

## ANA BOTEZATU

*A pile of anxieties*

21.6.–26.7.2020

Fri.-Sun., 1-6p.m.

Ana Botezatu (\*1982, Braşov, Romania) works at the crossing between ceramics, drawing, book illustration, set design, puppet theatre and ethnographic research. She studied ceramics at the Art and Design University Cluj-Napoca, and currently lives and works in Berlin. With our new exhibition at STATIONS we are presenting Ana's series of ceramic works of the past year, as well as a site-specific environment she has created for our small kitchen. The following is an interview edited from conversations we had before and during the installation of her exhibition and it meandered from the work she makes to her background and back.

M\*: Ana, we're happy to be presenting your latest ceramic works at Stations. I will start perhaps somewhat counterintuitively by asking you first about the books you have included in your exhibition. Among children's books and art books, there is also one of your own publications.

A: Yes, there's a bunch of books. Among others there's Georgia O'Keefe's recipe book, the one about the Bloomsbury group and their kitchen, some ethnographic books about traditional masks. And yes, there is a sample of the recipe book I compiled that was inserted in IDEA [Romanian art and culture magazine, no. 46, 2014]... So, when someone comes in to see the show, they can get busy for half an hour or so.

M: We've talked about your compilation of recipes before. When and where did you work on this publication and how did it come about?

A: It all started with a conversation I had with my good friend, Corina Bucea. We were talking about the fact that basically every woman in Romania from our parents' generation had a recipe notebook, regardless of social status, education or background. And they would lend them to each other, or meet and copy recipes, exchange them. It was like an open source of information long before the internet. It was also a bit like a survival book in communism. Corina and I formed an artist duo called „Mixer“ and decided to start interviewing women in a few Transylvanian villages, scan their notebooks, document and archive as many as possible. We made exhibitions based on this archive at Salonul de Proiecte, Bucharest and Temp d'Image, Cluj. If everything works out, considering the current travel restrictions, Corina and I will work on expanding the recipe archive. The plan is to travel to the Danube Delta, where we hope to cover as much as possible of this extremely interesting area.

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\*A = Ana Botezatu; M = Mihaela Chiriac

M: Is ethnography of particular interest to you?

A: I would say I'm more interested in intimacy and private life. When I first read the Duchamp interviews years ago, it was so fitting to what I felt. Duchamp was talking with great ease about art as part of daily life... For me there is no essential difference between the so-called high art and folk art, they both come from the same place.

M: And yet their context and reception are quite different. When we talked about possible presentations of your ceramic sculptures for your show you initially rejected the idea of placing them on plinths.

A: That was a visceral reaction. The plinths remind me of the academic education I received in Romania. Plinths were what you were supposed to present your works on if you were ‚serious‘ about your art.

M: Well, eventually you changed your mind: the series of little sculptures you have been making in the past year are presented on plinths, but the latter act more like little sets or stages for imaginary plots. There isn't a particular narrative, but your characters seem very expressive. If one looks at recent art made in the medium of ceramics one can notice that the latter has favored a new expressionism that explores the ugly, the grotesque, so there is this transgressive impulse that at the same time exploits and goes against the slickness and/or „cuteness“ of what has been done before in this medium (think of all the art historical china for instance).

A: The status of ceramics in art has gradually changed. It used to be a popular craft, and today many more artists are using it in their work, which makes me happy—it finally it gets proper recognition. Because of that it takes all possible forms. Each one is valid as long as I feel that the material was not abused or killed in the making.

M: Ceramics has long been a utilitarian and decorative craft. There was a process of „artification“ of practices related to clay that started more or less in the forties and that has slowly elevated ceramics from the minor position it has occupied within the field of arts for a long time. Today there are many artists working with ceramics. So, there are these two main approaches that differ and sometimes intersect. Your works seem to be located in an „in-between“, as you don't seem to settle or decide between making strictly utilitarian ceramics, sculpture, puppetry. They're all that at the same time.

A: I'm a little in between everything and I'm fine with that. There's so much labeling. To me that's scary, even when it's well intended. Ceramics is a medium that was always disadvantaged by this. Of all the materials and mediums I've tried, I have a particular love for clay. It's wonderful to introduce the things you make in your daily life without too much fuss, and I think that this action should not undervalue them. So, yes, it's true that my work is in between different fields, and that's also got something to do with the

fact that the late nineties, early noughties were a time when the young generations in Romania were getting more connected to the West and globally through the internet. That was the time when certain jobs in the creative arts were just being „invented“ or demanded more, so a lot of the times you would just learn by doing. I had all sorts of jobs, I worked as a set design assistant in a puppet theatre, designed museum displays, worked as an art therapist with juvenile delinquents, painted murals in churches...

M: Was the puppet theatre a big influence?

