

mask on, mask off

As our life progresses it dawns on us how much of our reality is hidden, not only to the external world but also to ourselves. Between the outer, perceptible world and our inner anatomical composition lies an ill-defined area, a mental, neurological no-man's-land, whose dimension is incommensurate. It can be vast as a continent and tiny as a grain, all according to the attention paid to it, or should we say, the attention which it demands. This is the area which Gudny Rosa Ingimarsdottir investigates, or rather, in which she operates, whereas it is from within that she carries out her exploration, metaphorically as a spelaeologue examines the interior of unknown caves.



'huntertable', detail
Exhibition in Sint-Lukas Gallery Brussels, April-May 2003



'yet another case of female depression', detail
Exhibition in Sint-Lukas Gallery Brussels, April-May 2003

There is less of metaphysics in her approach than might be expected from the terrain she chooses to explore, whereas she does not try to retrieve any systematic knowledge from these expeditions, only vague signs which she interprets in an exquisitely fragile way. Knowing the immateriality and inconsistency of the area in spatial terms, she does not dwell in it as if she were walking about on a firm ground. Familiarizing with, and understanding an entity which certainly exists but cannot be perceived demands sensitivity rather than senses, intuitive instinct rather than conceptual speculation. Gudny Rosa's experience of time and memory runs along similar lines. It consists of a duration in the Bergsonian sense, where even the actual sound of ticking and chiming clocks, indicating mathematical time, is presented as a *durée* and the pounding hammering of the measured hour is given a musical dimension.

Two things are worth retaining here; the absence of visual perception, which is hinted at by Gudny Rosa, herself, in her account of childhood recollections as a rationale to her Requiem project, and consequently the impossibility of relating sensation to its proper cause, which might explain the artist's difficulty when it comes to describing visually the most important things, which are synonymous with those responsible for the most enduring sensations. Describing her reminiscence, which she refers to as *frequent visits to her own memory*, she evokes auditory experience before any other - banging clocks and comforting baritone voices - and by referring to warm hands, follows it up with the faculty of touch. Neither sound nor touch are exactly the senses which first come to mind when we think of visual art

and artists, but on top of that, it seems that Gudny Rosa recalls these sketches from the past as having happened 'in a closed room' and 'behind a glass door'. Does it mean that even these childhood sensory impressions were not experienced under the best receptive conditions?

If this is the case, Gudny Rosa's perceptual limitations at the time - or her recollection of the incidents - can be compared to the trials of Beckett's hero in *L'innommable*, whose position is determined in such a way as to make it impossible for him to apprehend successfully the obscure sensations that pass him by, which under better circumstances he would surely be able to define without difficulty. But compelled to the worst possible visibility he is obliged to inquire incessantly who might be moving in front of him. Gathering from her works, drawings, textiles, sculptural objects, found objects, photos, videos and audios, Gudny Rosa, as someone who senses space as sensation from within rather than a clearly defined geometrical entity from the outside, seems to shun spatial distance in order to get a direct hold of the detail. This perspective of closeness corresponds perfectly with the aforementioned description of childhood recollections where sight was overshadowed by other more immediate senses.

In *What is ours*, a video from 1998, which deals with the tender act of breastfeeding, an important light is cast on this immediate intimacy, which favours the detail at the expense of spatial distancing. In psychoanalytical terms, breastfeeding is the perfect symbol of the Pre-Oedipal stage, which to a certain extent is synonymous with Julia Kristeva's rhythmic chora, prior to Lacan's seminal mirror-stage, when

the child starts mastering language and discovers his, or her independent existence as a detached being. At its primordial stage of being, spatial sense, as well as temporal and representational perception, is for an infant highly confusing. Reality is either sheltering and satisfactory, or stifling and uncomfortable, whereas space as experienced on individual basis, apparently, does not exist yet. The world, which is composed of mother's soft voice and body, is perceived by the nursing through touch and hearing rather than sight. These are precisely the senses on which Gudny Rosa draws when describing her childhood sensations.

The order of her exhibition *Panic 2* at *Les Témoins Oculistes*, in Brussels 2001, with its careful arrangements also seems significant in this respect. The emphasis on a centrifugal, cavernous type of installation where the public had to scan the walls at extreme levels, as paintings of animals in a Magdalenian cave, in order to view the works distributed about them, almost from the floor to altitudes above its average height, created an unusual pattern. However, by turning his back on the empty space in the centre of the room made the spectator experience a different kind of spatial effect. Even the few freestanding three-dimensional works at the exhibition were by their location near the wall, made dependent of the verticality of the display.

