

Enmeshed and Entangled: Patricia Waller's Alluring Crochet Works

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The first thing we notice about Patricia Waller's crochet objects is the sheer inappropriateness of form and content. It is so shocking that it makes us laugh in disbelief, but also in pleasure. Macabre or biting ironic topics are all clothed in crochet work, a technique traditionally associated with feminine homely craft, but not with high art. By making us laugh, the works immediately win us over. We marvel with amusement at the impertinence with which grotesque topics are presented in a disarmingly innocent fashion. Waller's approach at first seems ironic. But this reading does not go far enough. In fact, it itself falls prey to the wily seduction of the works. It focuses exclusively on the relationship between representation and represented, thereby distracting from what goes on between the works and the beholder. Furthermore, by unsuspectingly adopting Waller's strategy of playing things down, it dangerously underestimates them. Paradoxically, this only increases their effect. For their effect is subliminal and the more subliminal it remains, the more effective it is.

I would therefore prefer to approach Waller's works through the notion of the joke. Not, however, in the sense of innocent merriment. For one thing is clear: there is nothing innocent about Waller's work, even though it often consciously and cannily plays with notions of innocence. After all, no play with innocence is ever innocent. While the ironic approach presupposes an analytical and reflective distance between the beholder and the ironically treated object, the joke strikes deeper. It does not trigger a mental reflection that leaves the beholder uninvolved, but rather a spontaneous physical reaction whose cause is subconscious and personal. Such an approach is obviously inspired by Freud's study "Jokes and their relation to the unconscious". But since Waller's work clearly positions itself within the larger surrealist tradition, this seems a promising entry point. The artist's own statements also include many Freudian terms: dream and nightmare, fear and phobia, the unreal, repression. "I am fundamentally interested in finding images that involve the way we deal with our fears and our ability to repress them."

Freud considered the joke, in many ways similar to the dream, as a pleasurable transformation of psychic processes. In combining known words, signs, or images into

something unexpectedly new, jokes frequently work with displacement and condensation, substitution and modification, reversal and ambiguity. A surprising turn, a startling collision of irreconcilable elements affect a break in the normal flow of things thus releasing inhibiting energies and giving us pleasure. The joke in Waller's crochet objects is, of course, the already mentioned unusual rendering of her topics. On the other hand it is, of course, just the inoffensiveness of the form that allows Waller to explore areas otherwise difficult to tackle. Pop culture and high art, everyday and very unusual occurrences, fantasy and reality – all is uniformly rendered by Waller in a medium still unencumbered by artistic connotations. She thus manages to break up existing hierarchies, even though the homogeneity thus created is again but a deception, an artful illusion. Waller's works consciously play with different levels of perception. The very tactile form of her cuddly crochet objects accords them an immediate sensual allure, while on the mental level her contents shock, repulse, or perturb us. Yet both levels continuously infect each other. The sensualness of the form is transposed onto the content, softening its harshness and rendering it "socially acceptable", but also pointing to a secret pleasure we experience even here. The content, on the other hand, throws a new light on the homeliness of the form, which thus colored becomes uncanny. Altogether this generates a complex effect of attraction and repulsion: while we recognize its perfidy, we cannot escape its fascination.

For even macabre scenes produce not just a sense of revulsion, but also a disavowed form of pleasure. Whether of a sexual or a generally sensual nature – culinary delights – or whether, in accordance with older theories of laughter, it derives from a sense of our own superiority – e.g. when viewing prostheses – depends on the respective object and our own predilections and perversions. Some of the objects, however, clearly address our ever present craving for sensation, our fascination with freak shows of any kind. A delightful fascination that we no longer want to grant ourselves and conceal in our public personas. The same goes for our inclination towards revenge and destruction, as expressed in violent games ("Game over"). Yet the shift effected by the form renders the cruelties of the contents acceptable without diminishing the allure of violence. Waller's treatment of high art is ironically entitled "Don't Kill Your Idols": for it is of course just those idols that the artist would love to metaphorically knock off their pedestals. While the pleasure thus derived is tinged with a certain ambivalence caused by our mechanisms of repression, the endearing implementation sufficiently camouflages its subversiveness to allow us to enjoy it without inhibitions.

Only this extension of the inherent conflict on the level of content can explain the continuing interest of the works beyond their first amusing effect (for there is nothing more stale than old jokes). The disparity between form and content, on the other hand, turns out to be a clever ruse that distracts and disarms us while luring us in, only to deliver us willingly to the attractive and repulsive, but always pleasurable effects of the contents. The perfect seduction. And don't we all love to be seduced.