

sculpture



Installation view of "La Granja," von Bartha, Copenhagen, 2022. Photo: Malle Madsen

TIME LEVELS: A CONVERSATION WITH CLAUDIA WIESER

BY ROBERT PREECE

June 18, 2025

German artist Claudia Wieser works with photo-based wallpaper, ceramic tile, and other seemingly decorative elements to create environments filled with crisscrossing historical and biographical narratives. Working between art and utilitarian object, she considers the various components in her structures, which refer to art, architecture, design, film, and theater, as "individuals in a constellation." Initially trained as a blacksmith, Wieser also worked in set design while getting her degree in art. Both experiences, she says, played an important role in shaping her thinking and practice.

Robert Preece: Since 2009, you've been combining ceramic tile, smaller, sometimes mirrored decorative elements, and photo-based wallpaper into collaged installations that remake space and time. What drives this fascination and keeps you coming back?

Claudia Wieser: I originally come from craft and had an apprenticeship as a blacksmith before my art studies. During my studies, I also worked for three years in set design for motion pictures. These two experiences have had a lasting influence on my artistic approach. My affinity for material as a language of its own, for manual, hands-on process, and for site-specific design has its origins here.

From an early age, I was fascinated by spaces that were atmospherically charged by a certain staging—churches, museums, theaters, and particular architecture. These were spaces removed from everyday concerns, in which I felt different as a child, and now as an adult.

For me, my artistic practice is about more than just developing a proposal or a setting. I always want to change the atmosphere of the space, to take viewers away from their lives and reality. To do this, I use the means inherent in my

artistic language, in other words, wallpaper, sculptures, and reflective material. It is important to me that the individual pieces not only work together and contribute to the staging, but also meet my ambition that the object should stand for itself. They are not meant purely to be props in a staging; they are also to be seen as “individuals” that sometimes come together as a constellation.

RP: In some ways, your “La Granja” exhibition (2022) at von Barth in Copenhagen appeared simple, but there was a lot going on with the interplay between elements.

CW: “La Granja” is a good example of a very special spatial experience I had. La Granja is a rather absurd, almost abandoned mansion in Mallorca, with a curious mix of old medical instruments, craft rooms, kitchens, playrooms, instruments, animals, and torture chambers all in one house. It was like walking through a fictional dream world, especially if you could walk through it alone, for hours, as I did. That experience was the catalyst for the exhibition. I tried to capture and reproduce the rapturous, romantic, dream-world moments of La Granja through motifs and materials.

Different groups of works came together in the show, but they were planned to coordinate with each other. There was a tapestry showing a collage of different photos—landscape, antique sculptures, and other elements. There was a wall with combinations of old animal photos and my drawings, various mirror/copper reliefs and metal/glass shelves that occupied the middle of the room, acting as plinths for small wooden turned and painted sculptures.



Night, 2022. Ink and acrylic paint on lime wood, 75 x 17 cm.
Photo: Malle Madsen, Courtesy the artist and von Barth

RP: I’m intrigued by the forms, compositions, and material choices of your smaller sculptures—for example, *Night* and *Horizon* (both 2022). They seem to hold a certain magic. What are they?

CW: For me, they express an ideal/typical representation of form that has been handed down for thousands of years. Think of ancient vases, jugs, vessels, column capitals, ornaments. On the one hand, these are universal, very simple forms, but they often come with an individual finish. At the same time, they serve, in my case, as a support for a painterly and graphical setting, which modifies the general form into a unique object.

A very intuitive process takes place when working on these sculptures. I can’t plan at all what the work will look like in the end. I start with an idea and react to it, just as I react spontaneously to the form. Thus, this group of works always consists of a planning process, namely the drawing and the production, and then the intuitive processing of the material.

RP: In your earlier “Comedies, Histories and Tragedies” exhibition (2020), at the former von Bartha S-chanf space in the Alps, the staircase imagery was very strong, especially in terms of lines and implied lines. How would you describe its importance within the whole in terms of its content and its relation to the other elements?

CW: There was a play with two- and three-dimensionality, with real and depicted objects, perspectives, and spaces. The title, which refers to the first complete edition of Shakespeare’s plays from 1623, is exactly about that. To find oneself as a viewer in a space that refers to something other than the physically tangible opens up another level alongside the real objects in the room.



Installation view of “Comedies, Histories and Tragedies,” von Bartha, S-chanf, 2020.
Photo: Andrea Rosetti

RP: Those magical little sculptures made an early appearance in “Chapter” at Marianne Boesky Gallery (2018), where they sat on a raised platform. What was the photo-based wall imagery behind them?

CW: The initiating moment for “Chapter” was the BBC television series “I, Claudius.” I am fascinated by history, and this series, which I watched at the time of the 2016 U.S. election, is about universal themes of power, love, family, and intrigue. Though it’s set in the Roman Empire and was filmed in the 1970s, it seemed very relevant in 2016 and even now. Different time levels meet in this context, which is something that interests me.

The wall piece was composed of images from “I, Claudius”—the woman, for example, is Livia, the wife of Augustus, played by Siân Phillips—combined with photos that I took in New York and images of materials like concrete, stone, and brick. The ensemble was meant to be like a kind of cult space, or a kind of stage in which the viewer becomes part of the installation and mixes with the different layers of time as suggested by the title. Additional elements, such as a table, sculptures, and reliefs, formed the broader setting for this narration.

RP: Have you encountered any pockets of resistance to your work in terms of its hybrid approach to art and design?

