

Elsbeth

Mountains in a box

I have a tiny wooden cigar box in my study. It once held small 'Elephant' cigarillos, but they went up in smoke long ago. They made way for the Massif Central, cast in glass, neatly cut to the size of the box and with a dark blue background that shimmers faintly through the sparkling glass. The mountains, diminished and chilled in reality and in the meantime abandoned to the gradual wearing down of geological erosion, lie there in miniature, tamed and held fast between cedar wood slats. This is typical of Elsbeth. She observes the Earth, kneads the clay, melting and baking and pouring it into moulds to reduce geology to manageable proportions. She's like Vulcan, the Greek god of fire, in his forge: when finally the smoking and bubbling craters of the Auvergne were calm and cooled, he laid the full-size mountains between pine forests and vineyards while Elsbeth's miniatures are tamed and held fast in a small cigar box.

The basis for the work is a relief map produced by the French IGN, the *Institut National de l'Information Géographique et Forestière*, known to hikers and cyclists for their the blue ordnance survey maps which are sold in many a bookshop in France. The IGN also makes relief maps of some areas and departments: three-dimensional plastic maps showing mountains and valleys in the form of a miniature landscape. Personally, I love gently drawing my finger (our most sensitive visual sense) over these maps to get a feel for the landscape relief. You can follow the rivers, slide up the mountain ridges and walk back down on the other side. They are actually works of art: not because they are created by an artist, but because you can lose yourself in them. And I know people who have had such relief maps framed and hung on their walls (then they really almost become art). The mountains of the Auvergne served as a mould for the IGN's relief map, and the plastic map of Auvergne in turn served as a mould for one of Elsbeth's glass sculptures, reproduced many times for a French car company. Left-over pieces of glass mountainous landscape turned out to be beautiful in themselves, and one of them ended up in that wooden box.

Who is this woman who tames volcanoes? Elsbeth Pluimers has her studio in a part of Amsterdam, a stone's throw from Schiphol Airport and impossible to find without proper directions. Pleasantly Bohemian, old brick defence buildings compete with the weeds for a place in the sun, while magpies chatter

in the trees. This is where Elsbeth produces her art, from clay, glass, metal, stone and anything else she can find. She draws on her knowledge of biology and geology, of fossils and Asian traditions, ancient Greek art and her own experiences in Tuscany, and mixes and rotates and forms and pours. She melts and kneads and bakes in the way the ancient gods baked the Earth, once a chunk of the sun, which cooled and became stone. It weathered to form clay, from which man was able to make stone again with fire. In Elsbeth's mind, this is a form of eternal recycling: stone is born from fire again. And that's how she works. An admirer once wrote: Elsbeth Pluimers wants to understand the Earth and penetrate all its facets and layers. I would add: and tame it. Because the tamed Earth is an Earth we can live in and where man can add a layer of culture. It is imperative to be a keen observer and make use of the riches the earth offers, and not – as Elsbeth once told me – to be like Vincent van Gogh who lived right opposite a Roman arena and did nothing with it. To me, the essence of Elsbeth's work is to make the most of the Earth and everything in and on it, and to set to work with all that. Understand, translate and tame it, until it fits in a cigar box.

Jelle Reumer