

Emma Willemse

'Sailing the void'

Suspended installation, found boat, Eucalyptus bark, mutton cloth
6m x 2m x 1,5m

Artist statement

The suspended installation 'Sailing the void' is a continuation of my investigation of the motif of the boat and the meanings it generates in the context of displacement. I am interested in how the boat, as a means of displacement, can be a metaphor for the traumatic experience of loss.

My fascination with boats and their connotations were sparked off by a visit to one of the many funerary boats of Egypt, the Khufu sun boat discovered buried near the Giza pyramid complex. In various ancient cultures boats have been associated with the journey from life to the afterlife – the process of death and dying, such as in the classical Greek myth of the River Styx. Currently, the worldwide refugee crisis is associated with overloaded boats packed with desperate people fleeing their homelands and often not reaching their destinations, to such an extent that the Mediterranean Sea is considered to be the largest mass grave in modern history.

Travelling over water, which is a symbol of the unconscious, a boat has connotations of a safe container transporting the psyche over the treacherous waters of the unknown. However, the boats that I am using in my art practice are all rendered impotent through their brokenness. This is also apparent in 'Sailing the void', a partially constructed fishing boat that never saw water.

The boat in 'Sailing the void' was found in a second hand shop in Swellendam after having received a tip-off from a friend. It came with a story and with technical drawings, stating that the plans were originally drafted in 1938 and then re-drawn in 1948. According to the owner of the second hand shop, the boat builder died after years of constructing the vessel, leaving it unfinished. The family of the deceased then left the boat at the second hand shop where it was up for sale for years.

Although the history of the boat conjure up layers of meaning about unfulfillment and the loss of dreams, there are several clues in its visual transformation and presentation which allude to an "afterlife" for the vessel. For instance, it poses the possibility of a world where air takes the place of water.

Epilogue

'Void sailing' is a term used in shipping in which a sailing is cancelled by the carrier. Also called blank sailing, it could mean that a vessel is skipping one port or that the entire string of destinations is cancelled.

<https://www.flexport.com/glossary/blank-sailing>