

## Among urns and swirling hair. - On dark matter and the recent works of Rose Eken.

*"A culture that alienates itself from the very ground of its own being – from wilderness outside (that is to say, wild nature, the wild, self-contained, self-informing ecosystems) and from that other wilderness within – is doomed to a very destructive behavior, ultimately perhaps self-destructive behavior."*

Gary Snyder, *Ecopsychology*<sup>i</sup>

It is said that most of the universe is made up of an undefined, invisible material. So-called dark matter.<sup>ii</sup> It can be hard to fathom that we are part of an ever-expanding universe held together by this darkness, and likewise difficult to admit that each and every one of us possesses a dark side. We would rather focus on the light than open ourselves up to darkness.

We live in an over-enlightened time. We are over-informed. We are spammed minds in chronic inflammation. Most of us live surrounded by widespread levels of light pollution, reducing the night sky above us to a dark indeterminate blur. Not only have we lost touch with the darkness around us, by way of our age of illumination with its constantly glaring electronic lights and screens, we have also significantly shut down the darkness within.

Also, most of us are afraid of the dark and are more comfortable in lit rooms than pitch black forests. Is this because we have lost connection to our origins – have become cultured to such a degree that nature has become our dark side?

As the American environmental activist and poet Gary Snyder reminds us in the opening quote, we need to stay in touch with the wildness from which we originate, and to the darkness, to the unfathomable and to our roots, or else we lose connection to our origins, we lose ourselves.

In a great many of Rose Eken's works you will encounter an expression of a dimension of this darkness. Be it in works reminding us of our impending demise, memento mori-motifs in the shape of skulls, crows or vases as urns, or be it through works drawing from the *dark side* of rock-culture, Eken often enters the shadow-dimensions many of us try to shield ourselves from.

The exhibition *And the Forests Dream Eternally* (2021) that opened at the time of year where the dark forces are most present, Halloween, was in a class of its own, created from literal dark matter. Not only appeared most of the pieces black and shiny, their narratives were centred on the murky underbelly of life. The gloomy and melancholic vibe of the room didn't just express a gravity, but a real *longing* for the dark. To contain and invoke these occult powers, the ecstasy, the euphoria, the bodily states, that transcends the immediately ordinary state of being. These mind-expanding places within us, closely connected to the darkness, which we have somehow repressed, displaced, forgotten and hid.

In this exhibition, it was like the core of our urges, our longing for ecstasy, our death wishes and anxiety, were activated by symbolic measures in alliance with the darkness, and in the poetic title of the show, and also by the dreams and the imagination of that

which stems from far bygone times (biological life in shape of the forests) and extends indefinitely in time – eternity itself.

### **And the Forests Dream Eternally.**

Black stripes were drawn on white walls, like skinny tree trunks. The works themselves, also present in the room like wild growths – dark branches on the floor, stray plants and flowers on podiums, prickly vases and a vast amount of swirling hair. The exhibition oozed wildness and growth, as much as it did urges, lust and ecstasy. All the prickly pointing and swirling hair. Like a gothic contemporary manifestation.

On a low, black and glossy exhibition-podium, a special midnight-séance was staged. All black ceramics on the podium only, with the exception of the cover of *Heksens Håndbog* (The Witch Manual by Danish witch Danny Druehyld), and the delicately illustrated tarot cards, with their shades of green and lilac. Ashtray, mountain crystal, gothic candlestick, scull, grail and knife, all with shiny, black surfaces. Not a hint of soft new age vibe, but rather the appearance of an occult gathering, in which the different objects were ritualistic tools, relics or totems, charged with energy able to awaken hidden aspects and spur on spiritual insight. Esoteric wisdom, historically, has belonged in the dark, in the *occult*, meaning *the hidden*. Hidden because it was only for the chosen few to gain access to the not immediately visible dimensions, and because it takes a certain insight to handle the forces of darkness.<sup>iii</sup>. Closely tied, as they are, to both perdition and death, but also to enlightenment and euphoria. Only by opening up to darkness – to the scars, to trauma, grief, fear, death, even evil – can you acknowledge yourself. From that point on you will have to choose between getting lost in the pain or gaining strength from the wound.

