

Pacific (Le Voyage à Nantes)

Jenna Darde

Maen Florin - Place Royale

Built in 1865, the fountain in Place Royale was erected to symbolise the city's economic prosperity. The cherubs perched on dolphins and spitting water through seashells symbolise the eight geniuses of industry and commerce, and are a reminder of the major role played by the port of Nantes in the city's economy.

Dominated by its statue of Amphitrite, goddess of the sea, the fountain in Place Royale is an emblematic monument of the City of Nantes that brings people together.

Maen Florin was invited to create an original installation for the fountain in Place Royale, in response to its maritime symbolism.

What monument would we erect today to symbolise the role and importance of the sea? Nowadays, the sea is no longer the symbol of travel and prosperity of the 19th and 20th centuries; travel evokes voluntary or forced migration, pollution, and the creation of major ecological and social changes.

Between vision and experience, Maen Florin attempts to project onto the fountain a new image of a world in transformation.

Twenty or so ceramic sculptures, each one to two metres across, take refuge in the fountain's pools, alongside his allegorical bronze figures.

These singular characters colonise this new place, escaping the transformations and threats of the world and seeking protection from this monument symbolising power and prosperity.

New icons, these phantasmagorical creatures symbolise the mutations engendered by Man, leading to radical transformations of the environment.

Their anthropomorphic appearance, with human, animal and plant features, gives them a strange quality. These metamorphosed bodies appear transfigured in their setting.

There are half octopus, half human, half seaweed, half mermaid, shell animals, a bubble on legs carrying a face, shells mixed with jellyfish, birds or coral, tentacles mixed with seaweed. The shapes are both expressive and sober, the brightly coloured glazes reminiscent of the colours of the deep sea, and stand out very strongly in the urban environment.

Unlike the sculptures the artist has produced in recent years, which have focused exclusively on male faces, the forms of these sculptures are feminine and protective, symbolising the nourishing, enveloping and maternal force of the sea.

These figures liquefy, seeming to want to melt into plant and animal elements. As always in Maen Florin's figures, we can detect in them a form of fragility and suffering in the face of the world, but the strength of the material, the sculptural gesture and the generous colours that characterise the artist's work also make them beautiful, powerful characters, and bearers of a benevolent vision of the world.

Maen Florin was born in 1954. She lives and works in Schelderode near Ghent in Belgium.

Jenna Darde, 2023