

First published: The Estonian art quarterly KUNST.EE 2020, No. 4, pp. 74–76. Architect of the exhibition Taso Mähar, graphic design Jaanus Samma, curators Kai Lobjakas. and Ketli Tiitsar.

17. X 2020–10. I 2021

Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design

Dagger, djinn and wolf

Heie Marie Treier visited the exhibition that presents the last five years of jewellery by **Kadri Mälk**.

If anyone can be considered a mystic in Estonian art, it is Kadri Mälk. The almost sculptural jewellery exhibited at the exhibition "Bulldog" at the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design confirms this premise. However, the title "Bulldog" seems more of a joke. It comes from an empty bottle of London dry gin that has been worked into one of the pieces. The djinn has been released from the bottle and the exhibition, like a fighting dog, remains focused on the narrow path of being an artist with fresh ideas.

Practice

Being a mystic is a tradition dating back centuries. The materialist age of science suppresses the worldview that corresponds to mysticism and the religious consciousness that is its source. Perhaps the art world still legitimises the mystical or poetic worldview. Mystics have acted on the frontiers of philosophy and religion; they perceive subtle vibrations in the air and frequencies that are invisible to the naked eye. Consequently, they don't talk about their field too loudly and don't expect listeners to always understand them.

Today, however, individuals with a similar sensitivity can still be found in the complex field of economic theory of all professions. How to comment on Nassim Nicholas Taleb, invited as the keynote speaker for the Eesti Ekspress 2019 Business Management Conference, who "does not eat fruit that does not have a name in ancient Greek or Hebrew, nor does he drink anything that mankind has known for less than a thousand years"? If Taleb were a jeweller, he would probably not use any metal or gemstone not mentioned in the Bible. Likewise, mystics always have a connection to practice. The artist's practice is their work.

So, what causes us to recognise an artist as a mystic? Mätk has chosen the materials for her jewellery as representing permanence, security, grandeur and rarity, contrasting them with unexpected everyday elements. It is not uncommon for this to be accompanied by an elusive moment of danger or prohibition.

The combination of materials is often reminiscent of a mysterious list of things you hear for the first time in your life. For example, the object "Luminous Shadow" (2017) made with shungite, paint, silver and kunzite. Or a brooch – "Late Alligator" (2016) – from carved pear tree, paint, silver, black jade, rubies, topaz, tourmaline and spinel. It's like a gourmet meal which combines contradictory ingredients. However, precious metals and precious stones, the typical materials of jewellery for centuries, refer to something unearthly, awe inspiring. But everything is amplified in its service of art.

We certainly recognise a mystic or poet in an artist based on their vocabulary. This vocabulary can be found in the titles of Kadri Mätk's jewellery ("Peasant's Tequila or Vibrating Silence", "Broken, Wild and Dark", "Life's Ice Rinks", etc), as well as in interviews where the artist talks about her work and sense of the world, which has been consistent for decades.

Obviously, this also signifies a somewhat supernatural connection with place and culture. On the one hand, Mätk participates in top-level international discussions, representing the remarkably different Tallinn school. On the other hand, she has refused well-paid teaching positions at foreign universities. Would the power of her work disappear working elsewhere? Because one's home landscape exists nowhere else with its dense forests, home to a wild and free spirit animal, considered extraordinarily wise? There are no wolves elsewhere. If "wolf" is the key to understanding Kadri Mätk's work, keep it in mind.

Teaching

Kadri Mätk dedicated the exhibition "Bulldog" to her teacher Leili Kuldkepp (1931–2008). Therefore the knife-shaped neckpiece "Kuldkepp" (2019, fossil ivory, black diamonds (54 in two rows, à 27, à 0.015 ct), beech, paint, blood, steel, silver) is displayed on a separate plinth. As an accessory and piece of jewellery, it is reminiscent of Peeter Tooma's wonderful "Dagger Song" (Pistoda laul) from the feature film "The Last Relic" (1969): "May an adventurous priory knight / always have a dagger on his belt / or hide it on his person / because thus it's even more secure." This is the advantage of having been an artist for a long time – you can point out primary sources and teachers without the fear of being seen as an imitator. It is also irrelevant for this generation whether to follow the male or female gender stereotypes when it comes to the dagger, djinn and wolf. The power of objects, substances and animals is important.

Kadri Mälk's own long career as an artist and lecturer at the Estonian Academy of Arts has led to jewellery having a special status in contemporary art, which is not present in other countries. This probably comes from a hybrid higher education institution (Estonian Academy of Arts), where all departments teach on an equal footing side by side. A corresponding shift also took place in the Tallinn art scene in the 1980s – before the fall of the Berlin Wall, designers, leatherworkers and textile artists started to appear at contemporary art exhibitions. The self-awareness and ambition of jewellery is still as high as it was then.

Jewellery, or more precisely this school of jewellery, run by Mälk, seeks something more than to be a decoration or an accessory to clothing. This jewellery is wearable but very heavily charged with power and meaning. Consequently, "Bulldog" presents the artist's latest work, while also focusing on great generalisations and summaries.

Heie Treier is an art historian and critic working as Lecturer on Art History at the Baltic Film, Media, Arts and Communication School, University of Tallinn.