

MOURNING PROJECT

Artist talk

Grete Refsum, 11. October 2019

Introduction

I am a visual artist and currently a MA-student at MF-Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society, attending an experience-based pedagogical program.

My husband through 43 years, died 14. November 2017, due to pancreatic cancer.

After his death and funeral came all the practicalities. Then came the emptiness.

I denote the feeling «aloneliness» (*alensomhet*), the adjective 'alone' and the noun 'loneliness' combined. As an artist, I returned to my work, but found no way forward. I was stuck.

Mourning project I

I cleared out most of my husband's belongings. Remaining was his ordinary clothes, dozens of T-shirts bleached by washing. I could not make myself put them in the waste box. Nor would I keep them for future cleaning and polishing. So what should I do? I began cutting the fabric into strips and bind them together into some structure. The idea was vaguely some kind of knotted bowl, but I wanted the structure to flow the way it did. I define such a technique «wild knotting». This is a free modeling process in textile, without a structuring sketch or skeleton. The process resulted in *Mourning project I*.

Mourning project II

After half a year, the experience of being existentially alone had settled in. I felt mentally naked and spatially unprotected. Bodily the feeling was one of disorientation. I began to recognize a need of some shell around my body. Gradually the form came into view. The idea was to make a protective shield, a combination of a small gatehouse and a robe.

At the time, I got a big roll of thick steel wire. Besides, I had some red fabric piling up in the studio. So I started to weave the steel into a grid structure, which I bandaged with fabric. I work by hand, conceptually feeling in touch with the liturgical words of the Eucharist:

[...] the fruit of the earth and work of human hands, it will become for us the bread of life.

When the first protective form was completed, I made its counterpart. The red fabric was spent however. Looking into my shelves, I found a red cover for double duvets: the material was there.

During this period, I attended classes in the Old Testament; the calling of the prophet Isaiah was one of the central texts. I was introduced to the primary angel, the *seraf*, and shown Byzantine mosaics of these winged creatures in red and blue against a golden background:

[...] Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying (Isaiah 6,2).

The seraf cleans Isaiah and gives him legitimacy to speak on behalf of God.

One day, looking at my grid forms, I wondered what I actually was producing. In a flash, I realized that I was making wings of a seraf, the red ones in a contemporary expression! I worked on objects that were to surround and cover parts of my body, and at the same time the idea was to let these objects give strength to move on, to dare fly!

I played further on the seraf concept, thinking that the space I created might be seen as one in which wo-/man was given the opportunity to speak the truth for her-/himself, protected by the covering wings, in order to take off and fly with her/his own arms and body into her/his future life.