

From the cradle to the grave

Flemish artist Natasja Lefevre uncovers the duality of memory in Watou

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Watou – remember the name. Each year, the tiny village in a far-flung corner of West Flanders hosts one of the country's most beguiling summer arts festivals. Between July and September it transforms its most historic buildings and breathtaking hideaways into exhibition spaces.

Surrounding a central theme, writers, poets, painters and other visual artists transform abandoned locations into sacred spaces: the echoing halls of an abandoned convent, the hushed caverns of a gothic church, the stables of an old farmhouse and the cellars of the town's brewery.

"Memory is a way of meeting" Lebanese-American artist Kahlil Gibran famously said. It is also the theme of this year's festival in Watou. "Our entire existence drifts on a universe of memories," writes the festival's steward, Jan Moeyaert.

This year, Moeyaert asked curators and artists "to remember". *Between Language and Image: Collected Stories #3* continues what the Watou festival does best: an organic growth of visions that entwine in mood and content to take us on a journey to a world that we yearn for long after we've driven back to our big-city realities.

One of the most arresting works at this year's festival is the installation "Hope" by ceramic artist Natasja Lefevre. A native of the coastal town Nieuwpoort, Lefevre's haunting installation, which shows 200 pairs of children's boots in a convent prayer room, captures two sides of remembering.

"The duality of our existence fascinates me; I play with the concept in much of my work," says Lefevre. In "Hope" lies a "duality of the recognisable shape and the empty inner space to which the viewer's gaze is constantly drawn. But rubber booties are also symbolic of a child that begins to explore the world. As a child, I loved my booties because I never had to ask anyone to help me tie my shoelaces."

The rows of boots fill a tiny prayer room that faces Watou's graveyard, filled with row upon



Showing the rationale self to the door: Natasja Lefevre

row of tombstones. "There is something haunting about the repetitiveness of the boots, which is repeated in the tombstones," Lefevre explains. "Together they symbolise the beginning and the end of life."

Lefevre isn't a big name in the European art world, a fact that surprises some local critics. Her three installations at Watou could help change that. But Lefevre doesn't subscribe to the "high art," "low art" hierarchy of the established art world. "I never attended art academy," she shrugs dismissively. "I trained as a stone mason and wanted to restore buildings and monuments. Before I knew it, I was restoring the portals and porches of the Sint-Salvator church in Bruges."

Lefevre would work as restorer for five years

before finally putting her hands in clay for the first time. "I loved working with hammer and chisel; I loved the resistance of heavy stone beneath my fingers. It was a job that taught me a lot about myself. I learned that I have somewhat of a photographic memory, that I could look at shapes and effortlessly recreate them later. And it taught me, at a very early age, to channel my youthful explosive energy," she laughs.

But stone masonry is a labour of physical love that eventually extracts its toll on the body. "After five years, I had trouble opening my hands; clenching my fingers around the chisel and the constant cold air on my knuckles began to take its toll," she admits. "When the doctor examined my cramped-up hands, he advised me to take up clay modelling to get them mobile again."

Lefevre's first works in clay date back to 1999. "Before I began working with clay, I was photographing animal cadavers for a series called *Road Kill*," she continues "To me, there is something poetic about the empty shell of a cadaver, the stare of a dead, unseeing eye. The tension between life and death is captured in their shape. With my photos, I wanted to reflect on death as anecdote, present the polarity of life and death."

Lefevre's works in clay continue to explore the duality of existence: the eternal versus the transient, the visible versus the invisible. Her sculptures always strike a balance between the mysterious and the ordinary. "Clay is a completely natural substance. It is closely related to earth as a material, which appeals to me because nature always reduces all her creations to this substance."

Lefevre has three works on display at Watou, all housed in the convent. Clay and metal sculptures make up "3 Figures", while "The Eye Test" centres on a quote from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's famous book *The Little Prince*.

"'Eye Test' is certainly one of my favourite works," shares Lefevre. It reflects on how

we have moved so far from valuing deeper connections, that we live in a reality filled with concrete – material proof of our existence, but which pays little attention to our souls. But the soul always seeks a way to manifest itself."

In "3 Figures", Lefevre places her sculptures, "Seed", "Torsion" and "Capsule" together in a room. "I am fascinated by the tension between works," she explains. "By combining them, I want address the concept of inter-relations. The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas wrote that being human is, in essence, about relationships. As human beings we have a great need to be in inter-relation with others. Yet on the other hand, communication – the connection of inter-relation – is also so often an illusion."

Asked about the process she follows to develop her sculptures, Lefevre laughs: "As soon as I begin creating, my rational self may leave the room! Then other horses, whom I also keep well-fed, take their place."

The transformative power of creativity has always fascinated her. "Creating is very intuitive. I often begin not knowing where I will end, but I trust the power of this creative process. Compare it to the potential contained within a seed," she adds, "everything still has to happen, but it is all already there."

Like many visual artists, she learns something about herself with each piece. "Everything outside oneself is a mirror – also art. It serves as tools for self-reflection, a mirror to the self that shows us what we must learn about ourselves. And self-reflection is part of taking responsibility for what you make of your life." ♦



"Hope" at summer's greatest art parcours Watou

Art Festival Watou

Until 11 September
Across Watou (West Flanders)

→ www.watou2011.be