

Bie Michels

"Scratches"

"She must by then have become terrified of her own pointlessness."

(Hugo Camps, *De Morgen*, 3 February 2009)

Our mind is like a city with magnificent parks, well-stocked libraries, restaurants and concert halls, but also with neighborhoods of ill repute, dirty alleyways, and dangerous pubs. Some artists have a preference for these places, and go out exploring in the darkest and most terrifying recesses of their minds.

Often their work deals with traumatic experiences, undergone in their youth, or so at least it is usually interpreted. They view art as a solution, in order to exorcise inner demons and evil whispering voices. Such an artist, for instance, is Arnulf Rainer, and his work is categorized as "art brut," psychotic or schizophrenic art, primal scream art, or yet other terms of that kind. However, things can also be less wild, while still dealing with the same subject matter. Those of a more retiring or timid disposition seek a less confrontational path, and find a solution in the use of alter egos, metaphors, projections, and other forms of disguise. The style is then also more introverted. There is much that necessarily remains hidden from the viewer. In order, for all that, to make things intelligible to some degree, the artist seeks a system, a more or less logical arrangement, a hierarchical or serial structure. That is also useful and indispensable for himself or herself in order to keep emotions and impulses under control and to placate self-censorship.

Bie Michels's recent work concerns her mother, who waged a fight against Alzheimer's in the last 15 years of her life: A fight which she never quite lost, since she died before the disease had completely overwhelmed her, but a fight which did become harder, year after year, witness the countless notes and reminders which she left behind. At first, they are still easy for an outsider to follow: They concern shopping, meetings, times when appointments should take place. At a later stage, they are also joined by sketches of what route she should take on the streets, and the notes eventually become increasingly confused and desperate, as can be seen from the many arrows which she scratched by way of emphasis under her words, as if to impress them on her fading memory. They are dramatic and painful documents, but also proof of great courage, tenacity, and self-discipline. Bie Michels shows us a whole series of these scraps of paper, which she has transferred in more or less chronological order to plaster tablets and coated with wax. She has applied in the transparent layer of wax graphics which obscure "naked" readability of the text, and so to some degree keep the viewer at a distance. The rhythmical lines can be viewed as a graphic commentary on the underlying text, although their uniformity allows little interpretation. They seem, first and foremost, to be a way of emphasizing the unity and continuity of the wax plates.

Closely related to this series is a computer montage of intermingling e-mails. What, exactly, they are about or from whom they come cannot be established, because the viewer gets to see only fleeting fragments of them, which conceal more than they reveal. A parallel with her mother's texts is suggested by the impression of disorientation and confusion which they create, resulting in the impossibility of still giving clear shape to one's own inner self. Or is the veil lifted if we read very intently and watch the clip several times?

Paul Ilegems