

ARS
FENNICA

HENNA AND PERTTI NIEMISTÖ
ART FOUNDATION

ARS FENNICA

2023

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HISTORY & AWARD

The Foundation

The Henna and Pertti Niemistö Art Foundation – ARS FENNICA sr was established in 1990 to promote the arts by opening up new channels for Finnish visual art internationally, by providing artists with inspiration in their creative work, and by encouraging interest in and respect for the visual arts among the general public.

To achieve its goal, the Foundation awards the ARS FENNICA Prize in alternate years to one visual artist in recognition of individual artistic work of outstanding quality. The prize includes a cash prize of EUR 50,000, an exhibition presenting the nominees and an online catalogue, which can be freely downloaded from the Foundation's website.

The prize will be awarded in two stages. An award panel appointed by the Foundation's

Board nominates the candidates and also an international art expert, who then chooses the prize winner.

The candidate artists have variously been from Finland, the Nordic countries, the Baltic States and the St Petersburg region. The permanent chairman of the panel is MD Leena Niemistö and the alternating members are Kai Kartio, Director of the Amos Rex Museum, Leevi Haapala, Director of the Kiasma Museum, and Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Visual Artist who won the 2021 award.

The candidates for 2023 are Henni Alftan and Tuomas A. Laitinen from Finland, Lap-See Lam from Sweden, Emilija Škarnulyté from Lithuania and Camille Norment from Norway.



LAUREN MACKLER

SIMPLE, CLEAN GESTURES

“Works contend with the difference between knowledge and perception.”

For the exhibition at Kiasma, **Henni Alftan**'s five works on view – a tight set – contend with, as the artist puts it, the difference between knowledge and perception. Knowledge, what you know is there without needing to see a thing's wholeness; perception, the naked facts of what's in front of you. The exhibited pieces are a careful excision of her practice.

Each work embodies a different idea she experiments with on canvas. The set is her vocabulary, emblematic of her surgical approach to representation.

MAKING SENSE

Alftan's works begin with language: a phrase jotted in a notebook, some objects, a colour or -she'll quickly downplay its role. Rather, that her pictures begin without a set form is key. Before becoming an image, her subject is an idea, then a set of words, then a problem. How does it take shape?

To resolve this, she studies literature and paintings throughout history, and also contemporary photography's sleight of hand, to extract a logic that interests her and to distill life into pictorial fractals. She

PHOTO: PIRJE MYKKÄNEN



STARS, 2023
oil on canvas, 130 x 195cm

looks at the world around her for clues, for research, but the embodiment of her phrases on canvas are ultimately just as barren, abstract, and poetic as their source. A close-up of a digital alarm clock, an image on the page of an open book, a compass drawing a circle.

“How much can be taken off without making the painting senseless?”

Alftan aims, in her own words, to see ‘how much can be taken off without making the painting senseless.’ Sense, in this usage, can be translated to visual coherence, pictorial gestalt: the ability for the viewer to understand what she’s depicting even if all the pieces aren’t there. What she is depicting, however, is another kind of truth

of the object, both in its response to the world (i.e., the manner in which its materiality refracts light, its solidity, its opacity) and its multiplicity, or the many ways it can be represented.

Titles are of course essential, and Alftan’s titles are deceptively direct. They call a thing what it is (e.g., *Stars*, for example, a painting of stars) while showing us in the picture that when we use a word, we hold in our mind’s eye a multitude of images. (The stars here are glittering specks in a night sky framed by a window, itself adorned with curtains patterned with geometric yellow stars.)



STUDIO II, 2023
oil on canvas, 130 x 195cm

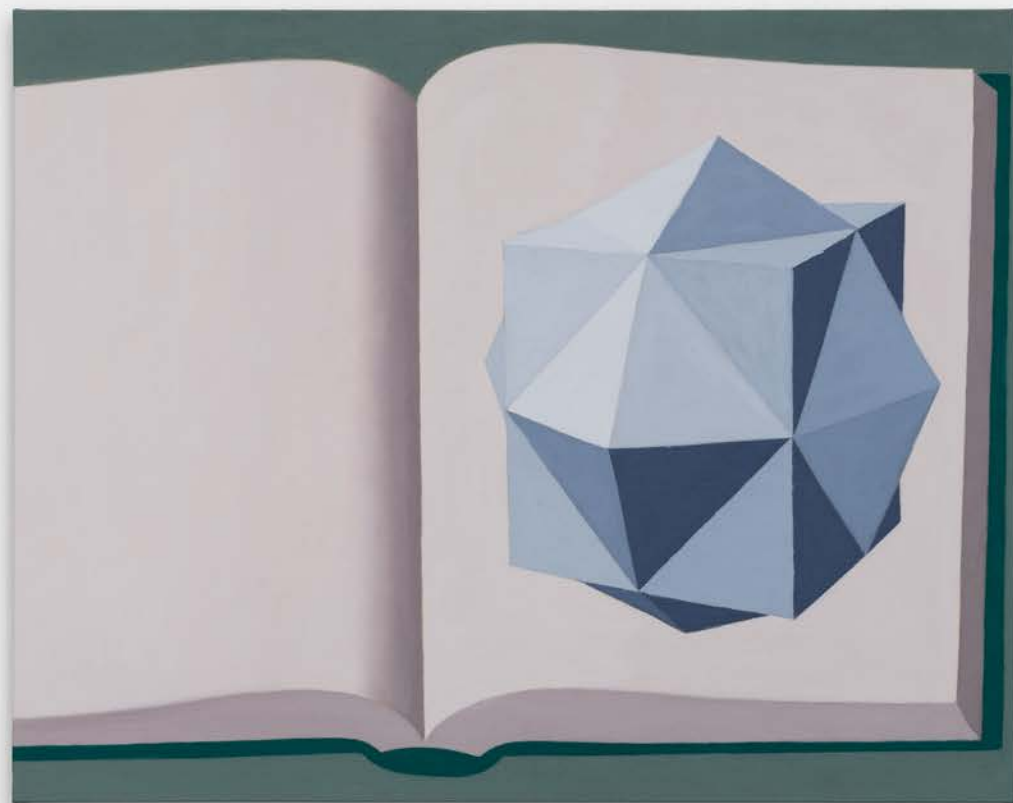
Words in her titles are often double-entendres, holding multiple meanings and even objects at once, complicating the pictures. Words in conversation with Alftan about her work are carefully calibrated, weighed with seriousness and care. She often clarifies meaningfully that she ‘paints pictures’ rather than ‘makes paintings’, so as to highlight that her focus is on the image, not solely the medium – although, that’s not to undermine paint as her toolkit for thought. But, back to geometry...

