ART AND NATURE IN INTERACTION

Jacek J. Kolasiński in conversation with Mette Tommerup

Mette Tommerup is a Danish-American artist living in Coconut Grove, Florida. Interacting with nature she creates challenging artistic projects on a large scale. These large-format installations are often a commentary on concepts in art and art history undermining the status quo.

Mette Tommerup, *Sky of the First Water*, 2022
Platform 3750, Coconut Grove, Florida
Courtesy Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs
Photo by Pedro Wazzan

Jacek J. Kolasiński: Your site-specific projects have wide-ranging impacts and resonate globally. Let's discuss your intervention at the Vizcaya Museum & Gardens in Miami, particularly your performance, A Futurist Evening at Vizcaya, and the work *Putti Kiss*. What inspired you to create this project?

Mette Tommerup: Vizcaya is a Renaissance-style mansion with impressive gardens, built in the early 20th century. Miami is a relatively young city—even Coconut Grove, its oldest part, is only about 140-150 years old. Vizcaya stands out with its European architecture amidst a rapidly growing city. The mansion was built by a wealthy industrialist, with many elements imported from Italy and Spain. This combination of Italian Renaissance, Baroque elements, and Mediterranean Revival architecture in a young, changing city fascinated me from the start.

JJK: You can definitely see strong Mediterranean influences here…

MT: Yes, the Italian inspiration is very evident. The impulse to create the 2013 performance came with the centennial of the 1913 Armory Show in New York, International Exhibition of Modern Art, which introduced modernism to the United States. At that time, Europe was already further along in adopting modern ideas in art, so I decided on a performance in Vizcaya, full of Renaissance details, to comment on the contrast between past and modernity. One key inspiration was Constantin Brâncuși, who rejected classical forms. Together with Robert Chambers, we deconstructed replicas of classical putti sculptures in the gardens, creating a modern version of *The Kiss*, known for Brâncuși's simple, geometric forms. Performance is an essential part of my work—it allows great freedom and introduces an element of unpredictability.

JJK: The gardens also have a dramatic history. Some were destroyed by a hurricane in 1926 but remain a beautiful, integral backdrop for art.

MT: Yes, the garden design combines classical European influences with tropical elements. Although part of the gardens were destroyed by the hurricane what remains offers a unique setting for contemporary art. In 2013, as part of Art Basel Miami Beach, I was invited to create a performance for *A Futurist Evening*. It was a perfect opportunity to explore the themes of classicism and modernity in this context.

JJK: Your intervention, especially with the putti sculptures, was very bold. How did you approach their physical transformation?

MT: The putti sculptures were replicas, so we felt free to transform them. Together with Robert, we purchased similar replicas and transformed them, creating a modern version of Brâncuși's *The Kiss*. We wanted to explore the tension between old and new, and performance seemed like the ideal format. Instead of destroying something authentic, we decided to transform a replica.

JJK: The theme of iconoclasm appears frequently in art history, whether in the destruction of sculptures or the transformation of monuments in different political periods. Your approach seems more focused on transformation than destruction.

MT: Exactly. It wasn't about destroying something sacred, but transforming something that was already a replica. The sculptures were kitschy, so we had the freedom to reshape them in a contemporary way. The physical process was challenging—I didn't expect concrete to be so hard to break! It was tough work, but the final effect was worth it.

JJK: The Futurist manifesto famously called for the destruction of the past and formalism. How did you reconcile this radical vision with Vizcaya's classical aesthetic?

MT: For this performance, it was easy to embrace the idea of destruction, and the ability to break apart and rebuild from the rubble was cathartic. Art Week in Miami can be filled with glamour, superficiality, and excessive commercialism, so this was a great opportunity to create a commentary on concepts in art and art history that challenge the status quo.

JJK: I remember vividly the moment you all stepped onto the stage, lit like a construction site under Miami's dark sky. You entered with solemnity, heavy tools in hand, and began working intensely. During the performance, I could see the concentration on your face, the exhaustion and sweat as you pressed on. Then, in the end, from all that effort emerged two beautiful works, a tribute to Brâncuși. The entire evening was captivating, casting Vizcaya in a new light and breaking its usual context—a place often associated with official events in Miami. This is where state visits took place; Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II met and walked through these same gardens during the papal visit to Miami. Vizcaya is also a venue for weddings and other formal occasions, and suddenly there was this entirely new, intriguing narrative that engaged the entire park.

