

Tangled/Untangled: Matthias van Arkel and the Intra-Active Surface

Matthias van Arkel, Tangled/Untangled

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To encounter a work by Matthias van Arkel is to enter a field of forces. It is to stand before a surface that refuses to be merely a surface, before a painting that asserts its volumetric presence, before a sculpture that insists on its origins in the painterly gesture. His works, these slabs of silicone, these fleshy topographies, these chromatic cliffs, do not simply represent entanglement; they perform it. They are entanglement made manifest, materialized, and made available for sensory apprehension.

The Intra-Active Material

The theoretical discourse on entanglement, as articulated by thinkers like Karen Barad, posits that entities do not pre-exist their relationships but emerge through them. This is not a philosophy of connection between discrete things, but an ontology of "intra-action," where phenomena are co-constituted by their relational dynamics. Van Arkel's silicone operates precisely within this register. As he states, "My work is all about coming together and breaking apart." The material itself, silicone, is chosen for its character, its "strong physicality," its "stickiness" both literal and metaphorical. It is a substance that refuses neutrality; it is "too shiny, too thick, too heavy, too colorful, too rough, too much of everything."

This excess is not decorative but ontological. In the new materialist philosophy of Jane Bennett, matter is "vibrant," possessing its own agency and tendencies. Van Arkel's creative process enacts this vibrancy through a delicate choreography of "intuition versus control." He works with a roller mill, cutting machines, and an oven, firing his works in sections, cutting them into squares to fit the kiln, and then reassembling them. Imperfections become embedded in the work during the layering process, creating a productive tension between the artist's will and the behavior of the material. This is not mastery over matter, but a negotiation with it, an intra-action where the artist and the silicone co-create, each shaping the other. The resulting forms, moving "like enlarged brush strokes forming abstract landscapes," are not illustrations of entanglement; they are physical evidence of it, a sedimented record of forces and resistances.

The Interface: Painting as Sculpture, Sculpture as Painting

Van Arkel challenges the very genealogies of medium specificity, forcing us to reconsider the relationship between painting and sculpture, a relationship that has been a central tension in modernism and its afterlives. His work refuses the flatness that the modernist canon famously posited as the defining condition of modernist painting. Instead, van Arkel's surfaces erupt into space. Each strip of silicone "represents a brushstroke," yet these brushstrokes are not applied to a support;

they are the support. They are three-dimensional, tactile, and autonomous. The clean edges of his cubes allow access to all six sides of the work, dismantling the one-dimensionality of the canvas and inviting a phenomenological encounter that engages the viewer's entire body.

Yet, this is not a simple rejection of painting in favor of sculpture. Van Arkel's practice emerges from a "conceptual approach" to painterly ideas. Color is approached with a painter's sensitivity, combining what he calls both "disgusting and beautiful" tones. The density and sensuality are painterly values, translated into a sculptural idiom. His works are "hybrid paintings," existing in the interstitial space between disciplines. This resonates with the discourse on contemporary art's relationship to modernism, where, as critic Claire Bishop has noted, contemporary artists obsessively reference modernist aesthetics not out of nostalgia, but as a "symptom of contemporary historicity," a way of grappling with the legacies of the past while forging new paths forward. Van Arkel's work internalizes this dialectic; it is modernist in its commitment to material investigation and formal rigor, yet contemporary in its hybridity, its embrace of imperfection, and its willingness to blur boundaries.

Tangled/Untangled: A Poetic Nerve

The title of this exhibition, "Tangled/Untangled," speaks to the dual movement within van Arkel's practice. The "tangled" refers to the complexity of emotional states that drive the work, the overlapping and contradictory feelings of love, loss, secrecy, and devastation. The artist describes that his older work "Anna," was created in the aftermath of a breakup, as an attempt to create ambiguity: "Perhaps two bathers in a stream. Maybe they are playing, maybe they are drowning." This ambiguity is the aesthetic manifestation of emotional entanglement, a state where meaning is not singular but multiple, where joy and sorrow coexist.

But there is also an "untangling" at work, a desire to make sense, to structure, to bring form to chaos. This is evident in the rigorous technique, the methodical layering, and the physical labor required to produce each piece. The process of firing the silicone in sections, of cutting and reassembling, is an act of structuring that echoes the psychological work of processing emotion. The "tangled" and the "untangled" are not opposites but phases in a continuous cycle, mirroring the "coming together and breaking apart" that the artist describes.

This dynamic also speaks to the broader theoretical framework of entanglement as it relates to art. The exhibition is not merely about representing entanglement; it is about creating conditions for the viewer to experience it. The works themselves are "entangled objects" in the sense discussed in contemporary art discourse, objects that carry multiple histories, material agencies, and emotional resonances. Their tactile quality, the way they "hit a poetic nerve," as van Arkel puts it, and affect the viewer "in a way that is beyond words," is precisely the kind of intra-active encounter that Barad describes: a phenomenon co-constituted by the viewer, the artwork, and the environment.

Materiality and Meaning

Van Arkel's choice of silicone is significant not only for its physical properties but also for its symbolic resonance. He notes that it is "the most durable rubber material in the world," made from sand and coal, "not an oil product." Its high molecular density protects the pigment from UV rays, ensuring longevity. This is a material that endures, that holds memory. In the context of works like "Diablo," made during a secret, extramarital relationship, the silicone's shiny, intense surfaces

evoke "rotting flesh," alluding to the relationship's illicitness and its inherent tension between passion and decay. The material becomes a repository for these contradictory emotional states, its physical character, sticky, sensual, imperfect, mirroring the human experiences it is meant to contain.

The organic shapes of his works, with their gaps and holes that seem to reference both sex and incompleteness, further underscore this entanglement of form and meaning. These are not abstract forms divorced from life but forms that are intimately connected to the artist's lived experience. As van Arkel states, "What gets me going is adding personal expression—an original melody of sorts that responds to my emotional environment." This commitment to personal expression, to making "his lived experience and emotion palpable," grounds his work in a tradition that stretches from Edvard Munch, his favorite artist, to the present.

A New Ontology of the Image

Matthias van Arkel's work offers a compelling model for contemporary art practice that engages with the theories of entanglement and new materialism. By pushing painting into the realm of sculpture, by embracing the agency of matter, and by making emotional complexity palpable through material form, he challenges us to rethink the very nature of the artistic image. His works are not objects to be passively observed but fields of force to be actively encountered, tangled networks of meaning, materiality, and emotion that resist easy categorization.

"Tangled/Untangled" at Corner Gallery invites us to enter this field, to experience the intra-active relationship between artist, material, and viewer, and to recognize that in an entangled world, meaning is never fixed but always emergent, always in process, always in the making. In this, van Arkel's work does not simply reflect the discourse on entanglement; it enacts it, making it visible, tangible, and undeniably present.