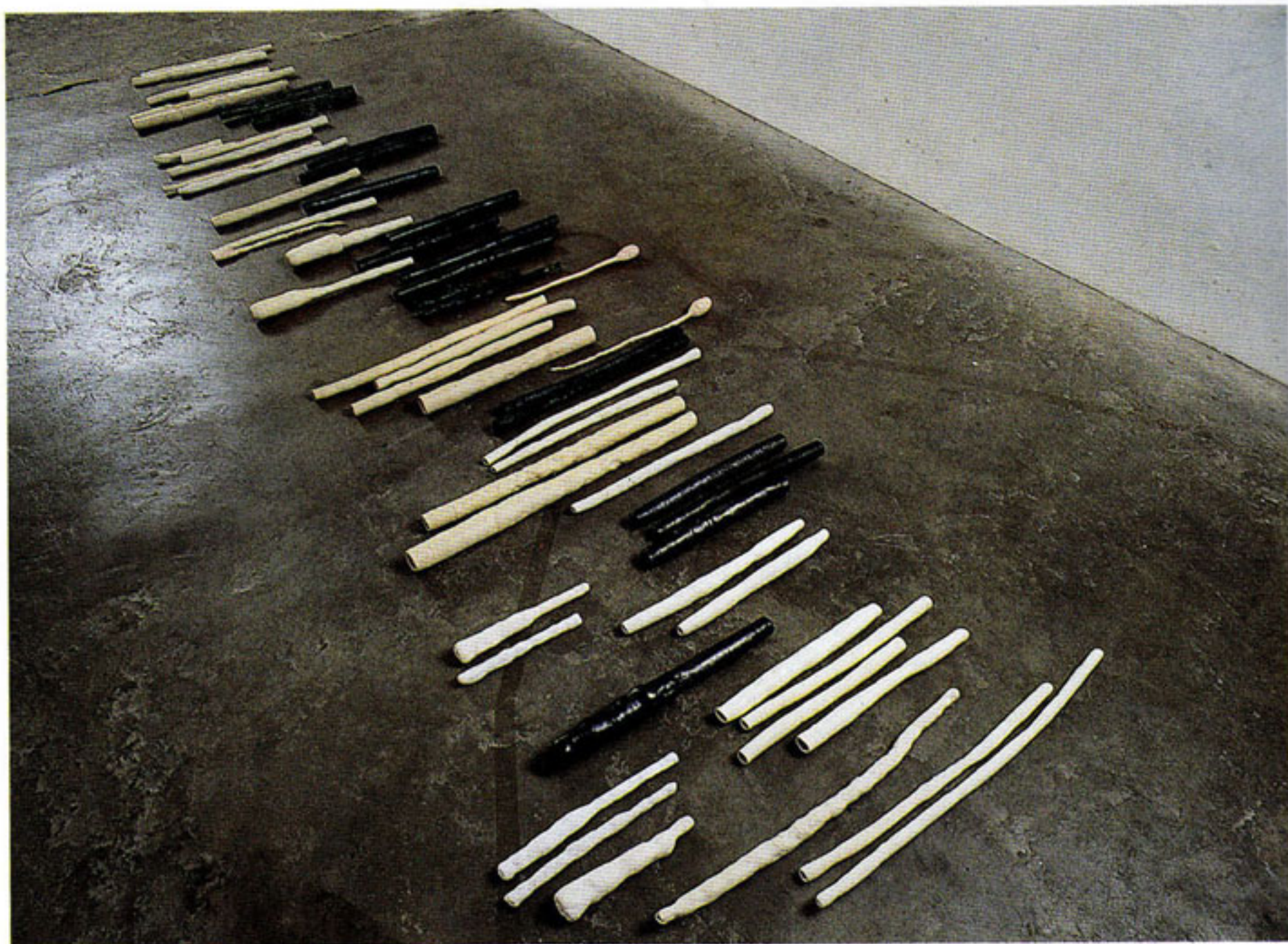


# Wilma Bosland at De Witte Voet Songs of the Wanderers

*Article by Siobhan Wall*



*Songs of the Wanderers. 2002.*

**Y**OU MIGHT WANT TO TREAD CAREFULLY WHEN YOU enter the Witte Voet Gallery in Amsterdam as Wilma Bosland's ceramic sculptures are lying on the floor. Walking around the work is like seeing part of an ancient forest where fallen branches lie scattered across one's path. Or it is as if these long ceramic objects might have come from a dismantled pipe organ. The title of the recent exhibition suggests a nomadic drifting where the sounds of wide open landscapes or Aeolian harps might still be heard, like the sound of the sea in a conch shell.

These pieces feel ancient, as if pulled from some entangled plant and then been precisely arranged like silent limbs in a mortuary. Bosland's work seems to have grown in this space, surrounded by the rough, damp encrusted walls. It is as if they have always

been here, waiting or sleeping and will never depart, never wake up. However, despite the fact that they seem to carry a sense of history, there is something entirely modern about her work. We might have wandered into an industrial workshop where elongated cylinders are about to be assembled into a machine. We step around what look like smoke-blackened exhaust pipes, but these are objects of beauty, charred by raku firing and as iridescent as the lead in pencils. What these delicate yet strong pieces invite is a kind of reverence for what lies unsaid in the everyday.

