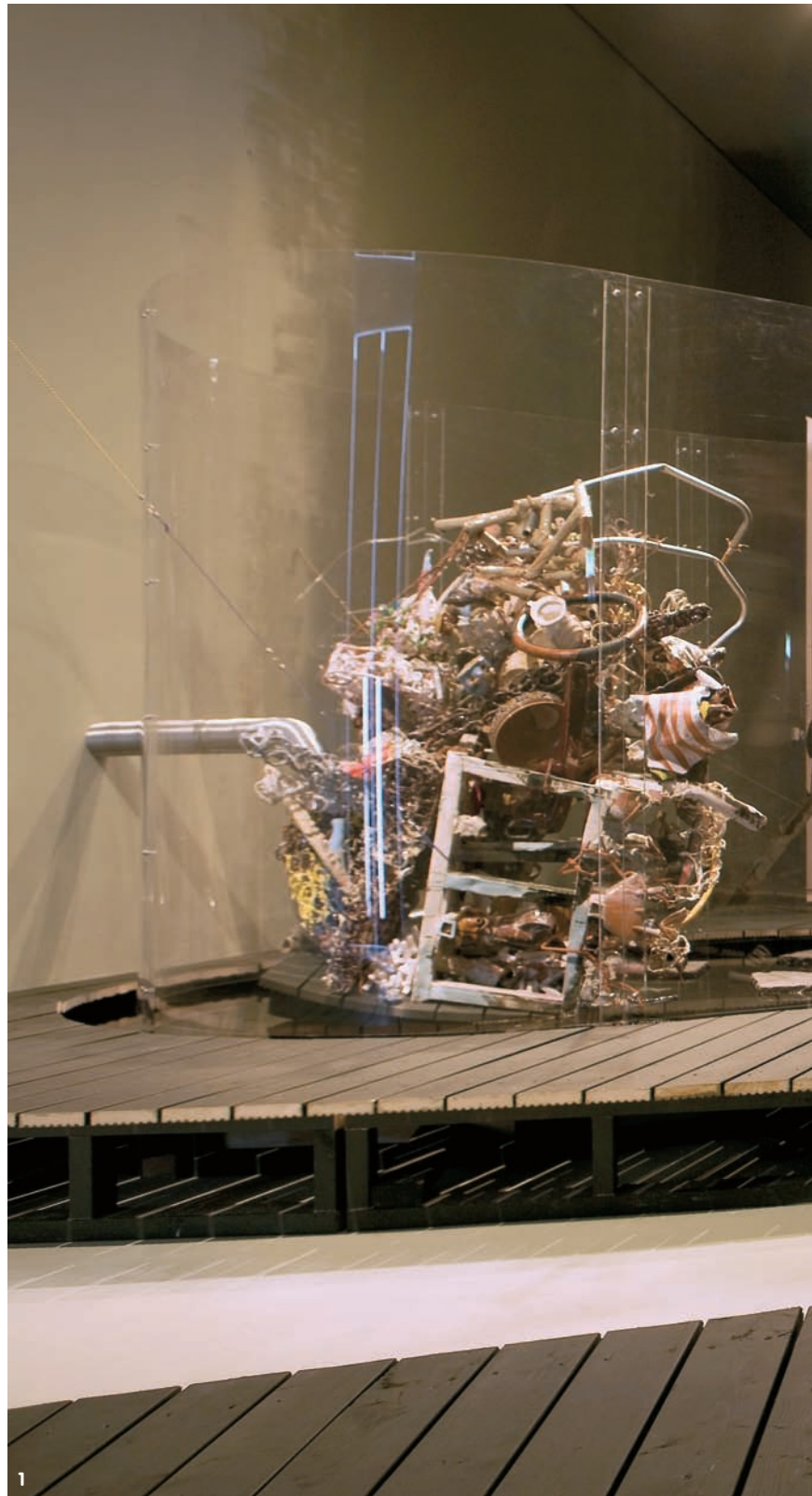
Linda Sikora reflects on recent ceramic installations by artist Linda Sormin.

Twentieth century art and social movements offered more than one vision of a world that valued freedom and spontaneity. These values were a challenge to authoritarianism; they also became a foundation from which artists could envision and declare possible future directions of the world. Linda Sormin's artistic practice is of the twenty-first century. It does not position itself as the future or as prophetic. To read it in this way is to miss its urgency. Her art is of this moment, amid a continuum of time, but unabashedly about today.

As notions of utopianism have changed and a less linear, more complex sense of the human condition has emerged, twenty-first century-ism in art is resisting critical analysis that remains concerned only with issues of previous generations. While it is perhaps more obvious that we need to develop a relevant discourse to address forms of art that we consider emerging, this accounts for only a portion of significant artistic practice happening today. We must not underestimate the need to reconsider our approach to all art – to sculptural objects, to materiality and to the public exhibition space. Linda Sormin's work invites us to do just that.

Metaphysical materiality: matter that is, at once, intentionally fragmented and concrete. Metaphysical materiality (otherwise put: immaterial materiality) is an oxymoron. Or is it a negotiation? The difference seems important. Oxymoron implies something contradictory such as incongruous states of materiality. Negotiation implies co-existence or co-operation; a back and forth that comes to terms with differences. A metaphysical consideration of materiality does not deny the importance of the material object. Quite the contrary. It is, rather, an unaffected response that attempts to call attention to the extensive and dynamic realms in which sculptural form – for example, *Ploen-nanofolk*¹ (2005) by Linda Sormin – is conceived and realised, up to and during the moment of public encounter. The work is aggressively material, but this is not the totality of the artistic output. It may be tempting at first to assume so. It may also be tempting to completely consume the artwork through the materials and signs that are readable and understandable. The object, however, is not for simple consumption. It is not purely instructive or declarative. It is there to give and take – conversant and generative. It is there to help us renegotiate our relationship to the world, or at least initiate that dialogue.

