



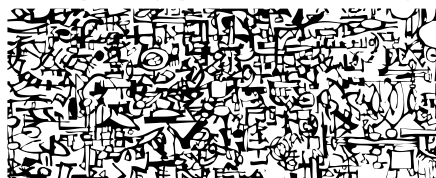
STEFANBLOM

DShK

DEGTYARYOVA

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KRUPNOKALIBERNY



STEFAN **BLOM**

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Portrait of Stefan Blom. Courtesy of French photographer Emmanuel Sarnin.

A Long Time in the Making. Stefan Blom was born in 1963 and I have known him for more than twenty years, for as long as I have been visiting South Africa. We first met in 1993 and each year, almost without fail, I have visited Stefan at his Cape Town studio, first at home and then, as now, on the once unfashionable Commercial Street. From my annual visits and our conversations, it is very clear that the eleven life-size sculptural figures that make up the full body of his current work have been a long time coming, and that there is nothing opportune in terms of their arrival at this time. The number of years and his studio environment are I believe important in terms of the realisation of this latest body of work. Stefan's studio is indeed an archive of their realisation, in which he can trace - across the walls, through the stacks, cupboards and drawers - a set of themes and forms back to his earliest work, which he began to develop as an art student in the 1980s, after national service and leaving the military in 1983. These reoccurring forms and themes have been reiterated, reworked and reused over time, perhaps not as an obsession but as a sustained project to find a fitting form for a number of what one can only suspect are concerns that are personal and deeply pressing. Only one of the eleven figures from this collection has a reassuring singularity of form and is, in a sense, above suspicion, in that it has little trace of past concerns. Varaahi, the elegant, pale yellow dog or sow with such beautiful human ears, has an independence and clarity denied all the other figures. The other ten are each somewhat suspicious and disjointed composites, immobile on either their retro cartoon-like pedestals or fixed tripod legs. They each bring together sculptural forms, components, costumes and types of manufacture that do not always sit comfortably with one another. Grey and somewhat roughened sculptural surfaces sit alongside the pale flesh-pink plastic smoothness of a mannequin, alongside flawless and impervious high gloss bright yellow or blue used for elements that appear to reference cartoon illustrations or animations. The faces of dolls or masks have been manufactured to appear as though they have been appropriated, then scorched or scarified, then adhered to the figures with varying degrees of integration. Metal military components have again been manufactured to become both costume and prosthetic, again integrated to varying degrees - from the technically seamless to the forcefully inserted.

There is without doubt a Frankenstein quality to these figures, pieced together from what might look initially like left over bits and pieces. However, everything here is, on closer inspection, evidently manufactured by the artist, with a craftsman's painstaking care to production and construction. There is also without doubt a binding and confusion of gender and sexuality, a deployment and awareness of objectification that is both compelling and disturbing. However, this coming together of diverse forms and languages from popular, artistic and military cultures, with different degrees of integration, is not simply a post-modern possibility, but in this carefully constructed context deeply unsettling or disturbing. In terms of South African art this is obviously not without precedent, and indeed it is hard to avoid Jane Alexander's *Butcher Boys* and her own subsequent strange range of characters. To me as a visitor, looking from somewhere else, Stefan's work feels quite intimately related to the South African context of its production and the unimaginable experience of a generation, of men in this case, to which the artist belongs. However, his figures refuse this kind of literalism and purposefully disturb and unsettle as those in a dream or nightmare, in which the play of condensation and displacement, metaphor and metonymy, make the meaning just beyond our grasp. And, as with dreams, attempts to bind just one meaning to these figures risks the dull banality of all interpretations.

The suspicion that these figures and these matters are in some way personal is very powerful but no satisfactory confirmation is provided by the artist, by the context or by the work itself. Reviews and critical engagements with Stefan's work often struggle explicitly to find the words to adequately represent his work and what it really is about. Indeed, reviewers repeatedly imply that there may be no words for these figures, hinting at something universal or too extreme that might be beyond representation. Whilst I do not entirely disagree with this understanding, I would like to suggest that rather than there being no words, there are for this artist a few words and number of forms through which the question of what the work is about can be both explored and eventually displaced or disguised, rather than resolved. For me, the work - and our annual conversations - generate intrusive questions that I, as a guest in his studio (let alone in his country) feel reluctant to ask, let alone answer, let alone answer for him beyond those provided by his own work. This reluctance or reticence is of course in part my own, but not entirely. It is also both personal and socially required, particular to this artist and to a South African context and more generally applicable to all potentially disturbing memories and histories. I guess what I am suggesting is that this body of work, this family of figures, this defeated platoon, is some form of coming to terms, of working through, the details of something that may be too extreme or persistent or personal, or simply not our business. **Professor Simon Ofield-Kerr, Vice Chancellor, University for the Creative Arts.**

DUSHKA (880 mm x 2100 mm x 880 mm fibreglass with polyester resin as the plastic matrix, mild steel and 2k polyurethane paint). *DShK or Dushka is described chillingly as "the sort of weapon that writes love letters in blood" by authors Richard Marcinko and Jim DeFelice in their book "Rogue Warrior: Curse of the Infidel".* Dushka is the first sculpture - one of eleven - in Blom's body of work titled DShK, which was originally exhibited in a South African gallery in 2015. Both the titles of the body of work and the individual sculpture reference the 1930 Soviet weapon Degtyaryova-Shpagina Krupnokaliberny, a heavy machine gun nicknamed Dushka, Russian for "sweetie", still in use today. Dushka is one of nine sculptures concerned with the archetypal feminine found in the ancient goddesses who possess both the power to engender life and to destroy it. Blom's focus on the instinctual feminine reflects his strong identification with inherent female power. Dushka also sets the tone and theme for the sculptures that follow. Both it and subsequent sculptures contain both a grappling with the effects of personal trauma and the recognition of its presence in the volatile political and social conditions found in his own country and globally. This body of work also illustrates and celebrates the sculptor's peaking mastery of construction and technical skills.



