



ONERIVER

ARTISTS

INSIDE THE WASP'S NEST – THE WORK OF JULIA VON EICHEL

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"Untitled", 60"x72"x60" (approximately), 2012, Mylar, acrylic, nylon, wood, metal, thread Image courtesy of Julia von Eichel

When a *Vespula vulgaris*—the common wasp—builds a nest, it usually selects an accessible, yet hidden, site. The female does the majority of the work in the assembling process. The Vespidae, which belong to the Hymenoptera order, constructs their nests with wooden materials. The queen begins the process by chewing wood or bark, breaking it down with her saliva, and turning it to a paper-like material. She creates her nest from the inside out and works by using the proportions of her body in relationship to the nest. She spends a significant amount of time creating and laboring over her nest. A wasp's nest is usually nestled in wall cavities in homes, under eaves, bird boxes, sheds, and other similar places.

When I contacted Julia von Eichel to let her know I was interested in writing about her work, she invited me to her studio. Her response to timing was "I'm in the studio all the time." Like a wasp working constantly, she toils quietly and constantly on the parlor floor of a row house located in the Clinton Hill area of Brooklyn, NY. Like the *Vespula vulgaris*, she has easy access to her studio and floats between floors of her home. Having her studio in her home allows her to seamlessly move between the multiple roles she plays: artist, wife, mother, gardener and more.

When von Eichel begins creating her sculpture, she begins with a few fixed variables which include materials, color, and structural intention. The material components she has been using to create her recent work all have their own nomenclature and purpose before she transforms them into her nebulous sculptures. The materials she uses are wiffle balls, dowels, silk, thread, and acrylic. The silk clings and hugs the structure in a labor-intensive assembling process, transforming the recognizable materials into otherworldly forms. The work brings to mind two historical figures, Eva Hesse and Lynda Benglis, in its use of materials. The manipulation of the materials transforms them into objects that resemble nests, magnified spores, cornucopia-like forms, and other organic structures.

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"I'll eat you up, I love you so," 2016, silk, acrylic, wood, thread, plastic and epoxy, 40" x 30" x 24" Image courtesy of Julia von Eichel

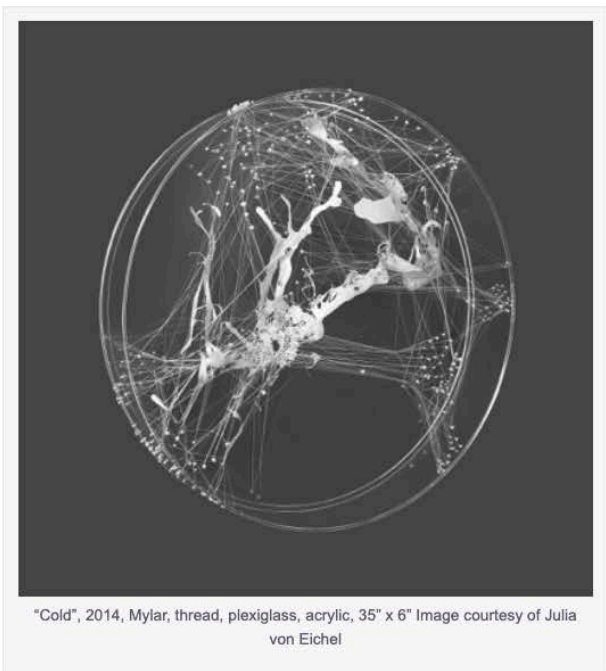
Like Hesse, von Eichel begins with unorthodox materials, transforming them into natural-looking forms and recontextualizing them. But von Eichel's choices, from the beginning, have an emotional range. The artist told me she began using the wiffle balls when she was shopping for toys for her children. The title of the work *"I'll eat you up, I love you so,"* 2016, silk, acrylic, wood, thread, plastic and epoxy, 40" x 30" x 24" comes from Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. She faces the intersection of two different concerns: how to deal with the formal aspects of sculpture and have emotional content be at the core of the work. Peter Plagens describes this eloquently in a review of her show at Winston Wächter Gallery and says Julia von Eichel gives us "...emotional resonance conveyed through an inventive and economical three-dimensional idea executed with just enough craft to give it a genuine presence....The result is a precariously graceful white tent with a subtly threatening underbelly of exposed spheres and shafts. It's a visual arresting metaphor for-perhaps-life itself." [1]

When von Eichel was making this work, she was managing some issues consisting of family, health, and the ever-present pressure of completing work. The silk clings and wraps tightly, revealing the continuous contours of the substructure. On the top of the piece, the mouth exposes the innards: colorful balls, thorny dowels, and thread. Just below the opening, the seamless surface clings to the armature and finally, at the base, the orange balls and dowels make an appearance again. The sculpture seems as if it is showing us the consumption and digestion of its own materials, reminiscent of how the large intestine works in the body. Or perhaps the child's wiffle balls are a metaphor of the exterior world and all it may entail, which is being consumed to reveal a thorny outward representation. How one represents oneself socially is, consciously or unconsciously, based on the inner mechanics of the individual psyche. Like the queen wasp who deposits her larva in her nest, the artist secretes bits of her own personal self into these structures and reveals a tight, clinging, uneven, but ultimately seamless self.

More recently, von Eichel has started to open up the vocabulary in her process. *"Chamber,"* 2018, Silk, plastic, wood, thread, acrylic, epoxy 60" x 34" x 60" is a large sculpture that is suspended from the ceiling. This is a significant shift in the recent work, but it harkens back to her previous installation-based work. Up until now, the previous works hung on the wall and at times seemed like they had grown from the architectural space they occupied. *"Chamber"* hovers and floats in the space: it does not touch the ceiling nor the floor. This work continues to utilize the same materials as previous works, but unlike *"I'll eat you up, I love you so,"* which provides a glimpse to the interior and working mechanics of the structure; *"Chamber"* allows the viewer to circle it and gaze within. The work has opened itself up to reveal both the inside and the outside at the same time. If we could accept the materials and process to be stand-ins for the interior self—to have emotional resonance of the artist—perhaps von Eichel is becoming a little more open and at ease with her own sense of self, having dealt with and processed loss and personal turmoil.

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The position of von Eichel's work is that they begin with form and content, without becoming didactic in either area. The work is nestled between two states of unrest. While on one level her work begins with materials, as with many artists, she begins her process from a more significant place: the self. These works are vessels born from a process and curiosity but are infused with a personal history that are significant beyond the parts of the whole.