

Notes on a Darker Rose

by Heine Hansen

"Nothing therefore needs to be more emphasized than the warning that we should not, like sheep, follow the lead of the throng in front of us, travelling, thus, the way that all go and not the way that we ought to go. Yet nothing involves us in greater trouble than the fact that we adapt ourselves to common report in the belief that the best things are those that have met with great approval, — the fact that having so many to follow, we live after the rule, not of reason, but of imitation. The result of this is that people are piled high, one above another, as they rush to destruction."¹

(Seneca, De vita beata 1.3; transl. J.W. Basore)

I was reminded of this passage, written by a pagan philosopher some two thousand years ago, when sitting in Eken's studio reminiscing about an underground music venue, 1000Fryd, in the town of Aalborg. My friends and I put on punk shows there in the early-to-mid nineties, and Eken, she told me amidst piles of ceramics, visited the venue several times in her youth, doing light design for a band called Lob of Lemmings.

Seneca's comparison is with sheep, and he didn't know about thrash metal. But, sitting there on the stairs in Rose's studio, the mention of lemmings somehow made me think of his image of the great big mob of humanity, goaded along by mistaken consensus, leading itself to certain ruin. What triggered the association was not just the strange name of a long-gone metal band, but also the ceramic pieces occupying every single inch of space in the studio. For there is in Eken's work an unmistakable fascination, perhaps even empathy, with those that do not, to use Seneca's phrase, "follow the lead of the throng" and travel "the way that all go." Particularly, I might add, with those that, in their disaffection with the modern world, try to find a different way through music of the loud, angry, and aggressive sort.

This new body of work seems to start from this same fascination, and in that sense, it is classic Eken: music, musicians, and the paraphernalia of musical performance and subcultural identity, painstakingly replicated in carefully crafted ceramic pieces. But this time around it's darker. In fact, this time around it's black. As in black glaze, black metal, and black magic.

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Strange things can and have been made from clay. Even, according to a mythological commonplace, human beings. In Eken's hands, they become metalheads. Black-metalheads. One bust portrays Icelandic actress Thora Bjorg Helga in her lead as Hera in the 2013 film entitled, well, Metalhead. Contrary to what you might expect from a film about the most extreme musical subculture since punk, it is an almost feel-good tale of the healing and liberating power of music, in which a young girl struggles to cope with the loss of her older brother and the well-meaning but stifling small-town environment in which she grows up. Involving herself in great trouble (to use Seneca's words again) by trying to adapt herself to common report and live after the rule

of imitation, it is by pouring her sorrow and anger into a black-metal demo tape that she finally finds release and a way of travelling, not the way that all go, but the way that she ought to go. It is this, potentially transformative, musical act that Eken captures in the busts of the remaining black-metalheads in the exhibition, the four members of Danish band Slægt. As anyone who has attended the dark ritual of a metal show will know, it is an act of great intensity, and it is captured here with a vividness that seems almost defiant of the inertia and heaviness of the material from which these busts are made.

This strain between matter and form recurs in another set of centerpieces: the stunning, upward-sprawling plants. Deadly nightshade, thornapple, henbane, and opium poppy. So appealing in their labored intent to defy gravity, but all of them deadly poisonous. There's a sunflower, too. It is neither poisonous nor deadly. Rather, if one is to believe *The Witch's Handbook* (Heksens Håndbog), also found here in ceramic replica, it is a flower associated with loyalty. Another piece incorporates angelica. According to the same book, if you take the root of this plant and place it in the bed between two lovers, it will cause love to grow and infidelity to be forgotten. The sunflower, you'll notice, is dying.

We have entered, through the rabbit hole of black-metal iconography and pagan leanings, the realms of witchcraft and black magic. A bit like Hansel and Gretel, we've wandered far from the way that all go and ended up in a clearing in the deep dark woods where beneath an enticing exterior, unknown forces lurk. And here, remote from the clamor of the common report, in the favorite haunts of black-metalheads and black-magic practitioners alike, even stranger things begin to appear. I don't know what they are, exactly. The best my scrambling brain can come up with, as it tries to figure out what it sees, is something like this: extraterrestrial totem poles made of black ceramic vessels stacked on top of each other while imitating those spiky backpacks so popular amongst ravers in the nineties. But that hardly does justice to the curious allure of these alien pieces, one of which seems to have been wrenched inside out. Yes, strange things can and have been made from clay.

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As the music to which it pays homage, this show is dark. Angry, even. It is also striking in its beauty. And, perhaps, if you look closer, you'll even find hope. Here, after all, having strayed down the dead ends of both the senseless attention-seeking vandalism of early black-metal church torching and the mindless destructive conformity against which Seneca warns, seems to find her own way in the end. And, historically, even those deadly poisonous plants have been thought to have, as *The Witch's Handbook* will also tell you, potentially positive effects; the opium poppy is still used for medicinal purposes. More generally, you might in Eken's affectionate hands see the black-metalhead and the witch become representations, respectively, of the courage to stand apart and a close connection with nature. In an age of internet-driven monoculture and impending environmental catastrophe, where Seneca's image of people "piled high, one above another, as they rush to destruction" takes on a particularly foreboding quality, these traits might begin to seem admirable, perhaps even heroic.

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1. Seneca: Moral Essays. with an English translation by John W. Basore. Vol. II. Loeb Classical Library. London: Heinemann, 1932.