

sculpture

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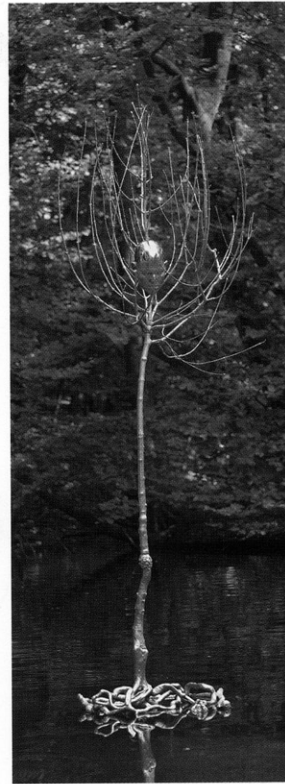
ARNHEM, THE NETHERLANDS Sonsbeek 2008

Sonsbeek, an international exhibition of sculpture, was established in 1949 and went contemporary in 1971. Its 10th edition, "Grandeur," which was installed in gracious Sonsbeek Park near the center of Arnhem, offered visual delight from beginning to end. When the art faltered—as it did in some instances, for the title was meant to be aspirational, not aggressive—the always irresistible park came to the rescue, with its rambling paths, shaded nooks, mysterious clearings, sparkling lakes, ponds, and its truly grand, soaring trees. Art historian and critic Anna Tilroe served as artistic director and curator, inviting 28 artists from 14 countries to bring

26 works to this small city located just an hour outside of Amsterdam by train. In an effort to engage the community, Tilroe organized a procession of "Grandeur's" works, which were carried through the medieval inner city by members of the local guilds; reportedly some 30,000 spectators attended the festivities.

Using the alphabet as a thread to lead viewers through the maze of walkways—each work's location was labeled by a letter from A to Z—the show opened with a video by Dutch artist Marijke van Warmerdam that focused on the eye of an elephant as a metaphor for vision, memory, and civilization. Nearby was *Mystery of Fertility* (2008), by Swiss team Gerda Steiner & Jörg Lenzlinger. This playful, robin's-egg-blue shed embellished with artificial flowers was stuck through with branches, hoes, rakes, and other gardening tools, like needles in a pin cushion. It was also sprinkled with deep pink salt crystals that grew madly over the course of the exhibition and eventually overwhelmed the structure.

Several works depended on trees either as content or support structure. Belgian artist Michel François propped a horizontal linden tree, its roots neatly wrapped in burlap, on two dead tree trunks, contrasting the living with the dead. The tree was planted in Sonsbeek after the show. American Charlie Roberts had other uses for dead trees, converting them into a colorful installation of painted, crudely carved, primitive figures and forms at the bottom of a deep pit accessed by mud steps and flanked by wooden flags. The tableau's main feature was a large, goofy Aztec head that functioned as a hut sheltering sculptures of pop icons and an infant in an updated, fetishized nativity scene or wake. Argentinean Tomas Saraceno's gorgeous, clear plastic geodesic-like dome hung in the trees like a snagged balloon, an alien's habitat



COURTESY SONNABEND GALLERY, NY, AND GALERIE THADDAEUS ROPAC, PARIS/SALZBURG

with a sustainable garden growing inside. A bewitching, naked silver figure by Dutch theater artist Johan Simons, its body sectioned so that its head faced one direction and its torso the other, was seated on a branch, alternating genders with each revolution. One of the most resplendent works was French artist Jean-Michel Othoniel's immense Murano glass crown suspended like a chandelier in a light-shot clearing. Its rose, purple, and silver globes glittered in the sun, and a first glimpse of it through the trees was a moment of true enchantment for those of us with a lingering belief in fairytales. El Anatsui threw his equally magical tapestries—made from whisky bottle caps—over rhododendron bushes. Although a reference to the custom of drying laundry on shrubbery in Nigeria, they would have appeared to better advantage hanging from trees or spread out on the grass.

Other works took advantage of the water. Spaniard Fernando Sánchez Castillo placed four realistic bronze busts of dictators, including Stalin and Franco, into the lake where they continuously spat water at each other, the ruthless demoted to the childish and ineffectual. Belgian Johan Creten's installation of a cradle and raffia-patterned ceramic beehives emblazoned with gold masks referred to tribal rituals, the cradle of civilization, and the development of social structures. These elements were all raised on poles over the surface of a pond, their images reflected in the luminous green water. American sculptor Rona Pondick also used water to her advantage, creating a beautiful but subtly disturbing image. Her delicate silver tree seemed to float on the pond, its root system resting lightly on the surface of the water, curled like an umbilical cord. Hanging in the tree, cradled by its leafless branches, was the shining silver head of the artist. Quietly startling, it suggested an oracular chthonic spirit rising out of the dark water—mythic, mysterious, good, and evil.

Of course, many works used the grounds. A feminist message issued from Dutch artist Lara Schnitger's gigantic, peg-legged super princess dressed in a patchwork of patterns and fabrics. On her beauty-queen sash blazed this proclamation: "This princess saves herself! Long live the frogs." Japanese artist Yasue Maetake created a large, complex installation of elusive, open-ended images, its iconography consisting of bones, tadpoles, a kite, bird forms, and organic and inorganic matter, including mirrors in a sculptural/architectonic

Above: Rona Pondick, *Head in a Tree*, 2006–08. Stainless steel, 105 x 42 x 37 in.

structure that merged art and technology, nature and science, East and West. Ana Maria Travares placed round mirrors surrounded by circular stone bands at five junctions connecting the park's underground streams. The stone band, referring to water as a source of life, was inscribed with a repeating text cut from mirrored glass: "desire, deserve, delight" and "sparkling life; still waters." Dutch artist Rini Hurkmans contributed a yellow and white flag of compassion that hung from the flagpole near the main villa of the park and a carpet made of white shirts and blouses collected from their owners and sewn together. The flag was on sale as a multiple, with proceeds benefiting a relief organization. British artist Stephen Wilks installed a carousel of stuffed, life-sized donkeys in the park's gated deer enclosure, part of his ongoing "Trojan Donkey" project of performances, sculptures, drawings, and video works. Wilks transports his donkeys around the world to people who document their experiences with the sculpture/animals and insert their photographs into the stomach cavities.

American artist Brody Condon's project was harder to classify. He built a four-story tower hung with white gauze in the woods and then turned it over to a live action gaming subculture. Live Action Role Playing (LARP) is a current trend inspired by video games. At Sonsbeek, gamers came from all over the Netherlands and some neighboring countries. Designing an environment to correspond to a narrative that they created among themselves, they stayed in character for several days at a time in groups of 30 or so and avoided visitors. Dressed in a variety of costumes, from the medieval to the futuristic, they studied the works in the park to decide which ones to adopt for their rituals. In essence, they created an alternative social system, a parallel existence and imagined world in resistance to this one. As T.S. Eliot said, "Humankind cannot bear very much reality." In the end, "Grandeur" was thankfully less grand than it might have been and therefore easier to like, not a bad thing.

—Lilly Wei