



Anchored to the Bones of an Old Frisian House

When the artist Heather Sheehan first entered the Old Frisian House, built in 1640 in Keitum, on the island of Sylt, Germany, she sensed that there was still a life story in the old captain's house masonry that wanted to be told. This is not the first time this has happened to the American. She stepped in and photographically sketched the fictional life of Sylta.

Translation of original German text written by Wiebke Stitz for SYLT MAGAZINE

Heather Sheehan's work has nothing to do with today's colloquial term "New Age mysticism." Even if one might assume so at first glance. "The stories choose me to pursue them," Sheehan describes in the prelude to a project. That's what happened to her at the Old Frisian House. "The hair stood up on my arms. I knew that a traumatic event here hadn't been dealt with, so I decided to make the story of an island woman, I call Sylta."

A trained costume designer who has exhibited textile objects and installations in Germany and America for years, Sheehan spent four months, sewing a costume reminiscent of regional ones. Working entirely by hand. "I felt strongly that I wasn't supposed to use a sewing machine for this. Slowly, stitch by stitch, I began to hear phrases, the sense of another presence gathering in my gut." With the finished costume and her analogue camera, Sheehan returned to Keitum.

Alone, she wandered through the Old Frisian House, picking up vibrations while moving furniture about. When she carried the wooden cradle from one corner to another, something happened. That night, when Heather lay in bed, she felt the lamb's fur in the cradle touching her cheek. She dreamed that she was in the cradle, peeking out through the little heart-shaped cutout in its wooden frame. "Even though I was portraying a grown woman, I had been given entrance to that of a baby lying in the cradle." This gave the finishing touch to the story of Sylta, a captain's wife who lives in Keitum. Her husband goes to sea. She is pregnant, awaiting his homecoming. News reaches her that he will not return. He is lost at sea. And then, Sylta's child is stillborn. "Because I'm a woman, women's stories are relayed to me that I can use my body to portray," Sheehan explains. "Often they are tragedies; it's deeply emotional work."

For other women's stories, too, she has taken on the role of medium, or perhaps better said, the roles of photographer and subject both. When Heather walks through the old rooms in her costume, she has her analogue camera with her and the self-timer in her hand. The photographs are exhibited and published in a book. It will be the same with Sylta's story: as of February, 2024, at the Sölring Museum, Keitum, on the Island of Sylt, Germany.

"We're still learning today how people felt in the past," of this, Heather Sheehan is certain. That's why the stories come to her. "If people weren't happy in the past, it was not spoken of. That's why there's so much still in old houses that wants to finally be released."

heathersheehan.com

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*Heather Sheehan's
Sylta
at the Sölring-
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