

A Season in Hell

By Lolita M’Gouni

«’Tis the feast of corn.’Tis the feast of bread
On the dear scene returned to, witnessed again!
So white is the light o’er the reapers shed
Their shadows fall pink on the level grain. »

Paul Verlaine, *Wisdom*¹

Bread can be white, wholemeal or granary, braided, stuffed or flavoured with olives, there’s also rice bread, pancakes, loaves with a thick doughy texture, sliced bread, bread made with the finest wheat, party surprise loaves, bread pudding, large round loaves, twisted short «bâtards» or crusty «ficelles»; indeed bread means much more than having toast for breakfast. Ancestral food rites are based on bread, this staple food; bread lies prominently on the table, this solemn patriarch presides the meal with its symbolic power. You will find bread on any table, at any season, in richly-concocted Rabelaisian menus offering a thousand and one special festive rolls but you will also find it in the stern and dark seclusion of the dungeon where Jean Valjean² endures his penance of dry bread and water. Feeding on the polyvalence of this food item, Pétra Werlé has been using bread as her favourite material for more than thirty years: she kneads it, moistens it, shapes it into fascinating small sculptures that our eyes only may touch. Her bread creations are displayed under cloches or in show cases and her serial and proliferating microcosm calls to mind a never-ending music score.

Pétra Werlé will present her latest series of sculptures at Béatrice Soulié gallery: the *Arthur Rimbaud* series, which began in 2012, has been inspired by the poems of this author. To produce her minute works, the artist first had to read and scrutinize some poems. The forty sculptures interpret some carefully chosen textual fragments in a deeply moving tribute to one of the greatest French literary figures. Each sculpture echoes a text by Rimbaud, and we discover that the protagonists are staged under a cloche, they are shown in a scenery of «bready» vegetations, the flowers have been sculpted with patience, the stems have been made with hard bread and the buds with soft dough. One can admire the tiny details of the delicately sculpted plants and the characteristic floury faces of Pétra Werlé’s characters. Let us note «The Sleeper in the Valley» conveying the horror of the original poem; or behold « The Runaways/Les Effarés », complete with its small round loaf of bread that really creates a miniature «mise en abyme».

Pétra Werlé’s seasons follow each other delicately, she has kept a fruitful imaginary universe, an unclassifiable, ageless and undated territory. Her numerous works are the result of her devotion for a food item that has been turned into a creative material; they shape up a new creed, we become its disciples, Verlaine and Rimbaud might have called it «wisdom».

Lolita M’Gouni sculpts and draws. She is also known as “LMG Neuroartist”. An agrégé graduate in fine arts, she is writing her doctoral thesis at ParisI-Panthéon-Sorbonne University. In 2009 she met Petra Werlé, with whom she put up an exhibition at Dupuytren museum the next year and for whom she regularly writes texts and press releases.

¹ Paul Verlaine, *Wisdom*, X, 1881

² Jean Valjean gets sentenced to forced labour after stealing a loaf of bread, Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1862