

Re-enchanting the world in Hypnotikon

A few years ago we kept a pet mantis named Etera. She was a tiny demon of considerable beauty. Her body was a flowery pink with white dots and chlorophyll-green hind legs. Unlike an ant or other common insects, she was keenly aware of our existence – turning her head 180 degrees and looking at us straight in the eye. After she molted, the old exoskeleton hung like a ghostly jewel amongst the twigs. Emerging from this process she was weak but hungry. We fed her mosquitoes caught in our apartment. Releasing them into her subtropical glass cube felt like a ritual sacrifice. After catching them with her pink mandibles she would first bite their heads off and then eat the rest of the body. After feeding she would dance joyously. It was a mythic drama in miniature.

When I first met Ohlsson/Dit-Cilinn they were constructing an incubator of their own. A mythic reality in which they could eat, dream and work. The site was a series of cabins located by Lake Siljan in Dalarna. Arriving there I was struck by an intense smell, like burnt hair, invading my nostrils. The artists were carving a moose skull and were filling the spring air with odorous dust.

I compared the artists' place of work to a terrarium. While this is apt in terms of teasing out certain aspects of reality, it was not a hermetically sealed space. Rather it cultivated openness to the rich scenery in which the cabins were nestled. The lake, the forest, the empty summerhouses with their deserted trampolines, a burnt down sawmill turned skate park turned weedy lot, where plants like mugwort and henbane grew. The latter provided the show with its title. Henbane or hypnotikon is a medicinal plant in the Solanaceae family whose usage dates back thousands of years. The plant induces a kind of delirium, which is said to have inspired the reveries of the Delphic Oracle and gave the medieval witches their flight. In this dreamlike state, voids are no longer empty but sentient and observing. The fine hairs of the body become a landscape of tentacles and the unseen presences of the forest clot the senses. The artists take these experiences to heart and view them as a valid spectrum of cognition.

Walking along the moss-laden trails of this area I get a sense of the intimate textures and gestures at work in Hypnotikon. The crumbling concrete buried in pine needles, the iridescent beetles burrowing in dung and the scales of a pine cone feasted upon by a squirrel. But there are other presences here. Power lines sing to the flattened frogs on the road, crows scavenge among the garbage and a network of fiber mingles with the mycelium in the soil. The artists aim to integrate an experience of being part of this living landscape. Not just the rural idyll but the technosphere in all its radiance as well. These are works of deliberate re-enchantment. A vital practice, since it is only when nothing is considered sacred that the destruction of the biosphere has been able to occur.