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ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANIMISM

She imbues her works with stories while simultaneously listening to the material. The result is a kind of magical realism at the intersection of two and three dimensions. Carolina Söderholm travelled to Copenhagen to talk to Hilda Hellström.

In her reliefs, **Hilda Hellström** models a strange world of fossils, mutated plants, and myths. She works with traditional techniques such as marquetry and casting, moving through layers of time like an archaeologist and creating works that combine elements of both research and magical realism. Among her most recent public projects is the monumental work *The Way an Algae Transforms into a Rock* for Stockholm University.

“I’m very interested in how you can imbue an object with stories. To mythologise them, like objects in an archaeological museum,” says Hilda Hellström when I visit her studio in an old industrial and office building in northwestern Copenhagen.

A collection of strange stones and prickly cones lies on the workbench. Leaning against the wall is a series of compelling works she has made from beech trees that fell onto the beach along the dramatic coastline of Møns Klint in Denmark. In the workshop, she saws the fungus-infected wood into thin slices, which she joins together like collages. The fungal growth has given the wood a beautiful marbled surface, making the slices resemble maps of an unknown terrain. From the images she assembles, figures seem to emerge organically from the patterns in the wood.

“I’m a collector. The first time I brought logs home from Møns Klint was in 2016. I’ve returned several times since,” says Hilda Hellström.

Already in her degree project at the Royal College of Art in London in 2012, she allowed the material to shape the story. This time, she worked with radioactive soil from Fukushima, Japan, which she visited one year after the nuclear disaster.

“I got in touch with a rice farmer who had decided to remain in the evacuated area. From his devastated rice fields, we dug up soil that I used to make five different serving vessels. The vessels represented the crops that had been grown in the area.”

Today, Hilda Hellström often works with the plaster-like material jesmonite, which is easy to cast, saw, carve, and polish. She often colours the material with natural pigments such as burnt

umber and green umber. In the workshop, she brings out a piece of lava rock from Vesuvius, whose colour she is now recreating in a cast work.

“Still my work is about excavating stories from materials,” she says as she carefully removes the plastic from a relief she has delicately modelled in clay. It is the model for a bronze medallion portrait of former Swedish Prime Minister **Stefan Löfven**, commissioned by the Swedish Parliament.

“The finished medallion becomes a negative form, somewhat like a photographic negative, where the image is inverted and what is dark becomes light. It becomes an optical illusion, where the light comes from within.”

Making the portrait bulge inward into the bronze is Hilda Hellström’s way of twisting and stretching tradition.

“Art is built on tradition, of course, but it is also about constantly challenging and developing those frameworks. Finding some kind of dialectic between the two. I feel that there are such conservative winds blowing today.”

We discuss the proposals that the liberal-conservative think tanks Timbro and Oikos brought attention to last year. As part of a liberal-conservative programme of ideas ahead of the 2026 Swedish parliamentary election, they propose that Stockholm’s Royal Institute of Art should teach classical art and architecture instead of fine art.

“I work in a way that is very classical and timeless, but in this context I have to introduce something else. I do that through the negative version of the portrait, which is also a risk. When you see the medallion up close, it becomes abstract and distorted, but from a distance the facial features emerge. Stefan Löfven has approved it and thinks it feels right.”

Hilda Hellström was born in 1984 in Bohuslän and can see how she has been shaped both by growing up close to nature and by her parents’ professions. Her sensitivity to craft is an inheritance from her father, who was a carpenter, while, like her mother, who worked as a psychotherapist, she thinks associatively.

“I like the phenomenological approach, going up to a work and experiencing what is in front of you. I’m interested in finding technical solutions that aren’t obvious to people. In there being an uncertainty about how something was made, an ambiguity in the aesthetic. But I’ve realised that sometimes I have to explain myself,” says Hilda Hellström.

For this reason, she has created a narrative framework for this autumn’s exhibition at Berg Gallery in Stockholm. It revolves around a mythical island in the North Atlantic called Urdabryn.

“The story goes that only two documented expeditions have ever reached the island, so it has more or less remained untouched by human contact. The flora and fauna of Urdabryn have

developed an intelligence that is roughly five times higher than that of the same species in our reality. You could say that the exhibition is like a material library from this island."

She describes the island's name as something that suddenly came to her, with Urdabryn etymologically traceable to Urd, the Old Norse goddess of fate.

"The exhibition is called *At the Edge of Fate, on the Brink of Primordial Time*, which can be interpreted as where we find ourselves today. I think about how everything is moving so fast, how quickly we receive information. It's about time and perspective, about seeing humanity in relation to a rock. Or how there were ideas in antiquity that are just as relevant today."

On a bench in the workshop, *Ode to a Diatom* is taking shape in clay. Hilda Hellström has meticulously depicted a normally microscopic organism which, in the mythical island's distorted hierarchy of plants, has become gigantic. The title alludes to the poem *Ode to a Nightingale* by **John Keats**, one of the foremost poets of the English Romantic movement. In other works featuring giant leaves and cones, she has drawn on the real-life Chilean rhubarb plant.

"I like playing with what is real and what is invented, and I'm very fond of the magical realism found in Latin American art and literature. The exhibition about Urdabryn is about material having agency, a capacity to act. About there being an intelligence created by non-human beings. It touches partly on animism and nature mysticism."

Here, Hilda Hellström sees a connection between contemporary ecophilosophical movements and her own interest in relinquishing some control over the artistic process. This can mean giving it over to non-human actors, to the forces of chance or gravity, or to plants, stones, and animals. Above all, it means being attentive to what the material is telling you.

From a shelf, she takes down a gnarled burl, a tree branch that has grown back into itself, forming a knot.

"I'm going to carve it so that the burl takes on even more of the shape of a brain. It fits so beautifully with the animistic aspect, the idea of a thinking nature," says Hilda Hellström.

Carolina Söderholm
Writer and critic, recurring contributor to *Konstperspektiv*