

NILS STÆRK

Olaf Breuning

It's still a garden

24.02.23 – 14.04.23

NILS STÆRK

The zany, the cute and the interesting are defined by literary critic and theorist Sianne Ngai as aesthetic categories that permeate our modern culture and that dominate both its art and its commodities. Ngai examines how these categories express ambivalent feelings, which are ultimately tied to how modern subjects work, exchange and consume. Ngai explores the consequences of an aesthetic "littleness", or what is perceived as diminutive and subordinate and the cute as something that produces feelings of both caring and aggression at the same time.

Breuning's sculptures blur the line between the innocence of childhood and the fear that comes with adulthood. A sculptural landscape of trees, birds, crocodiles, and mushrooms spreads throughout the room. Large, hand-dipped candles protrude from the figures everywhere – the circles that adorn the candles are echoed in the colourful woodcuts that hang on the wall. The works, which are not too distant from school-play scenery, nor children's drawings of a hen, a worm, or a cluster of spiders, reflect the idea that cuteness is both appealing and frightening. Breuning's sculptures are humoristic, and they are cute. Cute, in their simplicity, cute as a stepsister to both the beautiful and the ugly. The cute is an aestheticization of powerlessness, a form of affective response to an absence of agency. To judge something as cute, you must first feel your own dominance in relation to it. *We love what submits to us.*¹

Breuning's woodcuts are created through an intuitive process to retain the raw quality of the materials. Both woodcuts and sculptures are created with or out of wood, and the use of nature in the works enables the works to talk about nature: the relationship between humans and nature, how we use and control it.

At first glance, Breuning's sculptures seem cute and endearing, with their exaggerated expressions and playful shapes. The hand-dipped lights stick

¹ Ngai, Sianne: *Our Aesthetic Categories* p. 125

**NILS STÆRK APS
GLENTEVEJ 49
DK-2400 COPENHAGEN NV**

**VAT# DK-31498538
TEL +45 3254 4562
MAIL GALLERY@NILSSTAERK.DK
WEB NILSSTAERK.DK**

NILS STÆRK

out in an almost tentacle-like manner. The number of lights is overwhelming; they clearly attest to countless hours of work, in an activity familiar to many from childhood. The sculptures are not just cute but are also massive. Their very size attests to their material, they bear witness to the fact that we are simply passing through and what lasts has always been here.

Upon closer inspection, what we perceive as cute is laden with an underlying sense of discomfort. Breuning's sculptures are not just cute. There is something menacing about what we initially classify as cute. When we give something a face, a deformed face with huge eyes and no mouth or a very small one, we deny it, conversely, the use of speech. A cute face is incomplete and does not look like our own. The facial features are enlarged or reduced. It is a paradoxical face that must have just enough faceness to be able to meet our own and generate empathy, but not enough humanization to make it our equal. If the latter were the case, the very power difference on which the aesthetics of cuteness depends would be erased.

The cute is denied speech, by our own hand. In this lies a latent threat. If things or objects can be personified, then surely people can also be transformed into things? What goes around comes around. The power of the cute is made up of our own aggressive affect, which was directed at the cute and returns against us with all its force. Our aggressiveness ends up coming back to us. The cuteness of the object attests to its later ability to take revenge on a society that has made it harmless, just like nature's potential to later avenge its abuse at our hands.

Rationality and power stand in stark contrast to the fluidity and softness of the cute but are in one and the same way a part of it. Therefore, what is cute is also, in some capacity, incredibly threatening to us. We cannot understand power, humans' power over nature, our power over each other, without examining its counterpart.

**NILS STÆRK APS
GLENTEVEJ 49
DK-2400 COPENHAGEN NV**

**VAT# DK-31498538
TEL +45 3254 4562
MAIL GALLERY@NILSSTAERK.DK
WEB NILSSTAERK.DK**