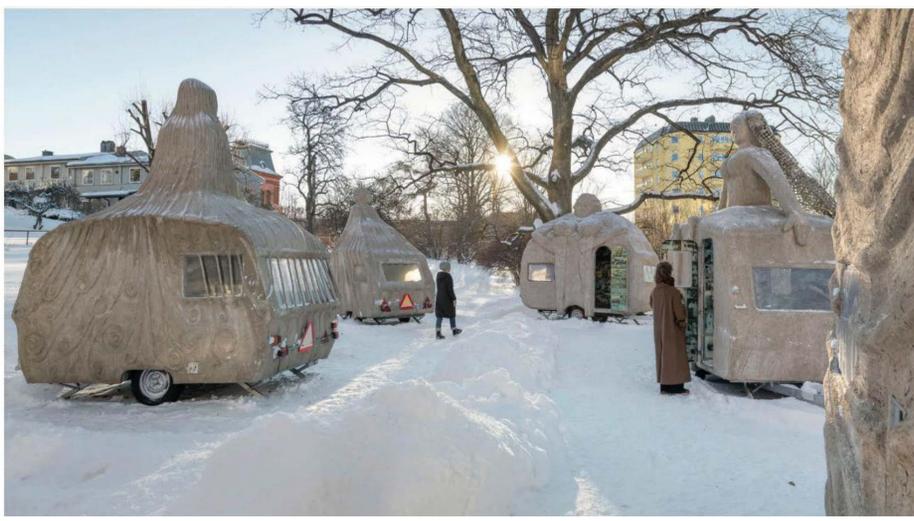


REVIEW MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM: CAMPINGWOMEN AND MY SHIP IS LOADED WITH LIFE, NORWEGIAN SCULPTORS ASSOCIATION, 18.01-03.03-2024



Marit Benthe Norheim, Campingkvinner (2008). Istvan Virag / KUNSTDOK

4 DECADES OF LIFE-GIVING CONCRETE WOMEN

Marit Benthe Norheim's community-oriented approach and symbolic language speak directly to the current time. Therefore, while the almost perfect retrospective of four decades of artistic practice creates a desire for more textual insight into the artist's work.

Joachim Aagaard Friis
WRITER



It's a clear and icy cold day when I visit the Norwegian Sculptors Association's villa to see Marit Benthe Norheim's current exhibition. Even before I step inside, however, I encounter Norheim's "Camping Women" (2008), standing and sparkling in the sun on the snow-covered lawn in front of the villa. It's an interesting contrast: the five camper trailers, which Norheim has covered with fiberglass and concrete and shaped into spectacular female sculptures, evoke thoughts of vacations down south, but now they stand there in the midst of the snowy landscape looking almost angelic.

Caring female communities

The camper trailers have traveled all the way from Norheim's studio in Hirtshals in northern Denmark, along with volunteers. This aspect of participant-based travel activity, where sculpture and movement blend together, has always been a central part of Norheim's practice. Since 2008, when the camper trailers were created, they have traveled around Denmark, Norway, and Iceland with volunteers who have literally lived in them, and the artworks themselves have been created in collaboration with women from around the world.

Each "camping woman" has her own identity, reflected in the sculpture's design and the interior of the camper. For example, the Siren is pink inside, with an enticing female voice singing from the speakers. The Refugee Woman leans forward as if in a hurry, and her skirt (i.e., the camper itself) flutters behind her. The interior is made of porcelain mosaic created by women and children who have experienced being refugees. The Bride stands with her chest pushed out and a bridal veil, while inside the camper, one finds wedding photos and wedding music from around the world. The images thematize the beautiful but also complex and difficult power dynamics under which a bride can live.

There is a warmth and love in these sculptures that feels genuine. The motifs and messages seem to stem from a heartfelt necessity in Norheim and her many—often non-professional—collaborators. In this regard, the time seems ripe for Norheim. Themes of motherhood and cyclical temporality, (female) community-oriented practices that prioritize care and vulnerability over critical and conceptual strategies are all highly popular among contemporary artists and writers across generations.

