

Penelope and Ulysses: a wave of longing

In her previous installation "The Phoenix" Othilia Verdurmen demonstrated her ability to visualize major subjects in an alluring and sensory way. Her latest magnificent installation in the museum Twentse Welle in Enschede shows the ancient epic of the Greek hero Ulysses and makes us think about loss and longing. Verdurmen's new work expresses both the strength and yearning of the waiting and pining Penelope, and the struggling and wavering of Ulysses. Time and again the ceaseless attraction of the sea is stronger than his nostalgia for his homeland Ithaca and his love for Penelope. A multi coloured mysterious wave represents the water that separates the couple, a separation ordered by the wrathful Poseidon.

By Jet van der Sluis

Sensuous

In two parlors, symbolizing the female world and the male world, Verdurmen tells us the ancient saga of the hero Ulysses who after twenty years is allowed to return to his beloved Ithaca. The parlor on the right is dedicated to Penelope, faithful spouse constantly endeavoring to get pushy suitors off her body. It is remarkable to see the high level of abstraction and clarity in the way this strong woman is represented. Her loins are draped in a transparent cloth, woven with metal threads, on which is embroidered Ulysses' head as seen on the classic Greek vases. Naked heroes, in the same idiom, surround him. Penelope stands next to her beautifully adorned marriage bed on a warm glowing orange coloured platform, the bed that Ulysses himself made on the trunc of an old olive tree. In this way their love is literally rooted in the land where he was born. From the strongly erotic wall hangings it is manifest that her longing has an intensely physical component. The sense of loss is overwhelming in this richly decorated room: Ulysses' presence is only seen in the shape of a damaged masque in which the image on her loincloth is hardly recognizable.

Wave

In the next room we meet Ulysses himself, a man-sized, dynamic statue made of papier- maché. This figure too is only a shadow of the man he once was: despite his powerful appearance the overall impression is one of a torn man. Next to him is the skull of a capricorn. This combination shows virility and vulnerability all at once. The object of his desire, Penelope, is present in the form of a masque similar to the one in the other room: fragmented and disintegrated. But most of our attention is quickly focused on a captivating sound and light sequence around a huge wave. With this almost baroque installation, made of a wide variety of materials, Verdurmen convincingly creates a mysterious underwater world that constantly alters its colors due to delicately changing lights. We recognize not only fish, seaweed and mollusks but we are also invited to an underwater world unknown to us. The enchanting, ever changing lights offer us a glimpse into that mysterious world. All this is accompanied by a hypnotizing soundscape in which we hear the waves of the sea breaking on the beach of Ithaca. A deep Greek voice reads fragments of the *Odysseia* to us. We hear the mechanical sound of Penelope's spinning wheel and there is music that reminds us of the alluring songs of the Sirens. With this very moving piece of art, inspired by Homer's epic, Verdurmen tells us a fascinating story of longing and loss, of constancy and regret, as inevitable and eternal as the tides and as multifaceted and intricate as life itself.

Othilia Verdurmen, Penelope and Ulysses, Museum TwentseWelle, Enschede, 23.01/ 26.06 2016
www.twentsewelle.nl