CW: Actually, my working between art and utility was a reason for several invitations to exhibit. I can’t sense whether there has been any resistance, at least it hasn’t been expressed to me.

RP: *Rehearsal* (2021) was installed outdoors in Brooklyn. What kinds of things did you have to consider with the work positioned outside? Was it a challenge to work with these considerations in relation to what you wanted to express aesthetically and experientially?

CW: There are naturally more considerations and technical issues with outdoor projects than in controlled indoor spaces. Still, this had little influence on my aesthetic decisions, since Public Art Fund, which initiated the project, created possibilities to realize the work exactly as I wanted. In terms of experimenting or a late decision-making process, this

was, of course, something with a long lead time and planning. In this respect, it certainly differed from my normal way of working; I usually give a lot of space to play when installing and assembling material. However, I wanted to make the installation accessible for the viewer, to involve the city and to play with reflections and in this way to make human interaction possible as the title suggests.

RP: How did you select and arrange the imagery for “Generations” (2020), at the Smart Museum of Art in Chicago? What were the different things you were thinking about? Was working on that scale particularly challenging?

CW: This was a survey exhibition that travelled from the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art in Omaha to Chicago. The challenge was to integrate the body of works in two totally different locations. Following the title of the show, I wanted to include references to the past as well as to the present in the wallpaper imagery. This explains the images of antique statues and cultural objects in combination with current photos and contemporary art objects. The central forms are always human figures or things created by humankind, because the condition of human existence is what moves me.



Untitled, 2020. Glazed ceramic tiles and mirror-polished stainless steel on MDF, installation view.
Photo: Fred Dott

RP: *Untitled* (2020), an installation that you created for “The Absurd Beauty of Space” at the Hamburger Kunsthalle, was a bit different. The mirror-polished stainless steel of the cube form created amazing optical effects. What drove your thinking, and how did you make the cube form?

CW: For that show, seven artists were invited to deal with the specific architecture of the Kunsthalle, which was designed by O.M. Ungers and is based on the basic structure of the square. For me, it was a clear decision to exaggerate the theme of the square and not to work against it. It was therefore obvious to work with square tiles and a cube. The outer surface of the cube reflected the outside world through the opposite windows. The basis for the use of mirror-polished stainless steel is always a drawing, which serves as the template for the laser cut. So, as a rule, the final decision takes place at the design stage and not at the installation stage.

RP: You’ve identified two early works as key to the development of your practice— *Treppen* (Stairs, 2009) and *Der Innere Kreis* (The inner circle, 2009), both installed at the Kunstverein Oldenburg. *Treppen* involves a structure covered in photo-based wallpaper with imagery of colliding staircases. Could you explain this work and its significance for you?

CW: I worked a lot with abstract motifs before starting to use imagery of things. *Treppen* was the first time that I used photographic material found in old books. I was interested in the visual quality of the photos, which were about 100 years old. Through the nature of photography, the stairs developed an almost sculptural quality and a three-

dimensionality, as well as exaggerations through brightness and contrast. I wanted to use this to completely change the cube room in the middle of the exhibition space and to change the visual habits of the viewer. The cube, which was usually there to highlight other elements than itself, suddenly became the object of attention. I often use architecture as sculptural material.



Installation view of "Generations," Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, 2020.
Photo: Eat Pomgranate

RP: And what about *Der Innere Kreis*, which is much more abstract, and almost minimal?

CW: *Der Innere Kreis* was located inside the cube that I just mentioned. A peculiarity of this room is that its height is twice as high as the surrounding walls. When someone comes around the corner, there is a moment of surprise at how the room opens upwards and creates an unexpected feeling of grandeur. To emphasize this, it was important to me to play with the space as a whole and to create a kind of "sacred" space with relatively simple means.

RP: How would you characterize your work prior to 2009?

CW: One of my most important and formative exhibitions was in 2004, directly after my studies. I was invited to exhibit in a Munich project space and decided to completely change the space. I wanted to test how well one could get along without a white cube, without maximum neutrality for presenting art—something that seemed a high priority in my art studies and in institutions. So, I completely covered the exhibition space with black and white copies and aluminum foil, which exhausted my financial possibilities, and I invited other artists to also exhibit there. It was a test, but I liked the result, and it surely laid some foundation for my later installation works.

RP: Your untitled solo show at Galerie Kamm in Berlin in 2013 appears to merge or synthesize the elements you had been exploring in these earlier works.

CW: In this exhibition, I wanted to imagine the exhibition space as a whole and cover it with a second "skin" composed of a collage of images. Basically, this was one of my most reduced exhibitions, as I shifted all levels to the two-dimensional print. The allusion to cultural history, as well as to objects, things, materials, all this was only present in the print and no longer as objects in the space.

RP: What did you learn from your apprenticeship as a blacksmith? And how did it impact your art-making?

CW: That experience was very important. It gave me a lot of self-confidence, because I was the first woman working in that company. Before that, there were doubts as to whether a woman was suitable for it. I learned a lot about my hands, about the expressiveness of material.

RP: What other experiences helped you along on your artistic journey?

CW: Growing up in a boring suburb of Munich sparked my desire to escape that bourgeois, stuffy world. Art seemed to be a good way to get out. No one in my immediate environment helped me, but nothing was put in my way either. Immediately after my studies at the Art Academy in Munich, my former studio colleague at the time opened a gallery called Galerie Ben Kaufmann, and I was represented there for a few years before he decided to close the gallery. That basically started everything.

"Surroundings," an exhibition of new outdoor work by Claudia Wieser, is on view at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center in Kallithea, Greece, through November 16, 2025.