

The religious element in the sculptures of Claus Ørntoft

By Dean Lars-Erich Stephansen

"Introverted Stranding I" 2002 - Dødemandsbukten, Søgne, Norway. For Søgne's 1000 year jubilee, the municipality invited Claus Ørntoft, four Norwegian and one German artist to "show new sculptures in an area, where nature is united with cultural and historical traditions." They wanted to demonstrate that an investment in culture is an investment in the development of society, commercial life and general well being and welfare. The local community did not want to let go of "Introverted Stranding", so they sold shares in the piece. With the support of Sogne Municipality and Vest-Agder County Municipality, they bought it, so that it still lies in the location that it was created for.

Photo: Claus Ørntoft

Dødemandsbukten

Høllen in Sogne municipality lies about 10 kilometres west of Kristiansand. From here, there is a fixed connection with Høllen boat routes to Skærgården's small settlements and other islands, should the need arise.

After a three quarter of an hour sail, you can get off at the outermost Skærgård island. You have to remember the connection back an hour or two later, if you don't want to be stranded on the island overnight.

No one lives on the island. But there is a small, well-trodden path over to the opposite side of the island, where there is a narrow sandy beach between the rocks. Dødemandsbukten.

And there it lies on the shore, the reason for the journey: "Introverted Stranding", one of Claus Ørntoft's sculptures. One sees a shape, half human, half sea creature. A person, perhaps, who has almost become an animal. Or where the unfathomable exertions that it has been through have emphasised the animal characteristics of the human being.

It appears, from its situation, as if there has been bad weather with a storm and powerful waves. It has battled against the sea and with the weather, the current has almost pulled it under; but at the very last moment it has managed to pull itself up onto the shore - and collapsed. From exhaustion. The water still laps at its feet. But it feels nothing. It senses nothing. It is spent, but alive. It is very dramatic.

Man is like a reed that the universe can crush, wrote Pascal. Thrown into the world from another place, Ørntoft seems to add. Washed up on a deserted island surrounded by the powers of chaos. The might of the sea. The hostile cliffs. You need to look after yourself.

Claus Ørntoft has a tremendous sense of the numinous - the overwhelming in the sea, the overwhelming in the mountain mass, in granite. The overwhelming in the Universe. The holy.

It is not for nothing that he reads Kierkegaard and always thinks about existential questions. "Art and religion have always belonged together. It is about cognition. Art is cognition," he says.

A journalist who came to interview him declared spontaneously as he entered Claus' studio. -It must be wonderful to be able to use all your time on your hobby.

-This is not a hobby. It is a preparation for death.

This is also why there is something exclusive about Claus Ørntoft. It suits him very well that one has to make an effort to see his sculptures in the right surroundings. Forty five minutes out and forty five minutes return with Høllen Boats. It is not easy to get out to see it. He only wants to be seen by people who really want to see him. You almost have to make yourself deserving in order to see it.

But it is worth the effort. In a world in which one utilises all the tools of technological wonder, mobile phones, the Internet, planes and extensively developed road networks, in order to eliminate time and distance, Claus Ørntoft demands that one steps out of all that flickering human enterprise and treads into the Skærgårds island space, which, just like the rooms of the church, exudes peace and tranquillity, and forces one to reflect. There are only the sounds of nature. The sea. The wind. The gulls.

And then this Introverted Stranding.

Given the fact that human beings can also be stranded within themselves. Lose their direction. Lose all contact with the world around them. If the waves are breaking around them, if they are busy drowning in a flood of people in the city, they don't sense it, they sense nothing, turned in upon themselves. Everything is chaos. Can one create life in chaos?

It is frankly amazing that there can be so much life in a stone. That it can appear to be so organic. But it is a stone. Red, Chinese granite. It is, to a marked degree, designed for the space that it inhabits. The shore between the fjord walls. Claus Ørntoft is always very concerned about how his sculptures function within the space they inhabit. "Cliff Animal", "Three Rovers", "Place Animal", "Tension field", all are good examples of this. But none to the same degree as "Introverted Stranding".

It has a twin, which has been exhibited at the Vendsyssel Art Museum, in Oslo and other places. The exciting thing is, that even though it is clearly designed with Dødemandsbukten in mind, the twin also has the same sculptural strength and functions well in the other spaces, but with a new narrative.

A stupid stone

"It is just a stupid stone!" said Claus Ørntoft, when I asked about his first granite sculpture, a cow head, carved in a stone that he had been given. I wanted to know whether it already had some of the form in it, whether he had, in a manner of speaking, seen the cow in the stone?

"There are dozens of artists who go around saying this kind of nonsense - that they just need to free the figure that they see inside. Stone has its monumentality, its volume, its mass. That is what granite has. That is why I choose it. But it has no conscience. It has no spirit. It tells me nothing. It is just a stupid stone."

It was a stupid question. I know how long he works with an idea, makes notes, makes sketches, before he makes a model in clay. After this he goes from the idea to the process and models the figures in their full sizes. A mould made out of plaster is sent to China, where the rough sculpting takes place. Back at home in Mygdal, Claus Ørntoft chips away the last centimetres all the way around and decides down to the finest detail, how it will look. He transforms the materials into

spirit. It is not the stone that shapes his consciousness, but rather his consciousness that shapes the stone.

This is why there is so much life in "Introverted Stranding". This is why there is so much movement in many of his sculptures, that one can become fearful of getting run over by a pack of wolves or torn apart by rovers. They are no longer just stone. Claus Ørntoft has added something.