RULES

Alftan never attempts to paint the thing itself (im-

possible!) but rather the picture of the thing – that is, what we envision when we think of a thing, and an image that contains in it all the physics, logic, and ‘rules’ (as she would say) of that object in real life or our remembrance of it.

In her aforementioned studies, she investigates the rule of how a phenomenon occurs. In her paintings (*Studio II*, for example), a textured wall leaning against the actual wall of the exhibition space wall performs a delicate interplay between thick and thin that also conveys the way in which the textures of the world play against each other: how light might alter the experience of a particular material, be it canvas, paper, or plaster.



GEOMETRY, 2023
oil on canvas, 73 x 92cm

This is not to say that what Alftan is aiming for is a true representation of the world's physics. Indeed, objects here (such as paintbrushes on a stool) sometimes defy gravity in order to highlight their correspondences with the other shapes in the image. Here, for example, the gravity-defying paintbrushes, flex physics in order to echo the legs of the compass, in a painting within the painting.

“Volume in two-dimensional space is a fiction.”

In a work titled *Geometry*, a polyhedric shape embodies volume. At the same time it is framed, in the picture, by an open book and becomes an illustration on its two-dimensional pages. This push and pull between flatness and dimensionality is simple,

straightforward, and holds within it the contradictions at hand. Volume in two-dimensional space is a fiction, a trick of the imagination – and yet isn't all painting, all representation? The polyhedron is a pointed choice, since it contains the long history of the intersection between art and geometry.

Upon reading an anthology on the matter, Alftan noted that early studies of the prismatic shape were done through folded paper. The simple image depicted in *Geometry* contains all of this. It considers depth and optical phenomena, as well as a lineage of representation oscillating between two- and three-dimensional space over time.



3 AM, 2023
From series *Déjà vu*
oil on canvas, two parts, 54 x 65cm

of light and shadows, through showing two stages of an action or a gesture, or, as in 3 AM (on view here), through alluding to technical glitches in life that hinge on both visual memory and cognition.

Here, two paintings of the exact same clock and book on a nightstand have only one difference between them: a single digit flipped from 2 to 5, numbers who already mirror each other in their digital form. Evocative of insomnia, anxiety, and other instances of watching time tick slowly or confusingly, the work provokes for the viewer an experience of repetition that suggests familiarity made strange, uncanny.

Ultimately, Alftan's work evokes the visual and psychological reveals of a magic trick in everyday phenomena. And like any performance, here Alftan is the magician while the viewer becomes a vital component of completing the perceptual experience, standing where the painter once stood and implementing the missing pieces, thus fulfilling the experience via their own perspective (emotional and physical).

Alftan described to me the painting of her studio (*Studio II*) as allegorical. Within its simple composition, it contains full-scale replicas of two other paintings on view, and the viewer looking for the cloaked meaning of an allegory finds it hard not to feel implicated in this work. The act of looking at the paintings in their natural habitat (the studio) while being in the gallery conveys the sensation of a hall

TIME

The act of looking – not seeing, which is passive (according to Alftan) – is an endeavor towards perception, towards understanding the parts of what we see externally and internally. Another palpable study in Alftan's work is the difference between measured time and perceived time, time as experience.

Take, for example, her *Déjà vu* series. The ineffable sensation of familiarity in a moment we couldn't possibly have already experienced, a series of events that elicit a recall, an echo, a semblance of knowing. These paintings contain time through the implication



SWIMMING POOL, 2021
oil on canvas, 130 x 195cm
photo: Aurélien Mole

of mirrors and that's the closest description I have of the experience of Alftan's work:

Simple, clean gestures that initially feel like they are a surface but are loaded and layered; infused with a visual tactility, a jovial sense of trickery, and a commitment to being concise all the while oblique. To compass (an outdated usage of the word as verb) is after all to circumvent a

“Simple, clean gestures initially feel they are a surface but are loaded and layered.”

subject – a center – through a wide circular trajectory, an intentional poetic meandering, a cool distance, around meaning rather than directly, piercingly, through it.

HENNI ALFTAN
Artist in her studio





FILIPA RAMOS

MEETING THE BEAR HALFWAY

– AN INTERFACE FOR TUOMAS A. LAITINEN'S THE EARTH IS THE EAR OF THE BEAR

I am writing this text while listening to **Tuomas A. Laitinen's** *Sapiduz*, an album he released in early 2022. In it, the artist brought together the mood and polyphonic entanglements of Early Music, which he digitally disassembled and capsized, placing them atop cosmic sonic backgrounds. Each melody becomes a capsule in which ancestral and future tones, digital and human realms, organic and synthetic matters are enmeshed to create something that is as strange as it is familiar.

"No person could have created these sounds alone."

On my favourite track, also called *Sapiduz*, I picture the medieval mystic **Hildegard of Bingen** suffering from an aural migraine, surrounded by bees that hum around her to ease her pain. No person could have created these sounds alone, no machine would be capable of engendering such melodies and no animal would mind composing such tunes. Together, thanks to Laitinen's will, the generative skills of a machine and excerpts of nonhuman agency, a series of compositions were created that belong as much to this world as they open a myriad of parallel, trance-inducing sonic universes.

Listening to *Sapiduz* while writing these words allows me to imagine the environment Laitinen will create for the Ars Fennica Award, which will only materialise itself once the text has been written. My words precede the installation but have the responsibility of fostering the relationship between viewers, artworks and space that will be occur during the exhibition. Thinking of **Laura Tripaldi's** definition of the interface as 'a space of encounter in which two different bodies come together to form a completely new state of matter,'¹ I treat these pages as such generative meeting place that emerges out of the materialisation of words that will be read on a printed page.

