

SALTATION

The visual shape of a sand grain is practically inaccessible to the human eye. To reproduce it as a sculpture like Ingri Haraldsen and Petter Buhagen has done for their show “Saltation” at Norske Grafikere a human would rely on an optical device that produces grotesque enlargements.

Understandably biological evolution didn't deem it necessary for us to possess the ability to discern the shape of sand grains with our bare eyes. Direct interactions between singular grains of sand and our eyes are mostly mediated through the sense of touch. Touching sand grains with your eye, though, is generally discouraged. Things that get caught on your retina can cause considerable irritation. Hence, contact between singular sand grains and our eyes is seldom a result of intention. We actively avoid them and have even grown physical attributes—eyelashes—which main purpose is to shield our eyes from contact with air born particles.

Except for when under scientific—or artistic—scrutiny, assisted by powerful magnification instruments, we only register sand grains visually once they have assembled into larger wholes. The primary aesthetic treatment of sand in human culture hence involve large quantities of it: uniform dunes stretching towards the horizon or the ocean. This depiction of sand as either ‘beach’ or ‘desert’ correlates to how our sensory system is set up; our senses have evolved to deal with only a certain spectrum of the sensual world. In a way, these incapacities of our sensory apparatus is what defines us as a species; it is this shared restriction on access that furbishes us with a common ground and thereby makes possible intersubjective congress. Modifications to our biologically determined access mode, attuning us to an expanded or thwarted spectrum of sense impressions, suddenly allowing us to perceive the world in registers akin to say a cat (or why not a bacterium?), would have interesting—but also likely detrimental—societal effects. Haraldsen makes a modest approximation of such an altered relationship to the natural world in her series of blown-up, silk-screened details from photographs. The cues that usually inform our categorizations are here disturbed by noise, either occurring from the process of capture or taking place outside the camera. The distinction is hard to make—and perhaps moot.

Its principal inaccessibility for human vision as a singular form, combined with its disposition to act in unison with other likewise disappearingly small instances of matter to form mesmerizing visual phenomena (deserts, beaches), makes the sand grain a potent metaphor for the stuff that our digital environs are made of. The information units that constitute everything digital likewise repel the human eye (or at least withdraw from it), yet conspire to arrest it when added together. Digital information also share with sand an essentially migratory tendency. ‘The digital landscape’, like deserts is a transitory formation, incrementally expanding into new territory, chewing it up.

Migration is also key to the method that Haraldsen and Buhagen employ. The title “Saltation” refers to the movement of sand grains inflicted by wind. Once wind speed reaches a certain threshold it picks grains off the surface of a sand deposit and carries them a short distance. When the grains drop their momentum is transferred to a new grain which then gets thrown into the air, and so on. Haraldsen and Buhagen’s visual spores jump like sand grains, from one media to the other. “Saltation” visits a range of digital and hands-on techniques: sculptures are moulded in clay, then scanned and transformed into 3D-models before being cut out in slices of plywood on a CNC router and rebuilt manually. A similar translation process recurs in the other works on show; all casually combine disparate techniques: collage, drawing, photography, silkscreen, digital print, painting, xeroxing. The frequent translations from one platform to another pushes Haraldsen and Buhagen’s motives—taken from such unrelated sources as old children’s books, photos of garbage, copy machine noise etc.—into obscurity.

Any non-cohesive particle light enough to be carried by wind yet too heavy to remain suspended over time—even including man-made substances like granular snow—can technically be classified as sand. The properties of sand under this permissive definition is untied from any particular physical substrate. The category of sand essentially speaks to an oscillation between movement and pause. Once an object has discarded its dependence on a fixed chemical basis, having stepped through the portal of the scanner, it adopts a corresponding behaviour. Crucially the loss of representational content witnessed in “Saltation” does not signify a pursuit of abstraction in the formalist sense. It is a symptom of restless transition. The object is there but our relation to it is distorted. Perhaps the rotating image on the scan bed of the copy machine in Buhagen’s “Collapse” series—where, as the title indicates, multiple angles and instances of a single object are ‘futuristically’ *collapsed*—captures this restlessness most poignantly.

– Stian Gabrielsen, October 2015