Let's move on to your newer works. It seems that this project sparked a deeper interest in site-specific work.

***Sky of the First Water* is deeply rooted in the local history of Coconut Grove, paying homage to its Bahamian founders. How did you balance the abstract form of the mural with the cultural and historical significance of the site?**

Mette Tommerup, *Ocean Contour*, 2022
PortMiami, Terminal F
Courtesy Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs
Photo by Zachary Balber

MT: As a local resident of Coconut Grove I am well-acquainted with the heritage of its Bahamian founders and their dedication to establishing Miami's oldest part. Before Coconut Grove was incorporated into the city of Miami in the 1920s, it was a dynamic, prosperous center and an essential hub for the Afro-Caribbean diaspora in the U.S. The numerous churches and homes in West Grove are a testament to the entrepreneurship and rich culture of the Bahamian community. Although only a fraction of these original families remains today, many still call this place home.

The mural developed gradually over time. My goal was to create a monumental piece that would harmoniously fit into the Grove's tree canopy and coral rock foundations. I wanted it to have a form that could resemble the movement of clouds or water with an elongated shape that alludes to the Caribbean islands, especially the Bahamas. It was essential for me to create a work that would bridge Coconut Grove's historic architectural relics with the modernity of this new space, honoring the past as it meets the present.

JJK: The concept behind this mural involves a symbolic act of liberation. Could you explain how the act of tossing and cutting the canvas influenced the final form and meaning of the piece?

MT: My proposal for the Art in Public Places project came right after an elaborate installation at Locust Projects. The installation titled *Made by Dusk* was a tribute to the centennial of women's right to vote and a space dedicated to the Nordic goddess Freya. Part of this installation took place on the building's roof, where I symbolically liberated a large section of unstretched canvas. This performance was captured by a drone, and in the still shot, the canvas seems suspended in time, draping the facade of this alternative space. I used this image as a starting point for the mural in Coconut Grove, creating its monumental version, made in a modular grid system with a topographical theme. A core element of my work is to strip away unnecessary decorative elements and let the piece come to life independently in the natural environment, creating a sense of liberation and freedom.

JJK: The mural's color changes from silver at dawn to gold at dusk, integrating natural light into the artwork. How important is the relationship between art and its environment in your creative process?

MT: I love the challenge of creating art on a large scale—works that can directly interact with nature and, in this case, subtly reflect light. The metallic coating of the mural contains mica, a natural mineral activated by light and the time of day.

JJK: Yemaya, the sea goddess, subtly appears in the island shape. How do you view the intersection of mythology and spirituality with your artistic practice, especially in public spaces like Coconut Grove?

MT: After completing the exhibition dedicated to Freya, I wasn't specifically looking to incorporate mythology into this project, but some forces have a mind of their own. While working on the mural design, I suddenly noticed the outline of a floating female figure and embraced it. Yemaya is an Orisha—the goddess of water, the mother of all Orishas, and the mother of humanity. Later, I realized that another artist, Loni Johnson, had closed my Freya exhibition and, during that performance, invoked Yemaya as one of three Orishas. During that performance, she invoked Yemaya as one of three Orishas. The building housing the mural belongs to Miami-Dade CAHSD (Community Action and Human Services Department), offering social services to individuals and families in need. I liked the thought of Yemaya protecting all residents of Coconut Grove and beyond, hovering above the canopy and gazing toward the sea that connects us to the Caribbean islands.

JJK: Another question that arises is that you had to work with elements pre-designed by an architect—where light enters at certain angles, and water reflects from various sides. These factors were beyond your control in the studio. On-site, you had to anticipate how the lighting conditions would affect and change the work. Similarly to Coconut Grove, where the moving sky and shifting

light make the piece look different at various times of the day, creating a new version of itself. Are there moments of discovery when you return to the installation and see it reacting to these elements in ways you hadn't anticipated?

MT: Honestly, it's a little frightening not knowing if it will all work out exactly as planned. I have a lot of experience helping others with projects, and I knew that both of these works would have a significant impact, especially due to their scale. Technically, I was confident in their success, but I couldn't predict how they would look until they were installed; it was a big risk. I am, however, very happy that the mural changes throughout the day. It looks as if it's effortlessly floating in space, choosing to stay there. I feel that it brings positive energy to the residents of Coconut Grove and beyond. The port project was particularly stressful; both projects demanded a lot of effort. Interestingly, after 18 months, their installations coincided, which was quite surreal.

