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frieze



Nina Beier
Sets Sail

A Conversation
with Nari Ward

What Was Berlin's
Times Bar?

In Deep:
Dominique White

Profile: Ahead of Nina Beier's two solo exhibitions at the Kiasma, Helsinki and Museo Tamayo, Mexico City, *Jeppe Ugelvig* considers the artist's penchant for critiquing commodity fetishism

Nina Beier



The turning point in Nina Beier's career came in the shape of a dog. Specifically, a golden retriever that appeared to have taken its last breath atop a Persian rug right in the middle of a bustling art fair in 2012 (*Tragedy*, 2011). For five excruciating minutes at Art Basel, the motionless canine held a tight grip on its surroundings – suspending fairgoers in that uncanny space between reality and performance – before hearing its trainer's cue to stop playing dead and walking off. After breathing an initial sigh of relief, Basel's moneyed art lovers soon found themselves reflecting on a more complicated conundrum: the relative values of life, labour and commodity.

For Beier, the contemporary artwork is the perfect vehicle for examining and amplifying the finer mechanics of such semantic *horror vacui*. 'It all crystallized when I experienced *Tragedy* as a work,' Beier tells me upon a visit to her studio in Denmark one December morning, as she prepares for a string of forthcoming institutional solos in 2024. 'Here's an object *being* itself while simultaneously creating an image of itself.' As the artist points out, things frequently appear both *as* themselves and as *representations* of themselves: a wig, for instance, is human hair used to re-create human hair; an actor hired to cry is, nevertheless, still a person crying. Beier's dog becomes an image of, well, what exactly? Of the absurdity of projecting our own fear of death onto an animal, this spirited thing that we envy because it's unaware of its eventual demise? 'What's truly unfathomable is that dogs are in a way *man-made*,' Beier observes. 'They are the living outcome of a 30,000-year process of domesticating wolves. Every dog somehow contains an entire history of domination, control, manipulation and power.'

Encountering Beier's oeuvre is a reminder that things – and their images – always exist in a state of dialectical tension, and that most are a product of human interference. This point may sound trite, but Beier's delivery is deceptively simple, highly amusing and frequently awe-inspiring. Only two months earlier, at Art Sonje Center in Seoul, I walked through the artist's *Field* (2023): a 'meadow' of 6,000 flowers planted in fake terracotta pots which would slowly wither over the course of the exhibition. Two years earlier, at Kunsthall Rønnebæksholm in Denmark, I wandered through an old barn crowded with

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Nina Beier depicted with *Fleet*, 2024, cruise model ships, sand, sugar, dimensions variable. Image commissioned for *Frieze*. Photograph: David Stjernholm

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China, 2015, hand painted porcelain vase and hand painted porcelain dog. Courtesy: the artist and Standard (Oslo); photograph: Vegard Kleven

the kind of ornamental statues of lions typically found at the entrances of grand houses (*Guardian*, 2021). Here, the marble beasts were laid on their sides, while house cats roamed around, lapping a range of commercial milks (cow, almond and 'cat-friendly') from crevices in the lions' undulating surfaces. If *Field* replicates contemporary cultivation methods in which, Beier tells me, 'each crop [is] a clone of its neighbour, indistinguishable from the next', then *Guardian* can be seen as a monument to the full domestication of nature, where animal, earth, soil and body is spectacularly extracted for value, be it as food, decor or companionship.

Over the last two decades, Beier – a 48-year-old Jutlandish Dane who studied in London, lived in Berlin and New York, and recently returned to Copenhagen with her partner, artist Simon Dybbroe Møller – has refined her ability to stack symbolic associations and materialist supply chains into captivating artworks. When I ask where it all started, Beier – not one to linger on biographical detail or curatorial timelines – invokes the mythical quality that pervades her practice: one of her first works, *First Person Singular* (2009), she tells me in passing, involved 'a gallery attendant sing[ing] every song written in the first person singular that she could remember, but only when she was alone in the exhibition space'. In a similar vein, for *The Complete Works* (2012) at Tate Modern, the artist invited three retired dancers to perform, to quote the gallery website, 'every piece of choreography that they had ever learned, enacted in chronological order'. Such dreamlike art experiences are not disconnected from the post-internet zeitgeist that defined much art of the 2010s, where the pleasant absurdities of art, image and economy were examined by Beier's generation. But it was the dead dog, Beier explains, that brought her back to the physical subject-object, on which her work has focused since.

