

There is eruption in Marit Benthe Norheim's monumental sculptures.

Camping bodies

REVIEW Sara Hegna Hammer, 24. januar



Beaten camp: «Campingwomen». Photo: Istvan Virag, KUNSTDOK

Marit Benthe Norheim:

Norsk billedhoggerforening, Oslo – Open until March 3rd.

When I was in my second year, a peculiar sculpture was unveiled a stone's throw below Skien Upper Secondary School. The seven-meter-high "Rat Maiden" (2006), which also serves as a slide, did not blend in with the terrain by the riverbank. "Sick shit" was the students' description of the woman with a rat's head between her legs.

Soon the sculpture would fade from my consciousness and not reappear until last week when I came across pictures of some equally strange, concrete-clad caravans with towering female figures on the roof: Marit Benthe Norheim's "Campingwomen" (2008).

Norheim was born in Telemark, but has lived much of her adult life in Denmark. In addition to "The Rat Maiden", she has made a name for herself here at home with the aforementioned "Camping Women" - a caravan of campers that toured Stavanger when the city was European Capital of Culture, and has since been seen on the road from Finnmark to Copenhagen.

Now the five caravans are parked outside The Norwegian Sculptors Association, and it's a unique experience to stroll around them in deep snow. The sound of Geir Johnson's soundtrack seeps out of the poorly insulated wagons, and through the windows you get a glimpse of how the caravans - or bodies - are decorated.

The artist sees the female body as the starting point for life, and the sculptures represent archetypes: The Bride, the Mother, the Siren, the Refugee and the Virgin Mary.

In "The Refugee," a recited poem by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish can be heard. The cart is filled with ceramic works by children - pictures of what they would take with them if they had to flee. In "The Siren" is a sculpture that resembles both a phallus and a fetus, and over the loudspeaker you hear a luring song, interrupted by a woman's voice asking you to put away your sour socks. Safely inside the "Virgin Mary" rests the lifeless body of Jesus - protected only by his mother's body.

The monumental installation leaves a complex image of the woman: caregiver and object of desire, victim and wielder of power, life giver and life saver.

"Campingwomen" slips seamlessly into an artistry that since the 1980s has revolved around a fascination with the female body. Long before a "tsunami of breast milk", in the words of literary critic Endre Ruset, washed over our culture, Norheim has insisted that reproduction, as banal as it is unfathomable, is artistically interesting.

In every corner, we find sculptures with milk squirting from the breasts or heads pushing out between two legs. The title "My Ship Is Loaded with Life" speaks volumes. After gaining insight into Norheim's literally life-affirming artistry, "The Rat Maiden" no longer seems like «weird stuff». It is not her strongest work; the competition from "Camping Women" is too tough for that. But it has its natural place in a fascinating body of work that will hopefully receive greater recognition in the Norwegian art scene.