Drawing lines between decades

These themes are not new to Norheim. Since the beginning of her career in the 1980s, she has been interested in motherhood, community, and care, as convincingly demonstrated by the retrospective exhibition "My Ship is Loaded with Life" at the Norwegian Sculptors Association. The exhibition is the largest presentation of Norheim's works in Norway ever, and it draws connections between all periods of the artist's practice in a remarkable way. This is as much due to Norheim's incredibly consistent practice as it is due to the curation.

For example, the two works in the exhibition's first room - "Swan Song" (1987) and "Birth Dance" (2023) - seem made for each other, despite the 36 years between them. Both works thematize different aspects of birth - both as a real bodily experience and metaphorically as the creation that occurs in creative work. In "Swan Song," the female body appears exhausted, all energy concentrated in the sculpture's base, whose concentric circles and red colors evoke a kind of expanded power of the woman - or an enlarged womb? "Birth Dance" (2023) more directly addresses birth, but here the sculpture is in dynamic motion and seems charged with energy.



Marit Benthe Norheim, "The Three Graces" (2007) and "Mermaid Helicopter" (2022) Istvan Virag / KUNSTDOK

Mothers, goddesses, and mermaids

Women and mothers populate the entire exhibition in many forms and colors, and despite Norheim's extensive production, they have been selected and arranged in a simple and tasteful manner. The Three Graces (2007) stand graceful, each nursing their children – goddesses and mothers at the same time. Norheim has a unique way of creating the female figures' breasts – they protrude to the sides like a Madonna dress in the 1990s, or they are barely visible, only marked with two lines on the body. In this way, she plays with the motif of mother figures, nursing scenes, and birth scenes in various ways. The central theme in all the works across forms is the message of life and fertility that flows through these scenes.

On the wall behind the Three Graces hangs a sculpture made of fiberglass and polyester with the delightful name "Mermaid Helicopter" (2022). In this work, the surreal aspects of Norheim's practice come more to the forefront, but the female figure is still clear. The sculpture is adorned with small glittering jewelry and other decorative items, providing a colorful contrast to the white concrete material that fills most of the exhibition.



Marit Benthe Norheim, "Portrait of a Mother, Piece by Piece" (2002). Istvan Virag / KUNSTDOK

Forming Emotions from Clay

The exhibition also includes participatory activities: In a room with the standalone sculpture "Portrait of a Mother, Piece by Piece" (2002), visitors can shape small figures from a lump of clay and place them around the room. The breastfeeding motif recurs here, but this time breastfeeding occurs in a double exposure of children being breastfed and milk flowing from the mothers' breasts.

The sculpture functions as a sitting installation, inviting visitors to feel the closeness and security that Norheim wishes to convey, and to express these feelings through the malleable clay. This is a nice detail in the curation. That being said, I must also mention that I miss a more detailed description of Norheim's works and practice in general, especially when the exhibition calls itself a retrospective. You only get a half-page introduction to the exhibition and the artist, and there are no descriptions of the works. It's a shame because you can feel many stories and emotions embedded in the works.

Constructive Art for the Times

Even though the basic figure of the mother and child recurs in almost all of the works, it is impressive how many different forms it takes on in Norheim's hands. In the work "Mother and Daughter" (2011), the two sculptures are shaped like two round totem poles, and in the small bronze sculpture "Mother and Child" (1980), the motif resembles a holy image of the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus.

My favorite rendition of the motif is the sculpture standing at the entrance to the exhibition, "Hiding in the Skirt" (1995). The mother, standing and holding her skirt over her child, forms an hourglass-shaped figure. The sculpture is typically made of concrete, but here Norheim has used a waker as a skeleton, creating the half-round shape of the skirt. There is a fine point in this choice of material about care, closeness, and community – we always need others to move forward in life.

After over 40 years as a practicing artist, Norheim's retrospective comes at an appropriate time. But it also fits well into the decorative and symbolic turn of the zeitgeist. The exhibition does not contain any "hidden" messages to be interpreted through critical reflection – the experience is unfiltered and "one-to-one," and it is refreshing. Norheim speaks directly to a "reparative" art reading, as described by Eve Sedgwick, the paradigm where art is interpreted in a constructive rather than a critical and deconstructive way. This is a perfect framework to showcase Norheim in, but not a framework that is forced – it's just how she has always approached art.



Marit Benthe Norheim, Hiding in the skirt (1995) Istvan Virag / KUNSTDOK