PERCEPTION Performative is a word Linda Sormin has used to describe her practice. Perhaps much artistic activity could be described as performative; however, there is such a direct translation of process and human doings into matter through Sormin's practice that it seems a particularly appropriate description. *Ploen-nanofolk* is not literally in motion or being constructed and reconstructed during public



1 *Rift*, ceramic, found objects and mixed media, 2009, installation at Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (Photo: Dan Prince)
2 *Salvage*, hand-pinched glazed ceramics and found facade bricks from the gallery building, collaborative installation at Louisiana Artworks, New Orleans, USA, 2008 (Photo: Michael Smith)



3 *Salvage*, glazed ceramic, found floorboards and bricks, nightlight, installation at Louisiana Artworks, New Orleans, USA, 2007 (Photo: Michael Smith) **4** *Stow*, glazed ceramics and mixed media, installed with Seth Hisiger at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island, USA, 2009 (Photo: Rob MacInnis) **5** *Stow* (detail),

hand-pinched glazed ceramics, found rubber, metal, string, Thai dancing dolls, porcelain shard, 2009 (Photo: Rob MacInnis) **6** *Stow* (detail), glazed ceramics and found blue and white dish, pink basket, porcelain wiseman figurine, fired metal sinking ship, 2009 (Photo: Rob MacInnis)



encounter; however, *Ploen-nanofolk* is never at rest. Upon completion, the work remains delightfully and uncannily resonant with its becoming. The energy encountered and felt in the work stems, in part, from the residual processes of artistic behaviour that are carried in the bones of the objects. Put another way, the resonant behaviours and actions, compounded, become how and why the work is dynamically perceived.

GESTURE Much of the most legible activity in Linda Sormin's pieces occurs within the quick and intimate gesture of the hand. The process is transparent. Clay is rolled and pinched. An activity of the extremities. This simple, empathetic gesture of touch becomes wondrous. The few larger, seemingly structural elements or members are mechanised or machined (extruded clay, constructed plywood). The pinching is primordial, a reflexive gesture of the hand against plastic material. The proximity is intimate, concentrated. The activity of pinching and the resultant pinched structure is the glue in many of the pieces, literally and figuratively. Ceramic objects – found, collected, and identifiable – infiltrate the structures. In *Strawtern* (2004), herds of small, kitsch, blue and white glazed elephants adapt to impossible environs with unfamiliar gravitational fields flooded by optimistic, triumphant colour. This casts narratives in directions that have no beginning or end, no truth or fiction. Do not confuse it with the telling of a simple story, this conversation is open and will usher in many points of view.

Salvage (2007), a work Linda Sormin embarked on in post-Katrina New Orleans, is more project than piece. Soliciting/encountering objects, artefacts and tales from local residents, Sormin has attempted to fit her work next to, and have her work emerge out of, a more specific cultural plot (storyline; piece of ground). Familiar elements of her work revise their meaning; any chaos in the gallery space



could belong to mother nature. Conceit and contrivance is the risk and the potential in this context. The heightened physical urgency of the work and its increasing concern with structure (dwelling) and gravity – in the broadest sense – serves to remind us of how we make our place in the world: that we (humans) stand (are upright) and from this vantage point, as Vitruvius suggests in the *Ten Books on Architecture*², comes advantage. Ultimately, *Salvage* exudes optimism.

DICHOTOMIES Sormin's work is not cautious. It is wilful and inhabits the imagination and physical space with abandon. It is constructed on-site, over time and sometimes over territory, as is the case with exhibitions that may be miles or continents away. Fragile pre-fabricated sections are placed, leaned, propped, levered, inserted and buttressed against each other to form an exclusive composition that is again built upon and detailed in response to the environment and atmosphere of the exhibition space. It belongs in the space because it is in the space and of the space. It is out of place because it is place.

The sinking, compromised whitewashed table of *Ploen-nanofolk* uproots our confidence in the architectural structure of the white-

Notes 1 'ploen: Thai adjective for the state of well-being and satisfaction one reaches by becoming completely engrossed in something – in this case the repetitive act of building...'; correspondence with Linda Sormin 2 Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, *The Ten*

Books on Architecture, Dover Publications Inc., New York, 1914 (trans: MH Morgan)

3 Umberto Eco, 'Reflections on War', *Five Moral Pieces*, Harcourt Books, United States, 2001 (trans: A McEwen), p3

Recent Exhibition *Possibilities and Losses: Transitions in Clay*, MIMA, Middlesbrough, 22 May-16 August 2009

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walled exhibition space that we presumed safe. It reminds the beholder that gallery spaces are not neutral. Far from it. Culturally they remain a unique place of human interaction and association where quotidian societal pressures and functions, that take us into many public spaces, are absent. At best, exhibition spaces are places where reflection and conversation foster reimagining.

Linda Sormin has discussed her work in dichotomies: '...porosity and density, mass and lightness, strength and fragility, balance and imbalance, hoarding and loss...' The list continues. These dichotomies are negotiations that evolve within the metaphysical materiality of the work... throughout the fragmented and concrete. Real or imagined, negotiations exercise a critical muscle in the human mind – a muscle that is responsible for social/human association and connection. Umberto Eco might also consider this part of 'intellectual function' which he says lay '...in sighting ambiguities and bringing them to light.'³ Linda Sormin is dexterous in sighting concealed territory and, with that, modelling ways to negotiate current human conditions. At the present moment, this is proving to be much more urgent than prophecy. 