

Nadja Iseli – A stone is a stone is a setting

Marco Meier

While postmodernism radically shook up the art genres and the traditional definition of artwork began to waver, there was a gradual shift in the notion of what constitutes art, with increasing attention being aimed right at the middle of completely normal life. Since then an oeuvre has been measured contingently by the sum of artefacts and objects it has spawned. Or rather, one's entire life is lived along the track of an artistic stance. And since the end of the nineties the talk of "work of life art," in the sense of art intervening in life, has encapsulated an artistic significance which bundles the intimations of fragments around an artistic middle again. Essentially, the output is only legible in a meaningful reference to a life plan. Histrionic though it may sound, it is not, it cannot be, because the fulfilment of this notion is only evident after a proper portion of success in life – for critics and artists in equal measure. And it was a risky road.

Nadja Iseli is both an artist and a model builder. For her models, built to order for architects, she uses primarily light materials such as plaster, wood, cardboard and synthetic materials. The models are marked by an ephemeral lightness. These precisely materialised drafts and visualised interior designs in small format enable the viewer to get a picture of the building project. The gently floating appearance of these models seems to mirror Nadja Iseli's own delicate nature. As an artist, however, she works mainly with stone, weighty stones in fact, as if she wanted to hold out the practicalities of earning her living towards the weightiness of another world, her world of a fantastical link to nature. The phenomenal paradox of these two worlds, which come into contact in her atelier on a daily basis, engenders a tension of uncanny intensity. At first glance, the two worlds are scarcely related. On closer inspection, however, they gravitate towards one another in an intense dialogue. The force with which ideas unfold here counteracts the ease of utter intention. It is as if Nadja Iseli, with her elegant, yet steadfast sculptures, forms a fictitious inner world for the hollows of her commissioned models. To a certain degree, the shells acquire a visionary fulfilment. This change in perspective leads to a material counter movement, which comes even stronger into play formally with her further reinterpretation in her selection of stone. Nadja Iseli reads nuances of primeval memory and attempts to unveil them artistically in every sculptured stone. Cycles surface in her sculptures; the vast horizon of evolution forms a bond with the human will towards nature to create with absolute ease. The model thus becomes the creative raster of reproduction, gaining validity for Nadja Iseli as both the artist and artisan. Existential questions concerning an integral design of spaces, places and materials converge and present themselves to her in both disciplines. And this is no theoretical concept here, but rather the dynamic convergence of tangible aspects of a "work of life art."

And yet the actual dynamic originates from, of all things, the most enduring and unwavering element in this process – namely, the stone. Selecting the stone is tantamount to the painter's first brushstroke, the author's first sentence. The creative spectrum is already marked out for Nadja Iseli in the "DNA" of every stone. Legible in every stone is a very specific locus. Iseli knows exactly what kind of stone to search for when addressing a theme, and never places it in a setting without incorporating the narrative thread. To be sure, the ideal is not always possible in practice. "But in fact," explains the artist, "there is only one suitable setting for every stone and the form I have given it." A good example of this is the sculpture "An die sechs Quellen" (At the source) made of olivine diabase from Hessen, which Iseli was able to realise for the Bad Salzhausen International Sculptor Symposium in 2011. The theme of the six recumbent diabase segments refers to the six springs of curative waters which originate here in the region. The close proximity of the segments forms a cohesive whole, resulting in a self-contained narrative. Absolutely striking is how Iseli has managed to "breathe" the ethereality of flowing water into these weighty segments. The tranquil appearance

of the work is deceptive, for it is the arduous result of cutting the formidably hard stone. In her atelier slender basalt columns stand about in vertical serenity like contemporaries of another world. They retain their natural dignity – formed over the millennia – and tower heavenwards in all their stately splendour like primeval huts. Formally reduced to a minimum, these lithic “high-rises” beget a poetic presence. And set between them are flat UFOs made from the same basalt stone, with their sparkling eyes in the middle, like infinitesimal windows to eternity. “Supernovas” is what Nadja Iseli calls these sculptures lying in wait on her atelier floor. Should the viewer happen to look out the window, the stony narrative undulates further beyond the atelier. Such loquacious prehistoric stone in such telling repose is seldom seen.

Translated by Sharon Kroska