HABITAT CASCADE, 2019

exhibition view: "Tuomas A. Laitinen - Habitat Cascade"
Wäinö Aaltonen Museum of Art
photo: Ville Mäkilä / WAM



Methodologically, I am aligned with much of Laitinen's practice, which investigates the generative potential of recipes and its correlation between formula and outcome, preparation and shared content. Laitinen's work engages with how language and sound exist through bodies, imagining the various shapes they assume when the physical and spatial conditions that generate and host it mutate. Similarly, this text is a simultaneous becoming installation and reception: announcing, conducting and adhering to the conditions that led to its existence.

Laitinen's interest in language extends itself beyond the human realm, contributing to disassemble the monopoly of cognitive and expressive processes that until recently dominated the definition of the human. In the installation *Habitat Cascade* (2019), he exhibited the results of his interest in octopuses' sentience, which led him to observe and engage with these animals. One of the ways in which he did so was through the installation of a series of glass mazes entitled *A Proposal for an Octopus* (2019) that the octopuses could explore, traverse and occupy, a

"Installation Habitat Cascade (2019) exhibited the results of his interest in octopuses' sentience."

process he documented in the video *Haemocyanin* (2019). In tandem, he designed *CTongue* (2018), a writing system inspired by the movement of octopuses' arms. This system exists as a digital typeface and as a series of modular glass objects whose vermicular shapes resemble other worms and snakes whose life is now independent from the octopuses that generated them. They also recall the scribbles people do when writing in an automatic, unconscious manner. These scribbles are paralinguistic expressions in which quasi-verbal forms emerge from the



HAEMOCYANIN, 2019
still image from a video, 8 min
UHD, Stereo

hand but exist beyond meaning. Reflecting on the relationship between corporeal and enunciative matters, Laitinen explains how this series 'was also a way to think about the movements of the body as a language, as a complex system of emergence and adaptation, without collapsing into a binary mode where language and signs are separated from the processes of the body'.²

"New mode of perceiving that challenged the tropes of normality."

Before interacting with such an outlandish creature as the octopus, the artist played with the possibilities of transformation of the human face, which holds so much of our species' communicative and expressive means. For this, he created a series of glass sculptures, *Sensory Adaptation Devices* (2015). Worn

as a mask, covering the entire face, they altered and interrupted a person's conventional communication and orientation systems, as they distorted vision and sound for who was wearing them and for those around them. This created a new mode of perceiving and being perceived that challenged the tropes of normality, efficiency and functionality traditionally associated to the human body.

Acting again like an interface, a zone of contact and transformation, they reveal the interdependency of consciousness, experience and perception.

Such an interest in attunement, and in triggering a higher awareness of one's relationship to place and space, is another feature of Laitinen's work. He



S.A.D. #14, 2022
from the series "Sensory Adaptation Series" (2015-),
cover of Kaukolampi's album "Inside the Sphere"
photo: Wilhelm Sjöström

pays attention to how agency is equally distributed across humans and nonhumans, living and non-living beings, questioning such taxonomic divisions and inviting people to notice how systems of world-making, bypass the conventional species divide and are found in some many ways. For *The Earth is the Ear of the Bear*, he pursues such understanding of

how to exist is to be a body in relation to other bodies, investigating the role played by sound and the practices of listening. In an immersive environment where a hypnotic video plays in continuum, a series of metallic sculptural beings carrying ultrasonic speakers reverberate sounds that are emitted from the bodies that intercept them in space. Visitors will

incorporate these sounds, grow them out of their bodies and mix them in the space while moving around, creating an experience that transcends the boundaries of the systems that generate and receive them.

The Earth is the Ear of the Bear gets its name from an excerpt from **Roberto Calasso**'s book *The Celestial Hunter* (2016), an elegant inquiry upon chasing and metamorphosis, presented as essential processes of becoming human. Proposing that hunting differentiated human-kind from other animals, Calasso considers the bear as a figure of in-between – an interface – across humans and the natural world they tried to leave behind. The bear stands for a continuum, a being that is intrinsically

”Bear as a figure in between - an interface - across humans and the natural world.”

connected to humankind, to the point that it can hear people’s thoughts. The bear also exists as a planetary whole, transcending any physical and metaphorical boundaries.³

The bear reveals that to listen is to be listened to. By hearing the bear, the bear hears you. By looking for the bear, the bear looks for you, from within, through their body. Having the earth as its ear, the bear makes humans realise that they have never fully disconnected themselves from the natural realm, that ecology is not an invention of science but a system of togetherness that makes the world every day anew.



EARTH IS THE EAR OF THE BEAR, 2023

still image from a video
UHD, Stereo

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¹ Laura Tripaldi, *Parallel Minds – Discovering the Intelligence of Materials*. Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2022, p.8.

² Tuomas A. Laitinen in conversation with Filipa Ramos on occasion of the presentation of *Haemocyanin* on Vdrome. *Vdrome #182*, March 2022, <http://www.vdrome.org/tuomas-a-laitinen/>.

had to be careful when talking, since the bear could hear everything said about it, even when it was far away. Even when it retired into its den, even when it was asleep, the bear carried on following what was happening in the world. "The earth is the ear of a bear," people said! Roberto Calasso, *The Celestial Hunter*. London: Penguin Books, 2020, p.10.

³ 'Because the bear could also be a man. People



PHANTOM BANQUET, 2020

installation view, Galerie Nordenhake

photo: Carl-Henrik Tillberg



THE LIGHTNESS OF HISTORY

JENNY WU

Suppose the past flickered, like a theatre of shadow and light. If there were a central figure in the work of **Lap-See Lam**, it would be the ephemerality of history and memory in the face of cultural forces like hybridisation, assimilation, and appropriation. Some artists study histories of migration to locate the signals that resonate across generations and geographies. Lam's multidisciplinary practice, however, lingers in the dissonances of the archives: the afterimages of the Hong Kong-Chinese diaspora that survive only as fragmented signs, the architectures that cannot be fully reconstructed, the images that never finish buffering.

