

*A Family of Man*  
*Visual artist Othilia*  
*Verdurmen: from*  
*multimedia installations to*  
*monumental sculptures*

Othilia Verdurmen (1962) started in the world of theatre and set construction in 1987, and this is clearly visible in the theatrical installations from the beginning of her career. After 'Night World' and 'Crawl out of your skin', she created the fairytale installation 'Li-Ming' for the Natuurmuseum in Leeuwarden in 2005, designed for children aged 4 and up. An exciting adventure in which children crawl through the mouth of a lovely dragon to search for her golden eggs. In 2011, she caused a sensation with the multimedia installation The Phoenix, which was exhibited in the Groninger Museum and the Rijksmuseum Twente, among other museums. A monumental, tempting version of the Phoenix rising from its ashes, with a special history. The first concept (and with it three years of work!) was lost in a fire in her studio. The bird destroyed by the fire, however, was given an important role in her second design: from the dead, lying firebird a standing, more colorful specimen rose again as a victory of life. In a hypnotic sequence of lighting, glowing and radiating, supported by a continuous stream of all kinds of mysterious sounds and scents, you as a visitor were enveloped by the mystery of the resurrection.

In her subsequent, even more ambitious work Penelope and Odysseus (2016), she also pulled out her whole theatrical range. This multiple story about loss and desire also offers a total experience, in which her characteristic baroque idiom seems to dominate. Yet this equally beautifully depicted epic marks a turning point in her art and thinking. In and with the image of the tragic hero Odysseus, she discovers the story of the human body itself. Her dynamic hero, despite his powerful physique, makes a torn impression. This sculpture 'tells' about his boned core: hard, but also vulnerable; hollowed out, but full of life.

This sculpture forms the starting point for a radically different way of designing. Whereas she previously depicted archetypal stories, she now goes in search of archetypal images.

Monumental sculptures in which she tries to condense the riddle of existence, of life and death. For Odysseus she experimented with a kind of reinforced paper-maché, a process that she developed through trial and error. She now works with a material saturated with pigments, which remains malleable for a long time. The tactile element of 'letting it pass through your hands' is essential to her experienced way of creating. Technically it is challenging: after reinforcing steel (a welded skeleton), she envelops the starting pose with wood wool until the desired volume is reached. This basic shape is then covered with plastic, after which she models the sculpture with her own made 'primal mass'.

Only when the sculpture has completely hardened (a process that takes months) she can hollow out the inside, after which the sculpture can stand 'on its own two feet'. She herself says about this: "The theme of The Firebird was transience. This resonates further in the sculptures. The empty space in the sculptures is an imprint of the body that I have removed from it and thus raises questions about the inner landscape and transience."

Her first sculpture after Odysseus was Geb, a figure from Egyptian mythology who, together with his wife, the goddess Nut, embodies the story of creation. She represents the vault of heaven and in old images forms an arch with her body that protects the earth, in the form of her husband Geb. In this story, the earth is not feminine, as in countless other cultures, but masculine. By making Geb, Othilia essentially identifies herself with Nut, the protector of creation. A similar tension between the feminine and the masculine can also be felt in the sculptures that were created afterwards. In her own words: "Each sculpture has its own universe and gave me a huge adventure. I wanted to explore physicality that is simultaneously male, female and animal in an abstract way".

Her visual research into the core of what makes us human has found its reflection in four new, human-sized sculptures. In the Black Dancer she sought a balance between grace and robustness, but also the expressiveness of the color black. The Blue Juvenile is inspired by the element

of water, but also depicts the fluidity and transience of life itself. The interior of this

sculpture can be read as a cave system: The archetypal - and therefore universal - quality of these images lies mainly in the contrasts they embody. Hard versus soft; abstracted, yet realistic; open, yet closed. Literally multi-faceted and complex in their structure. They are the personification of the power and the vulnerability of our existence. Othilia Verdurmen no longer envelops us with sensual, exuberantly designed stories. Her recent images invite us to penetrate the essence of things ourselves.

