

John K. Raustein: Volume and Dissonance

Text by art historian, critic and writer, Line Ulekleiv

Når alt vi vet blir fremmed (omstridte beslutninger) (When Everything We Know Becomes Strange (Controversial Decisions)) has temporarily settled into Sølvberget galleri, slap-bang in the middle of Stavanger. The gallery at the library sits right at the hub of the inner city. This is the artist's own stamping ground, and the local geography finds embodiment in his works, first and foremost in his choice of palette. A library is by definition a reservoir of sources, references, book learning, and literary experience. Through text and images it allows us to visualise and imagine other times and other places in a space that is social and democratic.

I.

For John K. Raustein, every new exhibition space represents an opportunity to add new folds, drapes, and bulges to textile materials and to an ongoing and ever unfolding narrative. Once again he has created an exhibition that utterly transforms the space. Four monumental rooms full of shelves piled high with soft objects, all sewn from a plain cotton canvas in a time-consuming and repetitive process. An immense, writhing mass of ragged cascades. And underlying it all is a certain labyrinthine dramaturgy. One has to find a particular orientation among the four abstract, expressive scenarios. Invited into this abundance of textiles, each viewer will bring their own set of diverse ideas and associations. The rooms overflow with a disorienting jumble of forms, yet at the same time they seem marked by some paradoxical order – shelves stacked with an eclectic archive. What kind of display space is a shelf, and what possible purpose might these objects serve? Could they be props for some mysterious theatrical production? The primary organising principle here is the colours: primrose, aqua, terracotta, and sage – each separately marking a route through the architecture, while collectively forming a quartet like the seasons of the year.

Raustein forges his own method. He works sequentially, over long periods of time, taking each element as a foundation for the next, creating individual installations that can be dismantled and recombined. Elements from earlier exhibitions (such as the one he presented at Kunstnerforbundet in 2019) are integrated into new constellations, forming works that

point both to their origins and to continuation. In effect, each of Raustein's textile sculptures is like a body that grows amorphously and connects successively to other bodies.

The idiom that Raustein has developed over several decades has grown increasingly complex and could certainly not be described as ascetic or anaemic. If anything, it consists of volumes that spawn an inconclusive openness. The experimentation with shapes and forms that take possession of the space gives rise to something almost grotesque. The softness and sensuality of the material seems overwhelming. The bloated masses of fabric piled up in baroque, voluminous folds produce an exaggerated and repetitive decorative effect. There is an ambiguity to the seeming voluptuousness in all this material variety, a monumentality that also evokes a sense of threat. The shelves are loaded with textile objects that bulge and swell uncontrollably, almost to the point of bursting from their skins. At the same time, there's a hint of something more repressed in the more tightly rolled bundles, which seem to allude to mechanical installations.

II.

For Raustein, personal narrative is infused into the very fibres and their tactile aspect. To feel the fabric (also with the eyes) is a reflex that involves a mingling of the past and the present, the allusion to material sensations that have become part of us. Knots can suddenly appear in the long thread of time. The artist uses personal memories and distinct references to his own childhood. His works can be viewed as possible points of access to identity and memory.

Textiles are per se pliant and metaphorical. The fact that they provide protective warmth and insulation makes them supremely indispensable and hence timeless.

Raustein reflects on the world and status of textiles and their tradition, like a sensual *perpetuum mobile*. He nods to role models and colleagues who for him are synonymous with inspiration and respect, people like Sheila Hicks, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Bente Sætrang, Hanne Friis, and Gunvor Nervold Antonsen. In his shelf sculptures, he often pays homage to such artists who use textiles in their work (his assistant and colleague Line Solberg Dolmen, for example, has put her own signature to one of the objects in the primrose room). This use of multiple voices expands the domain of textile activity. The strengthened status of textiles

as an art medium over recent decades has allowed it to become a soft sounding board for existential questions. As a result, its position on the outside, or on the margins, of established art history has begun to shift. Raustein's works are permeated with an awareness of the conventional gender associations of textiles as both discipline and medium, and accordingly he seeks out borderline situations where the categories begin to bleed into one another.

Raustein approaches the debate by abstracting and integrating it into his sweeping draperies. At the same time, he explicitly references the construction site as a source of inspiration. In his own words, the dream of becoming a handyman has always remained beyond his reach, because none of the ready-made guises of masculinity has ever fitted him. Nevertheless, he now gets the better of the physical paraphernalia of the construction site by subjecting it to an aesthetic gaze, translating its features into textiles and making them part of his own construction. Parallel formal configurations occur in the very different situations of the construction site and the gallery. Raustein has discovered and documented a kind of involuntary art in the textiles and similar materials used to protect and insulate items on construction sites. Metal armature, pipes, coils, and reinforcing mesh serve as direct templates for softer, more amorphous textile forms. Diverse practical materials thereby acquire their artistic doubles, extensions through interpretation.

III.

Raustein is always on a quest for just the right colours. He quite literally wants to get inside them, as if to inhabit them. Colours are self-asserting. They allow us to orient ourselves optically outside of language, within the body. Our experience of colours, whether isolated or in shimmering cascades, can be as tangible as it is enigmatic – there is always something that evades articulation, that sits on the periphery of vision. The exhibition is divided into four colour zones, inspired by the legendary film *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* from 1989, in which the director Peter Greenaway used colours in an emphatically theatrical and symbolic manner. In this film, cinematic violence and cruel beauty are channelled through colour – most memorably in a sequence that considers why black foodstuffs (such as Russian caviar and black truffle) are the most expensive. They represent the overcoming of death: Death – I eat you.

In contrast, Raustein's palette comes across as a cluster of literary references to his own childhood. In its monochrome aspect, the exhibition induces a peculiar colour blindness. All of the same tone, the forms blur into each other, erasing their differences. The use of primrose, an acidulous yellowish green, hints at spring, which starts early in Jæren. Everything comes to life cyclically. For Raustein, the mellow grey-blue hue known as aqua suggests the distinctive lofty blue skies of the Jæren landscape. The terracotta colour is taken directly from the last roll of film to contain pictures of the artist's father, which, after his death, were developed in sepia tones by mistake. Finally, there's a shade of green that can be described as sage, jade, or lime. For Raustein, the colour cannot be dissociated from his mother, since it was her favourite. Thus, his palette is resonant with memories of his family. Colours can speak of loss, but serve at the same time to keep the memories of people fresh; anchors to life. The artist also links this shade of green with the shuttering that was erected in Oslo after the terrorist bombing of 22 July 2011. The city's residents were kept at a distance, yet between the boards were cracks that they could peep through. It is a reference that also throws light on the one room in Raustein's exhibition to which access is denied. The green room is roped off so that visitors can only peer in at the unexplained tableau from outside – an inaccessible volume, a silent space full of underlying dissonance.