

The alchemy of things

About Kasper Kjeldgaard's paper works in wax and the vibrant dust of pollen

Active, eager, airy thing,

Ever hovering on the wing.<sup>1</sup>

In the spring all living things vibrate in a willingness to connect with each other and each other's each other. As we breathe in the pollen-yellow flower dust that dances rhythmically to the wind, we taste the food that nourishes the insects, that colours their feet and yellows their bodies.

*Cera alba* is the scientific Latin name for the common type of beeswax that is produced directly from glands on the back of the honeybee (*Apis mellifera*),<sup>2</sup> where the whitish virgin wax gathers in small flakes for use in building up the hexagonal cells that contain the queen bee's eggs. Pigments from flower pollen, resin and propolis mix in with the wax and give it its yellow ochre tone, while excrement and remains of the closed cocoons are left behind by the bee larvae.

In Kasper Kjeldgaard's paper works we find the beeswax as densely packed horizon lines in landscapes. It impregnates more than colours the structure of the paper, melting into the fibres of the sheets, becoming a third substance in a symbiosis. In the stiffened material of the wax paper one can see a shimmering that recalls the crystalline structure of old glass windows, which as we know thicken at the bottom as the ever-living material that glass is. Similarly, the presence of time can be sensed in the overlapping of the wax and its running along the edges of the papers, in view of the process that has gone before, with the many dips of the sheets into the warm tubs.

The generous contribution of the wax to the paper works is manifested as a second membrane, a skin that breathes in the sun-warmed space and emits a mildly sweet scent of honey. Alongside the scent the wax has the character of a plastic material that is proof against the moisture of the air and protects against ultraviolet radiation. As an organic material with a special stability this means that, contrary to all reason, it has been found well preserved at Neolithic burial sites 6000-5000 years old.

These are only some of the reasons why the material has achieved a mythical status across cultural boundaries. In ancient Egypt it was used as an outer skin and sealant in the mummification process, while in the Mesoamerican Maya culture and other cultures of Central and South America as far south as the Amazon and the Andes it was considered a magical material that could mediate between spirits and human beings and was part of some of the earliest known rituals.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristophanes, *Knights*, 400, *The Plays by Aristophanes*, Everyman's Library, London, 1909

<sup>2</sup> Originally named by the Swedish physicist, botanist and zoologist Carl Linnaeus in his work *Systema Naturae* (1735), which set up a new hierarchical classification of the plants and animals of nature.

In the visual arts wax has been a functional raw material for the *cire perdue* bronze moulding technique, where the living expression of ancient sculpture profited from its plasticity, just as shamanist features have been used artistically in contacts with the practices of non-western cultures through the raw materials of nature. The German conceptual and performance artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) used shamanism progressively as an artistic strategy, and spoke with wax, fat and wool in his installations and performances to the irrational and mystical sides of human beings, and to the idea of working in physically, morally and spiritually healing ways with society. Just as Beuys was marked by Rudolf Steiner's esoteric philosophy Anthroposophy, the holistic thinking in Kjeldgaard's work is suggested in the circular spatial objects.

I recognize a veiling in the overlap of the wax in the quadratically dipped sheets, as in the large paper works that hang from the ceiling and fold in over themselves. Here one senses how with the veil of the folds and dips one can envelop layers of time and meaning and convey the concentrated, saturating story that the beeswax brings with it. The veiling is very finely calibrated by the transparency of the wax, which allows the gaze to continue into the work rather than stop at the surface, and from there gain awareness of the content of the refined layers.

The abstract works interweave with references to ritual acts and cultural histories, while directly and multi-sensorially expressing how something can be meaningful without being capable of explanation. Subtly, in the silent space, they are given the opportunity to say something that makes me think how much the volume with which you express something depends on the context. In some contexts it will feel as if you are shouting; while in others you will hardly be audible.

Nina Wöhlk – written in May 2018 for the exhibition Transparensen.