

Liesbeth Marit



Unexpected encounters at the fence of our world

Liesbeth Marit exchanged painting for film and photography. She is in charge of the visual part of Kaboom Karavan and made one of the most special recent Flemish films: 'YURI and the frustration of our ponies' about a horse, a baker on a moped, and love.

Liesbeth Marit makes photographs and films with close attention, also for the minimal and the everyday. This is also how the viewer should approach them, in order to discover the story and connect with them. "That sounds very human."

Liesbeth Marit's films take their time to tell stories. They have a calm pace, generally with long takes, fixed camera positions and well-considered framing. Combined with the carefully created decors and lighting, they are reminiscent of 'tableaux vivants' which have slowly come into action. Her background seems to make sense: Marit started out with painting at the 'Hogeschool Sint-Lukas' (Sint-Lukas College) in Brussels. The single canvas and the still image soon seemed to be too limited to her. She exchanged painting for the experimental studio, in which the process of conceptualization was central. The result could vary from a sculpture, performance or object to an installation. This is where she started to use videos as part of the installations, such as 'You May Leave Your Trace Here' (2002) and 'Save Me' (2005). She says her work has organically evolved into film.

Marit: "The different visual arts I have studied in the past – objects, installations – come together now. I pay much attention to the right decors, with the right props and styling. My experience with installations helps me with this. Everything has to be right, it is a struggle with all the pieces of the

puzzle. That's why I love film: it is a complex process, but you do something different in every step you take. I'm not working on the same painting for a whole year. Thank God."

The short films you have made in recent years often have a mysterious atmosphere, and the traditional storyline is missing. Nonetheless, they portray a development or story. Are you in search of other ways to structure a story?

Marit: "I have a self-taught approach to film and narrative structures. I have always felt the need to tell a story. My sketchbooks are filled with texts – short fantasies, quotes, observations of situations, behaviors and attitudes of people, sporadically interrupted by drawings and photographs. I slowly absorb the text fragments visually. They join one another and start to move. They become my stories which are constructed with images, not with words. This 'imagination' process is not linear but associative, in the same way our thoughts often have a spontaneous and incomplete character. I think this open but essentially narrative structure is important."

So the associative story does not arise during the filming or editing process, but is fixed in the screenplay?

Marit: "'One Way of Going' tells the story of a woman that says farewell to the life she is living. This farewell is contained in a number of rituals which she and an older man carry out. All scenes have been written down and drawn beforehand, with the accompanying decors and color palettes. The atmosphere is important, but at the same time it is only the clay with which the scenes and the story are molded."

In 'YURI and the frustration of our ponies', there is a long scene, filmed with a fixed camera viewpoint: a pony walks aimlessly on a fenced tennis court, in the middle of a forest. This scene was also used as a music video for 'Kolik' by Kaboom Karavan.

Marit: "This is also a story in a certain sense. Night changes into morning. The surroundings slowly change color and receive a warm glow. After a while a dog walks past the fence, seeks contact with the pony, and disappears again. The association with us people and the unexpected encounters which come to rub themselves against the fence of our world is not hard to guess, is it?"

Do viewers have to try harder to understand the story?

Marit: "Film is a strange medium because people work long and hard on it, but we assume that people watch a film only once and that they have understood the film within the short time span of one or two hours. Music on the other hand is allowed to pass through our bodies several times before we form an idea about it."

A generally calm pace and long takes characterize many of your films. That is striking in a time of much fast cutting. What is the reason for that choice?

Marit: "I don't like fast cutting; I feel cut up by it as a viewer. In some of the brilliant and slow scenes of Béla Tarr, the viewer becomes stuck to the situation or the character. That creates an intimate relationship. There is no cut; it lasts and there is time. A strange struggle is fought: on the one hand you are trapped in that long take, on the other hand this enables the viewer to think freely about what is seen. You can weave your own feeling into the scene. If there is no time, you are silenced. There were two common reactions to the pony scene from 'YURI' which we just talked about. People either thought it was one of the strongest images of the film, or they wondered why it had to take

such an awful long time. People from the latter category didn't notice the change of light. When looking back on it, they regretted their impatience."

'YURI' is your first longer film and it has a more pronounced story. Was that a big step for you?

Marit: "Adding language was a big, but logical step to take. I tell my stories with images, body language, decor and sound. But the word is of course also one of the means in cinema. 'YURI' begins with a prologue, in which a black horse walks in circles through a dark arena while a voice gives a fairly apocalyptic description. I wrote that text according to eyewitness accounts of the Chernobyl disaster. Language can portray the details and impact of a disaster at a fast pace. It wasn't necessary to portray a ruined landscape; I thought the horse in the darkness provided the right association. I also wanted to challenge myself by working with a cinema cliché: a love story. I wanted to place it in the shadow of a big disaster. I took Chernobyl as an example, although the name is never explicitly mentioned in the film. The question that the film poses is: how does one struggle with these two great forces, love versus devastation?"