The lion and the snake

Claus Ørntoft is deeply influenced by Christianity and constantly refers to Christian symbols. When he makes a lion, it is not just a lion, but a representation of the violent forces that are at play in the life of a human being.

The strength of a lion is good, when it uses its powers to protect the human world, but evil, when it directs its powers against human beings. This is in keeping with the fact that many princes have lions in their coats of arms.

Claus Ørntoft has expressed the ambiguity of the lion in his twin sculpture in front of the Valgmønheds Church in Odense, where Samson at the right, fights the lion, the deathly forces of the desert, which threaten mankind, whilst the lion at the left is killing the snake, which seduces and lures the humanity into ruin.

He is always aware of the ambiguous symbolism, that the motif of the lion contains in the Old and New Testaments, where "Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8), whilst Christ is "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. (Revelations 5:5).

If one can glimpse a similarity to the motif used in Martin A. Hansen's "Worm and Bull", it is not a coincidence. He has read it many times, and of course, he did offer to become an assistant to Sven Havsteen Mikkelsen. This was declined in an acknowledgement of his own lack of pedagogical skills. Instead, it became a lifelong friendship and an ongoing dialogue over the course of fifteen years.

The Ørntoft church

Claus Ørntoft owes a debt to the old Romanesque stone masters, and he gives tours of his own church, the Ørntoft church. This is obviously an old coal church from the 1100's built of ashlar. It is, despite changes through the centuries, basically Romanesque in character.

On entering, one immediately sees the old, broad baptismal font in its original location; because baptism is the entry to the congregation. Claus Ørntoft has made a plinth for it, much like the ones that one can see baptismal fonts placed on top of in Gotland. On the plinth, there is a carved relief: a fire, a dove and a mother with her child in her arms - faith, hope and love.

The baptismal font forms the western point of the church's axis, the altarpiece, the southern point. The pulpit is placed on the axis right in front of the chancel arch.

Pulpit and pulpit. It is not a pulpit in the traditional sense, where the priest is protected by the walls of the pulpit, but rather a podium, a beautiful granite block with the four symbols of the evangelists carved on each side and an iron rod with a console on top in the northwestern corner.

The priest should not hide behind a pulpit, but should stand freely and with all his being, preach

the Christian word in the middle of the congregation, says Claus Ørntoft. Just not directly on the ground, like some modern priests have started to do, making it difficult to see the priest, but a step up, as if on a box in Hyde Park Corner.

The alter is a portal, whose shape is decided by the Romanesque chancel, and it opens out towards the East, the holy corner, from where the morning sun sends its rays in through the Romanesque windows and reminds us of the resurrection of Christ. The two solid granite columns of the portal bear a tympanum on top. The column facing north represents the old Covenant, symbolised by the Star of David and a seven armed candelabra carved in relief, the column facing south, the new covenant represented by two fish. On the tympanum there is a Latin choir.

In front, there is an altar table, a cube in granite with three angels carved in relief on each side. It contains a reference to the Book of Revelation chapter 21, where the New Jerusalem is a cube, and there are twelve angels over the twelve entrances. Claus Ørntoft was very enthusiastic when I told him that the holiest in the Temple of Solomon was also a cube.

The altar has no back, says Claus Ørntoft. It is part of the Gothic, but was foreign to the Romanesque way of thinking. Our Lord does not use backdrops, he sees through everything. Thus the portals' east side is just as beautifully crafted as the west side. The tympanum has a triquetra in relief, known from the Celtic cross as a symbol of the Trinity.

Claus Ørntoft says that he would have preferred a more simple piece today, The axis, the strict form, the basic idea, was fine and should be retained. But instead of the angels on the altar table, he would make Romanesque arches, which reflect the triumphal arch. Three to each corner of the world, just like the entrances to the New Jerusalem. On every column there would only be one symbol, the seven armed candelabra for the Old Testament and the fish for the New Testament.

The symbols on the baptismal font for faith, hope and love, which he tried to reformulate, he now finds sentimental. Today, he would choose the classical symbols, the cross, the anchor and the heart.

The Ørntoft church is a fiction. The Academy created a prize commission, "Commission for a church" with Elsted church as the model. Claus Ørntoft won the prize with his project, which was never realised.

The beautiful, the good and the true

- This isn't a hobby, it is a preparation for death.

When one finds oneself there, one is moving on the border of the pathetic. Claus Ørntoft is very aware of this. He fears the pathetic, but wishes to express pathos, the passion with which one relates to existence, to life and death, to good and evil.

This is why he also dares to speak about the Classical ideal of the beautiful, the good and the true. But he cannot maintain the ideal today, but with Kierkegaard's ideas of the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious in an order of importance at the back of his mind, there are grounds for being sceptical about a purely aesthetic approach, not just to art, but to existence in general.

- Doubt is like a spinning top, as long as you whip it, it will spin! Claus Ørntoft quotes Kierkegaard from memory. And then you cannot do anything. You must dare to be fallible. You must dare to

have pathos, even if it exposes you.

Right now he is working on a troll, or "trickster" for Herslev near Fredericia. It is the tension between good and bad that he is playing with here. The trickster turns around and looks towards the east, the holy corner, and he represents the ambiguous in the world of human beings, the dangerous forces that are at play outside of the protecting church walls. It thereby stands in a "dialogue" with the church, which represents the holy and the perfect. Order instead of chaos.

Religion is one way to conquer the forces of chaos, science is another. We cannot do without either of them.

Dean Lars-Erich Stephansen, b.1950. Parish priest at Sct. Catharinæ Church in Hjørring from 1987. Dean of Hjørring Deanery from 1998.