

Concrete and Coffins

Ledelle Moe at Commune.1

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Ledelle Moe

Husk I, 2014. Concrete and Steel .

Concrete is a magical substance. We use more concrete than any other substance, barring water. It's as close as we have gotten to creating rock, yet before it sets it is pourable, moldable and mutable. We think of concrete as unchanging and permanent, but its chemical structure changes over time, making it harder and stronger. Hitler's architect, Albert Speer, didn't use concrete because it doesn't degrade into ruins: when building an empire to last the ages, its eventual ruins must be epic and yet romantic. However, some of the most epic ruined structures are made from concrete, in particular the Colosseum, while the largest unreinforced concrete dome is Rome's Pantheon.

On the other side, concrete is the apotheosis of industrial society, as far from nature and the Romantic as possible. Robert Smithson, in his essay *The New Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*, mocks concrete structures as a sort of anti-sublime monument, something ultimately modern. He calls them ruins-in-reverse. I remember as a child, digging forts in the open fields behind my house, and the feeling of disappointment I experienced encountering a massive shard of concrete just below the surface. Frustration, because it was immovable, but also because that the land wasn't untouched.

Ledelle Moe's concrete sculptures in her exhibition 'Traces', fall by materiality alone into these strange spaces: magical, monumental, industrial, quotidian. Dominating Commune1's first space are two massive, prone birds (ornithology is not my strong point, but I think they are sparrows), entitled *Husk I & II*. The room is perfect for large sculpture, because one can also wander up a floor and one can look down on them, which adds an unusual perspective. Moe's sparrows use a classic artistic trope, that shifting scale from the small to the massive creates an uncanny sense of significance, not only in the form but in the dramatic mark-making she employs. The sparrows are clearly represented as dead, lying on their backs,

legs limp. It reminds me (and this embarrassingly reveals my upbringing in a minister's home) of a bit from Matthew in *The Bible*: 'Aren't two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will.' If we remove the Fatherliness from this verse, the idea is that all creatures share death.

Even the little can be wrought large in the face of this shared fate. They also act – because of their stony, concrete nature – as sarcophagi, which have functioned in history as a way of making a likeness solid and eternal, while simultaneously ridding the world of the flesh (sarcophagus can literally be translated as 'eater of flesh' as the lime content in the stone would do just that). This idea is solidified by the birds' construction, where the seams are visible, allowing glimpses into the hollowness inside. In this sense the sparrows function as monuments to the insignificant death, and the paltry husk that remains behind.

There is, however, something more to *Husk* than this, for on another level its sculptured hollowness reminds me of the Ghanaian tradition of wildly carved fantasy coffins. In this tradition, coffins aren't meant only as a memorial, but as something to take with one into the afterlife, that is representative of the value of your life. The sparrows then can be seen as a reminder of the value of smallness, of touching the world lightly, like a real sparrow.



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Finding VI and VII
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Upstairs, in a series of figurative sculptures entitled *Finding*, Moe's language shifts. The scale is radically reduced to a series of hand-sized sculptures, mounted on the wall and carefully picked out with spotlighting. The lighting, and the dramatic shadows it casts, acts as a signifier of contemplation - that these are objects worthy of time - and imparts them with a museum-like sense of wonder. It tends to lend the objects a sense of antiquity, as if these are archaeological finds. The figures themselves are fragmented, with the surface abraded and details softened. There is, again, a play between the quality of cement (in its industrial mode) and these delicate, ancient, fragile figures.

The sculptures' rendering is reminiscent of ancient Greek *kouros* and *kore* sculptures. These were stylized life-sized figures that were produced before the more familiar naturalistic classical figures. These young male (*kouros*) and female (*kore*) sculptures have an ambiguous function. They may have been memorials to specific youths, idealized figures or representations of deities. There are elements present in Moe's *Finding*, suggesting all of these ideas: where each figure has unique features, they are also broken and fragmented, suggesting a wholeness and perfection in the past. Ultimately, Moe's archaeological forms are highly redolent: much like the always-incomplete archaeological record itself, there is always space for conjecture and imagination amongst the solidity. With this in mind, Moe's use of concrete to make such ambiguous forms, seems apt.