

About the sculptures of Dieke Venema

The question that keeps emerging when seeing the works of Dieke Venema is what they actually are. How to define them? It is a question both about how they have come into being and what they have become, as well as how they relate to each other. Several sculptures she made a couple of years ago were created by taking an everyday, recognizable object, often literally used as basic form by the artist, and subsequently expanding it using a ceramic shell. The word 'expand' may sound peculiar in this context, but the existing object has actually been supplemented, a malleable material has been applied to it. The basis – the object – is literally situated 'in' the sculpture, forming its core and thus its starting point. Besides that, works were created based on an object – with the inspirational shape standing next to the object, as it were, not integrated into the work itself. Both of Venema's work methods have in common that they are not aimed at deforming an object that is recognizable in its shape and function. It is not about abstracting an existing form, to go from everyday to non-existent. What I think it is about is starting with a good, workable form that is found in existing objects and provides leads to work with and develop further. To arrive at a 'thing' from there, a form that convinces in itself, not because it is derived from something that already exists, but something that can be viewed for its own sake. It is a search, especially in the earlier work, for an independent form that is often monumental and always 'whole'. In that sense speaking of figuration and abstraction does not fit Venema's work.

How to arrive at such an object? I make a connection here to artist Richard Tuttle, about whom Venema and I talked in a conversation prior to writing this text. Not because Venema's work resembles Tuttle's, but rather because of similarities in their work method and attention. When in a catalogue of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1979 Tuttle talks about determining the vertical element in a piece, he writes the following: 'It is really a complicated work method, a combination of rational, seemingly rational and irrational things – the more the better – it is the shape the work takes, but it is only justified by research.' Knowing when a work is good, when it is 'right', takes its own time according to Tuttle; it is something else than (wanting to) understand. In his opinion, knowing should come to us, and that is what happens within an attentive work process that is guided by experience.

In the presentation at Witte Olifanten, three free-standing objects made by Venema a couple of years ago, are combined with a more recent work, that may be easily seen as a footnote, hanging on the wall small and a little timid. However, it is an element that is much more dominant than its size and placement suggest. More than the other three standing objects, that are similar to each other in approach and appearance, the hanging piece indicates a mindset, a development. The free-standing sculptures have a rough skin, are more robust. In Venema's more recent work, ceramics, a material familiar to her, have been handled in a different way. Incidentally, the small piece does not only consist of ceramics, but of two different materials that simultaneously distinguish the two parts of the work from each other, namely a flat element of polyester carrying several ceramic balloons. These have been thrown on a potter's wheel and then pushed into shape. As a result, they have a smoother skin than her earlier ceramic work, while the polyester part that carries the balloons has an even smoother surface.

Venema's current work is less monolithic, both in form – it is multiple rather than fragmented – and in meaning: looking less 'from one piece', it is more approachable, more open. In this context, one could even use the term polyphony, whereas the earlier works are more monophonic. According to the artist herself, the earlier work was more solution-oriented,

resulting in a visual form that leaves few other options open. This strong orientation toward completion has been mitigated a bit: the more recent work is less complete. It offers possibilities without wanting to be ultimate.

The place Venema's small object occupies in the room is also different compared to the more monumental works, which influences the character of the hanging work. In her recent work there is less reasoning from the sculpture as a centre. As the piece is hanging on the wall, one cannot walk around it, and therefore it relates to a greater extent to the flat surface, to the vertical wall instead of the horizontal floor, than the earlier work did. The free-standing objects, which only requires a stable base and the effects of gravity to remain standing, take on a more autonomous posture. These pieces can be viewed from all sides.

Venema's development as an artist, of which one becomes aware when viewing earlier and more recent work in one and the same room, is not a step forward, but a step in a different direction. The changes in the more recent work have their basis in the making process, departing subtly from other preconditions, possibilities and interests. This is not about 'inventing' new images, but about working with the essential components of sculpture to arrive at form and identity. During this process, searching for unity and the monumentality that often accompanies it, is abandoned. The changes that originate in the thinking and making process, also have their impact on the relation of the work with the viewer – it is more approachable – and on the relation to Venema's other works: though it is still about visual and material proposals and interpretations of form, the essence of the work has clearly shifted in the new objects. As a result, the earlier sculptures acquire new possibilities: suddenly, it is conceivable that the single objects could form a configuration, rising up from the floor as upturned balloons. The effect of the sculptures, it turns out, lies between their physical shape and the ideas that surround them.

Noor Mertens, 2018