

By Renske Janssen

Trick or Trait. Gestures on Social Status is the title of the exhibition of Maartje Folkeringa that I visited recently in art space Onomatopée in Eindhoven. The title is a reference to an American tradition in which children dress up for Halloween as skeletons, vampires or pirates. They call at houses in their neighbourhood and scare the residents by yelling "Trick or Treat!" which generally means the children demand candy (treat) at the threat of mischief (trick). Their little costumes are supposed to frighten and 'confuse' the residents but because they are children the peculiar cultural custom has something endearing to it. The traditional collection of candy stands for a mentality that, to put it bluntly, is fundamental to the consumer culture. After all, America is still the land of pop art, consumerism and capitalism. And the tradition has spread to other parts of the world. By turning 'Treat' to 'Trait' – as in character traits – the expression takes on a more honourable connotation that touches upon Maartje Folkeringa's artistic practice: "Reveal your character or die!" Her art seems to challenge the visitors to show themselves rather than to hide behind their cultural image.

According to curator Freek Lomme, Folkeringa's work is mainly focused on the 'non-verbal means of communication in our social interaction, our behaviour and the symbols we use to express our worth'. And indeed it is possible to read the underlying, invisible verbal forms in Folkeringa's work. But it would be somewhat odd to only talk about "invisibility" when her work is undeniably explicit, rough and ragged. In what way are form and content connected in her work? And is Folkeringa after some form of social criticism or is it all utterly ironic?

At a closer look Folkeringa's sculptures are usually made of "worthless" materials such as plastic, paper, foil, found scraps of metal and PUR foam (polyurethane). The subject

matter touches upon our daily visual surrounding, mass and consumer culture. This places her in the Pop Art tradition of putting a spotlight on ordinary objects in order to question their value. Folkeringa's *Bust Gentleman VII* (2009) for example is made of PUR foam, paper and plasticine and shows a bespectacled man on a pedestal in Onomatopée's gallery space. A remarkable form that is sufficiently figurative, one would think, to speak for itself. Could it be someone's portrait? The man remains anonymous though. The work's title therefore evokes even stronger the image of an average office employee or civil servant: inconspicuous, non-distinctive, his expression neutral. With the head separated from his body he becomes even more anonymous. The sweet colours his face is painted with betray a certain empathy the artist might feel for him. Perhaps she wants to cheer him up. We may conclude that this is not satire but rather a modest tribute to the average man, worker or civil servant. In an artistic context he might even flourish as an individual and distinguish himself from the masses.

Other sculptures by Folkeringa, like *Lady I and Iguana dog* (2010), are based on observations of an environment. She made this work during her stay at the Instituto Buena Vista, the Curacao Center for Contemporary Art. The Lady, dressed in a blue bikini with gold glitter, has long sharp nails that are painted blue with glittering nail polish; at her side she has a pet iguana. Here it seems that criticism is interlaced with irony, a strategy or procedure that a young generation of artists knows how to balance remarkably well. In addition the material is typical for them. To create something with shallow financial resources means you need to make use of found materials, which also means a more conscious mentality of sustainable artistic

design. While Folkeringa on emphasising the content in her work, the figures of her own friends and acquaintances are neutral and not mentioned. As if she says to anyone, it could be you, universal so we are all of them.

Sometimes Folkeringa is content of the direct and American sculptor Pauline Mooney's unequivocal picture of Hollywood to be more work is fragmented and in the choice of both matter. Also because consuming person and person presents to his fellow trophies to someone else a reward for achievement turn as comfort and "s function as jewellery and images that reappear in relations. The sweet colours them as she does in her number of star-shaped in various shapes and you can buy at the fair pink candy sticks. But actually more optimistic. At the downstairs floor exhibition space, for the wall is filled with images stars, jewellery and other and symbols of our (consumer) material is derived from collection that she attempts to categorise the media imagery using titles 'fair' or 'award ribbon' side and above one another wall is flanked on the

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design. While Folkeringa appears to be bent on emphasising the contemporary and banal in her work, the figures also often refer to her own friends and acquaintances. Yet their titles are neutral and no names have been mentioned. As if she says, "this could be anyone, it could be you". She makes them universal so we are able to identify with them.

Sometimes Folkeringa's figures are reminiscent of the direct and confrontational art of American sculptor Paul McCarthy. He paints an unequivocal picture of the Western world, of Hollywood to be more precise. But her work is fragmented and displays roughness in the choice of both materials and subject matter. Also because she emphasises the consuming person and the guises this person presents to his fellow man. He donates trophies to someone else, for example, as a reward for achievements, that serve in turn as comfort and "soothers" and equally function as jewellery and candy. They are all images that reappear in Folkeringa's installations. The sweet colours she applies to them as she does in her *The Best* series, a number of star-shaped objects that return in various shapes and sizes, recall the treats you can buy at the fair, like candy floss and pink candy sticks. But Folkeringa's work is actually more optimistic than McCarthy's. At the downstairs floor of Onomatopee's exhibition space, for example, an entire wall is filled with images of candy, watches, stars, jewellery and other representations and symbols of our (commercial) world. The material is derived from Folkeringa's image collection that she stores in folders in an attempt to categorise the daily stream of media imagery using titles like 'no-clue-cool', 'fair' or 'award ribbon'. They are hanging beside and above one another informally. The wall is flanked on the opposite side by the

book 'See me' by philosopher and musician Frank Meester. In a nutshell it is a cultural analysis of and a tribute to vanity. While vanity is often discussed in negative terms, Meester, and Folkeringa too, consider it to be a creative driving force instead. The way in which she shows things in a positive light that were previously discussed in negative terms, is actually her strength. She playfully lets them reappear in fragments throughout the art space. In this way she sets out a potential for her own art practice while avoiding repetition. Folkeringa stretches some of art's aesthetic boundaries. She explores the expectations of what Great Art should look like by selecting materials and subjects that do have serious symbolic value but not necessarily a directly economic one.

BANALITY AS A STRATEGY FOR SURVIVAL

The paradox in Folkeringa's work is the way criticism is expressed through the surface of the material. Someone who serves as an inspiration is Jeff Koons but Haim Steinbach or Robert Gober might be mentioned here as well. Koons claims to do so by applying shiny materials to his sculptures in which the viewer sees his own reflection. It makes him wonder what it is he is actually looking at: himself or the art object? This is exactly how Koons wants to challenge his audience to question the value of art: is it art or isn't it?

Folkeringa herself hardly ever uses reflecting surfaces, with the exception of the installation *Showroom* (2012), from which series one work is shown in Onomatopee. Two arches made of small shining cylinders, hung opposite one another, resemble enlarged Chanel earrings. At closer inspection, however, the material only appears to be precious while the work actually consists of hand-made plastic cylinders wrapped in gold foil. I wonder where the social criticism or irony is most clearly visible, in what kind of artistic surface. What is more attractive: material, mentality, or the shape of candy?