My own introduction to Beier's work was *Portrait Mode* (2011), a towering triptych of framed discarded clothes in a range of animal prints. The inspiration for the work harks back to the artist's childhood in Mozambique: there, Beier recalls, such items were regularly found in the country's waste clothing markets, where the West sends its fashion surplus to be traded, or to degrade slowly. The title of the work, whose formal composition recalls abstract expressionism, reveals the artist's intention to portray the absurd phenomenon that is trendification of animals – their *becoming-product* either directly (as pelt) or indirectly (as pattern). The 'portrait' of *Portrait Mode*, then, is the material conundrums of global capitalism itself, playing out between image and object, and across skewed economies and geographies.

If a Mozambiquan waste pile of European fast fashion is a fitting analogy for Beier's sculptural purview, the artist herself can be seen as the ragpicker. Indeed, Beier is unafraid to admit that she's a hoarder. She collects widely and indiscriminately: Chinese vases, giant seeds, money, underwear, marble eggs, Hermès ties or dozens of undulating, pastel-coloured sinks. In justifying her compulsion, Beier explains to me that months, even years, can go by before she finds a use for an object but, once she does, she will keep producing editions of works until her collection runs dry. 'I'm interested in the object as trope and how it travels through the world. While we are born into a world



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Plug, 2018, ceramic sinks, hand-rolled cigars, 'European Interiors', installation view. Courtesy: the artist, Croy Nielsen, Vienna, and Standard (Oslo); photograph: Stuart Whipps



of things, most of these have been produced before our time, or under social and cultural conditions utterly unknown to us. Things are testaments to their material production, witnesses to their circulation, slaves to their symbolic use. It's by collecting widely that you access this history; it's somewhere in between the many iterations of a type of object that the real object exists. Spotting the absurdities of a variation is where it gets fun.'

When I ask her specifically about the sinks – ubiquitous in mid-century Danish homes – she tells me that they were piling up in her studio for years before they eventually became the installation *Plug* (2018), in which each sink's outlet was retrofitted with a hand-rolled cigar. The cigar, Beier muses, is a semantically 'heavy product considering its dense symbolism of wealth and decadent pleasure, its direct manifestation of manual labour, its implication in mortality and the history of slavery'. The sinks themselves also evoke the spectre of colonialism: with colour names including 'Bahama beige', 'Bali brown' and 'Indian ivory', they conjure vague imperialist fantasies while literally washing our hands clean. Together, the voluptuous sinks and the phallic cigars create an allegory of ingestion and excretion, or modern gender roles, conjured by a few simple sculptural fixes. For Beier, locating such fixes can be described as a kind of object *listening*; not quite the logic of Duchamp's readymade, nor of the surrealists' assemblage. 'It's about identifying these crossings of symbolic content and concrete form. I wouldn't be able to streamline this method for the life of me: I simply have to wait until they find each other. This happens quite literally when the dents in a marble lion are filled with milk to attract housecats, or when plates slot neatly into the top of a vintage birdcage to produce an image of a dish rack.' She is describing *Empire* (2019), where the artist presented a stack of Danish royal porcelain within an Oriental cage as though it were a bird, pointing to the materialist history of porcelain – that prized Chinese invention which European royal workshops spent hundreds of years unsuccessfully trying to capture before Meissen finally devised a decent knock-off in the early 18th century.



The animal is placed somewhere between it all: nature, subject and commodity.

Above
Empire, 2019. Empire Porcelain dinnerware by B&G/Royal Copenhagen and metal wire bird cage, 94 x 44 x 33 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Croy Nielsen, Vienna; photograph: Manuel Carreon Lopez

Right
Field, 2023. potted flowers, plastic pots, 'Bob Kil & Nina Beier: Field Trip', installation view. Courtesy: the artist, Croy Nielsen, Vienna; Standard (Oslo) and Art Sonje Center, Seoul; photograph: Ahina Studio

Opposite page
Total Loss (detail), 2020, marble lions, milk, cat, 'and suddenly it all blossoms', installation view. Courtesy: the artist, Croy Nielsen, Vienna and Standard (Oslo); photograph: Andrejs Strokins



