

Camping Women on wheels create a experience space

Marit Benthe Norheim's Camping Women in collaboration with Geir Johnson. "Nature opens its eyes through art", Adorno, Aesthetic Theory (1970).

By Art Historian, Else Marie Bukdahl

Marit Benthe Norheim is first and foremost an artist who has, in an exemplary and contemporary manner, created an array of sculptures in the public space in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, England, Iceland and Greenland. She has managed to create unique sculptures, which establish unexpected visual dialogues with their surroundings. They lend the locations where they are situated a new identity and establish new patterns of meaning. The dialogues with the surroundings which are created by her sculptures are so nuanced and intense that meaning, form and materials are always closely aligned in relation to their locations. She has succeeded in making topical and activating the public space and giving the city life in new and surprising ways. The Lady of the Sea (2001) in Sæby and The Rat Maiden (2006) in Skien demonstrate this with all desirable clarity. They both visualise - on a very large scale - two of the most mysterious and ambiguous figures in Ibsen's drama. She has modelled both of these monumental works and the majority of her other pieces by hand in concrete. She manages to reshape and transform the concrete in an unusual way so that it can express the humanity, the life-giving processes and the protection against destructive forces which she has been concerned with interpreting.

In May this year she surprised us again and has drawn us into her magic circle. With her eagle eyes she has found five shabby caravans. With a sure and sensitive hand she has transformed them into mobile sculptures of great strength and originality. The caravans are shaped externally like monumental female figures modelled in bright white concrete. Inside the caravans there are sculptures, reliefs and photographs and music, which is partly edited, partly created by composer Geir Johnson. The music intensifies and makes immediate the themes represented by the Camping Women. Thus, they appeal to sight, hearing, thought and fantasy.

The Refugee is both a proud and vulnerable female figure, who looks into an uncertain future. Inside the caravan, 400 Norwegian children and female refugees have covered the walls with mosaics, which portray the loss and hopes of the refugee. Geir Johnson has intensified this theme with his musical reworking of the Palestinian national poet's famous work, Siege (2002). The Siren comprises a contemporary interpretation of the seductive siren from Greek mythology, who lures seaman towards shipwreck. This is also how seduction often happens today. In Maria the Protector we see a modern depiction of the theme of mercy which is often neglected at a time when individualism has such a central place.

The Bride has great erotic radiance, but all the wedding pictures inside the caravan show the multiplicity of views of marriage and point in many places indirectly at the often difficult circumstances that a bride has to live in. The Camping Mama is large and caring, but also symbolises the parochial, almost suffocating atmosphere that the bourgeois life can hold.

The Camping Women have created wonder and enthusiasm on the journey that they have been on in Rogaland since May (Fig 3). The Camping Women show how Marit Benthe Norheim uses the female body both in small and large scale to express fundamental human attitudes, experiences, feelings and dreams. She is in agreement with Mark Rothko, when he wrote in connection with the decoration of a chapel in Houston that he was "interested only in expressing basic human emotions".

Euronews has rightly pointed to the Camping Women installation as a unique and original installation. They are a part of and maintain in their own way our everyday reality, which is the space of sight, the body and action and are thus distance themselves from the media created reality, which is a virtual world.

The Camping Women frame the places where they are situated and give them new meaning. They invite the viewer to experience something new and unexpected, emphasize directions of movement in the environment and create new points of view. With her five Camping Women, Marit Benthe Norheim shows that art contains an unusual sensory experience, which communicates sides of our inner and outer reality which we often overlook and possibly have no knowledge of. Her understanding of the relationship between art and reality corresponds in many ways to what Francis Bacon has expressed as follows: "I don't illustrate reality. But create pictures which are concentrations of reality and sensory shorthand."

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Most of the pieces created by Marit Benthe Norheim up until 2005, are dealt with in the book Marit Benthe Norheim (Thanning and Appel, Copenhagen 2005). It contains an interview with Marit Benthe Norheim by Cultural Consultant Thomas Østergaard, articles by the Art Historian Dr Phil. Jorunn Veiterberg and Dr Phil. Else Marie Bukdahl.

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