A: A: I know how cheesy this sounds, but my main influence is my childhood. It was a magical time for me really, and when I think about it, up to this day nothing has surpassed it in my life. The way I live now, the things I like—are strongly connected to my childhood memories. I've thrown out so many works I've made or things that I've possessed, but wherever I have moved to I've always carried my three childhood books with me. But, in the end, yes, I always loved puppet theatre and theatre plays, and there is a theatrical element in all my work.

M: You named your series of sculptures „A pile of anxieties“. Why?

A: Because I am an anxious person and making these objects was the only thing I didn't question too much. Initially I started it by making fun a bit of the idea that people use this medium as therapy to unwind. Ironically it proved to be true, it does ease your mind.

M: Are your little sculptures also tongue in cheek to the china dolls that were so popular in Romania? A felt 85% of the population had them, they were slick and nauseatingly „cute“. Your little sculpture / candlesticks are more like a bestiary, they are cartoonish in a modern as well as in a medieval sense. Some postures or grimaces remind me of Gothic gargoyles.

A: I used to love those china dolls but they were not allowed in our household—too kitchy. But my Hungarian grandmother had some very beautiful ones from the turn of the century. I was totally fascinated with them, so yeah I guess the hint is there. With a twist.

M: You studied ceramics at the Design Department of Art and Design University Cluj-Napoca. What was that like?

A: Students were more or less expected to produce academic works in the vein of those made by their professors...

M: Ok, but the students must have had some external sources too, right? The beginning of the noughties was also the time when the Cluj painters emerged internationally, so there was a more palpable, direct link to contemporary art made outside Romania, wasn't there?

A: Yes, sure, but that didn't change things in art school much. Also, it was a boys' club, and as a girl it was harder to be taken seriously. You'd always be reminded of that by comments like „Oh, you'll get your hands dirty“ and so on, in spite of a pretty even gender ratio in class. Besides, I would often express my discontent when I thought it necessary, and that didn't make things easier for me.

M: That was happening in the ceramics class?

A: Well, it was a very masculinized environment. There's the utilitarian and the artistic ceramics department. I went to the latter but the expectations were still based on technical skill which was understood to be a „masculine“ trait. Only much later did I realize how awful it was that the nicest compliment I thought I could get at the school exhibitions would be when someone would mistake my work for a man's. It meant they thought it was very well executed. There were more girls in that class, but there was not one female professor. It was expected of the young women to make small objects, like jewelry boxes and stuff like that. So, I always instinctively felt like I had to oppose that. When I look back I find my old works hilarious. They were really big! During that time I had to flex my muscles to be taken more seriously.

M: But obviously your works have changed in the meantime. What happened to all those large works you've made?

A: Yes, that changed because later I understood that it's ok to do what I feel like doing. I can make small objects if that's what I'm interested in, and I don't have to prove anything to anyone. I've thrown all those big sculptures away.

M: What were they like?

A: They're not easy to describe. The thing is, it was also hard for me to accept that I wasn't interested in doing abstract work, it's just not me. I struggled with that during art school because that was just another prejudice. Abstraction was considered to make for better art, and the guys would usually go for that. Figurative, narrative attempts were not offered a great deal of consideration.

M: I'm glad you're mentioning your experience of gender inequality in our home country. There was still little to no access to public models of emancipation when I grew up in Romania in the 90's. Thankfully that has changed to some degree. But I have to emphasize this now because it's something that constantly needs addressing, particularly and even more forcefully at this moment when recent events in Romania have once more divided public opinion concerning the verbal and physical violence against women. Some people don't seem to think that's a problem. Inequality and the mentality that produces it are, moreover, supported by legislation. Currently there is public outcry against this outrageous law proposal that would basically eradicate gender studies in Romania, and

would inevitably affect all humanities, but obviously there are strong reactionary currents.

A: As most women in Romania it took a long time to be aware of the things that bothered me in our society. I felt it was not ok, but it was not a subject of conversation. I was lucky to have women role models in my life, that were very important for my growth. My mother was an intellectual, she was discrete, ethical and not playing this game of pimped-up women that was expected in our society. This made me aware of things that are maybe invisible, but essential. But again I was lucky to have amazing women around that taught me not to be pushed around and grow on my own terms. Other girls didn't have this chance. There is so much work to do in this sense...

M: Let's go back to the question about the sources you had, your access to information. You and me, we both grew up in Braşov, a city in Romania that is known as a tourist destination. It has pretty land- and townscapes but not exactly a bustling cultural life. Aside from that, in the late nineties, as weird as it may sound now, we were just getting acquainted with using the internet. Not many of us had internet at home, we'd go to internet cafés to check e-mails or play video games. This was twenty years ago and the internet has exploded since. In high school I've had art history classes, but it would all end with the 20s, 30s at best and, anyway, the approach was very conservative. The city library wasn't that well equipped beyond this point either. Perhaps the Francophone media library was a tiny bit more up to date. And so I wonder how you accessed information about contemporary art?

