

DIRK STASCHKE

Text by Pirita Litmanen

Dirk Staschke (b. 1971) touched clay for the first time in the second grade, while attending an art school class in Huntsville, Alabama. The Earth didn't shake, nor did he find his peace. For the young Staschke, clay was nothing special – yet.

“I often wonder where the line is between too much and enough.”

Here is what he tells about his work today.

You mentioned your first influences were music icons like Ian MacKaye, and the way he embodied a positive punk ethos in the early eighties. He is also seen as one of the starts of the DIY punk movement, against consumer culture and supporting the idea of producing with limited means. Your current body of work explores notions of cultural excess, mostly through food. What are your main inspirations today?

The work from the last eight years, or so, is influenced by Dutch still life painting. It started as a way of contemplating desire and consumption. It has now become a way of contemplating Art.

You said you see using food as a way of referencing consumption in your work. Why cakes?

A cake is a specious object that tantalizes the senses but is harmful in almost every other aspect. It seemed the perfect metaphor for excessive consumption.

Has your work changed the way you see or think about food?

Yes, I think about where it comes from and what is in it more than I did in the past.

Abundance is very present in your sculptures, which you said, relates back to the Dutch still-life paintings, where the theme is often explored. What makes you feel so strong about this theme especially?

Abundance is a core human desire. I often wonder where the line is between too much and enough. There is a common sentiment that only the people who have more than you, have too much. I am thankful every day for all that I have. This includes friends and family which in the end matters the most.

What's your favorite food to eat?

It changes from time to time. [I would say] Thai chicken curry but I have a thing for BBQ ribs at the moment.

What about your favorite food to make a sculpture of?

I enjoy making cakes but I like sculpting birds the most.

If you'd be a food item, based on appearance, which would you choose?

I don't know, the answer would probably change on any given day. An egg.

What makes a sculpture perfect?

When material, concepts, and beauty work together to form a piece where the sum is greater than the parts.

What's your favorite part of the working process?

Figuring out how to push the limits of a material in a way that surprises people.

At what point work turns into pleasure or pleasure turns into work?

This has become a life lesson for me. If you turn your passion into a job it becomes less pleasurable than it was. I still find great pleasure making [art] when I have the time to become completely lost in what I am doing. [It should be about] being in the moment.

What in your opinion is your biggest limitation as an artist?

I do not manage my career as well as I could. I know many artists who spend as much time promoting themselves as creating. It is my hope that my work will speak for me.

How important is beauty to you outside your work? What kind of settings or places you find aesthetically pleasing?

I like rivers and oceans. Outside of my work I find it mostly in solitary moments in nature, surfing and fly-fishing. My family and I spend as much time as we can on the Oregon coast for its intrinsic natural beauty.

What excites you most in your work today?

I am excited about the new work where abstracted forms become a direct result of creating representation. This relates to letting more chance and accident into the work. It also touches on the debate over craft in the Art world.

You've been working in many universities as a teacher. What is the most important thing you have learned from your students?

Patience.

What is the most important thing your work has taught you?

How to exist in the moment. Creating is a luxury that, if done well, is more like meditation.

You told completing a piece takes from a few weeks to months. When do you know the sculpture is finished?

It is a certain feeling that I've never tried to verbalize. I think when the work comes close to the notion of how I thought it might be. When that doesn't work it becomes an exercise in problem solving. Sometimes, a mistake becomes a gift. In my most recent work I have tried to leave a little more to chance.

Staschke has an upcoming exhibition with Winston Wachter Fine Art in Seattle, Washington. The show runs from March 3rd through April 15th 2015. This new body of work represents a new twist on the themes Staschke has been exploring for the last eight years.

Since then, things have somewhat changed. Today Staschke lives in Portland, Oregon, where he works as a ceramic artist.

His recent body of work explores notions of gluttony and cultural excess. Piles of cakes and pastries, inedible meals that are beautiful but simultaneously disgusting.

When he told me about his background, the events created a series of movie scenes in my head mixing in *The Warriors* (1979) and *Interstellar* (2014).

Staschke's father was a son of German immigrants. He was raised in Chicago and became an aerospace engineer. Staschke's mother was, as Staschke himself puts it, a frustrated artist who dropped out of art school to marry Staschke's father. Later Staschke's father went to work for NASA and they settled in Huntsville Alabama, where the artist spent his childhood.

"It seemed like my friends and I were always having to defend ourselves", is his answer when I ask how it was to grow up in Huntsville. He continues with a story including 50 people running after 35— with baseball bats. Staschke was one of the 35. On that night several people ended up in hospital.

"Anything out of the norm was considered threatening to most people in Alabama back then. In retrospect, it is completely insane that something as simple as a haircut or an earring could have potentially resulted in a death. Enduring that sort of craziness pulls people together and I'm still close with my old friends. It also explains a reason I might laugh a little when I see five year olds with Mohawks."

Like his mother, Staschke thought he would become a painter one day. He got a painting scholarship to the University of Montevallo to pursue his plans.

At Montevallo clay stepped back into his life and after his first ceramic class, Staschke knew it was what he wanted to do. Ceramics didn't give him only a surface, but also the addition of form. It challenged him to think how the two things would interact.

He also admits he simply has a love for things that are hard to do. Working with clay is very complex—from the chemistry of clay and glaze, to firing a kiln.

"All of these variables can result in countless possible outcomes. The realm of possibilities that ceramics offers will last a lifetime."

Staschke lists his first ceramic and sculpture professors, Dr. Scott Meyer and Ted Metz, as his mentors, friends and strong influences on his work.

"They set an example on how to do the most with the least. If something was broken they taught you how to fix it and if it broke again, it was expected that you might fix it yourself. Their doors were never shut."

He was a hard-working student. One who might question his teachers, but who would also skip a party and stay working at the studio.

Later he earned his Masters of Fine Arts Degree from Alfred University, Alfred, NY. For the last seventeen years, he has maintained an ongoing studio practice and extensive exhibition record. It is not as simple as it sounds.

"My first studio was in a two bedroom apartment in Queens so having a kiln was out of the question. This meant that I had to transport large raw clay sculptures to kilns around New York City which had its own logistical problems to solve."

During the years he has also taught at many notable universities, including Emily Carr University, Alfred University and New York University.

"I have moved around a lot. Each place has different landscapes and different people. All these places have also informed my understanding of art."

When looking back to his younger years as an artist Staschke, now at his forties, states:

"In my twenties art consumed my life. It was the only thing that mattered."