

The Storyteller

A bird appeared and sat on the opposite side of the river.

It did not sing like a bird, nor like a swallow,

But it sang and spoke in a human voice:

“Unless you sacrifice a human, the bridge will never stand.

And don't you sacrifice an orphan, or a stranger, or a passer-by,

But only the chief mason's beautiful wife...” The Bridge at Arta, Anon

The haunting sounds of laughter and singing in an abandoned Greek school in Istanbul, empty for twenty-five years, deserted classrooms left untouched; young, crystal clear narrators reading *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Bridge at Arta*; desks and walls that bear traces, scrapes and scratches of other lives and histories; newspaper clippings bearing witness to abusive behavior towards women. This is the enigmatic setting for Kalliopi Lemos's confrontational sculptures.

Lemos does not avoid subjects that disturb or trouble: her powerful art is thrust towards us, the sculptures that she 'has to make' challenging us to navigate and make sense of them. Unavoidable, they seem to be willing us to engage with them, to physically confront the message in their disturbing ambiguities. Lemos's tools are her emotions, and her will to shape and present her love affair with materials lies at the very core of her aesthetic. Her sculptural process is painstakingly realised. Each stage of her creation is first meticulously sketched (she likes to draw in charcoal and explains ideas using white chalk on her steel studio table) before she makes the work in clay. It is then cast in a mixture of sand, iron filings and resin, and finally the surface is sandblasted, rubbed by hand and sprayed with acid to expose the iron filings which then rust. This is a metamorphic transformation mimicking the aging of humans: beauty and destruction, life and death, the grand narratives are never far away.

Lemos trained as a painter, yet looking at her early work it is obvious that her two-dimensional painting was striving to achieve the three-dimensional in order to provide a direct relationship to the viewer's own body. She '...wanted the more direct form'. The gestation of her ideas in the studio, from drawing to fabrication of the finished sculpture also demonstrates the influence of her Japanese training, where nature is respected. As Lemos describes: '... in Japanese flower-arranging you get a tree or a flower and you touch it and ask permission before you bend or impose your will.' This engagement

with natural elements means that her studio is full of reeds, stones and natural objects as well as experiments in textures, some of which led to the current show.

In *I am I, Between Worlds and Between Shadows*, the dynamism of feminist theorists, past historical movements, myths and legends, contemporary politics and Lemos's artistic vision all converge in the poignant sculptures she presents, simultaneously evoking both sadness and anger, and admiration at the strength, courage and dignity of women in the face of adversity.

Lemos's themes and mythologies call out to us, yet the sculptures remain fixed, immobile, vulnerable yet strong. What are these strange figures, half-beast and half-human, redolent of Greek myths, of fertility, of sacrifice? Her symbolic creatures straddle both past and current stages of the political debate, speaking of struggle and pain. Her work, Lemos suggests, is born of 'suppression and sadness', it bears witness to the tragedy of many women who have been, and continue to be, oppressed or abused. Through their scale and positioning in the various classrooms, Lemos's brutally provocative artworks force us to address our own bodies and lives.

In *Memory* (2013), an elongated pair of steel prosthetics bear the weight of a headless body, long, glossy hair – a symbol of femininity - flowing out of the neck like the tail of a well-groomed horse, the torso's emphatic vagina a startling entrance that meets our gaze as we look up at the body. We are presented with the space or hole at the very centre of its construction, a Freudian sexual void, but also, Lemos suggests, a 'site of creation and memory'. *Memory* is laden with the resonance of conflict but also continues the tradition of artists making work about the fundamental creation of life. I am thinking of Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of The World* (1866) and references to primitive sculpture, fertility gods and Greek and African art. Hair this long holds memory, it has power and strength and commodity. The mane of hair might also evoke the rescue of Rapunzel, or the strength of Samson prior to Delilah's haircut and his downfall. But this symbol of strength, power, health and beauty is juxtaposed with the stumped legs which render the figure maimed and therefore powerless. The splayed legs reveal the vulnerability of the female, easily penetrated and without the legs to run away. There are echoes of Lemos's Greek heritage, and the myths which often are predicated on sacrifice. *Memory* is exposed, and the angle of the body which towers over us, forces the labia and thighs into focus. The lack of a face or eyes also abdicates the man from responsibility: he isn't under her judging gaze. It might also be apposite here

to recall the long endurance performances of Marina Abramović such as *Art Must be Beautiful* (1975) where, with a steel comb in one hand and a brush in the other, she combed her hair for hours to the manta 'Art must be beautiful, Artist must be beautiful' ... until she had destroyed her face and hair.

Lemos suggests that she is a feminist from the point of view of supporting fellow women, and with her subject matter. In the late 1960s and early 1970s feminist artists often expressed themselves using either their own bodies or abject materials to communicate powerfully the inequality they were confronting, blood and hair often featuring in their performances and images. I am reminded of Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975), where she stood naked, covered in mud, slowly extracting a paper scroll from her vagina from which she read. Lemos's thoughts on the vagina seem to echo Schneemann's: "I thought of the vagina in many ways – physically; conceptually; as a sculptural form; an architectural referent; the source of sacred knowledge, ecstasy, birth passage, transformation, power." Elongated labia surrounding a deep vaginal crevice are a striking feature of *Hen on Crutches* (2013), where a female torso is disturbingly presented as a plucked chicken, ready to be trussed. Again, power and helplessness are juxtaposed, with the stunted and helpless arms, resting on steel crutches - the type used by World War Two amputees – sitting in stark contrast to the powerful thighs and clawed hands. Yet the hen-woman is unable to reach the ground, and we can only imagine her moving slowly and painfully using her crutches. The potent symbolism of the hen and its associations with life after death (slaughtered chickens continue to move even after decapitation), fertility, enlightenment and sacrifice serves as both warning and fable. *Hen with Two Faces* (2013), although less disturbing, is also a portent: for hidden in the tail feathers of the proudly strutting hen, puffed-out chest displayed beneath calmly dignified head, lies an old withered face, sad and wise. As with all nature, we carry within us the inevitability of the ageing process, suffering and abuse always leave their mark, however robust and dignified the soul.