Lam's research-based and interactive works feature layered scenes in fluctuating environments. At times these resemble the playful

PHANTOM BANQUET, 2020

installation view, Galerie Nordenhake

photo: Carl-Henrik Tillberg



machinations of Chinese shadow puppetry, and at times they evoke the melancholy of ruins. The fictional stories Lam tells, using a cast of characters and archetypes from Cantonese mythology and history, are inflected with her eclectic sensibility and brought to life through diverse media forms like 3D scans, phone applications, virtual reality, and immersive installations.

Lam's work draws its inceptual imagery from the interiors of Cantonese restaurants, captured through 3D scans after her parents' retirement and the sale of their Stockholm restaurant, established by her grandmother and great-uncle in 1978. She showcases how these restaurants in the West become unlikely 'third spaces', serving recognisable elements of chinoiserie while harbouring dreams of liberation.¹ In videos like *Oriental Travesty* (2016), Lam's animated scans reveal porcelain vases and red lanterns, glitched table-tops and fragmented walls, while voices describe modest living conditions in multiple languages. The aesthetics evoke familiarity and foreignness simultaneously, offering glimpses rather than a complete picture of a time and place. The rooms are charged with the ambivalent tensions of exoticism.

In choosing the Chinese restaurant as a figure of study, Lam contends with questions of labour, tradition, taste, and authenticity. Her works traffic in shanzhai aesthetics, a mode of deconstruction that challenges Western ideas of originality and abso-

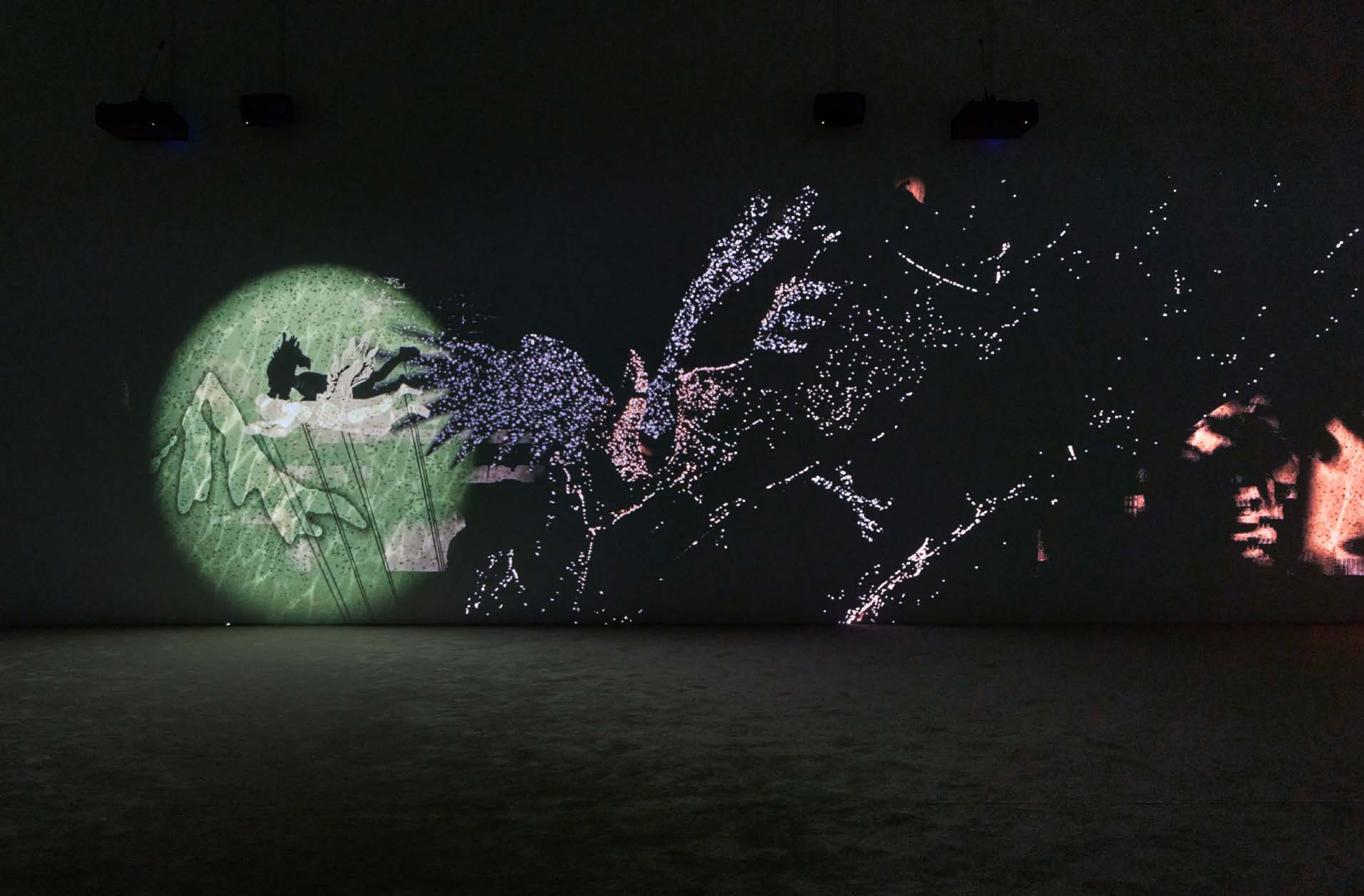
lute truth through accumulated co-authorship.² Her research, often resulting in series of works, explores the allure and seductiveness of cultural origins as commodity, going beyond debates of ownership and appropriation to uncover unfulfilled desires within diasporic communities themselves.

Lam's transcontinental and intergenerational epics carry the weight of history as if it were as light as fiction. When exposed to Lam's historical fictions, viewers become cultural tourists, interlopers, forensic scientists, and archaeologists – anything but straightforward consumers. In the interactive app-

based work *Mother's Tongue* (2018), fictional women deliver monologues while animated 3D scans navigate highly ornamented restaurants. Here, the relationship between testimony and truth is a tenuous one, as the app warns us from the onset: 'This is a work of fiction...'

Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental! The stories – about family relationships and the struggles of running a restaurant – are speculative, but they offer hints as to why history and fictionality have always been intimately linked. For example, a daughter of restaurant owners confesses she knows little about how her parents emigrated from Hong Kong to Stockholm, saying, 'I only know things by hearsay.' The language barrier between the speaker and her parents allows her, furthermore, to falsify school documents with impunity, complicating her relationship with her mother

"Lam contends with questions of labour, tradition, taste, and authenticity."



TALES OF THE ALTERSEA, 2023
installation view, Portikus Frankfurt
photo: Alwin Lay

a floating Chinese restaurant docked off the coast of Sweden, Sea Palace has since been converted into a haunted house for Stockholm's Gröna Lund amusement park. During this conversion process, auspicious decorations on the original ship were recast as malevolent presences to scare tourists on Halloween. Lam's installation gives the ship a third life, animating its spirit using the visual vocabulary of traditional shadow puppet theatre and sending viewers on an underwater journey with an array of figures from Cantonese mythology.

Tales of the Altersea, rather unlike a haunted house, employs visual abundance and ambient sounds to generate critical discourse. Intimations of narrative elude the tendrils of conventional storytelling, while human, geological, and bestial forms projected on the walls and floors swirl in a state of flux. The time-based work, whose loops are marked by the intermittent appearance of a pair of inquisitive eyes on the wall, demands reciprocity and engagement, or, at the very least, the acknowledgement of one's passivity. Cultural literacy is put to the test while context is left open-ended.

in the long run. In the gaps between generations, languages, and cultures, many facts fall to the way-side. What gets preserved, if we are lucky, are the tangible artefacts. In lieu of those, we pore over glitched archives.

By translating archives into sensorial environments, Lam stokes a feeling of collective experience. *Tales of the Altersea* (2023), the work in the Ars Fennica exhibition, is an immersive installation inspired by the history of a ship named Sea Palace. Once

"Human, geological, and bestial forms projected on the walls and floors swirl in a state of flux."

Lam's characters, defined in profile as they traverse lush seascapes and torched cartographies, flicker across the walls with intense irregularity. The sheer speed at which they appear and vanish prevents us from apprehending their entire world at once. Like humans, restaurants, or even historical epochs, these ephemeral images are never onstage for long. Like children of diaspora, they drift and collide and, in doing so, transform.

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¹ See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

² See Byung-Chul Han, *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese* (trans. Philippa Hurd). Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2017.



DREAMERS' QUAY, 2022
installation view, Bonniers Konsthall
photo: Jean-Baptiste Béranger

“Lam’s characters flicker across the walls with intense irregularity.”

ALDONA, 2013
still image from a short film
→



LUCIA PIETROIUSTI

"IF YOU ARE A MYTH, WHOSE REALITY ARE YOU?" ¹

Seen from a certain perspective, artist and filmmaker **Emilija Škarnulytė**'s 2013 short film *Aldona* distinguishes itself substantially, in both style and tone, from the rest of her oeuvre. The film follows the elderly Aldona, rendered blind in the wake of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, as she, alone, traverses the landscapes of a forest at dawn, then walks through Lithuania's Grūtas Park, a macabre theme park created by a mushroom magnate, which combines monuments of **Lenin**, **Stalin** and Lithuanian communist-era politicians with park design elements that would remind visitors of a Soviet gulag.

In this strange meeting-place for postmodern simulacrum and all-too-

PHOTO: BENOIT-MUÑOZ

recent political archaeology, Aldona walks to the distant sound of Soviet-era songs blaring through the park's loudspeakers, encountering textures with her bare hands. At first, as far as we can see in a tight frame, she could be stroking elephants: rough, grey edges. But as the camera patiently follows her along, a new shot reveals the vast scale of the monuments towering above this fragile elderly lady, who nevertheless confidently continues to map, and perhaps measure, the space around her with her fingers, her hands. She strokes Lenin's foot. Sticks her fingers in his nose, feels his moustache on a bust.

She walks past bronze reliefs at least three times her height. Here it is, just behind her: the crushing weight of Lithuania's recent colonial history made solid. There is the nuclear disaster that devastated the region, scars on the Earth that have become scars on Aldona's body, her poisoned eyes, with which she can no longer see.

As Aldona returns to her house, the intimacy between the filmmaker and her subject becomes more evident and delicate – I learn only later that Aldona is Škarnulytė's real-life grandmother, which explains something. Aldona, who knows her house by heart, cleans and sorts her cutlery. She sits at her dining table, listening to an audiotope recording of a fairytale about the desperate plea of a fisherman, his unrequited love for a wordless princess and the more-than-human characters (forest, birds, cliffs, seas) that are the story's silent protagonists.

Cautiously, Aldona picks up a handful of apple peels from the dinner table. She only speaks a few words (to her granddaughter? to herself?), about the circularity of being, as she

heads out to return the peels to the tree. It is dusk.

Different as this film may appear from the rest of Škarnulytė's prolific work, much of what distinguishes her vision, from method to core concerns, are already and subtly seeded in Aldona. Everywhere, the eye of Škarnulytė's camera is patient, methodical. Slow pans and only the most necessary of cuts. It lingers over images of sublime deep-sea beauty, or waits with something akin to loving irony in front of

the clumsiness of robotic arms belonging to remotely-operated deep-sea exploration vehicles, as they awkwardly clamp each other and samples of coral reefs, or Hoover up sand from the sea floor (*Aphotic Zone*, 2022). It is destabilising to look at all this shimmering splendour down here, and realise that, at this depth, you would be destroyed in an instant. And herewith the first echo of what would become

Škarnulytė's later and more recognisable filmic style in the earlier Aldona: the sense that something large and virtually impossible in every sense (inconceivable, unbearable) is looming just beyond view; that we catch an imprecise and partial fragment of it only sometimes, through our bodies and our senses, as we wander around, in the dark. And that these bodies, this unit

“Slow pans and only the most necessary of cuts.”



