

**Suse Stoisser -omnia – vincit – amor-
The cloister of the Abbey. Caunes-Minervois. 2014**

The cloister and crypt of the abbey church in Caunes-Minervois provide the venue for an exhibition of recent sculpture by Suse Stoisser, entitled 'Omnia Vincit Amor'. The material used for most of the works in the exhibition is steel and aluminium plate that has been cut into shapes, folded, painted and pierced to form shaped voids, letters and words. Stoisser is interested in how meaning in her works can be mediated and activated by the context in which they are exhibited. She pursues a dynamic interaction between her work and the site of its exhibition.

Stoisser's work is steeped in art history. 'Omnia Vincit Amor' is the title of a painting by Caravaggio in which Amor, a winged cupid, descends from a table and steps into a scattered array of objects emblematic of human aspiration and achievement, of the senses and the mind, a violin and a lute, armour, a coronet, a set square and compasses, a pen and manuscript and bay leaves. Amor, love that conquers all is represented as a mischievous gamin, shamelessly exposing his pre-pubescent genitalia, a grinning teenage flasher.

Amor, Agape and Eros are personifications of different aspects of love. In *Cupid 123*, love is represented by the legs of a cupid from a drawing by Durer cut from aluminium shapes at the top of long red 'stems' that 'grow' upwards from the crypt to 'flower' in the cloister. The metaphorical suggestion is that love grows still, in spite of huge social, scientific and attitudinal changes and a shift to moral, ethical perspectives no longer derived from religion. The optimism of this piece is reinforced in *Amor Propells*.

Five sculptures in the exhibition, *Walking and Falling*, *Walking on the High Side*, *Promise Guaranteed*, *HE is not there* and *ID* are related thematically and through a number of shared formal characteristics. They are free standing, floor mounted vertical rectangles of aluminium plate, curved along their vertical axis to present a side that is convex and one that is concave. The sculptures are painted with car paint to give a neutral industrial finish. In the first four, the shapes of legs and feet have been laser cut from the curved plate to create negative spaces beneath hand painted renditions of drapery and clothing. The 'figures' to which the cut out legs and painted drapery belong are terminated at the waist. Stoisser conceives of these 'figures' as models strutting along the runway of a fashion show placing one foot in front of the other to give the body its characteristic swing, though this is an unnatural and destabilizing way of moving forward.

The idea for the sculpture entitled *Walking and Falling* (and for the other four in this series) has its origin in a track by Laurie Anderson, 'Walking and Falling', from her debut album 'Big Science'. The lyrics are posted in the cloister. *With each step, you fall forward slightly And then you catch yourself from falling Over and over you are falling And then catching yourself from falling And this is how you can be walking and falling at the same time.* In the sculpture, the shape cut from the plate depicts the lower legs of a female figure. The legs above the knee are 'implied', topped off by hand painted denim shorts or hot pants. The ellipse within the waistband of the shorts is painted white, a 'tabula rasa'.

For Stoisser, there is metaphorical dimension to *Walking and Falling*. 'Big Science' was released in 1982 to become a landmark album of the 80's. When it was reissued in 2007, Joshua Klein wrote, "*Big Science* comprises songs from Anderson's...*United States* project, a multimedia art piece cum opera that depicted America on the brink of digital revolution and cultural nirvana, where the dollar trumped tradition and the apocalypse, cultural, political and technological loomed large". In this context, 'nirvana' means 'extinction'. *Walking and Falling* proposes that science is stumbling towards the destruction of traditional belief systems and of social, familial and sexual mores. The theme of *Walking and Falling*, that belief in Science is challenging religious faith and in doing so is overreaching itself is also proposed in *Apollo's Descendants*. Here, a veiled Madonna with no face is

located within the cut out shape of a NASA astronaut's helmet. The point of reference is the catastrophic destruction in 1986 of the Challenger Space Shuttle which fell to earth, like Icarus who tried to fly too high, too close to Apollo.

What appears as a single leg and foot is cut out from the sculpture *Walking on the High Side*. In fact what we see is the typical catwalk strut in which one leg is eclipsed by the other. The feet are shod in cross strapped Greco/Roman style sandals, also cut from the plate, tied above the ankle. The sandals are painted pink. The openness of the sandals might be an expression of freedom, the knot a symbol of restraint. The footwear also resembles that of a dancer. In classical ballet, in the fifth position, the dancer is on points, one foot in front of the other, to merge the legs and feet and to elevate the dancer's height.

The Isenheim Altarpiece is the source of the cut out legs and feet in *Promise Guaranteed*. In Grunewald's painting, a single nail has been driven through both feet of the crucified Christ which are therefore crossed in the manner of a female catwalk model. Cut out of the curved plate in *HE is not there* are the legs and feet of a walking figure beneath the painted loin cloth of Christ, also from Grunewald's Altarpiece. The lower body is cut away, the upper body is unpainted. All that is there is the loin cloth. Is this the meaning of the title? Has HE left? Does HE exist? Is HE perhaps a SHE?

