

STRONG FRONTAL FIGURES, by Jorunn Veiteberg

Figureheads are not usually a part of the sculptor's repertory. These grandiose wooden figures mounted on ships' prows have always been hand-crafted products with no status in an artistic context, and as a craft they blossomed first and foremost in the days of sailing ships. Figureheads could represent renowned warriors or captains, but were often women. In the beginning they were upstanding women holding bibles, but as time passed they became more scantily dressed, more voluptuous and frivolous. Nevertheless, they were always strong and powerful women, because the function of the figures head was to protect ship and crew from the dangers of the sea. They were the guarantee for a successful journey and the goal achieved.

The use of women as allegorical figures was also very customary in art until the 1800s. Based on thorough studies of Christianity, on the myths of antiquity and philosophy as well, handbooks were printed giving directions on how various virtues, ideas and qualities could be expressed by means of allegories and personifications. It appears that the figurehead is related to the traditional way of personifying the concept of trust, in one of the most frequently used handbooks from the 1600s and 1700s, Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, trust is personified as a woman with long flowing hair and loosely-hanging clothing. She holds a ship in her arms and gazes trustily towards heaven. In Ripa's definition, trust is to admit that one is in danger, but at the same time retaining the belief that one can be rescued. It is a quality needed by seafarers setting out on dangerous waters – that is why the woman holds a ship in her arms. This word of symbolism signifies the meaning in Marit Benthe Norheim's towering female figures, mounted as they are like figureheads on Union Company's new "flagship", the biological purifying plant beside the harbor basin i Skien.

Before looking more closely at other meanings contained in Norheim's sculptural ornamentation, let us introduce five figures which make up the decoration. They represent five different types or five different phases in a process. The composition of the first female figure is very symmetrical. She has bared her breast, but extends her hands shyly and protectively in front of her. Her eyes protectively in front of her. Her eyes protectively in front of her. Her eyes are closed, her mind is turned inward. The lower part of her body is decorated with a plant-like form which resembles a double set of ovaries. The next woman in the row is voluptuous and offers herself provocatively. Her hand lifts up one breast. She carries herself proudly and her gaze is open and direct. The lower part of her body is marked by a large spiral form winding sinuously around her body, ending on her stomach and thereby focusing attention on it. Corresponding mini-spirals coil around on her buttocks. There is an air of pleasure and affection about the third figure. There are no arms to hamper or restrain. Her face is turned away, her eyes are closed, but a large, listening ear is turned outwards. On her stomach are the marks of a womb-like form. A line beginning in her hair and curling its way around the body suggests many associations. Perhaps it is a long strand of hair, perhaps an umbilical cord, perhaps a symbolization of the thread of life. The entire lower body of the fourth female figure is decorated with garland forms. A smile plays about her mouth and her arms are held out from her sides as if she is about to dance. Her happiness and joy is perhaps caused by the child who presses itself against her breast. The fifth sculpture also consists of two figures – a large, powerful woman and a smaller creature of uncertain age and sex. The little one holds tightly to the woman, stretching his hand upward toward her breast as though seeking strength and protection.

They are sensual and vigorous, these women in concrete that Norheim has created, and she enters into a dialogue with a long art history tradition. The half-naked figurehead may belong in a low cultural sphere, but references for choosing her as a subject are also found in so-called "fine" art. Both the half clad and the wholly naked

female figure have deep roots in art history. It is, in fact, considered a separate art genre, introduced by the Greeks in the fifth century B.C. Thus, it is not merely a question of an artistic subject, but of an art form – the nude. Almost all art students are trained in this genre, and very many artists, painters as well as sculptors, have created their interpretations. Therefore, to a greater degree than any other motif, the nude denotes “Art” in Christian iconography there is, a more ambivalent attitude to nakedness. The nude body often symbolizes sin and shame, and the most loathsome of all is Eve, who in her nakedness, personifies sexual temptation. Only the Virgin Mary is guilt free. When she bares her breast to nurse Jesus, there is no negative undertone. As mother and virgin, she has become the ideal icon of The Good Mother. Norheim’s figures conform with this equivocal tradition. As is customary in the tradition, the figures are idealized and not portraits of specific women,. The bared upper body which signals immediately that we are facing mythological creatures or allegorical figures. Nor is it merely incidental that it is the upper body that is unclad and the breast that is emphasized. The area of the bosom is the seat of the heart. At the same time, Norheim plays on the many implications associated with the breast. The breast is seen as both a natural and a sexual attribute, and as a source of nourishment it implies security and protection. By proudly and shamelessly showing this soft and feminine part of her body, Norheim’s female figures convey strength and freedom. But there is no emphasis on the emotional bond between mother and child. Although one is obviously happy, the two mother figures show no active solicitude, even though their bodies provide protective cover. The huge dimensions of the figures and the constant touching on sensuality and fertility, nourishment and protection, lead one’s thoughts to depictions of female deities in pre-Christian religions. These early mothers symbolized fertility and life-giving, and in primitive cultures where man lives in harmony with earth and nature’s cycles, fertility is always sacred. The new feminist movement search for new and positive pictures with which to identify. Many women artists have created anti-

pictures in opposition to the stereotype female picture which prevails in art advertising and films, and similarly, the so-called Goddess Movement has rebelled against Jewish-Christian God symbolism. Norheim's figures can be interpreted in the light of both these "strategies". Sensual desire is depicted without automatically being tied to sin and shame, as in traditional Christian iconography, while at the same time there is a spiritual dimension related to the picture of God which the Goddess Movement stands for. Some have maintained that the most important contribution from this movement is the picture of the God of creation as Mother and Goddess. A much-used symbol in this context – although open to many interpretations – is the spiral which can be stretched and retracted, and is a symbol of birth and death. Just as the whirl, it can represent creative strength, femininity and fertility. All these interpretations are evident in Norheim's sculptures. The vital force and the feminine Eros which radiate from these female figures is closely tied to their life-giving capabilities.

Many feminists object to what they perceive as essentialism in the Goddess-Movement. In western philosophy women have always been connected with material nature, not matters of the soul and spirit, and this kind of thinking can be traced back to precisely those myths in which nature and earth were associated with a feminine mother god. By attaching women's identity and their very being so closely to their life-giving potential, women are once again reduced to biology and body. At the same time, however, it would be wrong, if women were to underestimate and disclaim the knowledge they receive through menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth. Although pregnancy and motherhood have not meant the same for women at all times, they are inescapable realities. It is, therefore, important that art takes up such experiences for examination and Norheim's sculptures also deal with these questions. We cannot avoid the fact that to bring forth human life is a condition for the perpetuation of the human race. Today this fact contains a huge challenge as we face the abundance of reproduction technologies which may be used in the future to degrade pregnancy and

childbirth, to commercialize child-bearing and in the long run to make the female body totally superfluous. Technological developments may lead to either good or bad, but in this case artistic decoration is playing on the same team as the purifying plant in adorns, as a tribute to natural, biological processes.

As art, Norheim's ornamentation represents the opposite to industrial production and we can safely say that on several levels this decoration adds new qualities to the factory. These sculptures bear witness to faith in the body's experience and women's strength. Sensual throughout, as these feminine figures are, they must invigorate a male-dominated milieu. At the same time, references to ancient myths of creation open up a spiritual dimension which is certainly not everyday fare in a high-technology factory based on rational thought patterns. Nevertheless, the most important aspect of Marit Benthe Norheim's figureheads is their function as protective symbols and as a signpost for the factory's future environmental protection policy.