

SCHILLER'S SKULL; MYSTERIOUS VESSEL

Oscar Enberg

6 October–10 November 2023

Following German poet Friedrich Schiller's death in 1805 and his burial in a mass grave, his corpse became the brunt of a century-long conspiracy. A skull was dug up by a Schiller enthusiast, who picked one at random based on its enormity, and then passed it off as Schiller's. It subsequently came into the possession of Schiller's intimate friend, the writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and inspired his poem, 'Lines on Seeing Schiller's Skull' in which he describes it as a 'mysterious vessel'. A decade later, it was duly placed alongside Goethe's remains in a vault honouring German Classicism.

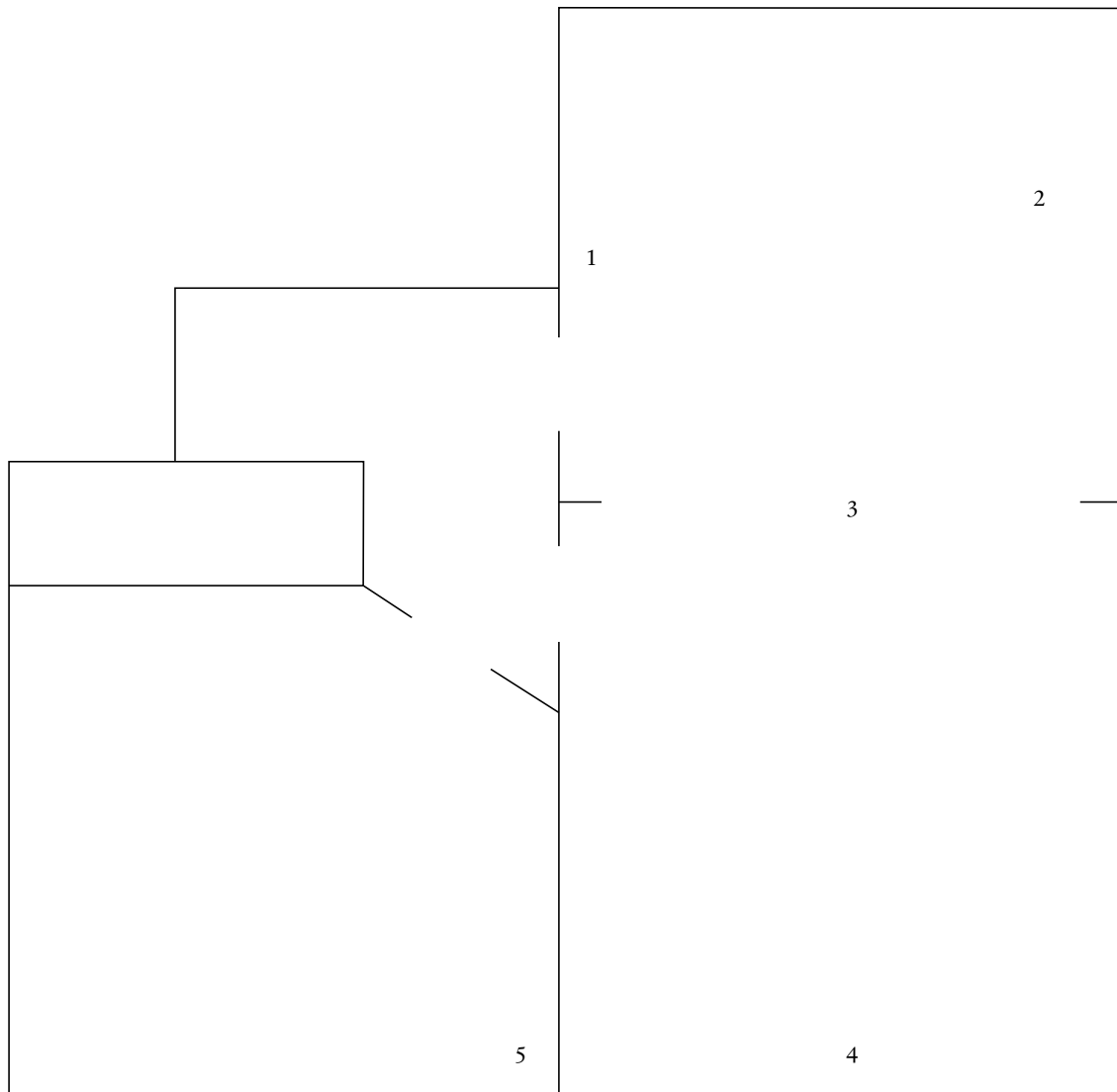
Oscar Enberg's fascination for this story sprung after recent examinations by anatomists and scientists alike concluded that the skull wasn't actually Schiller's after all. Having lived in Berlin for nearly a decade, Oscar noticed that this mysterious account from German history serves as a metaphor for his approach to making sculptures by, in his words, 'perverting the canon of literature' and challenging the received narrative. The enigma of Schiller's skull reveals that society's constant rewriting of the past augments how objects are remembered. Across Oscar's work, phenomena relating to German traditions or which carry a certain symbolism appear in varying repetitive forms. He coins the process 'a material patois', a sculptural dialect specific to a region. Complex methods of sculpting require attuned techniques to achieve such precision – the buttons, vases and woodwind instruments in his sculptures, for example, are conceived by a master woodturner in Brandenburg.

To make sense of these disparate objects, he likens the process to a literary technique called a 'Ring Composition', a way of uniting key moments by way of symmetry that, in his words, 'adopts a sort of meandering narrative'. This is played out through visual clues referencing the cyclical changing of seasons: as autumnal leaves carved from beech wood, for instance, or snowmen made from the kneecaps of cows. Nature also provides him with remnants of a life once lived, conceiving delicately painted orchids made from leftover bones found in former East Germany, or a tree log gnawed by beavers from a Brandenburg estuary. The relics are either left as they are or dealt certain sleights of hand, with trompe l'œil painting techniques feigning patina. Oscar's system for making objects requires this acute dexterity for material, but he contends that he's 'attempting to model a familiar but perhaps not completely intelligible language out of them.'

Oscar tests the limits of our perception of what he deems as 'dishonest' objects – a nod to the hopeful gravedigger who first mistook Schiller's skull. Whether as wooden vases that mimic a thick glazing technique in West Germany known as 'Fat Lava', or fruit and vegetables deftly painted to look as if they are rotting, there's a hidden rationale at play – a rewriting of a shared folklore in which objects command importance, but undeniably trick and deceive along the way.

Brunette Coleman

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1 Oscar Enberg
The Satyre, 2023
Antique ivory, ebony, turned ebony,
raccoon bone
6 x 7 x 10cm

2 Oscar Enberg
mysterious vessel, 2023
Oil, marmorino, lacquer, turned
linden wood, fox and weasel bones
67 x 50 x 25cm

3 Oscar Enberg
minor music, 2023
Oil, beaver felled tree log, turned
linden wood, iron oxide, turned elm
wood, cast plaster, fox bone, brass
160 x 70 x 95cm

4 Oscar Enberg
Stilleben mit Birne und Glüebbirne, 2023
Oil, cast plaster, turned elm wood,
linden wood, lacquer, steel wire, brass
110 x 130 x 65cm

5 Oscar Enberg
Brandenburg winter, 2023
Oil, beaver felled tree log, cow knee
cap, cast silver, rusty nail, onyx, cast
plaster, turned elm wood, brass
206 x 60 x 75cm