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Rolling Camping Women create new artistic experiences in the public space

Marit Benthe Norheim's Camping Women, created in collaboration with Geir Johnson

By Else Marie Bukdahl

Artist Marit Benthe Norheim is known first and foremost for the many unique sculptures and installations - often on a large scale - that she has created in Norway, Denmark, England, Sweden, Iceland and Greenland. These works reveal new perspectives and communicate new patterns of meaning in the public space. They thereby lend the specific site a new identity. The manner in which Marit Benthe Norheim works corresponds to a great extent to Art Historian Annette Østerby's description of contemporary artists' use of the public space: 'The artist uses the public space to create a closer and more personal contact with the audience and groups in the local population, thereby raising questions of identity in relation to a specific place, and about the relationship between the individual and society.'

Almost all Marit Benthe Norheim's sculptures are modelled directly in concrete. They exude a formal simplicity, a particular sensibility and an intense expressive force. Thus they are able to communicate new aspects of the inner and outer reality. The Art Historian Trond Borgen remarks rightly that 'Norheim uses the body as a symbol and metaphor for basic human emotions, experiences and attitudes.'

Some of her sculptures give the places they are situated in a striking new profile, whilst simultaneously visualising cultural aspects which are topical for precisely that location. This is true for, amongst others, the seven metre tall figure which was erected in Ibsen's birthplace, Skien (Norway) in 2006. This contains a sculptural interpretation of one of the most mysterious and ambiguous figures of Ibsen's dramas. It is about the Rat Maiden from Little Eyolf, but Marit Benthe Norheim has created it in such a way that it expresses a more universal perspective, which can best be described as the battle between the life-destroying forces and the life-giving forces in the human psyche. This doubleness has also been interpreted through the composer Geir Johnson's music, which is built into the sculptures.

But Marit Benthe Norheim has also been preoccupied with creating sculptures that move and which are therefore capable of creating new experience spaces in different locations and revealing unexpected connections. This is seen with all possible clarity in the 'Rolling Angels' (2000 - 2001). Geir Johnson has composed music which he has placed in their 'hearts'.

The relation between sculpture, movement and music has been interpreted in a completely new way in the five Camping Women on wheels, which she has worked on for two years. She has customised five caravans externally as monumental female figures. In the interiors of the caravans we see reliefs, sculptures and photographs, which lend nuance and depth to the main themes that the Camping Women represent. The artistic universe which Marit Benthe Norheim has built up inside

the caravans is given a special sound and intensity by the music that Geir Johnson has composed, whilst he has emphasised the themes which each Camping Woman represents through his musical language.

All the Women have richly contrasting characters and symbolise, each in their own manner, prominent trends in our current society and in our cultural history.

The Refugee leans forwards and looks ahead into an unknown world. She shows bravery and strength, but she is also anxious and vulnerable because she does not know what fate awaits her. The interior of the caravan is covered with porcelain mosaics, which were created by four hundred children from the Stavanger region as well as refugee women in Sandnes. The mosaics express loss and longing. The famous Palestinian national poet Mahmoud Darwish gave Geir Johnson permission to adapt part of his work, 'Siege' (2002) and set it to music. Through this work the painful fate of the refugee is presented in a richly expressive manner. The Siren is a buxom female figure with great erotic radiance. She is seductive, but also dangerous. She both attracts and repels. Inside the caravan, the walls are covered with pink concrete with impressions of many hands - these are the visible traces of all of those who have been drawn into her circle of magic. She is a modern interpretation of a Siren, who in Greek mythology behaved seductively towards sailors in order to watch their ships sink. On the floor there is a free-standing mysterious figure - maybe a human, maybe a foetus, maybe a phallus. Geir Johnson has composed the music, which is sung by Siri Torjesen. Her song is often interrupted by everyday often scolding remarks such as "Have you remembered to call mum?". The song suggests that after the seduction comes the trivial everyday.

The Camping Mama appears as an enormous matron, who embraces those who come in her vicinity, with great care - but she can be so caring that she is almost suffocating. This is emphasised by Siri Torjesen, who sings the popular songs, in which security can also become constricting. The Virgin Mary (Mary the Protector) is a contemporary sculptural interpretation of Maria the merciful, who protects and prays for the damned. The dead Christ lies on the floor of the caravan, flanked by the many people he has protected. Geir Johnson's adaptation of Miserere Mei by Gregorio Allegri, sung by Trio Medieval, contains a musical interpretation of the sculptural depiction of the theme of mercy. The Bride is both poetic and erotic. She embraces a man and a woman and seems to invite us into the caravan, which is papered with wedding pictures, which show known and foreign forms of marriage. The visitors can listen to wedding songs from different parts of the world.

Marit Benthe Norheim has managed to create a visual dialogue with a multiplicity of pictures and objects both outside and inside the caravans, which also take the surrounding space into account. Wonderful, dream-like worlds are created through these dialogues, through both the stories and the music, which are connected to the sculptures in an expressive whole.

The Camping Women drove through the wind-blown and harsh Western Jutland and continued on to the painterly Norwegian fell landscapes. On the 6th of May they were officially unveiled in Stavanger on the occasion of the city being nominated as the European Capital of Culture 2008. Since then the Camping Women have visited various schools, town squares and camping grounds in Rogaland and will continue their journey throughout the year. The caravans are open to the public at certain times of the day. Every time they have arrived at a new location they have created first amazement, and later taught new experiences and insights into the world that we know. The Camping Woman show 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. Through

art we not only extend our areas of experience and knowledge. We also meet the connections and unified wholes that have been weakened or entirely disappeared in our fragmented and unpredictable world.

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.

Annette Østerby, 'Introduction' to the catalogue for the exhibition 'City Space'. Sculptures and installations created in Copenhagen 96, 1996, p.18. See www.kunstkritik.no The journey is constantly updated on the home page for Stavanger Capital of Culture, see www.stavanger.2008.no
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