

MOURNING PROJECT 2018-2021

Grete Refsum

Mourning Project is an artistic response to a personal loss. When the Norwegian visual artist Grete Refsum lost her husband of 43 years in late 2017, she used artistic tools to handle the situation, expressing how she felt. The outcome exemplifies in sculpture and photographic work what a grieving process can look like. The work offers insight in how personal lamentation can be met constructively by creative means.

Introduction

My husband through 43 years, died 14. November 2017, due to cancer in the pancreas. The diagnosis was set two months before he died. One week prior to this death sentence, my working process suddenly came to a halt. I made some choices in the sculptural work that blocked further development. It was surprising. I could see no solution in front of me and wondered what this fact signaled. The object still stands uncompleted in my studio.

The terminal period and subsequent death and funeral, was followed by an avalanche of practicalities. Thereafter silence and emptiness settled in. My general feeling I denoted «aloneliness» (*alensomhet*), combining the adjective 'alone' with the substantive 'loneliness'. The world existed, I was alive, but felt lost. Artistically I was stuck.

Mourning Project is a series of artwork produced during the last three years, 2018-2021. It consists of three main parts: *Seraf*, *Sorrow Wall*, including *Østre brygge*, and *Portal*. The *seraf* work consists of five objects in total. The *sorrow wall* comprises two sculptural objects in dialogue with *Østre brygge*, a photographic and video work. The *portal* is simply one object.

0 Beginning: Wild knotting

For me it was urgent to clear the house. I gave away as much as possible. Remaining was linen and a dozen of bleached T-shirts, used and worn. I was unable to put this fabric in the waste bin. Nor did I wish to keep it. The artist in me took action, I started with the shirts, cut the material into strips and began binding them together. This technique I denote 'wild knotting'. I structured the work into the shape of a bowl. But without a strengthening skeleton, the pure textile form gravitates and loses precision.

I *Seraf* - seeking protection

After half a year, I experienced a feeling of being existentially alone, mentally naked and spatially unprotected. Bodily, the sensation was one of shrinking in and disorientation. I needed some shelter. The idea of making a protective shield, gradually manifested itself; shapes of a guardian gatehouse and a bishop's robe flickered in my mind.

At this time, I got about 100 kg of leftover rolls of galvanized steel wire, 3 mm thick. Linen and steel were given, the challenge was technically how to combine them. I work by hand,

keeping in direct bodily contact with the chosen material. Thus, poisonous gases and materials are avoided, and the incongruities of the hand decisively define the outcome.

I decided to make a simple weave of steel, a grid structure that could be bandaged with fabric. To get there was difficult, but after weeks of exploration – almost giving up – I succeeded. The grid was strengthened and bound together by red cotton from a double duvet. The process took months, but was equalised by the joy of mastering the task. Sensing the protective field arising from the first form, it asked for a counterpart.

During this period, I attended a class in the imagery of the Old Testament. The calling of the prophet Isaiah by a three-winged angel, a seraf, has given raise to conceptual and visual interpretations of angles in our Western tradition. The seraf cover its head and body with its wings, which in Byzantine mosaics are set in red or blue against a golden background.

Looking at my grid forms in red, covering my body and head, I came to think that in a contemporary context, these objects might be understood as a pair of seraf wings. They offered me protection, provided strength to move on, even dare to fly!

Advent had set in, and I decided to make a second pair of similar objects – seraf wings, now in blue violet. The third pair of (seraf) wings would be my own arms. But when the blue pair was done, and the second year of mourning set in (2019), I still had double sheets left, these in yellow and white. So I decided to use the fabric in a production of a third pair. The idea was to make a kind of resurrective, unfolding forms that would be accomplished at Easter. But in practice, this proved impossible. The resistance was hard. In the end, the solution became one bigger, taller, free standing wing. I needed no more.

II *Østre brygge* – reconnecting to the world *Sorrow Wall* – visualising mourning and time

Through the *Seraf* work I had recaptured space around me. I became aware that I had taken up the habit my husband and I practised for years, of going to our local beach before breakfast Sunday mornings. He used to stand on the pier, doing qi gong, while I had my place in the sand, doing tai chi. The beach can only be reached by foot, bicycle or boat. In the beginning it was quite emotional to go there. As a defensive response I started to take photos. Time became an entity. We live, we die, nature is given, time passes. How could this be visualised? I wondered if the state of mourning could be expressed in some material terms. During spring 2019, the idea of catching time ripened. I wished to make a photographic diary throughout a complete year. The motif would be the pier on which my husband no longer stands. Additionally, I decided to document my own stand, and since I am alive, in video, 1 min/Sunday. Preparatory work followed. The frequency and time of photographing would be every Sunday at about 9 am. I looked at several angles, positions and possibilities, discussed with professionals, bought a camera and a new cell phone, and set a date for the start up: 1st Sunday of Advent 2019. The project then would cover the 3rd year of mourning. The first Sunday, I was anxious. But practicalities took the lead:

striving to get to the spot on time, having a powered battery, managing to hold the camera, focusing the motif. On the beach, my i-phone 8 proved to be the preferred tool.

In parallel to the photo series, I intended to produce a wall structure onto which I could mount prints. The plan was to start above my head and throughout the year let the images slope down, ending on the floor in a video of waves. The sculptural work and the caption of photos went in parallel. Both media grew in their own peculiarities, becoming more and more disconnected and free standing. Finally, I let them part. In two unique ways they each tell a tale of a year long process of work.

The object became one big wall structure in tones of shaded white – a sorrow wall of approximately three times 365 squares, signifying days – and additionally a finalising dot, a ball in red. The photographic work ended in prints analogically displayed in two photo books made by leftovers from my husband's office: folios and plastic folders; posters with all 52 pictures put together horizontally or vertically, and a video of 50 minutes.

III Portal

As the sorrow wall neared its completion, I wondered what comes next? The Chilean author Isabel Allende somewhere writes that a deep sorrow takes three years for healing. I mentally and physically felt moving from a state of sorrow into some new part of my life. Could this mental state be materialised? I still had materials, steel and sheets of white cotton. Architectural forms of windows and portals caught my awareness. Such spatial forms represent the state of transition between two positions. A need for a ceiling dawned upon me. For me, producing form always goes before conscious understanding. Technically, the idea was like troughing over and extending the seraf forms upward. Self confident I began structuring a portal through which I could pass. Starting from above in white, I made it stand by help of hangings.

The process offered some challenges, and I did not grow into heaven that easily. Soon I understood that the breaking point of my material was passed. No binding could strengthen the sloping wires. Without helping hangings it would collapse. Besides, I was short of the pale blue, white cotton that I had selected for the ceiling heaven. All in all, my formal movement into the future seemed pretty hopeless. Of course, I knew that a self standing iron element of more than 0,7 mm would solve my problem. However, I long ago got rid of such materials along with the welding apparatus. My approach is one of seeking softer elements and the uncertainty of swaying that they provide. However, a strengthening had to be done if the portal should be free standing. I searched my storages and a pair of hollow metal rods that belonged to the roof construction of a hammock that I had dismantled, stood out. Conceptually they were perfect, the hammock is my favourite sitting place. But to bind them into the given form was as difficult as it was interesting. Finally, the construction proved terrific. The portal actually does stand, it will not easily turn over, but nevertheless stands swaying, reflecting daoist attitude and tai chi practice. As the flowering of summer set in, the colours floated into the binding, more and more, creating a foundation of soil that gradually moves upward into more light colours. My portal became a visualization of standing firmly on the ground, stretching up to the sky above me, a protected space to pass through, from the sorrow wall into the unknown