

Blow!8 catalogue text on Arsem's work
By Shannon Cochrane
2012

Lee Wen says that Marilyn Arsem's work is about weather because more than once he has seen her perform in all kinds of violent weather - wind storms and sometimes rain - great giant theatres of Mother Nature's prowess, seemingly triggered by her very presence. I think Marilyn's performances are about her hair. When she performs, she takes it down and it surrounds her body, lending her an air of vulnerability. This gesture feels very private. When weather and her hair meet, her waist-length mane swirls around her body in the wind, and she appears very powerful.

Marilyn always says that she doesn't know what her performance is going to be before she arrives to a festival. I'm not sure I believe her. There are forces working in Marilyn that she knows about, but seldom reveals. And despite her insistence that she doesn't know what to do, she always makes the right thing. Not the perfect thing, it's not about perfect, but the right thing. Marilyn says it's going to be too hard to make work, now that Bob has died. I believe her. Everything now is what comes after, and it's hard to know where to start, especially if you never knew what you were going to do in the first place.

In her artist talk, Marilyn tells us about two performances she made many years ago, both containing the colour red as a key element, and both designed to be purposely un-documentable. The first, *Red in Woods*, was created for an audience of one. Each single audience member was driven to the edge of a wooded area and left there, alone. They were told to follow a path of red thread that snaked through the woods. On this trail they encountered various scenes and tableaux invoking the fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood: a table with steaming hot tea and a warm meal; a young girl wearing a black cape, red hat and gloves, sitting alone on a log, peering out from behind the low branches of a tree; a bed covered with a red blanket seen in the distance in the middle of a wide expanse of field. Following the path through the woods as dusk fell the lone traveler at times felt both like Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf. Eventually they emerged from the woods unscathed, but never sure if they had been watched. Much later, the audience that experienced the work met to talk about their experiences. These stories and a few images taken by Bob comprise the "documentation", the only evidence that the work existed at all.

The other work Marilyn tells us about is titled *The Red Chair*. Each day before sunrise, Marilyn would take a red chair out into the landscape and sit in it, watching the sunrise. She would photograph it and leave it there for the day. The next morning, she moved the chair to a new location. Three sentences were inscribed on the chair, in Macedonian. They read: Please be seated. Here is this moment. The only time is now. Marilyn tells us that taking the photo each day was a conflict between staying in the present moment or thinking of and anticipating the future audience. What happens when you make a performance that no one sees?

It's not clear to me after the artist talk why Marilyn chose to talk about these performances in particular, until she begins her performance on the last night of the festival. She is going to make another performance about the colour red, she is going to make something that is meant to be watched from a carefully chosen location and from a particular view, and the documentation – the proof the work existed at all, is not going to be visible until much later, next spring in fact, revealed as a straight line of red poppies, stretching into the horizon.

I was with Marilyn in the days before her performance when she didn't know what to do, and then later when she knew and was searching for a vast quantity of poppy seeds. I knew what she was going to do before she started, and I felt prepared. Wearing a long red dress, with her waist length hair unfurled, and carrying a red side satchel holding thousands and thousands of poppy seeds (both a symbol for a place of burial, and as opium a powerful drug for pain), she planned to walk backwards away from the audience for 2 hours until very simply, she disappeared.

When she started her action outside, she greeted the audience, touching each person in turn, saying hello, holding a hand, and sometimes smiling. She faced us and told us to watch the performance from this exact spot. Then she said, "I have to leave now. I'm sorry, you have to stay here." With that, she began to slowly walk backwards, away from us, step by step, dropping the seeds one by one from her upturned palm into the single line in the grass as she went.

After a short time people started to chat with each other, occasionally looking back to see Marilyn's progress. The start of another performance was announced and the crowd slowly dispersed. Not to worry, you can always come back later. I waited for a few minutes because I had a strong desire to be here alone with Marilyn. She was moving very slowly, but suddenly I had the feeling that it was happening too fast. I slowly showed her the palm of my hand in a gesture to say, "I still see you", or, "Goodbye". She returned the gesture. Later when I came back to the spot, Marilyn was farther away. I could still see her red dress against the green grass and the blue sky, but I could no longer make out the details of her face. The third time her figure was so small, the outline blurry. I had a white shawl with me and I swirled it around my body, imaging that Marilyn might be able to see it and know that I was still here. Then without warning, she disappeared. No thunder, no lightening. I blinked a few times. She was really gone. In that moment, I understand deeply this was a picture of what it feels like to lose great love. It's there. And then suddenly, it's gone.

When Marilyn returned to the venue a little while time later, she was wearing a black dress, her hair up. The usual Marilyn costume, but she appeared as a ghost to me. She told me she could see my white shawl from even very far way. This made me feel good in a way, knowing that the picture of loss can be seen from both shores.

On the last day of the festival, the artists were asked to make works for various locations in a local hotel. The artists scatter and take up positions in the pool, the bowling alley, a conference room, the lobby. I chose the small fitness room. In it there is a treadmill. I

turned it to face the wall, my back facing the audience as they entered the room. On the wall at my eye level I wrote the word '*home*'. For two hours, I walked on the treadmill, carrying two red buckets, one filled with water, the other filled with rosemary (for remembrance). I walked forward in a straight line, step by step in perfect rhythm, steadfastly towards home.