

Marliz Frencken - Beyond Beauty

Marliz Frencken's statues seem to have just emerged from a hurricane. The female figures look tormented and broken. They can barely stand; their attributes have been bound and glued to them and seem to have taken possession of their wearer. Everything is dislocated and out of control. As the artist has frozen the action of her figures, brought as it were the moment of action to a halt, the spectator has full opportunity to observe and experience the incident in detail. The figures' lovely colours add an extra dimension, intensifying the performance. Sky blue, gold-yellow, bewitching purple and blood red suggest beauty, serenity, power and passion. The bold colours form a reflection of the emotional mood underlying the development and construction of the sculptures. The figures have sailed into turbulent sensations of glitter and glamour, yes, even of life and death. The colours are effectively used in the expression of the figures. Red represents aggression and passionate states. Yellow is sensitively used to suggest serenity. Pontifical purple suggests the Roman Catholic environment and the emotionally charged blackness expresses spiritual need and disunity.

The attributes -worn by the women or, more accurately, ~~that are~~ glued to them do not always match their characters. A voluptuous woman mirrors the image of the girl with a pearl by Johannes Vermeer and with the *Pieta* figure, Nivea cream tins are used as a halo for the Virgin Mary and Christ. A noblewoman bears a box of aspirins on her chest. With her attributes the artist refers to strong iconic brands like Nivea, 4711 and Aspirin. Initially you might think that the turquoise colour of the painkiller fits well with the colour combination of her elegant gown and exuberant headdress, but closer examination reveals the impression of two strips of Aspirin. Apparently it was in fact a case of pain control. Marliz Frencken plays games with well-known symbols. By deploying these in a consciously dislocated manner she induces her audience to start off on the wrong foot.

The iconography is classic, its use alienating. Everyone feels attracted to these life-like female figures through the thorough detail that endows such animated expression. At the same time they remain remote at a higher level, not allowing direct contact. Marliz Frencken's ladies are photogenic but inaccessible.

The decorum that her personages normally express, like the Virgin Mary and ladies of the Beau Monde, is put into perspective; yes, even ridiculed. Irony and triviality are sharp weapons in the artist's hands. One of her mainsprings is the critical expression of the unbridled consumption of the World of Peter Stuyvesant and ridicule of its ostentation, a glamour world artificially kept alive by those involved. Her resistance to such decadence is knowing, sometimes subtle, sometimes confronting. The result is 'over the top' scenes that turn the familiar cliché images from the advertising world on their heads.

The area of tension between high and low culture manifests itself in her work. In a theatrical setting the charm of the bourgeoisie and the banality of the street come together in conflict. One example is the beauty in the sculpture *Woman with white veil and shell* of 2007. She has a tiara on her head and wears a kind of transparent wedding dress that conceals nothing. Just like Botticelli's Venus, she stands on a curved shell with a striking pearl that can be taken as a symbol of fertility and procreation. The sacrament of marriage is here very explicitly connected with the sexual aura of the bride.

As Marliz Frencken knows the world of glitter and glamour from her own observations she can play on it to her heart's content. The sharp registration and manipulation of meanings sets

us at odds. She makes 'jewels' of worthless things. Fake chains, decorative ribbons, little dolls and porcelain animal figures are converted into attributes in her work. The synthetic resin covering all objects makes them radiate with light

Marliz Frencken has developed her own very individual and highly functional technique to preserve her sculptures. The objects were treated with a glossy transparent layer of synthetic resin applied in multiple layers that consolidate and isolate. Even fine threads and fabrics are coated, and gossamer-fine structures are created in this way. The effect of the resin application is spectacular. Light lends the figures an entrancing sparkling; they are simultaneously glorified and yet forever isolated. They came to life and at the same time they were frozen. The shapes appear as if nature lies under a thick layer of glazed frost in the wintery sunlight.

Everything moves in Marliz Frencken's works; the bodies seem to dance and sometimes take on a ballet-like stance. A personal connection can certainly be seen as the artist is familiar with dance and theatre and is herself spirited in movement and expression. Naturally the bright colours of the dance theatre were inspiring. In this context, her sculptures can be regarded as 'tableaux vivants'. The performing figures have come to a halt in a frozen pose, creating a moment of rest and reflection that offers the spectator a chance to recuperate.

The figures' transformations demand the required spiritual flexibility of the spectator. What is illusion, what is reality, what is dream, what is nightmare? Do we behold the Virgin Mary or is it a phantom? As a spectator you cannot help wondering whether we are facing some kind of self-image of the artist. Are the figures in all their diversity a kind of self-portrait? Do they bear within the personal experiences of the artist?

The photographs of the American artist Cindy Sherman are intriguing in this connection. She portrays herself as an innocent little girl, an upper-class lady and even a regal figure, but also as a provocative cowgirl and down and out alcoholic. Obviously these are no real representations of the person of Cindy Sherman but these personages have indeed sprung from the imaginative power of the artist. There must have been a moment of identification for the figures to be so expressive and compelling.

Like every young girl, Marliz Frencken once dreamed of being a princess.

In the Catholic South where the artist grew up, the Virgin Mary could be considered the ultimate princess, the embodiment of purity and beauty. Children want to be sheltered by the Madonna's mantle for protection and inspiration. Later on in life experience and awareness will arise. Beauty proves to have many faces. It is important for art to cross aesthetic boundaries: in this case the exploration of splendour and allure. Only *Beyond Beauty* does it become really exciting.

Frank van de Schoor