APHOTIC ZONE AT “PENUMBRA”, 2022

Fondazione In Between Art Film at
Complesso dell'Ospedaletto, Venice
photo: Andrea Rosetti



BURIAL, 2022
still image from a video

of measure for the things around us are such fragile little things.

Throughout her practice, Škarnulytė positions herself as an archaeologist from the future. Her films linger over present and past relics of anthropogenic infrastructure, from decommissioned nuclear power plants (*Burial*, 2022) to Cold War-era military infrastructure (*Sirenomelia*, 2017); from deep-sea mining prospecting to the heterotopias of speculative underwater data centres, when “the cloud” eventually runs out of space (*Rakhne*, 2023).

This archaeology-from-the-future gaze reveals to us, tourists from the present, vast spaces where

human-made concrete and steel rule over silent, infinite landscapes both above and below the water line. It is near-impossible to think of these landscapes as ever being peopled at all, were it not for the indelible marks those very people (the energy- and military-industrial complexes and their agents) have left behind. What would an alien archaeologist read in these signs, in 10,000 years? What materials, what signals, what stories endure?

It is difficult to linger with this image of an Earth this heartless. It holds the same fascination and terror of a trip to outer space: that moment in so many movies, that absolute aloneness, when the astronaut accidentally detaches from the ship while on

a space walk, and drifts, fully conscious, away and into deep space. A second echo of Aldona: a kind of solitude, maybe.

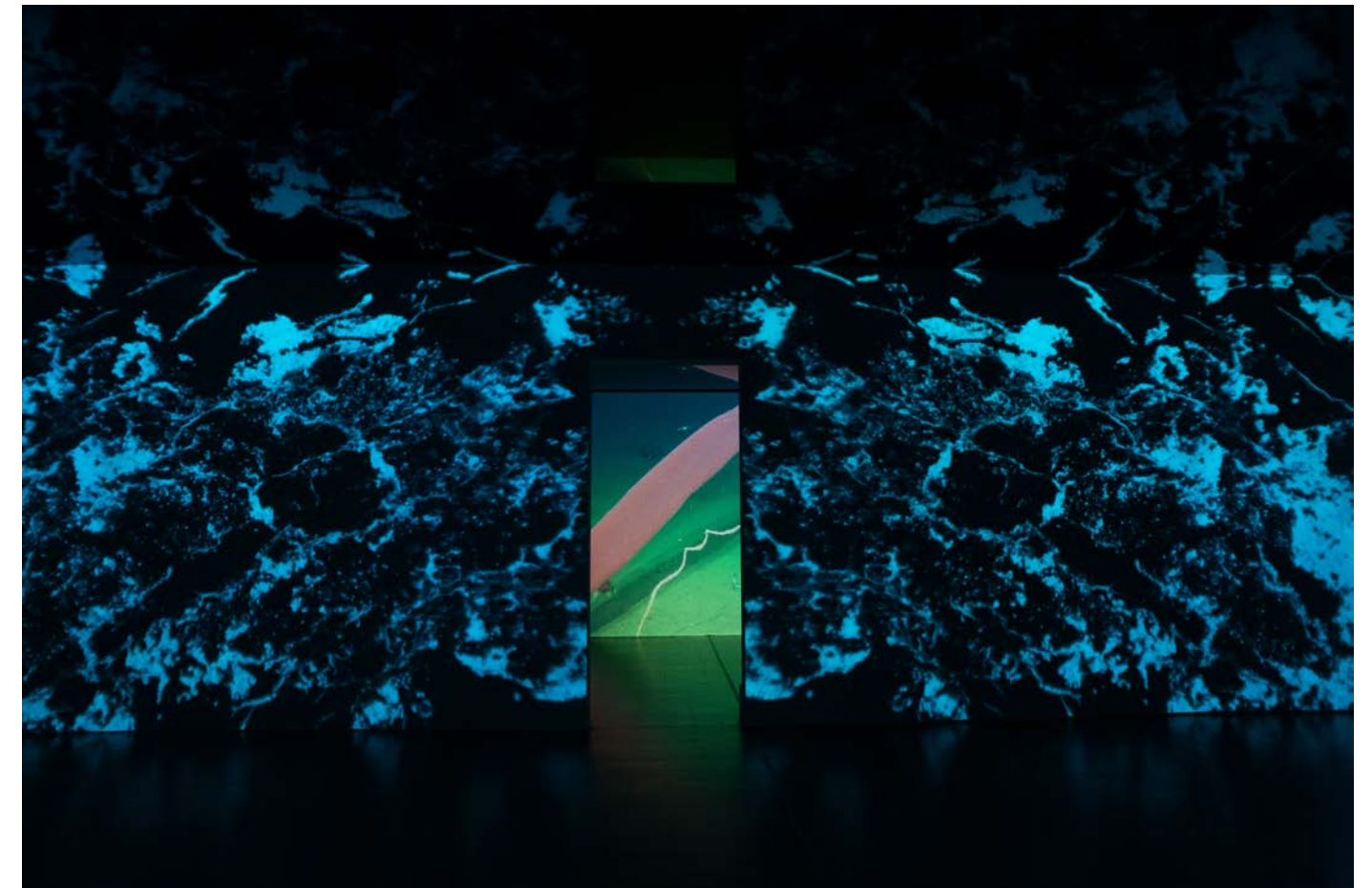
If we stay longer with Škarnulytė's films, something else begins to happen. There is Aldona the blind seer, like Tiresias, the blind prophet of Apollo in Greek mythology; or like unhappy Cassandra, doomed to be ignored; or the oracle of Delphi. There is the language with which Škarnulytė describes her films, which is a little mythological in itself (between scientific sublime and ecofeminist poetry). There are the ruins of an ancient city underwater in the Gulf of Naples (*Sunken Cities*, 2021), like a reminder that

worlds have already begun, been and ended on this planet many times over.