### **The dark goddess.**

In Indian mythology there is a dark goddess, feared by some, worshipped by others. Her skin is blue, her hair long, wild and dark. Around her neck she carries a long necklace adorned with skulls, in her four hands she carries a bloody sword, a decapitated head, a dish collecting the blood from the severed head, and her fourth hand signs a so-called abhaya mudra, meaning: Fear not. Around her waist hangs a skirt of chopped-off arms. And she sticks out her tongue.

Her name is Kali. Kali is connected to time, to destruction and death. The dark mother, as she is also called, Kali – Kala – is connected to darkness, to time and to the origins and expansion of the universe. Before life there was darkness. It was the prerequisite for life to exist. As such she represents the original darkness, the darkness from which we all originate.

Kali possesses a wild, untamed energy, she is blood-thirsty, violent, untamed, erotic – and revolutionary. She possesses the kind of anger it takes for the world to actually change. She is the torchbearer at the front line of riots, showing the way with her sword. She is the courage of young, Iranian women tearing off their scarves, she is the primal mother of rage, refusing to fit into the demands women face about virtue, humility, submission and subdued existence. She is the ultimate *fuck you* to patriarchy!<sup>iv</sup>

Kali sticks out her tongue at our egos, our culture – it is impossible to speak with your tongue out. And she wears the severed heads of the egos she has encountered, like jewellery. Kali reminds us of our primal state of being – before we learn languages, norms and culture – the innermost dark state of our souls.

You immediately recognize the dark energy of Kali in many of Rose Eken's works.

The hair. The ecstasy. The darkness. What message is Kali bringing? And what are the works of Eken essentially saying? It is as much about liberation from repression as it is about the courage to seek out the most sinister corners of the mind? About carrying the darkness with you instead of repressing it? About daring to face death?

For many years, Rose Eken has worked with the image of memento mori, but never before as *deeply dark* as in *And the Forests Dream Eternally*. Here it was not only classic memento mori references like the skull, the peeled lemon, the black bird – but an entire section of urns, some smooth and with crumbling skulls painted onto them, others adorned with pointy ceramic thorns. One urn had a cascade of skulls depicted on one side, while the other side featured a single skull with a plant growing from it. It was Angelica, from its Latin name *Angelica Archangelica*, referencing the legend in which the plant was given to man by the archangel Gabriel who appeared with the herb in his hand as a cure for disease. That is the origin of the name Angelica, meaning the herb of the archangel or simply angel-herb. With this image, the urns change from only having to contain death, to also containing life, and as such transforming from an urn to a kind of (baptismal)font or basin, combining death with resurrection, and portraying nature's cycle. From death also springs new life.

### **And the Forests dream Eternally.**

The exhibition title primarily references a 1995 album by Polish black metal band Behemoth, but also hints at French philosopher Luce Irigaray's beautiful text *Through Vegetal Being*, in which she writes about the forests as the birthplace for original life, and the place where we can rediscover our lost soul. She writes about our roots and the female natural wisdom:

"For a long time, women remained closer to a world of roots. And, especially, those who have been called 'the Witches', who remain faithful to the natural world, the living and the curative properties of which they know. They do not fear the winter because they share terrestrial energy and can feed themselves on the roots that the earth produces at that time."<sup>v</sup>

Within the dark works of Rose Eken there is a distinct connection to these roots: those of the trees, of the growths – as if they laid tangled on the floor beneath the dark flower bouquets on their pedestals. But also, to Eken's own roots and her strong connection to music's darker scenes in the shape of goth, black metal, death. Goth is signified by being sharp, pointed and angular. The depiction of figures expressing either great suffering or wild ecstasy is also a well-known goth identifier. It is also a music genre, goth, which emanated into the space during the exhibition.

