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A mobile exhibition with women

Marit Benthe Norheim, Camping Women - Stavanger 2008

By Trond Borgen

Sometimes art can be populist without being banal or reduced to kitsch.

Marit Benthe Norheim balances close to the point where interesting art can get bogged down in banality with her five Camping Women, the art commission for the 2008 Culture Capital in Stavanger. Five caravans are converted to large female figures in concrete externally, inside we see sculptures, reliefs, photographs and we can hear accompanying music by Geir Johnson. The reason why Norheim's Camping Women do not tip over into the banal lies in her combination of art historical references and a clear relational aspect which becomes visible both in the manner in which she has equipped the caravans internally and in the openness of the accessibility. The caravans will be driven around Stavanger and Rogaland and are open to the public every day, according to a clearly organised programme. This is where the curators behind the big, but unsuccessful Stavanger art project, Nabolagshemmeligheter/Neighbourhood Secrets could learn a lot, as they have not even managed to communicate actual opening times for their exhibition locations.

Inside one of the camping women there lies a body, dead, on the floor. It could be the dead Christ, who will be resurrected from the tomb, but it could also be any person in need of protection. Externally, the caravan is made to resemble Mary the Protector - here Norheim builds on the depictions of the Madonna della Misericordia, the Madonna of Mercy, who protects and prays for all human beings. All of this Norheim creates in concrete, a material we associate with industry, not with art. She transforms concrete into a flexible implement for her sculptures, the dead figure inside the caravan is surrounded by a series of smaller sculptures, related to the Romanesque incorporeal sculptural tradition.

It is as if Norheim suspends the weight of the concrete here, it becomes flexible and yielding in its representation of the body as spirit rather than matter. It is such art historical references, maintained despite a rough, but nevertheless yielding use of concrete, which always make an impression on me in my encounters with Norheim's art. In Mary the Protector, the references to church art of the middle ages are there for the viewer to see, without them becoming specifically Christian. Instead, this revolves around a more basically humanist project, through the representation of the human body in archetypal situations. From the caravan with the dead body - a metaphoric tomb - I move onto The Bride, a caravan full of wedding pictures which paper the walls and ceiling. They have been collected, both locally and internationally and represent the dream of happiness in the simplest manner, ordinary pictures people have dug up from their past. Norheims external bride, who covers the entire caravan, embraces two naked figures, a man and a woman, she invites us into the marriage and she invites us playfully into her body, simultaneously showing marriage to be an official and institutional framework for living together which has partly passed its sell by date, and which will soon make the life inside the caravan, the inner female life, all too cramped and restricted.

The Camping Mama lets you into her skirt and shows you other pictures of happiness, pictures of the holiday life of camping trips, often from a time when pleasures were simpler and life was less complicated. Again, the ambivalence, this open invitation can easily become claustrophobic. After a couple of minutes I had to escape from this cooped up space. I ran into the arms of the Refugee Woman which represents the dream of the future in the form of 400 colourful porcelain tiles made by 400 children in Stavanger, together with refugee women. It is as populist and as simple as it gets, but that is no reason in itself to reject this art. Quite the opposite, here it pays to take time to study the small pictorial histories that lie in the porcelain reliefs. They range from sorrow to joy, from desperation to hope for a better life.

The large breasted Siren has a buxom body, ready to eat you whole if you step inside. Pink concrete covers the whole interior, it is as if I have entered a warm womb. Hundreds of handprints cover the pink walls and in the middle there is an upright figure, also pink - half human, half phallus. This is a strange love grotto where the hands are the traces of all who have been here before, all humanity, all my rivals and soulmates. I am in the middle of all desire's erotic, physical and mental goals, generously offered up by a siren, a mystical female figure who is trying to seduce me - the siren who in Greek mythology lured sailors out into ruin. It is not easy to navigate safely and securely in here.

In Marit Benthe Norheim's Camping Women we meet woman as mother earth, archetypal bride, eternal seductress, refugee and spiritual guardian. Just as in Norheim's other concrete sculptures, a huge project with many ramifications which she has worked on for many years, these figures embrace many aspects of human existence. Norheim uses the body as a symbol and metaphor for basic human emotions, experiences and attitudes. In this instance they are created as formidable female figures, one opens her cape in a protective gesture, another effervesces with her bridal veil and admits more than her new husband into her interior, whilst another has a sway within her body, like a fleeing movement, away from this to something else, something better. The archetypal seductress eats her men and women raw, so that the only traces left of them on the walls are in the form of the imprints of hands in a pink womb.

And then Norheim puts her women into motion, at a maximum speed of 30km an hour, they roll out of the courtyards. They come to town like a nomadic carnival, in a procession where bedecked vehicles disrupt the flow of traffic. The traffic cannot find it's pace. It stops. It is time to wonder at life and art and time to go deep into women who throw their doors wide open. Here, there is a place for everyone in an art form which is difficult to access, in it's idiom and themes. This is an art that we need precisely because it is so well considered and well executed, and because it does not hide behind high flying, but perhaps less realisable theories, the likes of which we see in Neighbourhood Secrets, Stavanger's other art project. Norheim's Camping Women are basically relational, because it meets people where they actually are, right down at street level. In the midst of life.