Sound seems to play an important part in your films. I suspect that all the sounds are created specifically for the films and have not been sought out afterwards. How important is the role of the sound tape?

Marit: "I have worked closely with Bram Bosteels (Kaboom Karavan) on four film projects by now. The most recent one – 'YURI' – was the most comprehensive project because of the duration of the film. But the preceding film 'One Way of Going' was an intensive project as well. The sounds lost their intimate character due to the large recording set. We re-recorded everything in foley (a technique for adding sound effects to a film afterwards, RM). It was an exciting process of compiling and composing. Sound can enhance the visuals, but can also work against them. Both forces are interesting and have their necessity. There is more room for sound in my films because there is no, or little dialogue. Music and sound are direct means, they enter the viewer subconsciously. The sounds that Bram can create have a nearly 'fossil' structure; they are 'real' sounds that arise from the rubbing, turning, banging and rolling of sound objects and acoustic instruments. I love that purity tremendously."

You take care of the visuals at Kaboom Karavan's performances. How do you decide on the relationship between sounds and images?

Marit: "Recently, Bram and I worked together on an audiovisual performance for the 'Mind The Gap Nights' during the Rotterdam Film Festival. My first instinct was to reuse fragments from my films, but those images are too narrative and demand too much attention. Kaboom Karavan's instruments already have a very pronounced visual presence. That's why I chose a more subtle approach. I opened with a video, 'AS IS', which I made during a residence in an art deco villa. There was a secret café in the basement, with an old gas lamp on a coffee table. The light from the setting sun streamed in through a window which was overgrown by ivy. By chance, the beautiful light shone precisely into the round glass of the gas lamp. The softly swaying leaves sometimes interrupted the light, so that the reflection was vibrating as if the lamp was lit by itself. If I would have been there a few minutes sooner or later, I would have missed this mysterious image. The video of the sunbeam dancing in the gas lamp in a messy basement, with a fixed frame, played for several minutes. I wanted to go against flashy VJ montages. For other visuals, I use my photographs as a starting point. I make them move by

projecting a second layer on top of them, for example with a projector with turning disks or an old light box with graphic and anatomical images.

I experience your films as belonging to the traditions of cinema and experimental film, more than video art - although in video art there is a broader tendency towards calm, and attention for the passage of time. To which tradition do you consider yourself to belong?

Marit: "I feel more related to film and I also work more like people do in cinema. I write the concept and screenplay, I draw the storyboard, I direct and work with my fantastic crew. My films come out better in a cinema context than in a museum hall. I don't like it when people randomly walk in and out of the hall. My films have a clear beginning, middle and ending. This is also possible in non-linear structures" (laughs).

You regularly present your photography in the form of diptychs and triptychs. This is in fact another montage of images – which in this case have come to a standstill. At first sight, the images appear to have little in common with one another. Can the meaning be found in the combination of the images?

Marit: "I started photographing during my search for locations. I seek suitable decors and situations for my films and take pictures on the spot. Preferably, I use those images to write with an aim. The pictures help me to slowly decide on the atmosphere. They have gradually become autonomous. The border area between photography and film is interesting; some describe my work as 'filmic photographs and photographic films'. I like to present the photographs in series because of the associations they generate. This should not be a constant association. In another context they could be taken apart again. They all stand on their own but sometimes they come a little closer to one another. Well, that sounds very human (laughs). I just published a book with recent photographic work under my own management. Photography stimulates my film projects, but it also brings me peace of mind. Sometimes I like to have something tangible in my hands."

What are your other activities at the moment?

Marit: "We planned a television broadcast of a complete Kaboom Karavan concert. I will accompany some of the songs musically or deliver the visuals. We are still discussing it. The concerts are a new stage for me, but unlike my expectations I find it great to play live for an audience. Film remains the highest priority. At the moment I'm writing – owing to the support of the 'Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds' (Flemish Audiovisual Fund) – the screenplay for my first full-length film, with the working title 'Descansos'. I made 'YURI' at a very fast pace: it took a year from the first letter on paper until the premiere, for a film of almost sixty minutes. That year was a roller coaster ride. Now I'd like to take more time and delve deeply into every facet, from writing the screenplay to post production. 'Descansos' will become an experimental fiction film in which language comes to the foreground even more. I don't like to say too much about it yet as I am still in the middle of the writing process and I'm studying all kinds of political, ethical and 'meta-communicative' phenomena. Aha!" (laughs).

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