

# It is all so big. Too big. Too big?

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“That is an unreasonable demand,” claims Nadja Iseli. She is gazing out the window of her atelier at her most recent and largest work of art, scheduled to be transported to its intended location in the next few days. “Actually, I am the unreasonable demand.” She means it seriously and not exactly as a compliment. It almost seems as if she herself is astonished, somewhat baffled by her courage. Indeed, the two oversized chairs and the gigantic table made of Verde Spluga gneiss are so heavy, so voluminous and unwieldy that transporting them approximately five kilometers from her atelier to Brünighof in Lucerne calls for an unexpectedly elaborate logistical feat. As a matter of fact, one could quite conceivably speak of an unreasonable demand here.

With her artwork, however, Nadja Iseli is presenting the residents and restaurant guests in Brünighof with something permanent, while expecting – by all means, in the positive sense of the word – them to appropriate it, take time to initiate encounters, muse and engage in discussions. And for children to use it for play. Because ultimately the sculpture is replacing the playground. Her art is “art for everyday life”. She does not see her works exhibited in a museum, but rather being used in real surroundings. For then they can undergo a change – and yet endure for decades.

Table and chairs, symbols for sharing meals together, conversing, laughing, solving problems, grappling with the challenges of the world. “But,” claims the artist, “all of this here is too big. The table, the chairs, and the problems.” In actual fact, when sitting on the chair one instantly has the feeling of being too small. Legs dangle in the air, the back of the chair is indeed too far away, the table is too high, rendering it barely possible to set something down on it. It is too big to see or grasp much of anything on top of it. This is how it is for our little ones, the children in our world. And indeed, the current global issues can neither be resolved on a small scale, nor quickly. Due to its size and large mass, the sculpture prompts such feelings as humbleness and modesty. By the same token, however, they also bring great pleasure, engender a sense of awe and are thought-provoking, or at least inspire one to contemplate.

Nadja Iseli is, however, not a woman with a mission, given to teaching the world. While working on a stone, she processes her story, her narratives, what currently preoccupies her, what she is particularly happy about or what concerns her. In the course of this, she retains as much of the stone’s past as possible. She does not speak about her personal motives for her works of art. Certainly not readily. She leaves it up to the viewers to form their own thoughts and is merely interested in hearing and seeing the effect of her work. It is therefore hardly surprising that she is reluctant to give the sculpture in Brünighof a name. “Names predefine, specify, limit one’s perspective.”

When asked about her working process, however, the rather reticent and earnest artist becomes more talkative. “I am driven,” she says. Driven? She does not come across that way. What she means is that she is driven by a strong passion for sculpting stone, for getting the most out of the stone, out of herself and the material. Perhaps that is the reason she chose stone as her medium for sculpture, a material which requires time, for which she must take time. Even selecting the stone with the experts at the quarry requires quietude and a measured pace; sculpting it inside or outside her atelier requires a rhythm far removed from the hectic rush of everyday life. And a great deal of care, which Nadja Iseli has emphasized several times: “Stone is an extremely precious material.” By that she does not mean its monetary value, she means the formation of the stone and its long history. It is necessary to work meticulously, to search for the points of resistance and approach the task with perseverance. “This slow pace, this different rhythm of time, das is a luxury for me. It gives me a sense of pleasure. Stone is my material.”

This is why she does not shy away from large columns and groups of works. An example of this can

be found in "Durch den Wind", the three finely hewn basalt columns depicting a family. Clearly, they are together here, yet somehow they also appear out of place and lost. Seekers, displaced or homeless people? Another example is the impressive sculpture she created from shell limestone within five weeks at the "Panta Rhei" International Sculpture Symposium in Dettelbach in 2014. Waves that carry the eye and thoughts along into the distance and, at the same time, radiate such a tremendous sense of calm at their site. A young girl from Dettelbach, a village on the bank of the Main, sends the artist photos at regular intervals to show the slight changes in the work. And eventually her father even brings her to Lucerne. The young girl wants to see Nadja Iseli again and get to know her better. The tremendous joy derived from the successful interaction with the young observer is written all over the artist's face.

But there are also smaller works, ones that take less time. These fall more in line with her first profession, her bread-and-butter job that involves very precise architecture – a model builder. This is the second Nadja Iseli, who had completely separated her two lives in independent locations for a longer period of time. Now they have been consolidated in the same atelier. However, if a visitor searches for or believes to be able to find any sort of link between the two, she replies modestly: "Sometimes I am just a marathon runner and sometimes a sprinter."

Nevertheless, the fact that the two professions enhance one another becomes evident with a tour of Nadja Iseli's atelier; the house as a theme accompanies her. There are, for example, the extraordinary stone columns with small houses on the top. Or the dream houses cast in concrete, works reserved for the winter, when it is too cold to work outside. What does the house signify here – a longing for a sense of security, shelter, a meeting place? Or a prestige object with a view and guarantee of privacy, the house thereby concomitantly serving as a symbol for possible isolation, for excluding oneself?

I will have to, if at all, answer that question myself. Nadja Iseli does not consider herself a political artist. "Can or should art even be political," she queries. We come back to this topic more than once, also at her works finely cut in plywood. Black waves run through the formally stunning pictures, and a chill runs down my spine. Is the artist addressing here the topic of the refugees suffering on the open sea? We have both read texts on the relationship between art and politics, discuss them and ultimately leave these questions unanswered, nonetheless. Labels do not interest this artist because they, too, constrict one's perspective and line of thought.

"Art enables me to process my reality, to encounter and consequently become acquainted with other things as well as other people." How we as viewers perceive her art is entirely up to us. Nadja Iseli has completed a monumental work and is pleased with the result. The space outside her atelier is empty again, the tools and machines have been cleaned. New ideas are beginning to develop. Nadja Iseli is 64 years old, and changes are a part of life, especially at this stage. She might take up an earlier theme again and modify it. "Or perhaps it is time to create a vessel, to collect all my unreasonable demands and those in life."

Translated by Sharon Kroska