

## Ingenious female sculptures on wheels



Marit Benthe Norheim, Siren (2008). Concrete and fiberglass constructed over a caravan. 395x414x230 cm. Photo: Istvan Virag / KUNSTDOK



**The camping women Marit Benthe Norheim displays at the Sculptor's Association in Oslo are five precious sculptures. But what will happen when they age and are eventually parked?**

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Marit Benthe Norheim

*My ship is loaded with Life*

**The exhibition runs until March 3rd.**

In the garden of the Sculptor's Association in Oslo, Marit Benthe Norheim has parked *Camping Women* (2008). The five sculptures depict large, good-natured female bodies that the artist has created using fiberglass, concrete, and older caravans. Unlike traditional sculptures in public spaces, these artworks are not made to stand still. For the exhibition *My Ship Is Loaded with Life*, Norheim drove the caravans from Denmark to Oslo, and the images of the convoy rolling out of the ferry are a delightful sight. Mobility charges the *Camping Women* with a life-affirming optimism, but what will happen when the sculptures one day become old and frail?



Marit Benthe Norheim, *Camping Mama* (2008). Concrete and fiberglass constructed over a caravan. 370x497x223 cm. Photo: Istvan Virag / KUNSTDOK

Marit Benthe Norheim studied art in Bergen and in London in the 1980s before moving to Denmark in 1996. She has created several public decorations, often with a social and participatory approach. At the Sculptor's Association, she showcases sculptures throughout the entire house, spanning her entire career. "*Birth Dance*" was created last year, while the tiny bronze figure "*Mother and Child*" dates back to 1980. Both have titles and motifs that seem typical of her artistic style. It often revolves around the female body as a site for the child's first, dependent life, where the mother becomes a landscape the child crawls over, clings to, or springs out of.



Overview picture, Marit Benthe Norheim, *My ship is loaded with Life*. Photo: Istvan Virag / KUNSTDOK

When it comes to the *Camping Women*, Benthe Norheim created these sculptures for the celebration of Stavanger as the European Capital of Culture in 2008, and apparently they have been traveling around the Nordic countries since. Each of them represents a literary type or figure. For example, the *Siren* is reminiscent of the temptresses in Homer's *Odyssey*. Her body is a round, small house, with a kind of billowing skirt with a knobby surface. The sculpture has no arms, but a colossal chest pointing in the direction of the caravan's movement. The head of the figure is placed right on top of the chest and is seen in profile. The face has large, full lips, captivating eyes, and a triangular hairstyle. The head resembles a fluttering pennant or a sign

### Art that comes driving after us

This abstracted female body, pointing in different directions, reminds me of Pablo Picasso's concrete sculpture in Kristinehamn, Sweden, which he modeled after his wife Jacqueline Roque, in 1965 [editor's note: the sculpture has previously been mentioned in *Kunstavisen* in a different context]. Benthe Norheim seems to engage in a certain dialogue with and critique of this sculpture. Like the *Siren*, Picasso's sculpture has a cheerful, flamboyant appearance. It also lacks arms, only a thick concrete column for a body. However, a significant difference between these sculptures, apart from the 15-meter height, is that one must go to the Picasso sculpture oneself, while Benthe Norheim's ladies come driving after us



Marit Benthe Norheim. Left: *Swan Song* (1987). Reinforced concrete. 180x55x55 cm. Right: *Birth Dance* (2023). Fiberglass reinforced concrete. 90x90x250 cm. Photo: Istvan Virag / KUNSTDOK

The extensive *Camping Mama* elaborates on this somewhat intrusive and sociable aspect of Marit Benthe Norheim's sculptures. Her body is voluminous. She clings to two small, thin figures, which she presses against her large chest. Inside, the caravan is furnished with a kitchenette, a small dining table, and a sofa, all well worn. Lively music emanates from a portable radio. The walls are adorned with yellowed, old photographs from summer vacations and camping idylls. The sculpture somewhat mocks the mother figure who refuses to let go and struggles to create family coziness to an extent that the vacation becomes an obsession and mania.

*Camping Mama* is comedic and somewhat tragic. What will become of the aging woman when the children grow up and move out? As for the sculpture group, I suspect all the driving causes some wear and tear. The old caravans, clad in a thin layer of fiberglass with a shell of concrete, do not seem particularly sturdy. Stepping inside them makes the entire structure sway. One day, they must be parked for good, but deprived of their mobility and lacking the massive solidity that characterizes Picasso's sculpture, I fear that the parked ladies will become a sad sight.

### The trinket figures will survive

But Marit Benthe Norheim may have had a different plan for the retirement of the *Camping Women*. Inside the exhibition, in the smaller room on the second floor, she displays a glass showcase where miniature models of nearly all the sculptures in the exhibition are represented. Among them are five cute little *Camping Women*. The room resembles any arts and crafts store in picturesque small towns, such as Risør or Røros, specializing in ceramics and trinkets. The advantage of the Picasso sculpture is that it will likely remain in Kristinehamn for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, the area around the sculpture has been colonized by a small tourist industry, with restaurants, cafes, and souvenir shops selling Picasso-related merchandise. In contrast, Benthe Norheim has significantly reduced the size of her sculptures. However, by transforming the *Camping Women* into trinket figures, she has taken control of their old age herself, granting them a new future where they can still travel from home to home.