

OTHILIA VERDURMEN'S PHOENIX A MASTERPIECE

Othilia Verdurmen's Firebird is a stunning and ravishing example of abstract realism. The tension between abstract idea and the tangible construction makes this work of art a never-ending experience. Now we gaze in admiration at the wonders and intricacies of the details, then we are moved by an idea that only a masterpiece can evoke. The Firebird is realistic in the everyday meaning of the word: in an abundance of colours and forms, death and rebirth are right there in front of our eyes. However, the bird is also realistic in a platonic sense, as it teaches and reveals the essence of things.

Viewed in this Platonic light, we might feel that Verdurmen's Firebird is an abstract work of art after all. And yes, there is also an everyday sense of abstraction. The construction of steel, fabric and light in combination with sounds and music has been intensively stylized. Thus the work is both realistic and abstract on two levels. This is abstract realism in its ultimate form.

I confess that, as a philosopher, I occasionally become a little annoyed by installations. To my philosophical taste, the meaning behind the art work is too far-fetched or too quasi-profound. But Othilia Verdurmen's Firebird doesn't fall into this trap. Its theme is perennial and is profoundly touching. Death and rebirth: it is one theme. But at the same time it is a myriad of themes. It is the theme of death and renewal in nature, of sin and purification in fire and the return to innocence, of fertility and vegetation. It is the theme of suffering, sacrifice and reincarnation. It is alive in all cultures through all ages in one way or another. Frazer's Golden Bough presents it as the fundamental theme of many religions. In Eliot's The Waste Land it is the unifying element.

Abstract and concrete, real and dreamlike, a celebration of light and sound. That is why the Firebird is so impressive. Is it even more impressive when we know that this very Firebird really died and went up in flames during a fire in Verdurmen's studio just before it was finished.

The Firebird and the artist both physically experienced the abstract myth. The once airborne

bird now lies dying on the ground, its beak distorted and wings broken. But from the slowly dying fire the new young bird emerges, long-legged, innocent and full of hope.

This impressive structure with different materials, lavishly draped in many layers over the steel foundation, this display of light and fleeting colours, is perfected by a mixture of splashing sea sounds and mysterious voices from somewhere unknown, but there is also the concrete plaint of Arianna by Monteverdi, and the trumpet from Charles Ives's The Unanswered Question.

To me it is an absolute masterpiece that baffles and moves just like Eliot's sentence 'I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter' baffles and moves. Very concrete, but with a deeply poignant tension.

There is a bonus for the admirer. According to a Russian story, the Firebird grants one wish to everyone who doesn't recoil when confronted with the bird. For me that wish is: Please show me the firebird again.

Prof. Dr. Ton Derksen, philosopher of science.

Author of Lucia de B.: a rational reconstruction of a judicial error. This book led to the reopening of the trial and ultimately to her exoneration and the cancellation of her life sentence.

His forthcoming book The Wrong Place, the Wrong Time: The case of Olaf H., presents another judicial error concerning someone serving a life sentence.