Robert Chambers and Mette Tommerup
***Putti Kiss*, A Futuristic Evening at Vizcaya, 2013**
Vizcaya Museum and Gardens
Photo by Andres Bedoya

JJK: We didn't touch on one crucial point here. You created this project with South Florida in mind, an area with the strictest engineering and architectural standards for hurricane resilience. These works must withstand winds of up to 180 km/h or even more. How did you address these requirements?

MT: That was an intense challenge, and I have a good story about it. Knowing how difficult it is to work with the building department in Miami, I realized that to get approval, I had to use solutions that would appear exceptionally solid. Fortunately, I had an excellent team from Art in Public Places supporting me, but I still decided to approach the matter with the utmost care. Ultimately, I used massive Hilti anchors, about 20 cm long, deeply embedded in the wall. Made from corrosion-resistant stainless steel, they were quite costly, taking up a substantial part of my budget. When I ordered them from Texas, the supplier was surprised and told me that these anchors are usually used in nuclear power plants, especially in Japan. I thought if they work there, they will withstand a Category 5 hurricane here!

JJK: I love that story. Working with Art in Public Places in South Florida means you have to consider corrosion, the salt-filled air, intense sun exposure that quickly damages materials, and even the acidic deposits from palm leaves. It's a lush, tropical environment but presents unique challenges for art.

MT: When I submitted my proposal, I made sure to emphasize that the project would not require regular maintenance. I understand materiality, and I knew I wouldn't commit to this effort if the work wasn't built to last. That would be a waste of funds and time.

JJK: *Ocean Contour* at PortMiami brings the ocean indoors. How did you translate the fluid, dynamic nature of the ocean into a static, site-specific work?

MT: I had long dreamed of stretching my large canvases and connecting them. So far, I hadn't had the space or budget for such a scale. *Ocean Contour* is installed on a nearly 60-meter wall with a view of the bay. This creates an interesting dynamic for the viewer, who finds themselves between the actual view of the sea, the glass reflections, and the artwork itself. Your term "fluidity" perfectly captures the mental state in which the viewer might lose themselves, balancing between abstraction, light play, and the source of inspiration.

JJK: You mentioned that this work relates to Arte Povera. How does the philosophy of Arte Povera, especially the idea of painting as an endless scroll, influence your work and your view of public spaces?

MT: I'll try to paraphrase Germano Celant's inspiring words—why is painting considered a closed object instead of a part of an endless surface in time? The painted surface is often equated with the canvas, while it can be seen as an infinite scroll unfolding in space and time. This surface continuity is interrupted into fragments—paintings, creating gaps that may influence our understanding of painting and continuity in art history.

JJK: Given this epic scale, how do you balance individual compositions with the unity of the whole work?

MT: My works are modular, and I like to think of them as constantly in motion and independent of me. The 14 individual paintings can be reassembled in different configurations and locations if needed. I am drawn to the idea of reduction to the minimum—in this case, only canvas and a single pigment color—and to concepts that are not static. I like to challenge the idea of art as a precious object.

JJK: What role does materiality play in your creative process? For example, how does working with raw canvas and hand-engraved aluminum add texture and meaning to your large-scale works?

MT: Materiality and scale are extremely important to me. I enjoy when the process—even the struggle with the material—is visible, where the piece ultimately seems to prevail.

JJK: I didn't prepare this before the interview, but I wanted to check the statistics. How many people pass through

the terminal and see your work before boarding the ship?

MT: I know it's about 5,000 people per ship, and the ships depart not every day but very frequently. So it's a lot of people.

JJK: Your works often combine historical and natural elements. How do you see these two themes—history and nature—in your artistic vision?

MT: I am interested in referencing ideas from art history, but ultimately I try to free myself from these constructs. Over time, most of them seem very limiting.

JJK: What does the concept of "site-specific" mean to you? How do you adapt your creative process to the spaces where you work?

MT: Interactive performances that engage participants lead to unscripted projects. This helps me loosen up and feel less restricted by specific locations.

JJK: Looking back at your body of work, how do you see the evolution of your practice in relation to the places and spaces you've intervened in?

MT: Over time, I'm beginning to see more consistency. I usually set limits to a color palette and a natural element. I spend time meditating when a new opportunity arises—you never know exactly what this new location is trying to tell you.

JJK: Perhaps we can end on that note. Mette, thank you for the conversation.

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