Wilma Bosland's work is full of contradictions. Every piece is hand thrown and unique but certain shapes are repeated, driven by the compulsion to explore a form that remains elusive. However much one tries to capture the essence of 'pipeness', it resists

definition, refuses to be confined. Every piece is a visual oxymoron, both soft/hard, figurative/abstract, solid/hollow, identical/different, heavy/delicate, accidental/deliberate, serious/humorous. This makes the work intriguing because it cannot be easily categorised or named. The pieces remind me of the lucid but serene work of the American sculptor Eva Hesse, whose latex objects hang from the wall and drape on to the floor.

In a similar way Wilma Bosland's pieces seem to have a life of their own, as if they emerged independent of human touch. Some retain more explicit traces of human intervention, as in the gaping thumb holes in the larger, coracle-like forms. However, there is something uncanny about the way they seem alive even though they are inert objects. As the writer Hal Foster suggests, the indeterminate, liminal space between life and death is compelling because we are left not knowing whether these things might resurrect themselves. At moments one suspects Bosland's pieces might begin to move of their own accord, like the filled leather pouches in bagpipes which follow the rhythm of the musicians' breath. They may or may not be alive, and such work is pleurably disturbing because it is quietly disrespectful of crucial boundaries. However, there is nothing sinister about her work. In fact, we seem to be 'held' and contained by what she has produced. The smaller, hollowed out shapes on shelves could be made of thick dairy cream and are as comforting as dens or caves to hide in. Her longer bag-shaped forms nestle together in symbiotic pairs, merging like nuzzling creatures or like young against a mother's breast. However, they are enigmatic containers which refuse to hold anything, (both literally and metaphorically). Milk or water would simply drain out of these objects, thereby resisting their potential destiny as domestic crockery. It seems they have a different function: to invite speculation about familiar objects and the never static relationships between things.

It is noticeable that many of Bosland's pieces seem to be concerned with the beginnings and endings of life. Most of her work is unglazed, pale biscuit-coloured clay, but a few errant works are subtly tinted and glossy. These include two long-tailed, shiny pink shapes, plump with life-like giant spermatozoa. They are the only things glistening in the room, as if they have just wriggled out of a placenta and are enjoying having been born.

Another group of sculptures seem to have emerged from watery-pink jellyfish but are solid, opaque forms with trailing, stiff white tentacles the colour of medicinal tablets. However, these are far removed from the mass production lines of factory perfection. Instead they celebrate exquisite imperfection; alerting us to what is tender and humane. One of the most touching pieces was a hanging ceramic, reminiscent



*Black Raku. 40 x 60 cm.*



*White stoneware, terra sigillata. 25 x 15 x 45 cm.*



*White stoneware. 40 cm/h.*

of a gently protruding cervix with two drooping tubes, carefully suspended on the wall but just longing to be held, like a young girl's pigtails waiting to be played with and fondled. In fact, Bosland's work invites touch and a desire to nurture that cannot be reciprocated, so her pieces remain tantalising to viewers in the way they offer but cannot provide comfort due to the fact that they are hard, unyielding objects. Because they bear traces of the unconfined pleasure in making, they seem remarkably non-contrived. It is as if freedom has been solidified in these innocent lumps. Such immediacy is difficult to produce and rarely found in contemporary sculpture but these pieces have the unexpectedness of growths of fungi on damp logs, whilst also being sophisticated utterances in clay.



*Hanging Object. White stoneware. 40 cm/h.*

Most of Wilma Bosland's work is joyful and celebratory except for one dark wall piece which seems incredibly sad. It looks like the remnants of a deformed, crucified and abandoned body, but its shapelessness is closer to truths about hurt and loss than most pristine Christian depictions. I think this is what connects us to her work; the way each piece is a reminder of what we think we know intimately. She makes it safe enough for us to risk imagining what lies beyond the familiar. She helps us to see everyday things anew, from fingers to breasts, or bones and wet,



*Suspended Object. White stoneware. 40 cm/h.*

tangled hair. She enables us to see the seductive potential of parts of our bodies without judgement, as both everything and nothing seems sexualised. That is what is exciting about the dense combination of contradictory elements in these soft/hard, erotic/prosaic sculptures: they help remove our critical, rejecting capacity to categorise (and therefore dismiss), and instead make an inclusive, inviting sensibility possible. I am not quite sure how she achieves this, but the way her work simultaneously refers to both a past and a future, to make everyday objects seem quite unlike themselves, is remarkable. She makes us accept the cumbersome ineptitude as well as the gracefulness of our own bodies. So, despite finding rows of ceramic tubing on the floor, perhaps we don't have to tread so carefully around her work after all. Each piece invites a holding, a looking, and a playfulness that has been embedded in their making.

Siobhan Wall is a writer and artist living in Amsterdam. Photographs by Claude Crommelin.