

In Rome in the church of St. Peter, stands a sculpted *Pieta* by Michelangelo: it is a statue of a slight, seated woman across whom lies a limp, fully grown man. She can barely hold him, he is too heavy, too large. Too dead. In art the *Pieta* is originally the Christian symbol for pity and compassion. It concerns you: the observer who feels compassion for the one who is left behind, the one who lives on. The representation refers to the moment when Mary is left holding her dead son. He lies lifeless across the lap that gave him life. The image is for all mothers, all parents for whom the natural course of events has been reversed and the subsequent becomes the preceding generation.

This is something that is, for me, remarkable, for its significance extends far further than mothers with children. It touches each of us who loves, for we know that every person one day dies, including those we cherishes. Against this fact love itself has no defenses.

For me the *Pieta* of Erzsebet Baerveldt makes a special impression. It is the video *Pieta* of 1992 where a woman attempts to stand a life-sized clay human figure of clay onto its feet. To awake dead matter to life, says Baerveldt himself, an alternative Frankenstein story. The clay is wet and unfired the cumbersome body is therefore unmanageably heavy. The film shows a battle with gravity that the woman will inevitably lose.



*No, Not Alone, 2006*

For parents the idea that their child can die is unthinkable, a taboo that nevertheless often haunts their thinking. It is the ultimate, the pinnacle, of loss. I myself have no children but if I attempt to imagine how this must feel the idea alone cuts off my breath. I cannot.

Loss itself cannot be represented, it needs a context. Grief always concerns something or someone. How can one represent this? Through something that, literally, cannot be borne. You make the mother smaller, more frail, and the son larger, heavier, and therefore more dead. How heavily so dead a body weighs is something that one can at once feel in one's own muscles, in one's own being, whether one has children or not. One's own body allows one, for a brief moment, to experience the bitter rasp of such a loss.

It is important to find a form for this, through art, since it evokes, briefly, the experience of something through which one hopes never to have to live. This makes one more conscious of the vulnerability of loved ones around one and one learns to participate in the grief of others. Does that in any way make the grief of others less heavy? Probably not. But it makes the life of others more precious. A loss deserves its own sustainable image.

Caren van Herwaarden, 2006