

A NEW EVENT IN THE ARAB BATHS by PILAR PARCERISAS

Suse Stoisser, an Austrian artist who has settled in Cadaqués, takes advantage of this incomparable site of the Muslim baths, restored Romanic architecture from the XII century, in order to reflect on contemporary life through the world of forms, materials, ideas and words. The Arab Baths of Girona suggest an atmosphere open to communication, to relaxation, open to the public to share as a place of leisure that uses water as an accompaniment and a medium to attain a state of separation from the stress that animates today's society.

Symbolically, the calm enclosed water in these Arab Baths takes on a value of purification and is transformed into a kind of "subterranean heaven" as dreamt by the poet Paul Claudel: "All that the heart desires can always be reduced to the figure of water" which is the greatest of all desires. Here the Baths are transformed into a place that is almost religious, into a monastery that elevates water to the value of a unique substance.

The artist transforms this place into a sanctuary open to the mind and where water is the protagonist. A thought over water as we could say that invests this place of relaxation and communication with a religious sense which was shared by the same building in its conventual period.

Stoisser has taken into account the theories of John Gray on capitalism and society, which, within the framework of globalisation, involves the application of the single economic model of the Occident, promoted by new technologies. The old Arab baths were also places of business and economic exchange.

In the different rooms of the Arab Baths various works have been installed that depict the flow of words, as it were. In the *Apodyterium* or dressing room, a large photograph of water on a sheet of stainless steel bears the cutout image of a sofa with hand painted cushions on the steel plate. It is a reflection of Freud's couch, the study of the subconscious and a voyage into the interior dimension of the mind.

Seven cubes of steel represent variations of the syllables of the word *COMMUNICATION*. On the reverse side one can read some English words or prepositions that match the syllable shown on the front side in such a way that each cube takes on a new significance: *come on, on and off, care, union*. According to how the spectator moves around, it is possible to read one or another combination.

Another pile of cubes offers a similar game: *SCREEN/SCREAM*. On the front face it reads *screen*, on the rear side, *scream*. It draws attention to a society of screens within which we live and to the constant multiplication of ourselves when we communicate through different apparatuses. The scream shows the other face, that of our preoccupations and headaches.

In the *Frigidarium* or cold room, Stoisser shows us two works of great interest. The *Discòbola* is presented in duet under two arches. The archaic body carved on a flat plane of marble is a

symbol of our sensual body and the pleasure it gives, of its energy, here expressed by the steel disc about to be thrown. At the same time it is perforated with ovals of coloured glass passing through the figure and following its inclination and movement. It does not pass unnoticed that we live in a transparent society, of scanners which read our body at airports when we travel from one country to another. Another work in the same room searches for a perfect, flat horizon by means of different jars, full of water, placed on a platform of iron with different degrees of inclination. It is a way of subverting the horizon and demonstrating that water cannot be inclined, only the vessel that contains it, a metaphor of life itself.

In the *Tepidarium* or cold room, the game is *PENTÁGON/FLOR (flower)*, two stone volumes of vertical cuboids. One is an empty space cut out in the form of a flower. Underneath the cutout is the handwritten word *full*, and on the reverse side is the word *less*, negatively cut out of steel. The other volume shows an inlaid steel pentagon and, below, vertically, we read the variants of CARA (face, dear), CARE and CARO (expensive). “Empty and full” and “more and less” allude to the communication between man and woman, and the misunderstanding of words. In the same room appears the *Maja vacía* (2003-2004) a previous work that illustrates her interest in empty space.

Finally, in the *Caldarium* or hot room, Stoisser returns to the cubes or steel dice and the cutout pentagon, and with three words—*most, must and will*, each one written on a face of one cube—she outlines words that could guide the freedom to decide social destiny. The tree in these scenes is a symbol of life and growth. A piece which consists of steel plates with the articles “el” (masculine) and “la” (feminine), furnish the rest of the contents, although among so many messages apparently directed are also the absurdities possible with whatever kind of repetition: “la, la, la”. There is another anterior work, *Square Words*, in which different metal plates are superimposed and present similar but different visual representations—*and, end, und*—to be read or inverted.

The exhibition reveals the intention of the artist to situate some aspects of contemporary life in a magnificent place that, due to its ancient use and appearance, forms a potent significance when joined to the purifying value of water. This is a visit to the baths with a view to communication, reflection or commentary on contrary values in constant dispute: the past and present, masculine and feminine, order and chaos, movement and stillness, full and empty, under the difficult shelter of freedom as the key factor and determinant of individual and collective destiny, and in a place to rethink history.

Translated by HELENA KNIGHT