

NATASJA LEFEVRE

Lieven Defour

The ceramic artist Natasja Lefèvre takes up a special place within the broad spectrum of currents and movements in the arts. Until the year 2000, she had made pain-filled images of corpses, describing the process of ageing in frightening fashion. But with the new millennium came a new phase. After the tormented spirit, Natasja Lefèvre revealed a more relaxed, innocent and sincere voice. Her universe is under the sway of a childlike yearning, with a certain lightness and even benevolent humour. Death is replaced by hope and life. The serious, charged atmosphere of earlier times has disappeared in favour of a certain aestheticism.

Nurtured by a sense of youthful nostalgia, Natasja Lefèvre has forged a playful and instinctive link to the animal kingdom. Like Katharina Fritsch, Barry Flanagan or Wim Delvoye, she takes us into a fairytale world which communicates a narrative.

With great skill, she has shaped life-size hares ("Les Espérances" - "Hopes"), which convey a sense of solidarity by being arranged in a circle. Their cuteness and their adorable appearance make Natasja Lefèvre's fanciful invention irresistibly accessible and popular. Her affectionate approach is in obvious contradiction to any cultural



ILLUSTRATION -

Le vide - 2006

each figure 60 x 15 x 15 cm





or cerebral elitism from the world of the "initiated". The sincerity of this approach also allows her to cancel out the hierarchy between "superior" and "inferior" realms of art. In "Passage", a bold representation of two hares French kissing, Natasja Lefèvre fuses contradictory elements, in this case animals exchanging intimacies in human fashion. Although she is on the same ironic wavelength as Wim Delvoye here, she distances herself radically from any form of sentimental kitsch. She rigorously refuses to sacrifice her authenticity in favour of commercial mass culture or a romanticism.

Natasja Lefèvre often works on series centred on a fixed theme or within a specific formal structure. In the series "La Vide" ("The Void"), she kneads and models the clay to form hollow sculptures, empty shells, within which humans are reduced to stylised and purified figures. Her small, high-fired figures oscillate between

ILLUSTRATIONS -

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|-------------------------|--|
| above - | <i>Capsule</i> - 2006 - 80 x 60 x 50 cm |
| left - | <i>Embedded</i> - 2006 - 80 x 40 x 30 cm |
| opposite page, top - | <i>Le Passage</i> - 2006 - 70 x 50 x 25 cm |
| opposite page, bottom - | <i>Matrix</i> - 2008 - 60 x 40 x 35 cm |



the mysterious and a representation of the concrete and ordinary. On the one hand, these little humans run around in their boots with their hands in their pockets, on the other, the interior of their hollow faces is glazed in a different colour each time. Natasja Lefèvre never allows herself to become entangled in the anecdotal, but she provokes questions with her introverted figures. The central idea that comes out of this is that we all have to live behind a mask of external appearances, like an enveloping membrane which we are trying to escape.

The gaping void in the head probably refers to the loss of identity and interiority.

This is the reason for Natasja Lefèvre's need to express the interior just as well as the exterior of a sculpture. Viewed from an existentialist perspective, humanity is often confronted with an inner void ("Le Vide"). Each individual is desperately alone in the world but wishes to escape this sense of solitude. The faces with their empty expressions possibly express this duality, the dark extroverted aspect of the human soul.

Driven by a hunger to communicate, Natasja Lefèvre often arranges her sculptures in groups. In this connection, the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas has written that the human condition fundamentally concerns relationships. In "L'épiphanie du visage" ("The Manifestation of the Face"), our own faces only come into existence when facing others. By the absence of faces in "Le Vide", any attempt to make contact with others is doomed to failure and the individual must fall back on himself, subjected



to fear and being abandoned. From this point, these whispering silhouettes are filled with a sense of insanity and anonymity.

There is no doubt that persisting with a medium like ceramics requires great firmness of purpose. Natasja Lefèvre is driven by the technical desire to experiment and is permanently searching for surprising new ways to work with clay. By mixing clay with paper before building it up around a welded armature, she can minimise the shrinkage during firing. The graphic lines of the metal armature in the clay accentuate the form and give an added dimension to ceramic sculptures. She used this technique in "Robin", a life size representation of a nine year-old child, for "Capsule", a meditative figure, and for "Embedded", a closed, ascetic sculpture. The mute presence of these fragile sculptures by Natasja Lefèvre continues to be an essential characteristic of powerful ceramic art. Similarly, in the recent sculptures made only of clay, like the piece "Matrix", the charged silence evokes a sense of sublime timelessness.

It is rare for Natasja Lefèvre to leave the path of abstraction. In "La Pensée", she has constructed a dynamic, baroque hybrid composition with birds' wings. This technically demanding piece is made with great bravura, and its sculptural and rhythmic emotion make it stand out. In her visual vocabulary, she wishes to demonstrate an innovative, artistic aesthetic that is indissociably linked with the profundity of its meaning. Her sculptures are drawn from the depths of the interior, functioning as mirrors in which we recognise ourselves and find a standpoint, or by confronting ourselves there, to enter into a tangible discussion. With regard to the dialogue between innovation and tradition, Natasja Lefèvre listens first and foremost to her inner voice as an artist. She thus escapes unnoticed from any attempt to classify her, which would restrict her artistic horizon.

Lieven Defour (b.1957) is a Belgian art historian and art critic. He writes on contemporary art and teaches art history at various Belgian academies of art.

Natasja Lefevre was born in 1969 in Newport, Belgium. She is a self-taught ceramist and an art therapist and has taken part in various group exhibitions in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. In 2008, she participated in the exhibition "With love from Belgium" at the Keramikmuseum Westerwald and had solo exhibitions at CC Stromingm Berlare (Belgium) and in the "Raadskeller", Sluis, The Netherlands. Her work is in public and private collections.

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Forthcoming exhibition:
 'With love from Belgium'
 15 February – 7 June 2009
 Tiendschuur, Tegelen, Netherlands
www.keramikcentrum.nl



ILLUSTRATION - Les Espérances - 2006 - 150 x 150 x 40 cm

