

Christine Gruwez

Athens, Antwerp, August 2009

Christine Gruwez studied philosophy and Iranian studies. Her work focuses on dialogues between religions and cultures. She has published on Christianity, Islam and manicheism.

Sand is hushed earth. Earth, purified and refined. Refined by wind, sun, and rain. Refined by sweat and by the tears of those whose feet have trodden on it. And refined by every hand that has turned it over, grasped it and returned it to itself. Sand is also liberated earth. In sand, the earth is released from its lassitude. At last.

Sand is the earth's memory. In layer after layer it preserves the traces of ephemeral human existence. It is the sand that remains and offers enduring little signs, like a panoply of stories: countless fragments, occasionally a jewel or a sun-baked tablet bearing an inscription, or the dust-decayed remains of an addition to some grave that has long since vanished. Only an imprint remains.

How fragile is human existence! How enduring is sand! Also: how selfless it is. It absorbs everything, down to the minutest impression. For everything – without exception – a place is found, within its multiple layers. Sand stores and preserves while transforming itself at the slowest imaginable pace. And it becomes colour, in crystal landscapes.

Sand can assume any shape while remaining itself. Sand is pure potential. In the words of Aristotle, matter is nothing more than the infinite potential for acquiring form.

With sand that has come to her from all parts of the world, Elvira Wersche makes this boundless receptivity visible. Long before she stoops over a designated surface to map out the initial contours of a vibrant geometrical pattern, others have stooped to collect sand for her.

Their names are called as in a never-ending litany, and as a hymn to the earth, they reply:

Finely-ground desert sand from Mongolia, the Sahara or the Thar Desert.

Heavy earth from England, Poland or Kazakhstan.

Volcanic earth from Iceland, Pompeii and from Sicily's Mount Etna.

Red sand from the ruins of Jordan's holy city of Petra.

Sand from the Machu Picchu Inca temple in Peru.

Sand from a Zoroastrian fire temple in Iran.

Sand from Srebrenica, Vietnam and Korea.

Sand from Uganda, from Israel.

Sand from Ground Zero in New York.

The instruments used by Elvira Wersche possess the same simplicity and clarity as sand: a piece of chalk attached to a length of string, a small tea-strainer, a little piece of cardboard to designate boundaries. With these rudimentary means she creates a marvellous whole, in which each shape responds to each other shape – just as in music, every sound mingles to produce and to express a whole. Every proportion bears the mark of the most perfect of all proportions: the ‘golden section’.

In an act that retraces the elementary principles of creation, the sand, silent and at rest, is stirred into motion and made to sound. It is lifted up and renewed in its own nature. The sand has had to travel a long way – quite literally – until it could express itself in a new composition in this place, in patterns of near-magical colour and form. What follows is an act of consecration to the sand.

Then comes the moment at which it must move on. And so Elvira Wersche proceeds, in a vigorous, dazzling ritual, to erase the patterns again, and to reduce colour and form to a single mixture. After which small portions are dispensed to the visitors, who take it away with them to their destination, wherever this may be.

The journey continues.

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