

All in the mind

I found myself gazing at images of ruins and destruction at an exhibition in Munich called 'Last and Lost'. Although beautifully photographed, you really need to be in the right mood for a combination of destruction and aesthetics like this. A deserted factory floor, from where the last labourer had just left to collect his unemployment benefit, makes a despondent impression, particularly when it's been photographed in colour. And what makes it worse is that the messages scrawled on the floor, documenting the social phenomenon of separation and demise, have a somewhat romantic ring to them.

And I saw something poignant that afternoon that had stayed with me ever since. A series of images moving across a large screen in a kind of tent, which was separated from the rest of the exhibition. A female voice with an East-European accent provided the commentary. It was only when I moved closer that I saw the voice belonged to a young woman. She stood and walked through a meadow, and it took a while before I realised what she was doing: she was building a house. It had no bricks, no mortar, no wooden beams, and no glass, but it was a house just the same. It was a house that she was remembering. A house that once stood on that very same spot, but had been destroyed during the war.

Nothing was left of the house, except in her memory. In her mind, however, everything necessary to rebuild the house still existed. Like the corner where she used to hide with her cousin when they played hide and seek. It was her grandparents' house. I watched how she rebuilt it, using only words and gesticulations. How she

opened the non-existent door and walked through the imaginary hallway. How she walked inside and put the table back in the place where her grandparents used to eat when they had guests. I watched how her words replaced the servants' room in the empty sky, and the place that was no more but where once the little cabinet in which her grandfather kept his stamp collection had stood. And I watched her motion to

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the chocolate bar of which she always received a piece when she visited. I don't know how long I stood there, listening and watching. The meadow was just as empty as it had been in the beginning, but slowly I realised that even though nothing was visible, brick-by-brick she had rebuilt that house that once stood in Sarajevo. It was the house that the young woman had converted into a studio after the death of her grandparents, until the war demolished it. ■

Green, Green Grass of Home, a video by Maja Bajevic and Emanuel Licha.



CEES NOOTBOOM

Dutch novelist, poet, travel-writer and essayist Cees Nootboom (1933) has been frequently mentioned as a candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature. In 1993 he was awarded the Aristeion European Prize for Literature for *Het Volgende Verhaal* (The Following Story, 1991), the novel that signalled his international breakthrough, with translations in over twenty languages.