

*Material: A discussion of Maria Mikulic's Russian Doll (Hysterectomy), exhibited in 'Past Particles', at the VAV Gallery May 10<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup>, 2010.*

*Now go to sleep,  
the needle scratched,  
Hippocrates wants to calm you.*

– Sonya Whitefield, Ode to Hysteria

**Svea Vikander:** In this piece, as with others in the show, you incorporate two (at least – I see clay and textiles though there may be more) media. What do you enjoy about working with these media and what import (if any) do they carry for you, as an artist and as a woman?

**Marija Mikulic:** I do enjoy working with more than one material, and often the material I choose and the way I use it has much to do with its own connotations and history especially if it's reused. I like to overturn or contextualize that meaning or history in a contemporary way. Giving the material as well as the object a new context is something that permeates my work extensively. Of course fibres and ceramics have deep-seated feminine connotations and are strongly linked to craft. Perhaps not so much today but these materials have had to struggle for a long time in the artworld, much like women and other marginalized artists. Most of the work in the show is craft-like or speaks about craft in some way, but upon a closer look discusses very serious issues. I guess I really like that inviting and repelling dichotomy.

**SV:** To me, this suggests a sort of adult ludic formation – playing with the magnetism and repulsion of objects. There is an emphasis on nostalgia in the show's write-up, a sensation that was once considered a disease (it is derived from the Greek *nostos*, "homecoming" and *algos*, "pain, grief, distress") but now lies somewhere between mourning, sentimentality and comfort. Your work with repurposed materials from the past confronts the viewer with a similar kind of confusion, a pull towards both comfort and estrangement.

**MM:** I've read that it is human nature to find comfort in familiarity. We have a need to draw conclusions from our "evidence" so we can create our own personal meanings. I like to play between connecting those meanings and leaving things open to interpretation to make room for more meaning. I am particularly interested in opening up questions of environment and identity: Who are we? Where do we come from? Where we are going? and how are we getting there? These questions I think can all be discussed and commented on through material use. For example, in "Wool Sheeps" and "Leather Cows" I took materials from used human products and remade them into the original source. For me this discusses how appreciation and respect for material has been lost as we are so far removed from the material process.

**SV:** Yes, and this desire to bring materials into the foreground is perhaps also present in *Russian Doll (Hysterectomy)*. I was struck by the way it makes visible in concrete forms that which is usually only visible through a screen, mediated. It presents us with immediacy, tangibility. Even the fabrics are intimate – we cannot hide from their materiality, their softness and texture, their positioning on the floor. This is so striking because although it seems very much alive, it also serves as a reminder of death, or our

own mortality. Kundera says in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: "Death has two faces. One is nonbeing; the other is the terrifying material being that is the corpse." To your mind, what relationship do these materials bear to the body?

**MM:** This piece is made of both ceramics and textiles; the organ pieces are replicas of the inner organs of the body including the female reproductive system, approximately three times their original size (or more) to fill the interior cavity of the doll. The intestines are approximately 30 feet long of knitted wool. I tried to pick the colours from vintage medical illustrations. The liver and heart are made of old dresses (the heart is mine and the liver one from a Hasidic Jew). These choices again come back to material and the comfort we have from these fabrics, and soft pillows that contrast the disgust and discomfort of death and surgery and the body. Contrasted by the organs the container itself is unharmed and perfect but remains cold, lifeless and anonymous.

**SV:** This material contrast is echoed by the piece's spatial structure – as in the way the organ textile pieces spill out onto the floor. This movement contrasts sharply with the smooth, uncracked surfaces of the top/bottom of the 'doll', which seem like perfect and static containers. In fact, perhaps a Russian Doll is the perfect container: it contains itself and is self-contained, containing a replica of itself containing a replica of itself...

**MM:** I wanted to portray that doll as real. As reality, like a child would see. In childhood, everything and anything is reality... As you said, the doll of course contains dolls within itself and nothing more. We are raised with images of these feminine idols (Barbies, babies, Virgin Mary), empty vessels, functional, minus personality.

**SV:** It's true, and we often see the mother in particular represented as a vessel, a conduit for reproduction and sometimes (as in Soviet Russia), national pride. And if we see the mother as container (as in Erich Neumann's 'The Great Mother', a psychoanalytic worldview that posits a mythical mother/life-force as vessel for all things), this is problematic because we necessarily see the sterile woman as broken container.

**MM:** These dolls are indeed representations of the mother – the traditional 'Russian Doll' is called *Matryoshka* from the Russian name *Matryona*, derived from the Latin root *mater*, which means "Mother". This name was associated with the image of the mother of a big peasant family who was very healthy and had a portly figure. I did not directly link Russia's fertility/sterility issues to the piece but more my own mother's. My family is from Croatia (former Yugoslavia, where there was a major Russian influence – growing up my mother had to learn Russian and Catholics were not allowed to practice their faith). Interestingly enough, both of my grandmothers had 10 or more children, but after my mother immigrated to Canada and had me, she was told she must have a hysterectomy at 26 (which was common practice at the time). She really suffered because of that, and her past growing up in Eastern Europe. Years later the hysterectomy was found to be unnecessary.

**SV:** I'm honoured that you shared the experience of your mother's (unnecessary!) hysterectomy, a story that mixes the personal with the historical. What is it like for you to convey such an important narrative – and any narrative, in fact – in visual forms?

**MM:** Fairy-tales and personal stories are definitely themes that influence my work, but it's not something I think about first, it is rather a result of my process. What I mean is, I don't sit down and think, "Ok, I am going to do a piece about (insert issue)." A lot of the time it is me responding to the material at hand first and foremost, then exploring what that material is, what it makes me think of (significance) and where it takes me (how I

relate to it). What symbols and imagery do I think of specifically? I go from there, kind of like a mind map.

**SV:** This process seems to come naturally to you. Are you ever concerned about the tension between conveying both the 'truth' of the story and avoiding being excessively literal?

**MM:** I'm not sure if I'm concerned with "truth" as I am with creating a visual interpretation of the specific moment that has affected me the most. The moment of discovery or understanding. That moment to me is critical. Yes I try to avoid being too "literal". If the piece should get that far, I remove information to allow for ambiguity. I don't want to control the viewers thoughts, but if I can describe it in a feeling I suppose I am aspiring to capture a feeling of "awe", at least for myself. I feel by anthropomorphizing and or adding ambiguity to the elements or characters, it becomes easier to for the viewer to identify with the artwork and there is room for them to create their own meaning.