

Hans Theys

On Striving for Perfection An encounter with Nel Bonte

I recently visited the studio where Nel Bonte (b. 1986) works, located in a remote part of the country where the sculptor ended up years ago, following Love. Since then, she has made a home for herself in a modernist dwelling that has gradually filled up with the heavy-duty equipment she uses to make her bold, meticulous and sensitive sculptures. This woman's hands bear the traces of apparently endless shaping, sanding and polishing. It is unrivalled perfection she is seeking: eternal balance that surpasses our untrained gaze. And by now, of course, she can no longer leave that place, because all her equipment weighs tons and would get in the way wherever she went. I recognise a Cerdi semi-automatic welding set, an electrical arc welder, a Festool vacuum, a pillar drill, a circular bench saw, a Festool plunge-cut saw, a Rohde ceramic kiln, collapsible aluminium scaffolding and a chain saw. Mmm. The forms she creates are derived by some secret process from these very machines, or from other industrial objects she encounters during her long commutes, because in the meantime Love has called her away to other cities. She still commutes to this secret workshop, however, which, every so often, bears sculptural fruit. While we are talking, the artist continues to sand a round, solid object. The white dust swirls soundlessly in the winter sunlight and falls softly around us. Silently, I wonder where this shape comes from. It isn't round enough yet, she says. I can't detect any imperfections. I understand that an industrial model demands this perfection. I understand that this is exactly why the artist takes industrially manufactured forms as her models: because they give her the right to strive for perfection, tirelessly and dauntlessly. (And I remember one of the most famous ceramic vases in China, which appeared to be perfectly round and on which the artist had wished the emperor a long life, time and time again, in ten thousand different characters.) However what impresses me most of all is the blown-up replica of a toilet paper dispenser, which is made of thousands of sheets of toilet paper and has an unfinished appearance. And after I got home, I woke with a start in the night and thought: the broad metal nut you use to clamp a grinding disc into place on the wheel! That is what it must have been! And then I sank back down into one of those searing, feverish dreams in which we try to overcome our imperfections every day. Behold a courageous woman. A sculptor with courage worthy of Sisyphus.

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