

The Son, the Murder and the Architect

A photographer obsessed by a church. It's a strange church, a spherical monument contained by four cubes. The church, the Chiesa Madre, is to be found in Sicily, in Gibellina, a small town built from scratch after an earthquake destroyed the original town in 1968.

Petra Noordkamp graduated from the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam in 2000 and until now she has only published photographic work. She has now made a film about the church: *La Madre, il Figlio et l'Architetto* (*The Mother, the Son and the Architect*). Without voice-over and subtitles the film is a composition of tranquil images of the church's exterior: the steps, corridors and stone floors. The only moving beings are birds that fly over and a ball that rolls across the frame, but there are no people in the film – not in depicted form, at least.

If you listen to the voice-over, written by author and artist Maria Barnas, you see a totally different film. Then it is about the church's architect, about his son who was the filmmaker's lover, and about the mother who was murdered by the son. Then the church is the backdrop to their story.

The church's architect was Ludovico Quaroni (1911-1987). When Gibellina was rebuilt after the 1968 earthquake, at a site twenty kilometres from its original location, its mayor wanted it to be a textbook example of a modern town. He had the new Gibellina designed and structured in its entirety by leading artists and architects from across Italy. He asked the architect Quaroni to design the church.

Noordkamp first saw the Chiesa Madre on the internet. Though she had no idea who the architect was, she felt drawn by the building's alienating atmosphere. For her it was strongly reminiscent of the films by Michelangelo Antonioni (1912-2007) that she so admired. An empty street, a shadow on a wall – everything in his films has significance.

Noordkamp's film is also reminiscent of Antonioni's style. 'Each place tells a story,' she says. 'The buildings are the backdrop for the roles that people act out.'

In *La Madre, il Figlio e l'Architetto* the filmmaker herself plays a role. In the 1990s Noordkamp had a fleeting romance with the architect's son: Emilio Quaroni, a young musician. She encountered him in 1995 in Rome, where he lived, while she was sitting waiting for another young man at the Piazza Santa Maria in Trastevere. Her date didn't show up. 'I was travelling through Europe and, after a turbulent relationship, I longed for freedom, to be uninhibited. Emilio asked whether I wanted to take a walk with him. I thought: why not? I felt like the women in Antonioni's stories. I let myself be seduced. Within half an hour we were standing kissing on the Gianiculum, a hill with a beautiful view across the city.'

The romance was short-lived, amounting to little more than a single visit and letters. A slightly longer meeting, a few years later, took a strange turn: Emilio suddenly disappeared, while Noordkamp sat waiting in his apartment, the table set for the dinner she had prepared for them.

In 2001 she felt the urge to visit him again. Then, in a bar she had visited regularly with him, she learnt to her amazement that he had murdered his mother that summer. Nobody knows why. He didn't have a history of psychiatric problems, but perhaps he did suffer a psychosis. He received a ten-year prison sentence and was subsequently committed to an asylum.

In 2009 Noordkamp headed to Sicily, to take photos of locations where Antonioni had filmed his movies. She was also intending to visit the Chiesa Madre in Gibellina, but didn't get round to it. She only discovered that this unusual church had been designed by Emilio's father after

she returned home. She then came up with the plan to go and film the church and tell Emilio's story. 'It all came together,' she says. 'My love for architecture and the films of Antonioni, my relationship with Emilio and the matricide. The church, la Madre, symbolises the mother for me, even though that might not have been what the architect intended. Writing about his design, he states that the perfect sphere represents the universe, the infinite. But I see Emilio's mother in it.'

'I did have misgivings about my personal motives for making this film,' she says. 'Is it unadulterated? Do I really have some connection with this? Wouldn't it better to maintain a distance?'

Now the film is finished, can Noordkamp consign the story of Emilio and his family to the past? 'No,' she says. 'I've become fascinated by Gibellina, that strange little town in Arte Povera style. The architecture is so minimalistic that it has become a melancholy, eerie place. I would still like to make a film about that. And the odd thing is that there's now another story set in Gibellina. Last year, the mayor who commissioned Gibellina's design, Ludovico Corrao, was still alive. He was already well into his eighties and I was planning to meet him, but in August he was murdered by his domestic worker.'