

Narumi Nekpenekpen: Bouquet

30 Orchard St, Gallery 1 ▪ Sept 8 - Oct 8, 2023



Harkawik is pleased to announce *Bouquet*, our second solo exhibition with Los Angeles based artist Narumi Nekpenekpen, opening Friday, Sept 8. *Bouquet* marks a dramatic departure, in that it collapses primary/secondary/tertiary concerns, drawn and painted surfaces, and formal structures that previously acted like connective tissue between an array of modestly proportioned works, into several monumental sculptures. Crossing vernacular architecture and painting, these dimensional forms prioritize the notion of sculptural force over sculptural object. Vigorous in textures and unrestrained in color, these relentlessly handmade works are the largest Nekpenekpen

has executed to date.

Nekpenekpen isolates emphatic gestures, pulling them apart to explore their emotional texture, and allowing them to dictate the trajectory of her investigation. Rather than draw or map out her intent, she animates matter in realtime, along the fault lines her process reveals. She collects these expressions, like the images culled from films, music videos, photography books and editorials that dot her studio, and happens them, breaks them, fastens them while toying with speed, producing movement that might have more in common with choreography, film or music-making than ceramic arts. These gestures repeat—formed as rotund bases, massive eyes, links that may not make a chain, eloping limbs and hearts, stars, and flora alike—but with difference.

sunflower envy is constructed from a massive base made of slabs of porcelain clay held together by a meticulous gridded armature. Two red flowers hug one side of the structure, dripping red glaze onto branches that ensnare the figure's rear, foregrounding motion and gravity. From the other side, face and limbs pile atop one another so liberally that they suggest a deconstructed motion study, or a recollection of a figure seen from a moving car window, recalled, retold and then redrawn. Pinks, yellows, blues, and browns play with interchangeably striated and airbrushed surfaces bedecked with a drawn chain. In another work, two figures embrace; elsewhere the vestiges of clay's gravity-bound collapse becomes one figure in repose. In some works, links chain across the body; elsewhere they form the petals of a flower. Like Blondell Cummings's "moving pictures", Narumi's works offer an emphatic vocabulary of movement, one that is forceful and deeply felt, but rejects any systematization of it as such—including strict adherence to one medium or discipline.

In this repetition of expressions, the claim to the original articulation is contested, for it is an impossible origin. Nekpenekpen's chains, haphazardly linked, acknowledge the precariousness of the origin's unifying adhesive. What expands the world of possibility is the anaphora of repetition linked to itself, gaps in the links included. The anaphora of Nekpenekpen's gestures with clay creates sonic presence sounded out in the echoes of the hollowed out forms and through the openings of the lattice-like structures undergirding them in what becomes a beat to nod to, a furled lip when it hits stronger, and sometimes a total letting go to the rhythm.

This process is not the material's subordination to the sovereign artist. The material itself is autonomous and does not relinquish agency. In this sense, Nekpenekpen's pounding of the clay, imposing it against a board she places on the ground with a powerful toss, allows for a reciprocal making of the slab that is then draped across her figurations. The wrinkled stretches of the slab along with porcelain's affinity for certain breaches does not work against the art, but is part of its making. In this way, her work echoes the concerns of the postwar Japanese arts movement Mono-ha, even as it eschews its aesthetic austerity. It might, however, be historically and conceptually contextualized within the movement's ethics of unpredictability and irreducibility to unified form. Nekpenekpen manipulates form to take up questions of space, time, embodiment, and matter through process and dis-continuity. Here she insists on the experience of process over the final, sanctified object. The works are shaped precisely through the struggle with the material, such as the scaffolding to hold up the matter that weighs down heavily. Chance matters to the point of materializing. Glaze drips. Chains are sometimes pencil marked and other times made with clay, but they don't necessarily link easily, or at all, across dimensions. Following automatism's kinship to serendipity in the Surrealist school, Narumi lets chemical reactions oxidize colors and crystallize textures, matte and shiny surfaces overlap, and

allows airbrushed strokes and pencil marks to collide.

Nekpenekpen's works are not abstractions nor minimalist. Nor do they offer any immediately recognizable cultural and personal signifiers, even if they are so obviously impressed upon by weight of lived experience, both outwardly social and delicately intimate. They are figurations, but not human. An evacuation of passive familiarity persists. More an inviting wink than a malicious tongue-in-cheek, the figures reference both the world from which the work emerges, and a possibility outside of it. There is a largesse, a confident and unexpectedly consequential unfolding of color, scale, texture. Her textured surfaces, calligraphy-like marks, and assemblage-like manipulation of form recall the (non)tradition of various artists active in 1980s downtown New York, such as might be found in the lexically dense visual worlds of Martin Wong or the mesmerizing found object assemblages of Curtis Cuffie.

Nekpenekpen's *Bouquet* is one with roots firmly planted in urban poetics, rough of glaze, full of watery-eyed generosity, surprising not only in what is packed into its hulking corporeal forms, but how unexpectedly it unfurls, first gently, then with ever-escalating echoes of raucous self-possession. They are utterly singular in all her aesthetic vocabulary offers, and all it coolly discards.

—Perwana Nazif