This reference to musical inspirational sources and identity formation was portrayed in a row of busts with big, swirling, loose hair. As were the figures caught headbanging during a concert. Or in the midst of ecstasy, devotion, pleasure. Heads placed on podiums, like a

band reaching a musical climax. A vast amount of energy, frozen in the massive force and sensation, that carries on as soon as we turn our backs and close our eyes.

### **The black flowers.**

Another dominating series of works in *And the Forests Dream Eternally*, was a row of podiums featuring dark, ceramic bouquets of flowers. These conjured not only the beauty of the flowers themselves, but all of the many stems and leaves, appearing as wild growths. The flowers were not only adorable ornaments, but demonstrated the other dimension of nature, the poisonous and the deadly. Here were Madder berries, wild growing in Denmark and very poisonous, but there was also Angelica, which, as mentioned, was a medicinal herb and used in the Middle Ages to cure the black plague; especially the root was used for medicinal purposes. There was also Henbane, a poisonous wild plant with sticky hairs, and the beautiful sunflower. Named for the opposite of darkness. The sun. But here it was withered, dark and dead.

Parading in neat rows, the flowers became symbols of both the lushness and impermanence of nature. Just as the flower in art history has traditionally been used both as an ornament and a marker of beauty, but also as a symbol of the fragility of life, a classic memento mori motif. If we only worship the so-called nature for its beauty, and disregard all the rot and death it also circularly processes and creates, it will, in the same way as with ourselves, lead to an enormous, and deeply destructive, imbalance, as eco-activist Gary Snyder writes in the opening quote of this text. We must, as the nature we ourselves are created from and ultimately are identical to, feed on both the light and the dark.

The British philosopher Timothy Morton has described something similar about the dark sides of nature in a number of publications, and writes in his book *Dark Ecology* that dark ecology is a form of ecological consciousness which is dark-depressive. But it is also bittersweet – dark-sweet, and not just nihilistic:

"What is dark ecology? It is ecological awareness, dark-depressing. Yet ecological awareness is also dark-uncanny. And strangely it is dark-sweet. Nihilism is always a number one in the charts these days. We usually don't get past the first darkness, and that's if we even care. In this book we are going to try to get to the third darkness, the sweet one, through the second darkness, the uncanny one. Do not be afraid."<sup>vi</sup>

Don't be afraid. The same message as gestured by Kali's one hand; abhyayamudra, *the gesture of fearlessness*. Fear not!

As Morton writes further into his book, the point is to venture far enough into the dark, so that it doesn't feel claustrophobically enveloping, but clears the way to a new way of perceiving and being:

"At first dark nihilism is depressing. Then it's mysteriously dark. Then it's dark and sweet like chocolate. You find the sweetness inside the depression. Don't fight it. Find a way to tunnel down. Find a way to see how things sparkle all by themselves"<sup>vii</sup>

The works of Rose Eken carry a similar luminous state of mind in the midst of their darkness. Like they were conceived inside the inner-most bleakness of the mind, offering us a guiding light to get there. The easiest way is to just close your eyes. Another way is through art.

- by Maria Kjær Themsen

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<sup>i</sup> Gary Snyder: *Ecopsychology – Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*. Counterpoint, 1995. p. 184

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.information.dk/moti/2021/03/mysteriet-moerkt-stof-fortaeller-lidt-egentlig-ved-universet>

<sup>iii</sup> Suggested reading Wouter J. Hanegraaf: *Esotericism and the Academy – Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, Cambridge, 2012.

<sup>iv</sup> Also read Sally Kempton: *Awakening Shakti – The Transformative Power of the Goddesses of Yoga*. Sounds True, 2013. p. 117-146.

<sup>v</sup> Luce Irigaray: *Through Vegetal Being*. Columbia University Press, 2016. p. 39

<sup>vi</sup> Timothy Morton: *Dark Ecology – For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, Columbia University Press, 2016. p. 5

<sup>vii</sup> Timothy Morton, Op. Cit, p. 117