There is a lonely mermaid swimming alongside the steel and the concrete, swimming in the icy water (*Sirenomelia*, among others), or at the confluence of two rivers. (*Æqualia*, 2023). This mermaid figure makes of Škarnulytė's large body of work almost one long film in fragments: her journey through this inconceivable Earth. The artist, who performs the mermaid's role in every case, describes her/them as a character that allows the artist to measure these landscapes and histories with her body – or, like Aldona, with her hands. So the films

**“Language with which
Škarnulytė describes her films,
is a little mythological.”**

SUNKEN CITIES, 2021
documentation of Škarnulytė's solo exhibition at Kunsthau Pasquart
photo: Flavio Karrer





insist on scalar relationships between things, more-than-human beings, spaces; between perceived, deep and infinite time.

Yet, in the cold and unforgiving environments of a traumatised planet, Škarnulytė's mermaid also brings something else. A bit of magic maybe, a little bit of goddess-like forgiveness and love. The possibility of a life beyond the ruins of life; a rebirth

in the water. Something less than hope, yet moving in that direction, for the sake of this troubled place.

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¹ Sun Ra, quoted by saxophonist Abshalom Ben Shlomo in Emilija Škarnulytė's short film *Sounds of the Desert* (2022).

ETERNAL RETURN, 2021

installation view at Tate Modern's South Tank

DAVID TOOP

THE WORLD TREMBLES

'Did gyre and gimbel in the wabe,' wrote **Lewis Carroll** in *Jabberwocky*, and through this richly nonsensical and auditory description of the slithy toves and their carousing movement emerges a non-rational means by which to conceptualise the vibratory character of life as a sonic experi-

*"Non-rational means
to conceptualise the
vibratory character of life
as a sonic experience."*

ence at the edge of understanding. Drummer **Milford Graves**, initially a Latin-jazz percussionist who pioneered a new role for the drum kit in the New York-based free jazz movement on the 1960s, devoted his life to what he called Biological Music, an ongoing research project that attempted

to align the discoveries of empirical science with practical knowledge accumulated by the Cosmo-Mystic-Spiritual musician.

Through the practice of Spontaneous Improvised Music (again, his term) Graves attempted to map out therapeutic correlations between biological mechanisms, cosmic energies and strategies of sound working (from breath work to non-metronomic drumming based on heart rate variability). Voice and breath occupied a central place in this theoretical work of living being. As he wrote in his essay, *Music Extensions of Infinite Dimensions* (published in *Arcana V: Music, Magic and Mysticism*, edited by John Zorn, New York, 2010): 'When the BioPsychoSocial (BPS) energies and characteristics of the mind-body complex are threatened by depressive elements, the proper therapeutic procedure requires that the vocal system process and articulate sounds (breath) that are entangled, irregular, and non-metronomic.'

PHOTO: CAMILLE NORMENT STUDIO

PLEXUS, 2022
installation view, Dia Chelsea
photo: Bill Jacobson

"Physical vibration is felt at deep emotional levels, inner organs and cellular being."



To enter into a **Camille Norment** installation is to (literally) sit with the feeling of tactile vocal vibrations lifting up and permeating through the body; to conjoin with a profound and disturbing (in all senses) history of vibration, resonance, communality and the realm of possible futures. To some degree this is the history of a non-verbal sound beyond sound, not a sound for hearing dispassionately with the ears but a

"Body becomes a drum, resonated by time itself."

physical vibration that is felt at deep emotional levels and through the skin, musculature, inner organs and cellular being. Body becomes drum, resonated by time itself (since vibration is periodic movement, connected to the precedent of deep time as expressed through forms that all humans can recognise). Groan, moan and croon are the human voice at

an edge of articulacy, shaken by grief or love yet activating the somatic domain of soothing, repair, entrancement, hypnosis and anaesthesia. This is the universality of voice that bonds at deep cellular levels: parent with child, bereaved with mourners, those who worship in groups and those incarcerated together. Strange and poignant laments are found in forms that articulate fundamental human needs: lullabies, death songs, songs of sorrow and loss, songs of religious devotion and ecstasy, songs of

incarceration, songs of regret and pain whereby the voice is both containing experience and releasing an excess of feeling – tenderness or hurt perhaps – through a therapeutic vibration of the vocal cords and beyond.

'Vibration, not itself a thing or matter,' writes scholar **Shelley Trower** in her book, *Senses of Vibration* (New York, 2012), 'can move simultaneously through subjects as well as objects, bridging internal and



PLEXUS, 2022

installation view, Dia Chelsea

photo: Bill Jacobson

external worlds.' This is listening to be, rather than to do. To be suffused by the vibrations of vocal sound is to feel other bodies rise up and permeate our own, a sympathetic resonance with the potential to embrace all entities. A vibrational listening practice can bring us closer to the vibration worlds of non-human and extra-human entities: the drone of a bee's wings, the drumming of a spider's leg, the infrasonic moans of elephants and whales; or music which approximates the world of spirits.

Writing of the remarkable phenomenon of chord-like chanting and extremely low tones used by Tibetan monks in the Tantric Gyutö ritual, **Kenneth N. Stevens** notes: 'The unusual depth of the ritual chanting has of course long been known and, as the natural voices of the monks show, the deep pitch is unnatural, that is to say it is part of a deliberately cultivated style. In effect it is an outstanding example of what [ethnomusicologist] **Curt Sachs** called movement away from ordinary human expression associated with singing that is an act of ecstasy and depersonalisation; for it exemplifies that practice found in many cultures of masking the voice when the object is to communicate with the supernatural.' (from sleeve notes to Tibet, LP record, Anthology Record and Tape Corporation, New York, 1970).

We think we hear but do we really hear? As with sound, materiality and invisibility co-exist in contradiction as an architecture seemingly without solidity. At vibrational levels sound can also come into being as physical affect lacking the phenomenon we call sound. Though deaf, **Beethoven** was able to hear the sound of his piano by bone conduction, feeling the vibrations through a rod attached to his piano and clenched in his teeth. Sound was hidden from



RAPTURE, 2015

mixed media, including 12-voice chorus, glass armonica, audio device
photo: Camille Norment Studio

his ears and yet his ability to hear vibrations through his jawbone is evident from his compositions.

