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Hide in your mother's skirts

A theological view of Benthe Norheim's sculptures

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Isn't it fantastic? Now you can enter into a woman and look around. In fact, you can enter into five women and look around and stand in wonder at what they contain.

And maybe solve the mystery of women.

It is the Norwegian artist Marit Benthe Norheim, from Mygdal, who has, with both humour and seriousness, made five Campingwomen, i.e. five female sculptures in concrete, which have been built on top of five old caravans. So now you can go on board the women, in the same way that you would board a ship. There is also an internal element to the sculptures.

On a camping trip to Norway with the Virgin Mary

The Campingwomen, which presumably cannot be registered as caravans any longer, are fully roadworthy up to 30 km/h. On Saturday, the 3rd May 2008 they departed from Mygdal and after a short stop in Hjørring, where I had the pleasure of being able to send them on their way with a few words, they crawled along with regular stops towards Hanstholm. From here, they sailed to Egersund to arrive in Stavanger on the morning of Tuesday the 6th May.

Stavanger is the European Capital of Culture 2008 and has, in this capacity, financed a large part of the huge project. This is, for the time being, the culmination of a development, in which Benthe Norheim has increasingly accentuated the female form in her sculptures. Previously, her sculptures often lacked any obvious gender. But now there is no doubt. These are women! And you can enter them, into their wombs or skull or heart, depending on which one you choose.

It is not a coincidence, that they can be likened to ships. Benthe Norheim loves figureheads, and here she has put them onto the roof of the five caravans. Figureheads were mostly a cut out female figure, placed onto the bow of the ship to break the way through the waves and protect from all evil. The ship itself was also considered to be female, and its function, like the caravan's, is inextricably linked to the journey.

The Campingwomen are traveling, the caravans are actually a part of their bodies. The Refugee is dislocated from the place where she belonged. She had to leave. What did she manage to take with her? Did she manage to take all of her self with? This is the reason why the internal area is covered with porcelain mosaics, in which schoolchildren and refugee women from the Stavanger region have expressed their loss and longing.

The Bride is covered internally by wedding pictures from all over the world and, of course, a double bed is prepared for the honeymoon. In 2006, Benthe Norheim attended a wedding in India, where

the bride and groom hadn't even seen each other before the ceremony. So the wedding was quite a journey to undertake, perhaps a little too exciting.

The Camping Mama is different. She is not beautiful like the others. She is a big lump of a woman, with a hearty embrace, but you get the feeling that it might be difficult to catch your breath in her enormous bosom. Perhaps you will be suffocated? Internally, she is papered with pictures of camping life, for better or worse. Just as on a ship, life is cramped in the caravan. You sit with your thighs touching, you have warm woolen jumpers on, and of course, you don't wash as often as you do at home.

The Siren radiates a buxom and powerfully erotic energy. Internally, she has a pink wall surface containing imprints of the hands of many people. In the centre, there is a column, which could be interpreted as either a person, a foetus of a phallus. The Siren represents a natural force so powerful, that it becomes doubtful whether we control it, or it controls us. This is why, in some countries the decision is made to completely cloak women, because it is doubtful whether men will be able to control themselves otherwise. It is a natural force in its purest form. Maybe this is why the siren is considered a demon of death in Greek mythology. She lures men into wreck when they are travelling. Especially sailors.

The Virgin Mary is a roadside chapel dedicated to Our Lady, and built upon the family's own old used caravan. A rolling Frauenkirche, a Notre Dame. A rolling Santa Maria. But also a Pieta. On the floor her oldest son lies, surrounded by angels. Thus the holy womb is also a grave, from which Christ is resurrected on Easter morning, reborn.

Where the Siren speaks of erotic love, the Maria Protector is about merciful love, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion for the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" Isaiah 49:15-16 (New International Version). Maria loves others with all her heart, she protects the weak, she takes the stricken under her wings. The mother of pain and mercy.

Mater misericordia - or: hide in your mother's skirts.

Benthe Norheim has always had a sharp eye for vulnerable and neglected people. Her personal need to protect and care is strong. It is apparent that she has experienced the security of being able to seek her mother's skirts, and in any event there is no doubt that she has provided precisely this kind of security for her own two daughters. It is no coincidence that she has made works like "hiding in the skirt" (1995) and "H-G at home in the skirts" (1998).

Quite when she discovered mater misericordia, the mother of mercy, I don't know, but the theme can be found in a number of late murals all over the country, including churches in Sæby, Vrå and Gudum. In the centre, the resurrected Christ stands in judgement of the world. A lily comes out from the right hand side of the mouth as a symbol of mercy, from the left hand side, a sword, a symbol of the judgment. The Virgin Mary and John the Baptist stand on each side in prayer for those who are to be judged.

John the Baptist has folded hands, but Mary has exposed her one breast and lifts it up towards her son: remember how weak and dependent you were, when you suckled life from me? Now they are dependent on you. At the same time, she holds her cape protectively around some souls who hide

next to her. Mary is at once earthly and heavenly in her argumentation, because the body and the soul belong together.

