

**HANNE TYRMI:  
ONCE UPON A TIME I SAW THE SHAME**

Text by Ida Kierulf

*Too close was I to things,  
so that I burned my way through  
and stand on the other side of them*

Gunvor Hofmo, *From Another Reality*

*Once upon a time I saw the shame* – the title of Hanne Tyrmi's exhibition sounds like the beginning of a dark fairy tale. An expectation of magical enchantment is immediately turned into a distorted image – a gloomy upside-down world. The sculptures inhabiting the exhibition appear simultaneously familiar and alien, objects with a ghostly presence that seem frozen in time. The lead that runs through Tyrmi's work is poignant; it settles like a numb film over all things. In the exhibition, lead plays a central role; it folds and bends, it encapsulates and envelops, but what is enclosed appears as cracks and traces on the surface. The shame seeps through.

It is as if Hanne Tyrmi sees potential in the objects that surround us, she opens them up and gives them other possibilities, a new physiognomy. The surfaces of the world, everything we imprint with our memories and experiences, are visualised through her unique approach to materials. The artist *hammers* painful experiences into the materials and gives emotions tactile form. Like memory images from a darkened subconscious, the works evoke a sense of recognition in us and open gaps in our remembrance. They are like *images we never saw until we remembered them*<sup>1</sup>. The beds, the shelves, the bathtub – it is as if the senses and experiences of childhood stick to the objects, and can be awakened at any moment. The objects speak.

In *The room next door*, two frail mattresses made of lead are stacked vertically against the wall like mummified objects from an archaeological excavation, or from the ruins of a war zone. The work visualises an experience of the porous boundaries between refuge and threat, between reality and unreality. The bed and sleep are portals to a dark and distorted reality: *Sleep opens within us an inn for phantoms. In the morning we must sweep out the shadows.*<sup>2</sup>

Ghostly too are the eerie green bronze sculptures *Les fleurs du mal – The flowers of evil*. Like subterranean flora or flowers in a nightmare, they seem to grow through the floor surface on metallic stems. The blunt shapes and corroded, wound-like surfaces suggest something brutal and violent. The title of the work is taken from Charles Baudelaire's cycle of poems from 1857, which deals with the filth and ugliness of the world, and the extraction of beauty from the hideous. In the poem *The alchemy of sorrow*, the poet reflects upon the transformative power of grief and how it can transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. With its fusion of two contradictory concepts, the title emphasises the ambiguity in Baudelaire's universe, which is also present in Tyrmi's: *You gave me your mud and I turned it into gold*.

What is revealed and what is concealed, what is truth and what is a lie in a human life? These are questions that recur in Tyrmi's work and in this exhibition. The lead bags in the exhibition space harbour dark secrets. In *The seven lies*, with its biblical associations to human virtues and vices, flakes of lead are folded into shelf-like structures along the wall. Seven lies, one for each day of the week, are neatly wrapped. A cloth of lead floats weightlessly in the space in *Wrapping the brittle mind*. The work conveys a sense of something as fragile as an eggshell, ready to shatter if

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin: *The Work of Passage*, 1927-1940

<sup>2</sup> Gaston Bachelard: *The Poetics of Space*, 1958

packed too tightly. In the piece *Through another reality*, it is as if the surface finally cracks and bursts apart from the inside.

A lightbulb in dark bronze titled *Black sun* hovers overhead in the exhibition space, and here too, the ambiguity of Tyrmi's art comes to the fore. The black sun is a well-known art historical and literary symbol of melancholy, described in Julia Kristeva's book on depression: *Where does this black sun come from? Out of what eerie galaxy do its invisible, lethargic rays reach me, pinning me down to the ground, to my bed, compelling me to silence, to renunciation?*<sup>3</sup> A prosaic lightbulb is transformed into a devouring vanishing point. Yet, there is something hopeful here: darkness not only consumes light, but also creates it.

At the back of the exhibition space, we find the work that gives the exhibition its title, *Once upon a time I saw the shame*. A copper bathtub – polished and gleaming on the inside, matte and corroded on the outside – is encased in an industrial pipework that seems to loop endlessly. Both mental and physical waste seem to be trapped in a perpetual cycle, with no promise of outlet or purification. The shame keeps returning.

Nevertheless, a glowing interior remains preserved, something noble, deep inside. Perhaps this is where the power of Tyrmi's artistry lies; to see potential in the world, to visualise collective experiences, and to transform pain into a conception of light.

*What is the meaning of life? That was all a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years, the great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead, there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one.*

Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

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<sup>3</sup> Julia Kristeva: *Black Sun – Depression and Melancholia*, 1987