

Eija Liisa Ahtila. Sculpture in the age of posthumanism

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The “human dramas” in Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s works are fantastic, surreal, meditative and dreamlike in equal measure. In her works the Finnish artist advocates overcoming a world view that puts human beings at the centre because she believes that the human world is only one among many parallel ones. For the past ten years, she has – according to her definition of post-humanism – given equal status to non-human life in her art, investigating how we can gain a better understanding of the world of the other. Under the title “Sculpture in the Age of Posthumanism”, the Duisburg Lehmbruck Museum presents her latest installations for the first time in Germany. The exhibition is also the first showing of her works with German as well as English subtitles.

“The Finnish film and video artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila is a masterful inventor of new narrative forms of the moving image. In view of the current ecological and social challenges, she is working on a new visual language to create possibilities of experience that go beyond our anthropocentric world view,” comments Dr. Söke Dinkla, director of the Lehmbruck Museum.

“The focus in my recent works has been on questioning the anthropocentrism of the moving image. In my works I have explored ways in which the language of cinema could be used to create a more balanced image of our planet and of our current reality in conditions of escalating global warming and mass extinction of non-human life,” explains Eija-Liisa Ahtila.

Highly topical and socially explosive phenomena like natural disasters, species extinction and pollution show clearly how necessary it is to reconsider our relationship with nature. Ahtila’s works provide impulses to re-think our self image and open ourselves to other kinds of perception. Ever since her big solo show at the London Tate Gallery and her participation in documenta 11 in Kassel in 2002 she has been one of the most renowned international media artists.

Ahtila has pioneered the development of a visual language that opens up new insights into the fragile balance of our world. This new kind of perception is also created by her non-linear mode of storytelling: the plot of her multimedia installations is enacted on several screens. Watching them forces us to shift between various points of view in order to see the world from different perspectives.

The Duisburg exhibition provides a representative insight into Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s work since the 1990s. It is an opportunity to follow her artistic development from early works like “Consolation Service” (1999) through key works like the video installation “The House” (2002) and the rarely shown house sculptures (2004) to her most recent work, “Potentiality for Love” (2018).

Thomas Krützberg, head of the Cultural Department of the City of Duisburg, is impressed by the topicality of the exhibition: “Eija-Liisa Ahtila is one of the outstanding contemporary innovators of sculpture. I’m delighted that we are able to present the unusual work of one of the most renowned Finnish contemporary artists in an extensive show in Duisburg.”

Ahtila’s early works revolve around fundamental human experiences like love, separation, violence, death, sexuality and exceptional mental states. The stories are both personal and universal, because

they could happen anywhere and to anyone. The “human drama”, as the artist calls it, is an inextricable part of our existence.

Realistic and fantastical elements turn into poetic stories that translate the documentary source material into fictional dramas. The human crises and psychotic perception disorders of Ahtila’s protagonists unlock alternative experiences of reality for us.

In Ahtila’s video installation, narrative and spatial concept are fused to produce sculptural media spaces. Especially in her latest installations the physical qualities of LED modules and projection screens are used as sculptural elements in space. The artist translates moving images into spatial structures that make the viewers aware of their own subjective point of view. Interactive elements in her most recent work demonstrate that Ahtila’s focus is on the spectators’ immediate personal experience.