The Lady of the Sea

It is Benthe Norheim's strength that she acknowledges the contemporary acceptance of sexuality as an important and valid expression of humanity, both feminine and masculine, at the same time as being able, without betraying either the present or tradition, to draw on ancient religious themes and give them new life. Thus, *mater misericordia* is present in Mary the Protector, but almost more apparent in *The Lady of the Sea* (2001), which stands as a landmark between the town and the harbour in Sæby, which was once called Mariested (the place of Mary). *The Lady of the Sea* also has the figurehead as its basic form, but also partly takes its inspiration in the Henrik Ibsen play of the same name, which he got the inspiration for on a stay in Sæby and partly in the aforementioned mural in Sæby church, which is a *Mariekirke* (Church of Mary).

The violent tensions between flesh and soul, which every human is subject to, and which in the *Campingwomen* is first and foremost represented by respectively the Siren and Maria the Protector, is also expressed in the ambiguity contained within the *Lady of the Sea*.

On the one hand, the sea, which in Ibsen's words simultaneously draws, tempts, and seduces into the unknown, changeable and unpredictable, so suddenly shifting. The power of nature. On the other hand, heavenly mercy, where one can seek security and comfort and protection against all danger. The spiritual expression of humanity, which can reach out beyond itself and forget itself and its own needs.

In Sæby, Benthe Norheim also drew the local population into the creation of the work. As if it were the most natural thing in the world, she got hundreds of children to make their own protective figures in glazed clay. She then moulded them into the cape of the Virgin Mary. Or was it the cape of the *Lady of the Sea*? It is not that simple. On the face of it, it appears that it is *The Lady of the Sea* who looks out from the harbour towards the sea, whilst Mary looks in towards the land and the church. But it is also the lady who is looking out towards the sea whose cape one can seek shelter under against the west wind, just as the Mary on the mural holds her left breast up and reminds the one who has the power to judge and destroy, that he too was once weak and powerless.

If this is true, then the sea can partly represent sexuality as a natural force, which is the case in Ibsen's play; but it can also, in its inscrutability, symbolise eternity and the godly power, which can both create as well as destroy. A reminder of the hidden side of God, which is a mystery and which humanity cannot bear to see.

With this, Benthe Norheim captures the ambiguity, which becomes apparent in Ibsen's play in the final scene, when Mrs. Ellida Wangel, who the locals call *The Lady of the Sea*, conquers her terror and the lure of the sea and decides to turn her back to it and join the fellowship and civilisation and become her stepdaughter's protector instead. This is the ambiguity, which every human contains, and which in the New Testament is denoted by the dual concept of "flesh and soul".

So it is she, who looks into the town and the church.

Life is a journey - the myth of the pilgrim

The journey is a central theme for Benthe Norheim. This is witnessed by titles like *The Walkers*, *The Flyers*, *Travel*, *Journey*, *Flyers*, *Crossing the Sea*, and *Visitors*. The *Campingwomen* are also travelling, not just from Mygdal to Stavanger, they will be driven from one location to another in and around Stavanger all year long.

The *Campingwomen* made me think immediately about the myth of the Pilgrim, the first time I saw them. Not just because of the road chapel dedicated to Our Lady, but also because four of the women are travelling in one sense or another and thereby make the journey a theme. Life is a journey. And the fifth, the Siren, is a seductive female figure from the *Odyssey*, who lures sailors into dangerous waters so that they are stranded and die. So, as far as they are concerned, the journey is over.

A pilgrim is a traveller who journeys to a holy place - Rome, Santiago di Compostella, Nidaros. But the actual meaning of "pelegrinus" which the word stems from, is "foreign". The idea in the myth of the pilgrim, which goes back to the Middle Ages, is that the human being is a stranger, a foreigner here on earth. We are like guests passing through on a journey. We know the theme from Steen Steensen Blicher's "The time is coming when I must leave": "Because I am also only here temporarily and have a home somewhere else.", or from Granting's "And so we travel to our fatherland..." They point, just like Peter Dass in "About all my limbs" at the fact that humans live on earth only as guests, and have their real citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

Theologically speaking, the thought has its origins in the Middle Ages, where wars and plague catastrophes like the "Black Death" put the focus on death and created a longing for a better world. In the architecture the longing is expressed in the Gothic, with its Heaven-bound lines. A Gothic church appears to almost float.

An example of the religiosity, which is equivalent to this, is Selma Lagerlof's "Jerusalem". Here, she depicts people with a bizarre Gothic Christianity. They leave everything, because they do not belong anywhere on Earth. They travel to Jerusalem in order to be the first in the queue for the heavenly Jerusalem. This unease, which comes from belonging everywhere and nowhere is a characteristic of the modern, rootless city person. It is therefore no coincidence that this deeply felt Gothic religiosity has a special appeal today.

Within this restless unease, Marit Benthe Norheim, who has herself lived in such different places as India, Norway and London and now also Mygdal, points at some classical reference points, which are still valid, and which she holds dear: mercy and care, the belief in values which stretch you past the self and make you bigger than you could be alone .

But at the same time, one can see the ironic dig, especially in the *Campingwomen*, that the modern human may make themselves smaller than they could be. That instead of being a true traveller in the world, one is only a tourist in one's own life and not really present.

So it is completely logical, if one would have like to have played Kim Larsen's "Om lidt bliver det stille" (In a little while it will be quiet), which continues; did you see what you wanted to?

Sources: Conversations with Benthe Norheim. *Campingkvinnene kommer*, 2008. *Billedkunstneren*

Marit Benthe Norheim, Thanning & Appel 2005. Kunsten I Landskabet, Nordtryk A/S 2001.