

The Science of Imaginary Solutions
Etage Projects
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Bird, hand, vessel and void, Swedish artist Hilda Hellström explores the poetic and transformative capacities of materials through contrasting narratives and artistic methods. The process of creating, of manipulating and giving form to material, is a continuous confirmation of being and belonging in the world for Hellström. It is a physical and emotional insistence on her own existence, as an artist and living body. The Science of Imaginary Solutions is a demonstration of the energy, poetry and curiosity feeding her practice and visible in the many ways she casts and carves, makes and imagines.

Hilda Hellström's artistic practice is grounded in a profound interest in narratives and how they shape our perception of nature and the materials surrounding us. She works to question and break down traditional material hierarchies and categories, blurring the lines between what we consider 'real' or 'natural' and man-made or artificial. Through timely and meticulous craftsmanship she makes synthetic materials look natural and geological materials look synthetic, — i.e. by hand casting objects in an acrylic-based plaster, to mimic properties of marble and other stones. These transformative processes are reflections of her interest in the relationship between time and material, between chance and control, questioning her own perception of reality.

The exhibition title The Science of Imaginary Solutions is inspired by French writer Alfred Jarry's (1873–1907) literary trope 'pataphysics' — a type of philosophy or science examining imaginary phenomena existing in a world beyond metaphysics. Originally meant as a canny mockery to the rapid growth of popularisation in the 19th century, Alfred Jarry assigned meaning to the intuitive and the irrational. Subsequently, both Dadaists and Surrealists found inspiration in the quasi-science and artists like Miró and Duchamps joined the group of practitioners praising the irrational, useless, unconscious and the power of the imaginary. In the same manner, pataphysics endows meaning to Hellström by providing a type of terminology to an artistic practice falling outside traditional categories of craft making. By dismantling the conventional categories of material and craft, Hellström has left tradition, and thereby definition. As she is developing new techniques based on the unplanned, creating new realities based on the factitious, pataphysics gives Hellström a vocabulary. Always in process, and refusing to be defined, her works become beautiful hybrids existing in their own right, as imaginary solutions.

There is an inherent dynamic in Hilda Hellström's work, embracing and solidifying the transformative qualities in both material and process. There is a quiver, a constant tension, between form and material as the work oscillates between different states of being. Hellström works with suggestive typologies to reveal biased perceptions or expectations — a glimpse of a handle that can't be used, a ball that can never roll, a vessel with no void — she makes to unmake.

A series of ascending columns, plinths and sculptural objects form a body of intersecting, abstract material relationships. Symbolically reflecting Hellström's artistic process and the ongoing negotiation between hand, machine and material. They are alive, in-between stages, where the almost architectural features grow and multiply, connect and disconnect. One is the shadow of the other, interdependent in its making, simultaneously revealing container and content, capsule and incapsulated. Symbiotic figures; the vessel grows out of the plinth, one shape joins the other in perfect balance between tension and harmony, they are all in the process of becoming, of settling in to the world.

Hilda Hellström is fascinated by how geology and natural forces have the ability to provide a glimpse of the origin of the world and reveal how it is in constant movement. The interest in geology is linked to her preoccupation with sedimentary and metamorphic materials, and how they carry different narratives and connotations depending on their state. From plants to peat, from coal to anthracite — from graphite to diamond — materials travel through stages of 'waste', 'fake', 'real' and 'exclusive'. The story of time is layered in them, revealing a narrative of their journey through the world and through their various categorisations. Hellström consciously works with traces of process to portray how everything is in transformation, part of its own now, before and after.

Like an intersection of a mountainside, layers of acrylic reinforced plaster and pigment form benches to sit. Gravity has made formations like mountains and valleys in their surface as they have been made up-side-down. By the benches, Hellström's film *Malleability* is being projected. Colourful sceneries of synthetic material performing, reacting and operating, the film indulges in the inherent qualities of transformative materials. Styrofoam boils, isocyanate and polyol resin foams and become almost organic, growth-like substances. Sitting on the bench you become part of the scenery, part of Hellström's narrative — a perfect reflection of the age of the Anthropocene — is there any part of nature that is completely 'natural', completely unmarked by human action?

The more figurative compositions of Hellström's practice is rooted in a type of contemporary Romanticism. Romanticism was an intellectual and artistic movement which arose as a reactionary response against the scientific rationalisation of nature during the Enlightenment. Romanticists believed in nature as a pure and spiritual source of renewal, and a necessary contrast to the material changes in society. American romanticist Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) wrote in 1854 the later-turned-classic 'Walden, or Life in the Woods', about his two years of sparse living amidst woodlands by Walden Pond, Massachusetts. The work can be seen as performance art and has become a symbol of the transcendental capacities of nature and human development. Inspired by Thoreau and the romanticists, Hildan Hellström composes transversing narratives bridging man and nature, the metaphysical and material. Hellström is a geologist, an anthropologist, as she gathers and collects, protects and preserves sticks, stones and objects from her travels and beyond. One special find can direct a whole story as Hellström provides it with new narratives and adopts it into her world.

With a collection of pieces in the show, Hellström envisages an imaginary jamboree taking place at Walden Pond. A jamboree of scouts are gathering to follow in the footsteps of Thoreau and live in pact with nature. Hellström has made walking sticks for them to bring on their hikes. The head of the stick, a mythical looking bird man, Hellström found in the collection of Hallands Konstmuseum, Sweden, during her research for a site-specific commission. The head is dated 1200 BC, and Hellström borrowed it to make a mould from it to crown the sticks.

The find was like a token of the spiritual and transformative abilities of nature — man turns to bird, bird turns to man. The bird is an embodiment of the limitations of man and has through time been assigned all kinds of mythical powers — as a deliverer of omens, a symbol of wisdom/knowledge, freedom, death, rebirth and more. The bird almost becomes symbolic of Hellström herself and her artistic practice — a symbol of the unchained. Hanging from the ceiling are lighting paths of silicone with found objects inside, collected from nature. The three sculptures Extensions, Intimacy and The Uncanny Animist are symbols of the symbiosis between man and nature. Branches, leaves and flowers growing from human hands are like continuations of the physical body, expanding mind and spirit.

Due to tourism and climate change, Walden pond today is far from its 'crystalline purity' described by Thoreau. At Walden pond you just have to look in to its surface to see yourself.

Nanna Balslev Strøjer