ID is formally related to the 'walking' sculptures. The outline of a high fashion handbag and its straps is painted in white on both sides of the curved steel plate. From the top of the bag project hand painted representations of passports of various countries. The body of the bag has been cut away to produce three negative spaces, voids. The background colour of the convex side is shocking pink, the concave side is black. *ID* poses questions about how we define our identity and how we are identified in an existentialist world in which individuals are responsible for themselves through their own consciousness and not as they are identified by nationality, race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Identity and identification must be established against a social, moral and religious vacuum, an empty bag.

The high fashion bag is the subject of five sculptures all entitled *Devil's First Aid*. They are cut in the shape of women's handbags with integral handles. The bags are in low relief, by virtue of bends and creases which create the impression of the crumpled softness of empty bags, in contradiction to the rigid flat material from which they have been fabricated. Three are painted in high gloss to simulate leather (two in lurid pink) and two are in Corten steel to simulate suede. In each, the painted word 'Devil's' appears as a logo within a cut out ribbon-like banner, beneath which the words FIRST AID have been cut out to complete the title. A cure for unhappiness in consumerist society is sometimes satirically referred to as 'retail therapy'. Is this the devil's first aid? Stoisser's bags remind us of bags from the Italian fashion house, Prada, an iconic brand that epitomizes desire and symbolizes 'vanitas' in the modern world. As John Gray wrote in *Straw Dogs*, "Where affluence is the rule, the chief threat is loss of desire". The Prada brand is desirable, but the bags are empty, literally and metaphorically contain nothing.

Three sculptures in the exhibition represent the opposite, bags that are full but so heavy that they cannot be lifted. In the site specific piece *Big Bag 123*, three rectangular Corten steel plates are folded and bolted to enclose the lower part of a pier in the cloister, above which rises the clock tower of the abbey. The pier is visible through a window in each plate, cut in the shape of a handbag. *You cannot take it with you* consists of a slab of stone painted pink, like the Prada bags and sandwiched between two converging sheets of stainless steel and visible through bag shaped windows cut from the steel. This bag like the Big Bag in a literal sense cannot be taken with you. Its title is a well known moral aphorism, a warning that earthly goods, acquired in this life cannot be taken to the next. *Rocky Outlook* is a companion piece. It comprises a bag shaped slab of stone between two sheets of blued plexiglass, leaning inward and joined at the apex. Cut into the stone is a shallow rectangular niche, located behind a window cut from the A side of the plexiglass. The piece represents in a literal sense a vantage point in a rock face on a miniature scale. The title proposes a metaphor both visual and

verbal for uncertainty, a prospect of the future that is perilous. In many cultures, a niche is a site for a sacred sculpture or object. This niche is empty.

Three sculptures in the exhibition are configurations of cubes in various materials. *Communication*, *Pentagono-Will*, *Pentagono-Most*, *Pentagono-Must* and *3 Dados* (dice) address moral philosophical questions around free will and duty, predetermination and chance. Stoisser's philosophical interest is in the relationship between ontology and ethics, between being and behaving, in the words of John Gray, again from 'Straw Dogs' in "the gap between what *is* and what *ought to be*".

At the Vienna academy, Stoisser was a student of painting before switching to sculpture. Her work is informed by an understanding of the properties of both painting and sculpture. It explores the boundary between painting and sculpture and re-engages with the ancient tradition of painted and poly-chromed sculpture. Michelangelo defined modelling as an additive process and carving as subtractive. Imagery and meaning in Stoisser's sculpture is derived from what is added to the metal substrate through painting and also what is subtracted, the shapes cut out. Matisse described his cut-outs as "drawing with scissors". He said that "cutting directly into vivid colour" was the equivalent of the "direct carving of sculptors". For Stoisser, the laser/plasma cutter performs the function of Matisse's scissors. At the edge of her sculptures and within them, linear contours produced by cutting are as incisive as drawn lines.

The power and fascination of these sculptures derive from the contradictions with which they confront the viewer. Her work incorporates both industrial and hand crafted processes. Her sculptures counterpose absence and presence. What is removed is part of the picture. Her work explores the relationships between figure and ground, form and space, opacity and transparency, content and container, light and heavy, front and back. Most free standing sculpture is experienced in the round. Some of Stoisser's sculptures are free standing, but they are made to be seen from the front and back. Some have fixed viewing points like paintings. There is an interesting relationship between the titles of Stoisser's works and the works themselves. Both the titles and the sculptures are interactive plays on language both verbal and visual, exploring the relationship between verbal and visual signifiers.

'Omnia Vincit Amor' is a profoundly thought provoking exhibition that gives visual form to a number of related philosophical issues of all time. Stoisser's sculptures invite the spectator to participate in the challenge of discovering their reference points. The exhibition is in effect a thematic sculpture trail and how the clues are picked up depends on the spectator's 'baggage'. This exhibition is a chapter in a longer discourse that incites reflection on what it is to be human.

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