

THE POETICS OF MISTAKEN FORMS

Dan Rule, Vault Magazine, 2014

Freewheeling Swiss duo Bastien Aubry and Dimitri Broquard make happily wonky ceramics and playfully grotesque sculptural forms via a process of accident by design.

Bastien Aubry and Dimitri Broquard like to smile a lot. Any discussion surrounding their work tends to result in a grin, an in-joke or a shifty sideways look. From Broquard, there's talk of working with "excess information", of creating "visual pollution". Aubry muses, deadpan, on "perverted ceramics", "twisted realities" and the idea of transforming a material usually considered "very special and noble" into "something you can screw into". And there is laughter – plenty of it – as they sit shoulder-to-shoulder in their shared Zurich studio.

It's little wonder. The pair have garnered a reputation by way of mutating and vandalising traditional artisan Swiss ceramics, creating perfectly symmetrical IKEA-like display environments and documenting their often farcically abject sculptures (a naive, life-size ceramic chainsaw glazed in pearly white, for one, or a pair of shackled hands that double as an incense holder and ashtray, for another) against modernistic 1980s interiors – glass coffee tables, vertical venetian blinds, shagpile, black leather and all.

"We love to try and create a contrast between good and bad taste," offers Aubry at one point, his strong Swiss accent flitting jauntily from syllable to syllable. "It's about making a contrast between interior design elements and our ceramic stuff, to try to play with these environments. It almost works as a test: you place your work in an environment to discover how it reacts, and if it's too good..."

"It's boring," Broquard politely interrupts. "But it's also a very pragmatic thing because when you work with ceramics, the objects are small – you can't build huge sculptures with ceramics – so it's a way to expose and to feel the space."

While humour is a central device for Aubry and Broquard – who showed with Murray White Room at Art Basel Hong Kong in May and Spring 1883 in August after signing with the Melbourne art dealer in late 2013 – their work doesn't merely operate within a conceptual bracket of shits and giggles. Indeed, there's an understated, nonetheless pointed criticality to their practice, which expounds and deconstructs value systems surrounding high and low culture, good and bad taste, design and improvisation, and the artisanal and art.

Their porcelain vessels are perhaps the most telling example. Having assumed various guises over the years, their defining trait is the fact that they are all originally made by an artisan ceramicist Switzerland's Jura Mountains using traditional techniques. Aubry and Broquard have the jugs delivered to their studio air dried, only to set about denting, shaping, collapsing and "vandalising" the classic vessels before they reach the kiln. The end result is a set of forms that alludes to the functional domestic object and maintains its trace, but becomes sculptural and absurd. The work sways between usability and abstraction, functionality and non-functionality.

"We find that the jugs, as a starting point, are interesting objects," says Broquard. "The jug has been in existence forever and it's so realised formally, but then we try to develop them and expand on them like sculptures. It's about playing with these ideas of design and art and craft."

Adds Aubry: "In the beginning, we were trying to make them by ourselves, but it's important to have somebody who is technically astute make them because they need that legitimacy in some way," he says. "I think people definitely look at these objects and think 'Could I use it, or not?' and that's really interesting."

"It's not just for the museum – it don't make sense on a pedestal – so they could just be for your apartment, but it's not functional and it doesn't really work, and that's all part of it. We like to play with that idea."

Their series *Les cruches molles* (2010) saw them dramatically warp, collapse and rupture jugs glazed in white and hand-painted blue, mimicking traditional Delft pottery. But the painted vistas, which might have traditionally taken the form of peaceful pastoral scenes, further erode the work's lineage. The fragile vessels – stacked precariously atop one another and scattered about the gallery as if fallen from the

heavens – instead sport paintings of car crashes, scenes of debauchery, giant wolves and leering, wraithlike faces. They are so close to legitimate usable objects, but so far.

Other vessels have included their Jugs series from 2012, which showed alongside Linus Bill and Adrien Horni as part of a group show curated Gianni Jetzer at the Swiss Institute, New York. Merging hand-painted elements, sculptural and textural interventions and layered digital prints depicting Snickers wrappers and other consumerist detritus, the duo presented the happy mess of mangled forms on a meticulous geometrical arrangement of nondescript shelving units – two clear aisles or rows cutting a swathe through the gallery space.

For Aubry and Broquard, whose own studio shelves are littered with a jumble of books, sculptural works and objects, it's all part of the strategy. "The gallery is a white room, a white cube that is neat and nice," says Aubry. "So it's always interesting to create work that completely contrasts to that."

Broquard elaborates: "We're interested in both sides – the structure and the mistakes. I think it's important to have both together and you can see that in the way we make these shelves to present the work on. They are these very straight, geometric structures, so they look nice working together. The mistakes have to be presented within a structure."

