

the lab magazine

ASTRID SVANGREN

INTERVIEWED BY POLINA BACHLAKOVA APRIL 6, 2014

Astrid Svangren is a Swedish-bred, Copenhagen-based artist. She is known for creating installations that absorb the viewer in a blur of memory, poetry, dreams, and the landscapes they create. Yet these dreams are more brittle than they are romantic: although Astrid's work embodies the ethereal, it is grounded in what is perhaps best described as the vulnerably human. Astrid is represented by galleries in Copenhagen, Sweden, New York, and London. She is currently exhibiting 'Before Me: I Roll in the Snow [...]' at Maria Stenfors gallery in London, UK.

POLINA BACHLAKOVA—Let's start with the basics. Where are you and what are you working on these days?

ASTRID SVANGREN—At this moment I am my studio in Copenhagen. I am just finishing two works that will be suspended from the ceiling at Liljevalchs konsthall in Stockholm for Market Art Fair 4–6 April.

PB—I've read that you collect your visual world from dreams. How do you see dreams reflected in your work? Is it the content of your dreams, the feelings created by dreams, the idea of dreaming itself, or something else?

AS—I'd like to say that I am more interested in creating a dreamlike atmosphere in the works and installations, perhaps a little like having an lucid dream, where you are active yet in a dream state. I have for as long as I can remember been in the habit of writing down my dreams. My work is not an illustration of them, however, I am sure that I subconsciously access them in my work, as everything is connected.

PB—There is tension in your work between potential for movement and obstruction – for example, between the freedom of some of your textile-based materials and the way you layer them with harder materials like paint, plastics, etc. Can you elaborate on this tension?

AS—For me the different materials are carriers of different messages and the combination of them lessen or enhance the [work]. With these different combinations I charge the materials with meanings that traditionally or originally wouldn't be associated with them. The materials help me express my meaning by the way that it is used.

PB—Describe your process, especially when it comes to your materials. What draws you to the specific materials you work with?

AS—My work is something ongoing, I am not project based, but the works take over from each other. I strive to express a feeling or state; my approach can convey this at various levels. There, of all the different materials and ways of working, so I for instance use words. I write continuously in order to try to explain to myself what I want; the words are working alongside the material selection, materials are then inspired by the words. When it comes to fabric, I can tell you that it is a passion for me, I have gathered and collected fabrics as long as I can remember.

PB—There's something about your work that evokes process art, but specifically Eva Hesse. Has she been a meaningful figure for you? If not, who else do you consider an important influence?

AS—I really like Eva Hesse's work, precisely because she manages to trigger something intangible in your body. It is difficult understand it, yet it feels so familiar. But I would not say that she is the artist who has meant the most to me. Rebecca Horn's early work has meant a lot, even Willem de Kooning and Yoko Ono to name a few. I am inspired all the time by things around me. During the making of the exhibition at Maria Stenfors I was going through a period where I re-read all Marguerite Duras's books and was totally engrossed in her language. Right now I am reading Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and have become wildly inspired.

PB—Some of the shapes and their organization in your latest show at Maria Stenfors remind me of a human organism – bulbous, thickly knit and bound, skin-like, alive. How important is the idea of the body in your work?

AS—It is central to my work, I think a lot about body and embodiment, the body in motion; I base things on my own body (but a viewer becomes the body) and imagine how it can be affected by different moods, environments, and situations. How it somehow becomes even more apparent that it ends up being only grief, sexuality, or desire.

PB—The color palette of soft pink/bright yellow/bright blue in your latest show is, in some ways, quite feminine. It's almost like candy, but without the innocence. How do the ideas of womanhood, femininity, or feminism function in your work?

AS—That my works have a sensuality and are perceived as feminine is nothing I give much thought. I mean I'm a woman, I draw a lot from myself, I am aware of what is happening around me in the world – all this is of course is reflected in my works; it's only natural. Personally I rather tired of art being labeled by gender, it does not really interest me but clearly, I am a feminist. When it come to colors, it's up to each and everyone to have their personal associations. For the exhibition at Maria Stenfors, it was all about creating an environment that breathes butterfly house, greenhouse, cocooning, ambivalence, something hot sweltering, fluttering, and resurrection... which is where these colors came in.

PB—In an ideal scenario, what does your viewer walk away with after seeing your show? And for that matter is the viewer a strong consideration for you?

AS—I hope that I can awake something in the viewer, a questioning, a memory, that maybe everything is not what it seems to be. That there is something between one's self and reality. Yes, the viewer is important. However I never consider the viewer as I am making the works but during installation of individual works or an exhibition I consider it very much. A lot of my works will move as one moves past them or defy or follow the space that they are installed in, and how that bears a close relationship to how the viewer will move and experience the installation, but also hopefully trigger something in the viewer.

PB—You're a Copenhagen-based artist. How does the city influence you?

AS—For me personally it is important to live outside my native country. I have been based in Copenhagen for the past five to six years and before that I lived in Berlin. The challenge of changing environment and culture, breaking down old patterns and being confronted by something new, is enriching for me both as an artist and as an individual. It also brings distance to not fully belong in a country or culture, which I think has become integral to my practice.

PB—What is your definition of an artist?

AS—To be brave.