A: I went to the ceramics class of the art high school in Braşov and we had some great teachers there. These teachers were about our age now, and they would talk to us about many interesting things that weren't necessarily included in the syllabus. There was one particular teacher who had a formative role because he was very well read and smart and we all wanted to attend his class. He talked to us about Beuys for instance. From my current perspective it was still a rather limited spectrum but that was also due to the lack of resources. On the other hand while we had discussed Beuys in ninth grade, some of my colleagues at university had never heard of him before. I loved that time in high school because despite not being provided with barely any material resources, we would adapt and work more conceptually, sketch-based and we'd make little projects for the half of year we'd lack clay. And that was great, not just because we were able to work freely but also because had we gotten the materials, according to the syllabus we would have had to make dumb little objects like cute chicken, or picture frames.

M: The reform of our educational system, a long overdue and painful issue...

A: Yes... When college started I was greatly disappointed to find out that high school had been a much more democratic environment. Suddenly, I became more aware and self-conscious about being a girl because some people just wouldn't talk to you or not take

you seriously. That was demoralizing and had long-lasting effects. In the end, the education I got in college was secondary for me. My teachers reproached me that the years I had spent there had had no effect on me. I disagree and would say that, on the contrary, those years had a negative, inhibiting effect on me.

M: So there's the issue of assigned gender roles again. It sounds like there were certain expectations of artistic expression and what went beyond that was sort of castigated.

A: Yes, I might have done things differently, had the approach been different. Later after seeing more exhibitions by young Western artists, I realized that I had also worked in that style in the past, but had been told it was wrong. Luckily I was always a bit stubborn and managed to follow through with my plans one way or the other, but I had women colleagues who were really good artists and eventually gave up.

M: You told me you'd be interested in doing public art...

A: I would love to work on public projects. I'm very interested in how people are exposed to art in an unconscious way, without going to a museum or gallery. It can be formative, and in this moment in time the issue of public art is obviously being reassessed, and rightfully so. It's also very sad to see that after the 70's this preoccupation for projects that had a more humanistic approach for public spaces or housing faded gradually and now it feels as if it has disappeared almost completely.

M: The idea that art can and should be lived with in a very simple, accessible way—whether in public space or privately—seems to be very significant to you.

A: Europeans, especially, seem to have the obsession of putting works under a glass case and behave like they are holy. I prefer a more rooted approach in which more importance is granted to human skill. Objects come and go and should be used without inhibition. If they break I'm glad because I get the chance to make new ones.

M: You've been living in Berlin for about 6 years now, right?

A: Yes and I'm loving every minute of it.

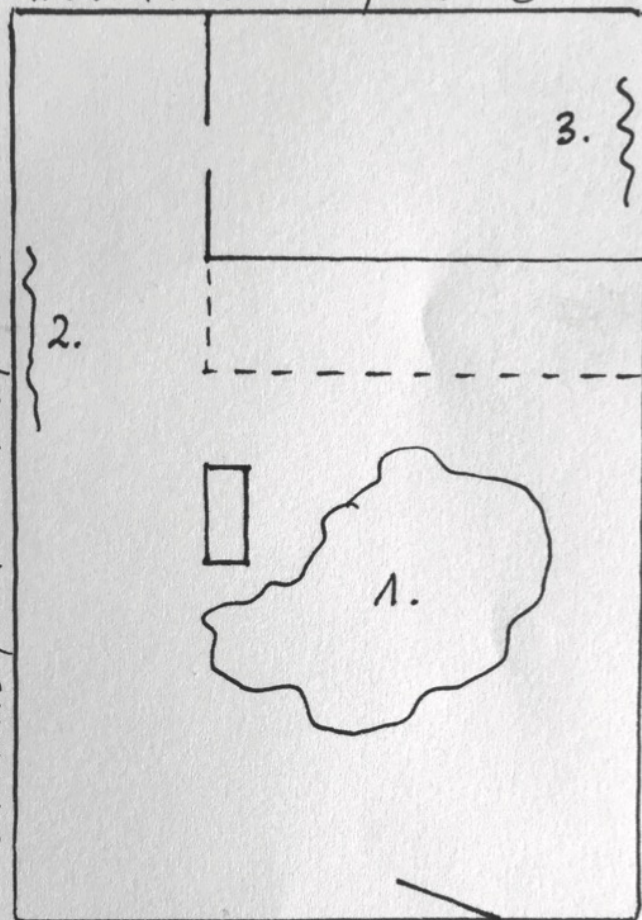
## **STATIONS**

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STATIONS is an exhibition space run by Melissa Canbaz and Mihaela Chiriac.

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ANA BOTEZATU, A pile of anxieties, 21.6. - 26.7. 2020

1. A pile of anxieties, 2019-2020, ceramics
2. Untitled, 2019, mixed media
3. A Lake of Salty Tears, 2020, ceramics