It's no mistake that the pair come from a design background. Indeed, they still actively run graphic design studio FLAG, which has made a name for its experimental, illustration and drawing-heavy approach to poster, catalogue and book design. The duo founded the studio in 2002 after originally meeting in design school and it now boasts a client list including the likes of the Swiss Institute, influential small press art publishers Nieves, Harper Collins and countless European museums and art institutions.

Art was never really part of the plan for the pair, but serendipity can have a strange way of rearing its head. "Making art was not a decision as such," says Broquard. "It started slowly and spontaneously."

"I guess we just began to do more and more specialist work, stuff without clients and stuff without purpose," continues Aubry, "and that's when we were suddenly making art. With design, there is always a purpose and this is why it became really important to make our own stuff, which was far more personal."

"It ended up working in a way that if we veered towards bad taste or the ugly object, we would know it was no longer design. This is an interesting thing with art – you can work with images and forms that are in no way nice."

"It's about exploring the idea of aesthetics," adds Broquard. "What is nice? What is beautiful? What is ugly? What is handcraft?"

One of Aubry and Broquard's key projects of the last few years was *Les Modernistes* (2009–2011), a series of mock touristic photographs and sculptural objects that saw the pair visit random European modernist sculptures in the public space, take happy snaps of each other beside them, then render domestically scaled, ceramic replicas of each sculpture as a kind of deadpan keepsake. While the series again espoused value systems relating to the art commission and the touristic souvenir, it also wryly questioned the politics of aesthetics.

"These abstract sculptures were actually pretty fascinating because we don't know who commissioned them and what was the purpose," says Broquard. "It just seemed that they were there because people felt they had to be there."

"We would ask the question of whether the sculpture was nice or ugly or why it was even there in the first place," says Aubry. "We also wanted to make a little bit of fun of these artworks, which were all so serious. It was like, 'Actually, it's just ugly,'" he laughs. "So we thought it would be interesting to collect them in a way and rebuild them as this domestically scaled series."

Adds Broquard: "We couldn't collect these ugly sculptures so we made small ones that you could collect and put on your shelf."

There have been plenty of other projects: oversized, hyper-colour ceramic cigarette butts; various series of digital paintings; etched kitchen cabinet drawings; ceramic planks (complete with mock nails); and the worm-like series hanging, draping ceramics installed on pegboard, *Worst Only* (2010). A recent series, *Cerebral Box* (2014), comprises oddly gorgeous ceramic cereal boxes, their surfaces slathered in a cacophony of painted and digitally transferred images; cereal branding and art history references mangle, merge and intermesh.

"We had the idea of making these cereal boxes, but we didn't want to just remake the boxes in a way, because that would just be like like pop art," explains Broquard. "Instead, we decided to fill them with modern and antique art references to add a new level of content."

"A cereal box is something you look at every day when you make breakfast," offers Aubry, breaking into a chuckle. "So we thought it was quite a nice idea to mix this everyday idea of cereal with beautiful art. I think it's cool to mix them together."

Their latest works have included a large outdoor sculpture that can be used as a barbecue and a series of “everyday ruins” in the form of sculptures referencing CD racks and the increasingly obsolete medium. “As the CD is in a bad way, we thought we’d give it a new life,” says Broquard. As part of the project, the pair commissioned a musician friend to compose a series of sound works by using the sculptures as percussive instruments. Ironically, the “ethnographic-sounding” results were then released on CD. A recent group show at SWG3 Gallery in Glasgow, Folklore Contemporain III saw them debut their aforementioned “perverted ceramics” – a series of delicate ceramic brackets that hold up a series of otherwise nondescript shelves.

It’s all part of wider, wonderfully contrary attitude – one that puts the error, the stuff-up and the bizarre outcomes of mistakes at the forefront. “I guess you could say that our interest in mistakes started by making them,” says Aubry, smiling. “When we were doing drawings and illustrations for FLAG, we always ended up liking the mistakes and the bad drawings more than the good ones. The spontaneous images – the not so perfect ones – were always nicer than the end product, so that is where the interest in the idea came about.”

And for Aubry and Broquard, that’s precisely what’s so attractive about working with ceramics. “You certainly can’t plan everything,” offers Broquard. “There are always surprises and things never quite come back as we thought, so there are always new directions. We always leave a lot of space for improvisation in this way.”

“If we make stuff, there is always this moment of randomness,” adds Aubry. “You just need to have the eye to catch the moment.”

There’s a moment’s contemplation, a rising smile. “Mistakes happen,” says Broquard with a shrug. “But you have to decide which one is a good mistake and which is bad.”