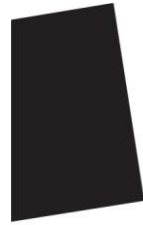


Ian Kiaer: COMMA 15

Essay by Melissa Gronlund



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Opening times

Mon - Sat, 11:00 - 18:00

Bloomberg SPACE

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Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

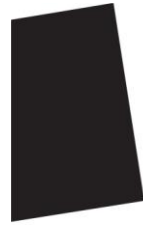
In physical terms, the studio and gallery space have much in common. Both are square-to-rectangular, often with few sources of natural light, and high ceilings. In a studio, there is usually one entrance; in a gallery there might be one or two. The walls are generally white, and the floor white or grey. What is contained inside each particular space, however, is set up differently. Studios are cluttered – this is an easy metaphor for the state of the artist's mind – and the implements they have serve to organise and facilitate this clutter: books (vertical clutter), shelves (horizontal clutter), picture-pasted walls (vertical clutter), tables (horizontal clutter).

In the gallery, by contrast, all clutter is removed, and this signals the finality of the artist's thought process. Objects, aggregates of clutter both mental and material, are *on display*, with nothing extraneous in the space.

Despite this shift of internal matter – contents sucked up by 'art objects' like some armadillo gluttonous for ideas – both studio and gallery work towards the same effect, that is, to confer upon its contents the status of being 'candidates for artistic appreciation', as George Dickie put it in his institutional theory of art. They are spaces of making and display, respectively, that let objects stand as representations of other things, or, more simply, let objects communicate more than the sum of their parts.

It is this shift *between the two* – from studio to gallery – that is the ground mapped out and contested by Ian Kiaer's referential object installations. By looking at different facets – legibility, accessibility, provisionality and, crucially, the distinction between *poiesis* (the act of poetic creation) and *praxis* (the act of physically making) – that might be coded as 'studio' or as 'gallery', his work labours to test assumptions of how a work is expected to function, or might function differently, in these two separate spaces.

Kiaer trained as a painter, and his interest in that medium remains significant. He is known, however, not for his paintings but rather for his disjointed, almost oblique installations in which the enormity and complexity of the objects' references are almost inversely proportional to the modesty of their language. Walter Benjamin is harassed into service perhaps too often, but listening to Kiaer speak about the pathways opened up by his references is much like following the explosions of the German thinker's constellations of ideas – an alinear and associative thought

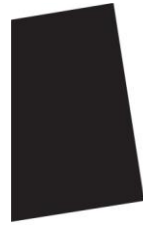


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process that reaches back into the past both for meaning and grounding. The arenas Kiaer has drawn from to make his installations include not only painting but also architecture, film, theatre, poetry and literature - disciplines in which the ability to host narrative content is enormous. Kiaer has explored: two-and-a-half-hour long films (Tarkovsky's *Solaris*); different stories collapsed into one picture frame (the paintings of Bruegel the elder); nineteenth-century stories of melodrama and adventure (Alexandre Dumas, as in the work currently on show); and a variety of different mid-twentieth-century designs for utopian living. The downshift from these vast displays of story and detail into the cracked, squat objects that Kiaer displays is often jarring, and forces the issue of legibility: how much of this material, available to Kiaer in the studio, is available in the gallery?

Notably, within these references, the notions of artistic creation and translation are often central, and are explored almost as if they could be pictured: a visual representation of artistic idea-construction. In *BRUEGEL PROJECT/CASA MALAPARTE* (1999) a tiny paper model of a house refers to the Villa Malaparte, a house built by the Italian writer Curzio Malaparte after he retired, and which was used as Brigitte Bardot and Michel Piccoli's house in Jean-Luc Godard's *Le mépris*, an allegorical tale of the re-making of Homer's *Odyssey* into an American feature film. Kiaer's model of the house summons up this fictional story of artistic creation (and bastardisation) as well as the closing of creativity the house signalled for its real owner. In the gallery space, the model sits in miniature atop a dull yellow sponge, much like the Villa sits atop a rocky outcropping in Capri; a landscape-like evocation of the house's actual surroundings that is somewhat undercut by the Villa's insistent 'model-ness'. Kiaer often uses the model as a genre – small-scale mock-ups of houses made of paper or cardboard are often found within his installations – allowing his work to open up as gestures not only for the references they trail behind them, but also, and more importantly, to function as stand-ins for the idea of provisionality, or as snapshots of a stage in which the right to change something is still available. By representing this mode of potentiality, Kiaer contaminates – if the moral valences on that word are right – the gallery space with *poesis*, the moment of studio-based artistic creation that has been as progressively overvalued and devalued throughout the last century as the architectural utopias he quotes from. The very idea of this studio as a special place, he acknowledges with ambivalence, feels out of time.

The question of the studio space recurs in the work Kiaer is making for Bloomberg SPACE – a tall aluminium frame stands in the front gallery, together with a grouping of paintings and other objects. The work *Offset/black tulip* (2009) derives in inspiration from Alexandre Dumas's *The Black Tulip* (1850), a romance story that begins with the historical assassination in 1672 of Dutch Prime Minister Johan de Witt and his brother Cornelius. Throughout the novel, the black tulip circulates as the object of desire and jealousy, a symbol both of Holland's economic power and the less rational forces that feed it. Cornelius cultivates the black tulip in a garden next to that of his rival, the burgher Isaac Boxtel, rearranging his plants so that he steals light and heat from Boxtel's own horticultural enterprises. Eventually Boxtel's plants wither and die, and as a curious consequence Boxtel becomes more attentive, learning to look as his own creations wilt.



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This shift that poor Boxtel undergoes is significant. The greenhouse, the site of the garden growing, becomes in turn a site for observation: and if we return to Kiaer's own plays with creation and representation, we find in turn another understanding of the gallery. *The Black Tulip's* inverse relationship between making and observing suggests the gallery as a site of display, even of theatrical display, in which the objects do not really Hoover up the clutter of an artist's mind, but simply act as if they do – the exhibition as performative.

Indeed, Kiaer's installations do not seek to inform but rather to create a stage in which the viewer is confronted with different fragments of experience, out of which he or she must navigate among or form a narrative. The moment of *poesis* – as its negative depiction in *BRUEGEL PROJECT/CASA MALAPARTE* suggests – is remarkably sterile, one that remains not only hermetic but also unfulfilled. Instead, the work's own choreography among its constituent parts – the changes in scale the objects effect and the differing types of looking they elicit from the viewer (peering, admiring, reflecting, turning back to see – seems Kiaer's (always provisional) answer to, or rebuff of, the problems of art's intentionality and inadequacy. Such a performance of colour, tone and texture disregards, in some respects, its own origins, and focuses instead on the specific encounter – a moment of legibility and judgement that seems unrelated to the space within which the viewer finds him or herself: Kiaer makes the space, whatever space, into one of fiction.

Melissa Gronlund is a critic based in London, and managing editor of *Afterall* journal.