The affinity between the full-scale spelaeological reality of the exhibition and Gudny Rosa's drawing, knitting and crochet is another trait worth studying. From the outset drawing has been her cherished activity and it still has a unique position in her art. Careful, playful, unpredictable and full of fantasy it

depends for the most part on highly mature contours, rendered with an astounding precision. The positioning of the content on the A4 format speaks of Gudny Rosa's strong, undeliberate formal sense. The imagination and ease with which she seems to realize them is sometimes breathtaking.

Again two distinct elements are worth retaining; the effect of weaving, and the effect of mending by stitching, or plastering. Already in the mid-nineties Gudny Rosa's drawings had been likened to organic oddments such as bodily organs, and they still preserve a fair amount of surgical elements and traces such as bandage, compresses and pinholes. Some of the drawings are handled as if they were wounded and had to be dressed. They are pasted over with sticking plaster, forming various patterns, yet at the same time half obliterating something, perhaps an important information, beneath the bandage. Thus the treatment of the wounds amounts to a palimpsest where an old message is regularly coated over with a fresh layer. This procedure conveys the meaning of the cuts immediately from the medical sphere to the level of psychology, where they suddenly become extremely significant in a highly subjective game of hide and seek. The benevolent act of mending, healing and stitching suddenly becomes ambiguous, even suspicious, forfeiting a good deal of its primal ethical innocence. Covering up of information, in whatever way or circumstances, amounts to the worst of crimes in today's society of unimpeded communication.

The tension between disclosure and concealment is the problematical point of departure in Gudny Rosa's approach, its 'ripe moment' and key to her

reluctant perfectionism. Her use of text - not least in connection with the drawings - bearing on short, explicit statements and aphorisms, is the revelatory part, while the weaving in its most extensive sense is its latent half. A highly significant photograph in *Panic 2* shows the artist with a thin, translucent paradermatic mask possibly of acrylic substance. Whether she is covering her face with this second skin or peeling it off is impossible to determine. Found and altered material, of clinical provenance, attests to Gudny Rosa's dermatological interests, a curiosity possibly related to her set of reasoning as a textile artist, regarding the Penelopean activity as a continuous narrative renovation, possibly even a reincarnation parallel to the spinning of a cocoon.

In this respect it is worth noting how much of the artist's textile works - textile in an extensive sense - are vessels in the double sense, recipients and organs, some of them even connected to the more extensive vascular system. The conveyed meaning is never far away, whereas typewritten labels tied to the items relate them to museum specimens. On the other hand, the texts on the labels, aphoristic as the texts in the drawings, may be seen to connect some of the items with symbolic references from the scriptures such as a 'vessel of wrath' or the 'weaker vessel', connotations, which in the case of Gudny Rosa, are perfectly appropriate.

But nowhere in Gudny Rosa's works is the association between text and textile as clear as in her many references to loss of language. In *Devoirs - Mes mots perdues*, from 2001, two bottles, perfect vessels for messages, contain a bundle of Icelandic words, cut out of a dictionary, and a knitted wool garment as a

surrogate for words which the artist has forgotten. I miss not having your tongue to play with, from 2002, is a posterlike photo of a printed aphorism which expresses the trauma of loss of language, connected as part of a triptych with a photo of a vulval detail of Icelandic landscape, and a third photo of a pile of organic intestines.

Loss of language is synonymous with loss of the Heart - a white porcelaine sculpture on a low aluminium pedestal, on display in *Panic 2* - which again refers to a curious, intestinal object labelled with a typewritten aphorism, *Yet another case of female depression*, as if an operation - possibly in order to remove the gall-bladder - had been effectuated in order to get rid of this infamous organ of melancholy. At first glance abjection comes to mind with all its terrifying loss of identity midway between subject and object, but gathering from Gudny Rosa's critical instinct nothing is more relevant to her art than Nietzsche and his ceaseless rebellion against cultural deflation and self-deception. Taking off one mask was according to him the same as putting up another, since truth in its most transparent form is beyond our limits. *We have art in order not to perish in truth*, he said, without meaning that we should hide in an illusion. But as Gudny Rosa seems to have understood through her art, truth is thing merely to approach, but let us not believe that we will ever get hold of it.

Halldór Björn Runólfsson