

Ria Verhaeghe 'Mama' _2024

In her new exhibition, *'Mama'*, Ria Verhaeghe (°Roeselare, 1950) pays tribute to her Hungarian mother Juliska,

who arrived in Bruges as a six-year-old child exactly one hundred years ago.

In the large Persoone family, she found a warm new home. Juliska's move was the result of three previous 'recovery' holiday trips to Belgium organised by the Roman Catholic relief organisation Caritas Catholica,

and took place in the context of early twentieth-century specific adoption programmes called 'children's trains'.

Juliska was one of some 40,000 Hungarian citizens who came to the West in this way.

The care initiative arose in response to the deplorable conditions in which children of needy families in the former Eastern Bloc grew up during the interwar period.

'Mama' starts with an enlarged portrait (a coloured photograph) of Juliska shortly after her arrival in Belgium.

At the end of the room, 90-year-old narrator Aunt Philomène (Mèntje), Juliska's ten year older foster sister but also a mother to her, will bid us farewell. 'My mother had many mothers,' Ria Verhaeghe says.

The exhibition includes display tables showing historical and documentary materials about Juliska's life.

Artist/daughter Ria Verhaeghe responds with newly created work, including some from the Provisorica WWEB, ICARUS and MOVE. The artist's mother, who excelled in needlework, was praised at the time for her 'golden hands'. In the work 'Patterns', Ria Verhaeghe incorporates some of her mother's original sewing patterns.

For the Hendrik Pickery Hall in the City Halls, Ria Verhaeghe designed a scenography in Prussian blue

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the colour of water.

In the artist's eyes, her mother is a river, embodying at once the Danube and the Canals of Bruges.

In 'Mixed Water', she shows, through a play of dissolving colours, how quickly the mixing of the two waters takes place.

Dilution, symbolic of the corruption of bloodlines, is a natural and positive process, but is inevitably accompanied by pain. 'People don't realise enough how much that can hurt,' Ria Verhaeghe says.

With her textile sculpture 'Shelter', Ria Verhaeghe creates a protective coat quilted with memories.

The metres-long gold leaf-covered wave 'Golden Prayer (Pray for Vertical)' is possibly a portrait of Juliska

as a river — an example of force/resilience, continuity and connection.

In her tribute to Mama, Ria Verhaeghe asks essential questions about processes of identity, migration and adoption.

She discreetly probes our readiness as a community for hospitality and solidarity, and our way of dealing with multiculturalism. She holds up a mirror to us insofar as we too are without the slightest doubt diluted from changing, to a greater or lesser extent unknown, historical bloodlines.

These natural and cultural traces live on in us without us always being aware of them.

Does this insight prompt us to be grateful for the coincidence of history, which today brings us unscathed

to the Bruges City Halls and to the experience of art?

'Mama' is a warm plea for living together with gratitude, joy, care, mercy and solidarity.

Barbara De Coninck