Lemos's work also appears to have mythological links with Kiki Smith's drawings, the sculptures of Louise Bourgeois, and with Joan Jonas's installation *The Juniper Tree* (1976). She does not, however, use her body to perform in front of an audience but rather uses it to create her work, drawing, gathering, testing, discussing, choosing materials that can literally live and transform over time. Lemos's studio overlooks her Japanese garden where on a daily basis she sees the power of nature not only to renew, but also to be shaped and pruned, affected by the seasons, killed by inclement weather.

Central to her work is the concern to uphold human dignity through the different passages of life, '...the agony of looking for the meaning of existence to show a truth: the dignity within every human being, no matter what the circumstance'.

Throughout the centuries it has been the purpose of art to raise questions in the viewer. What is the significance of the animals that Lemos has used to link her contemporary artistic practice with ancient mythology? Why is there a predominance of human breasts, the fusion of animal and human form? One of the more disturbing sculptures is *Hanging Hare* (2013). Suspended from a bronzed steel support, the animal is tethered around its ears by rope. There are connotations of death, of gibbets and torture. The hare is the subject of many myths, associated with the moon and fertility, cunning and bravery. But Lemos's *Hanging Hare* is naked, captured, tied and helpless, its support, in the shape of a staff, useless. In contrast *Deer on Altar* (2013) shows a doe laid on a plinth: that this is a commanding image of submission is not in doubt, but as in all of Lemos's work there are the haunting underlying themes, the mythical fused with the materiality of her work. Lemos selected the doe because it is 'svelte, elegant, swift and proud'. The haunting classical face confronts us in an image that she worked on early in the morning and late at night in order to have peace to contemplate the nuances of the features it was essential to express. Somehow the supplication shames us. But the surface also arrests us: this is not an animal to stroke or pet, but one whose coat is pitted and stained, the rusting filings exposed to light and humidity, unprotected by the resin and sand that constitutes the sculpture's materiality. Seductive and disturbing, the extended neck wills us to act. We are reminded of Iphigenia, whose willingness to sacrifice herself for the good of her people even after discovering that her father had duped her was repaid by the substitution of a deer as she was about to be executed.

The works are also magnificent: the mermaid climbing from an imprisoning well using her tail and hands (*Mermaid Coming Out of a Well*, 2013); the goat, body separating itself from its breasts, set to catapult itself into action, cloven hooves ready to spring (*Goat*, 2013). These seem to suggest a more hopeful vision. But paradoxically with each triumphant transition comes loss, compromise: the mermaid has escaped from the constraints of the well, but now she has nowhere to swim; the goat can leap into a new life, but leaves behind her breasts, her nurturing, reproductive self. This poignant reminder of the inevitable loss which accompanies the balancing of life recalls Lemos's own experience: at the age of 20, she found herself living in foreign country, away from all that was familiar, yet at the same time moving away brought marriage, children, and

her life as an artist. “My sisters, parents and friends were all back in Greece and I needed to learn to live away from everything I had known till then... These personal experiences have been instrumental and although I have not in the slightest experienced the hardship of thousands of fellow human beings who try to cross borders, I can imagine their struggle and empathise with their plight”. It took time.” Thus this is work that not only touches on the universal, but also on the personal, the uprooting of the physical body in search of a different life, not just Lemos’s own, but including the plight of her displaced grandparents, forced to flee their homeland: as a child Lemos grew up with stories of painful transitions, and the memories of tears and laments echo through her work.

The seven sculptures that form the exhibition are each given their own room and are all very different. Set on pallets in the position of the teacher’s desk, each has its own unique relationship to the classroom in which it is set. There is transmutation in the rhythms of the show as we carry memories from one room to the next. Lemos takes the viewer on a journey, connecting the figurative sculptures to sound to the desks in the rooms, one of which has been poignantly scratched with ‘Goodbye my desk, I may never see you again’. The symbolism of *Little Red Riding Hood*, with her mixture of fear and revulsion tempered with curiosity, is cleverly conflated with the diverse mythologies inherent in each artwork. Indeed, the tale by the Brothers Grimm seems a fitting choice for a space that would once have been filled with girls and young women. Sound is not neutral, it penetrates and affects us, especially when it is familiar. The children’s fairytale, subject of numerous interpretations with its connotations of menstrual blood, sexual awakening and the dire consequences of getting into bed with the wolf who has devoured the protective grandmother, is a resonant cautionary tale. The second narration, by a young Greek girl, is the fable poem of the *Bridge at Arta*: all day stone masons build the bridge and every night the foundations collapse, until a bird, speaking with a human voice, informs the head mason that the bridge will continue to collapse unless he sacrifices his beautiful wife by burying her alive in the foundations.

As we navigate the space we hear clapping, laughter, sounds of happy young children. Lemos’s sculptures contain the power of renewal, of altered states, of transition and the powers of recovery: there is hope.

Jean Wainwright 2013