Roland Barthes was right to point out in 'Elements of Semiology' (1964) that man-made objects are tricky semantic vehicles because they persist in existing 'somewhat against us'. A thing is never reducible to its function, the French philosopher maintained, because there is 'always a meaning which overflows the object's use'. No doubt Barthes would have chuckled at Beier's sensuous sculptural evidence of such epistemic slippage, or what the artist terms the object's 'refusal to be tamed'. For in Beier's sculptures, there is always history but never stable meaning, only a tongue-in-cheek deference towards consumerism's great unconscious. As Stedelijk Museum curator Karen Archey wrote in her essay for Beier's monograph, *Cash for Gold* (2017): 'Whether tactically filling up emptiness with loaded signifiers, or turning the emptiness itself into a loaded signifier, Beier's work speaks to the complexities of a world that is pregnant with meaning.'

'Why all the animals?' I ask Beier during one of our studio chats, citing two further examples of her creature-centred works: *China* (2015), which pairs decorative

porcelain dogs with vases that have been partially smashed to expose their hollow insides; and *Beast* (2018), in which the artist retrofitted mechanical rodeo bulls with containers of infant formula. 'As a motif, the animal is placed somewhere between it all: nature, subject and commodity,' Beier responds. 'The use of animals in human society always implies the negotiation of a power dynamic – whether it's gendered, material or symbolic.'

Beier's bricolage approach to her practice continues to mutate, implicating new cultural and historical categories as it does so, including the art itself – that unique product which maintains, even today, an awkward relationship to all others. Yet, in Beier's eyes, artworks are as typological as any other object, their ubiquity as telling as a stockpile of marble lions or H&M tops in fuchsia leopard print. In 2018, the artist revealed a major public commission, *Men*: a permanent bronze sculpture depicting found equestrian statues of male figures, installed directly on the Belgian shoreline at Nieuwpoort. Beier



had started collecting equestrian statues – jockeys, Roman warriors, English knights, polo players – from antique dealers around Europe after encountering an equestrian statue of King Leopold II, the ‘great’ colonizer of the Congo, in the coastal city of Ostend. In *Men*, however, the monumentalized imperial hero is lost in a crowd, literally ‘drowning in numbers’, repeatedly disappearing and reappearing as the North Sea ebbs and flows. This is a very different tactic than the total removal of colonizer statues, which in recent years have been disputed across the world. ‘I get curious when the symbolic order of objects is changing or has recently changed,’ Beier tells me. ‘Symbols are always up for negotiation and these changes are beyond the sculptor’s control.’ She pauses, then adds: ‘At the same time, I pick objects that everyone has a certain knowledge about. Every viewer will have a different entry point into their meeting with an object, but we all have one tool or another ready to pick apart the baggage they carry.’

If *Men* monumentalized the collapse of masculine monumentality, *Women & Children* (2022), perhaps Beier’s magnum opus to date, presented at New York’s High Line sculpture park, inverted this logic. While men in the Western art-historical tradition were typically represented on horseback – a symbol of rank and power – women and children were mostly depicted naked and defenceless. Reprising the approach she had taken with *Men*, Beier similarly assembled a range of figurines, from ancient to modern, to form a motley crew of society’s conventionally understood ‘weak’: the title references the phrase ‘women and children first’, a Victorian-era maritime code of conduct wherein women and children should be the first saved because they are typically found unable to fend for themselves. Beier’s *punctum* was adding aggressive fountain streams of water running from their eyes, destining her subaltern subjects to endless, cartoonish crying. When I encountered the work on a summer’s day in New York, it spoke powerfully to systemic violence and to historical pain. Yet, it also read as little more than a witty conceit. For, while Beier’s sculptures are certainly sincere witnesses to our world order, they will forever resist easy symbolisms, including the ideological. ‘I feel the most uncomfortable when I have overtly political words put in my mouth,’ Beier confides. ‘Sure, you can talk about feminism and postcolonialism in relation to my work, but I see them as paths that move around the object. The thing that excites me most is when objects are allowed simply to speak for themselves, in their total materiality. They smell, they break, they fall over.’ ●

Opposite page
Women & Children, 2022, found bronze sculptures, fountain. Courtesy: the artist; the High Line, New York; Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki; Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki; and the New Carlsberg Foundation. Photograph: Timothy Schenck

Below
Men, 2018, found bronze statues, 500 × 200 × 250 cm. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Frederik Werbrouck

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Jeppe Ugelvig is a curator and critic. He is the author of *Fashion Work* (2020, Damiani).