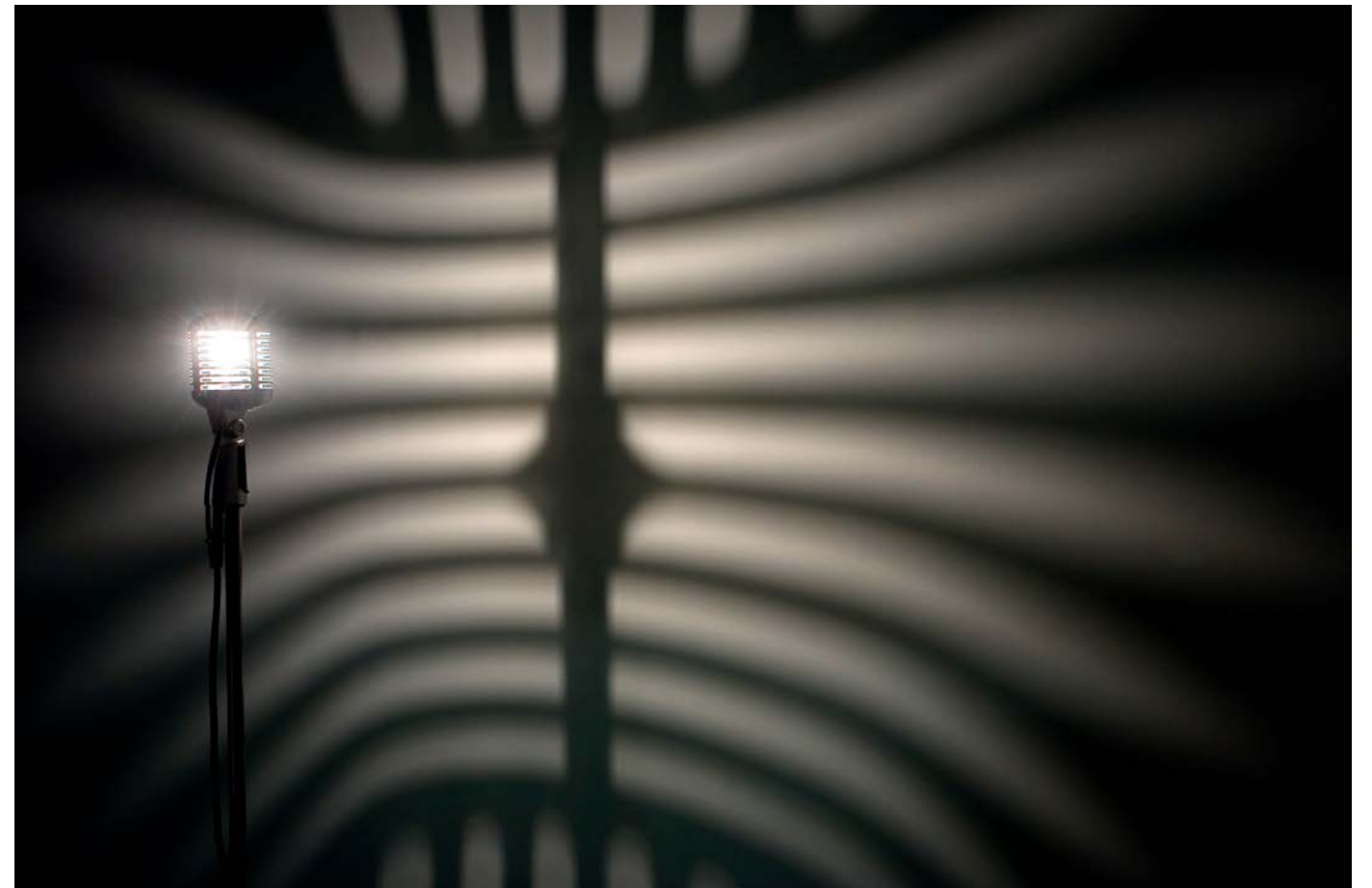
Through sitting, or lying, on the wooden seating structures that act as participatory body hearers-vibrators

in Camille Norment's installation, the vibration absorber/tone and breath emitter can enter into a vibrational pact with complex gyratory histories

"The moan carries a loss, translates a history of suffering into beauty."

both harmonic and dissonant. The moan, a vibration drone, links bee to bomb, pollination to pollution.

This catastrophically antagonistic relationship of constructive vibration to environmental destruction is inherent in the sorrow of the word, its honouring of loss through a sound that is simultaneously despairing and ecstatic expression. The moan carries loss, translates a history of suffering into beauty,



TRIPLIGHT, 2008

light sculpture
photo: David Olivera

release, enduring, yet acts as constant reminder. Like dolphins in a liquid world of echo or bats flying within dark caves of rebounding ultrasonic signals, we sit immersed in and resonated by vibration in order to contemplate the interconnected nature of all things.

These entanglements of violence and creativity, destruction and remaking, physicality and aetheriality, striking and decaying, resist the fixity of binaries and ask a question of materiality and vibration: how do they co-exist? Ultimately, how we hear what we hear returns sound to the sounds of body, to the body working, to the groaning, creaking noises of inherited

trauma, to body as social body, to body as biological composting site in which ultrasound and infrasound swirl and vibrate within boundaries that are neither certain nor stable. A world opens out, miraculous and connected. As the Ukrainian-Brazilian writer **Clarice Lispector** wrote in her 1973 poetic novel, *Água Viva*: 'I see that I've never told you how I listen to music. I gently rest my hand on the record player and my hand vibrates, sending waves through my whole body: and so I listen to the electricity of the vibrations, the last substratum of reality's realm, and the world trembles inside my hands.'

The Henna and Pertti Niemistö Art Foundation – ARS FENNICA sr was established in 1990 to promote the visual arts by opening up new channels for Finnish visual art internationally, by providing artists with inspiration in their creative work, and by encouraging interest in and respect for the visual arts among the general public.

In alternate years, the Foundation awards Finland's most significant visual-art prize – 50,000 euros. The prize goes to an artist in recognition of individual artistic work of outstanding quality.

An award panel appointed by the Foundation nominates the candidates and also an international art expert, who then chooses the prize winner from among these candidates. The nominees have variously been from Finland, the Nordic countries, the Baltic States and the St Petersburg region.

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