



Thea Djordjadze

Delicacy, vitrines and Modernism;
scaffolding, relics and arcades

by Quinn Latimer

Recalling calcified doves' wings, folded and come to rest on lean, modernist wooden scaffolding or thick earth-coloured carpets, Thea Djordjadze's recent assembled objects and installations – though newly made – emit a dusty perfume called 'Time' or, perhaps, 'Ages'. Over the past decade, the work of the Georgian-born, Cologne-based artist has straddled a twinned impulse toward the scientific and the elegiac. Djordjadze's sculptural work strikes a certain archaeological tenor, as she variously excavates modernist design, tropes of early 1960s' sculpture, nomadic textiles and relic-like objects that convey an acutely corporeal intensity.

Despite their spare architectonic rigour, Djordjadze's installations can read like vestiges of ancient nomadic tribes. This is particularly the case in her small, clay, plaster or papier-mâché objects. Quickly moulded by hand or roughly cast from everyday items, the sculptures are malformed, buckled and weirdly beautiful; with their pale, ghost-like presence, they could be ancient skins shrugged off in the process of moulting. Displayed as companions to her plinths, vitrines and shelves, the objects read as relics of humanity left to fossilize near the artefacts of human ingenuity. In Djordjadze's 2009 exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel, 'endless enclosure', the centrepiece was a large room filled with a constellation of such sculptural works. Traditional rugs made by nomads in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Morocco were placed on the floor with austere, furniture-like wood structures and small plaster objects. Arranged with the precision of a finished archaeological dig, none of the assembled works were more than knee-high. Accordingly, the tall white walls (empty but gleaming) seemed to stand in quiet awe at the astonishing trove at their feet. Each work featured a deft admixture of materials and cultures – sourced from Modernism to Primitivism – but this was less a historiographic

presentation of traditional design versus modern aesthetics than a mixing of those histories and their materials in order to create some strange new brew.

If Djordjadze's excavatory impulses are a favoured trend among a slew of young artists working today, the way in which she directs them are unique. Her work is devoid of the fetishistic clarity of museological approaches (no pinned and labelled butterflies here). Instead, a more abstracted feeling for form and content – and thus a larger realm of latent meaning – reigns. Her works approximate but never quite embody. For example, in her 2008 solo exhibition at Sprüth Magers in Cologne, she presented a large wood and glass structure that functioned as a display case for a series of watercolours and husk-like clay and plaster objects. Neither bookcase nor vitrine, the sober, skeletal structure of *Time Future Contained in Time Past* (2008) was meant to function loosely as an 'arcade', a reference to Walter Benjamin's project on Modernism, urbanism and memory. Thus the institutional authority usually accorded the vitrine took on a more metaphysical dimension. The work appeared to be about memory, no matter what the memories were, and left the installation open to multiple readings. Were the spare watercolours sketches for her sculptures or autonomous works to be read like hieroglyphs behind the glass? What were the roughly formed objects – casts, skulls, fragments? That the meticulous structure presented holdings that were so provisional made it a kind of sly study of historical display – and of the glass houses that reliably hold our memories – with the expected narrative all but obscured. Just as one's eyes moved from object to object before finally perceiving the work as a whole, Djordjadze's practice appears occupied with similarly formed constellations of history, in which ideologies and events, as autonomous as stars, gradually form themselves over time into a larger (dazzling or despondent) recognizable shape.

Below left:
Liege
2007
Concrete, coated steel
69×196×50 cm

Below middle and right:
Time Future Contained in Time Past
2008
Wood, glass, oil on linen,
watercolour on paper,
jute, clay, plaster
(detail)
Left: 392×202×212 cm
Right: 21×15 cm

Opposite:
Untitled
2009
Wood, lacquer, plaster,
watercolour paint
111×140×50 cm
Exhibition view from
'endless enclosure'
2009
Kunsthalle Basel

Djordjadze's interest in display and design is not relegated to Modernism and its 'primitive' precursors, however. Together with Rosemarie Trockel, with whom she studied at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and has since frequently collaborated, the artist recently designed Image Movement, a film shop and cinema within Sprüth Magers' new Berlin gallery. Functioning as a film archive of sorts, the shop takes a more practical approach to the preservation of memory. This interest in interior design – and Trockel's influence – also extends to Djordjadze's choice of materials, which are a combination of the feminine (ceramic, textiles, soap, glitter, watercolour) and the architectural (plywood, plaster, metal, PVC). From 1999 until 2003, Djordjadze was also a member of *hobypopMUSEUM*, a Düsseldorf collective with which she curated, performed, published and exhibited. Since then, she has continued to collaborate on occasion, but has concentrated her efforts on her increasingly cogent body of work, in which the sameness of materials and methods are plumed to resounding effect.

In the short essay 'Excavation and Memory' (1931–4), Benjamin writes that man 'must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter' as it yields 'those images that, severed from all earlier associations, reside as treasures in the sober rooms of our later insights – like torsos in a collector's gallery.' Djordjadze appears to have taken his advice to heart, repeatedly returning to the same materials, which, in their re-shaping, both lose and advance their initial referents. In the 'sober rooms' of her installations, Djordjadze's objects make claims not just on memory but on the poetic imagination that sets it spinning – backward and forward.

