

Multimedia Phoenix in Enschede

After a successful residence in the revitalized Groninger Museum, the Phoenix created by Othilia Verdurmen (Groningen 1962) is now on show in the Rijksmuseum Twenthe in Enschede. Every half hour (from 13.00 onwards, and from 11.00 onwards at the weekend), you can enter the wondrous world of her installation, in which two fabulous birds recount the age-old story of the Phoenix.

With this spectacular creation, Verdurmen gives a new charge to the concept of sculpture, not only through the surprising use of material but also – and primarily – by the fact that her presentation makes an appeal to all our senses.

By Jet van der Sluis

Rising from the ashes

Verdurmen's multimedia version of this old story has an exceptional history. When the artist had been working on the first concept of this mythical creature for three years, her studio burned to the ground and only the twisted steel carcass of her once metres-tall bird remained. It was a major disaster, of course, but one with symbolic significance: as the story goes, the Phoenix casts itself into the flames only to rise again reborn. The bird, destroyed by fire, thus acquired an important role in her second design: a new bird arises from the recumbent carcass – an upright, more colourful example, evincing the triumph of life.

Verdurmen originates from the world of theatre and décor-making and that is clearly visible in this theatrical installation. In expectation of things to come, you first enter into a darkened sluice where you have to wait at a clandestinely illuminated portal.

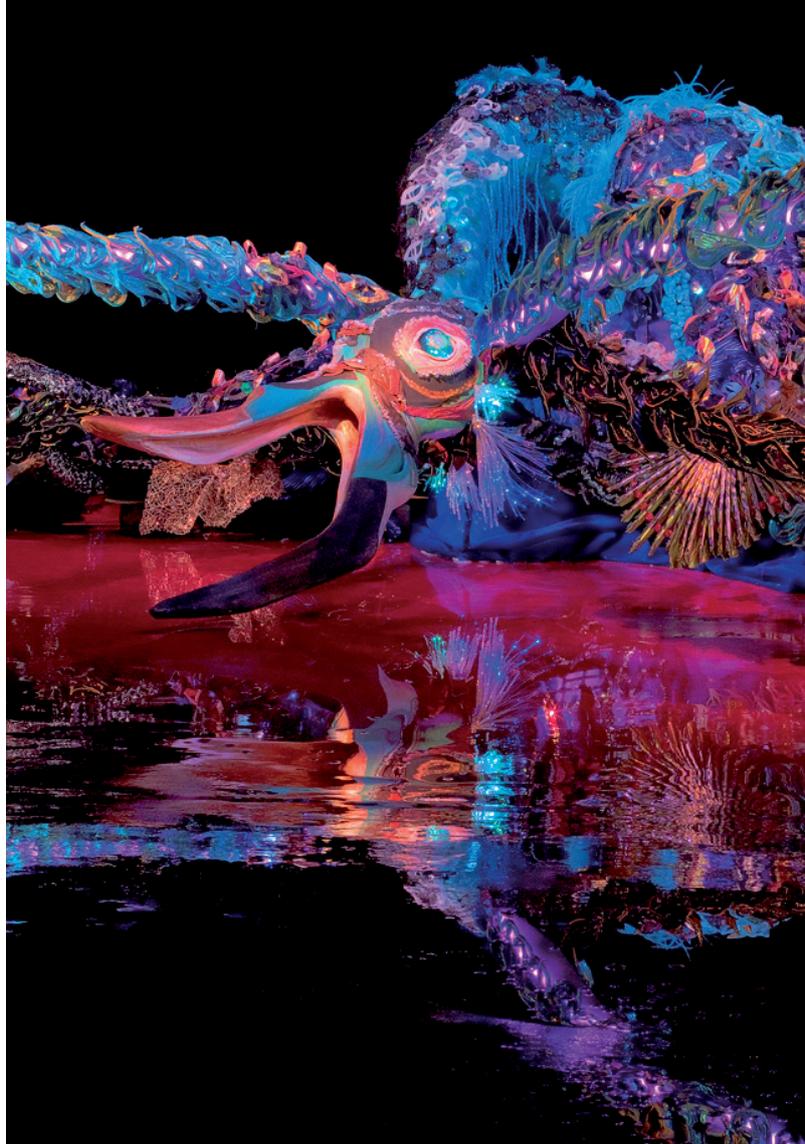
The total experience begins with a light and sound show projected on a transparent screen behind the portal. On the basis of incomprehensibly mumbled sounds, shards of music and colourful projections that evoke associations of water as well as fire, you are slowly immersed in the imaginative world of this extraordinary artist. When the portal finally opens, you can enter the shadowy space of her exceptional sculpture.

Light art

For a moment you have a view of the impressive entirety of the recumbent and resurrected bird, but then a subtle play of illumination, glow and radiation begins, supported by a continuous stream of miscellaneous sound fragments: a soundscape.

Both birds are absolutely beautifully made: their baroque 'plumage' evokes associations of exotic animals such as the peacock and bird of paradise, but this one consists wholly of beads, pieces of fabric, paillettes, electric wiring, lamps, etc.

It is crystal clear that an enormous amount of technical know-how lurks within this installation: not only do the birds continuously change colour internally (due to built-in LED lights), there are also a huge number of coloured spotlights, so that your view is literally guided to the appropriate place. In addition she has added to this light and sound play a number of aromatic sensations that refer back to the original story about this primal symbol of resurrection. In olden times, people believed that the Phoenix built its nest of lemon grass and myrrh, a nest that it subsequently set on fire in order to rise rejuvenated from the ashes.



Othilia Verdurmen, *Phoenix*

Mortality

It is also striking that this story about life and death occurs in both Greek and Chinese mythology. Even in the visual language of Christianity, the image of the Phoenix is frequently used as a symbol of the resurrection, but in this case specifically for the resurrection of Christ.

Othilia Verdurmen herself is very sensitive to the mysticism around our mortality, which this story is actually all about. With this installation, she is not only telling a story but also attempting to convince the spectator to consider the mystery of life, just as she is doing. The subtle lighting suggests cyclic movement in the static constellation: at one moment, the triumphantly erect, yellow and red bird turns pitch black and the horizontal carcass begins to glow internally, in all kinds of ways.

It is extraordinary that the 'dead' bird is never without a certain amount of light: there is always life there somewhere.

With this, the artist seems to suggest that death is not an absolute quantity: as a person, you still shine in the memories of those who loved you. Toward the end of the 'performance', you feel life almost literally resonating in your chest, as the accompanying sound at that moment consists mainly of deep pulses from the didgeridoo, alternating with recognizable, indigenous bird noises. Ultimately both mythical creatures bathe in full light, and a prolonged final chord fades away: life and death (again) form an inseparable entity. Those who surrender to Verdurmen's astonishing world feel this as an experiential fact.

Othilia Verdurmen, *The Phoenix*, Rijksmuseum Twenthe, 1 October 2011 to 1 March 2012.

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