For Blom, as for most visual artists his “vocabulary has predominately been that of endless colours and shapes” and for him “visual communication has always been a tool with which I could express not only my emotions but also views and perceptions of the world”. An idea can take a long time to germinate. In the case of Dushka it took Blom 20 years or a fifth of a century before it was realised in a sculptural form. This sculpture has its beginning in the artist’s compulsory military conscription at a time in the history of South Africa where all able young white men were forced into a two-year military programme to protect the country against the perceived threat of communism. Part of the training was familiarising the soldiers with Soviet weapons as they could be used against them by the enemy. It was during a lecture on Soviet weapons that Blom was first introduced to the Degtyaryova-Shpagina Krupnokaliberny (DShK) or “sweetie”, an ironic term of endearment for a weapon of death and destruction and one which suggests the intimate relationship soldiers are encouraged to have with their weapons by some of those in command. For as Blom explains, the weapon is all you have between yourself and death at the hands of your enemy. In their book “Rogue Warrior: Curse of the Infidel” authors Richard Marcinko and Jim DeFelice chillingly describe the DShK as “the sort of weapon that writes love letters in blood. “

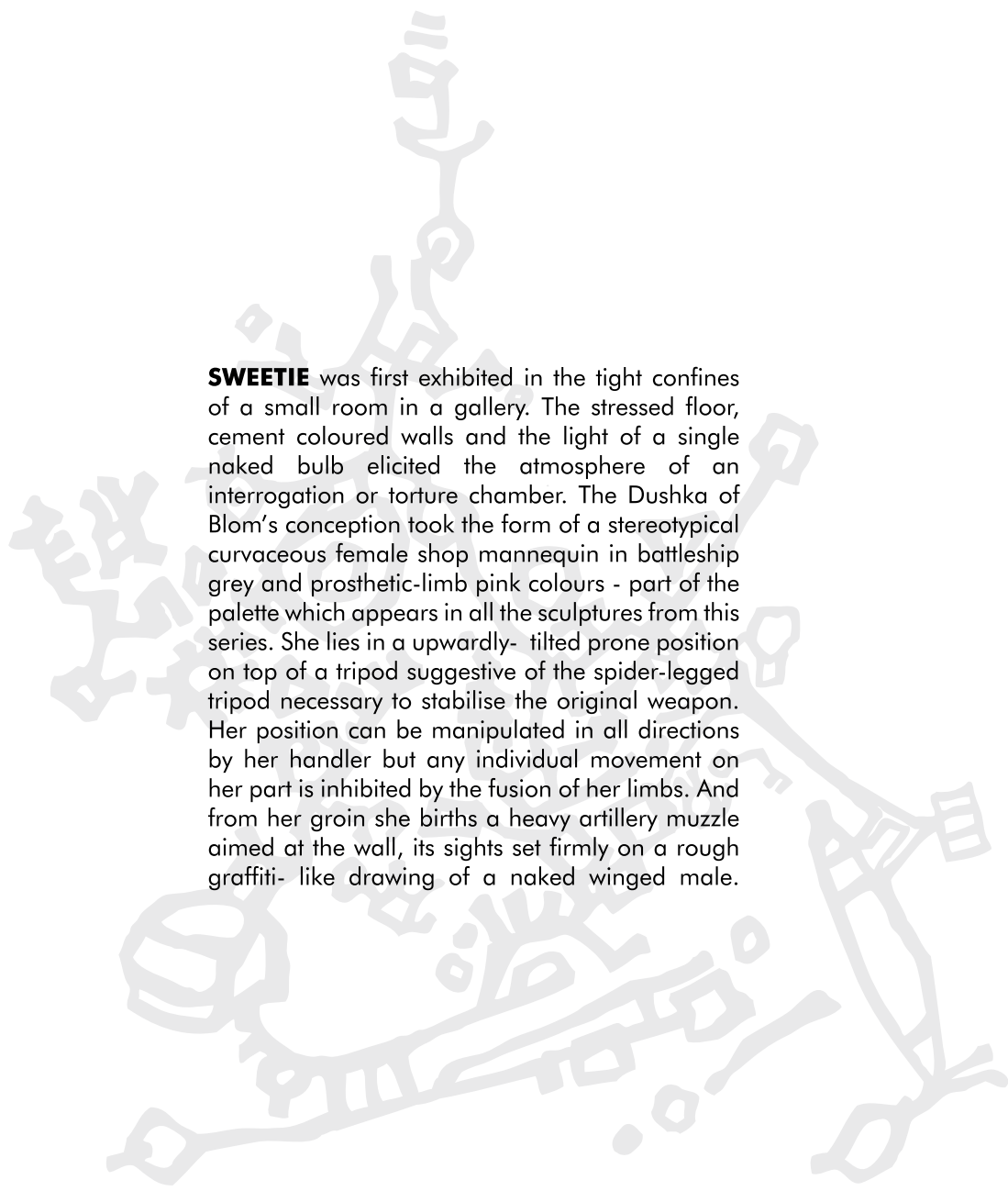




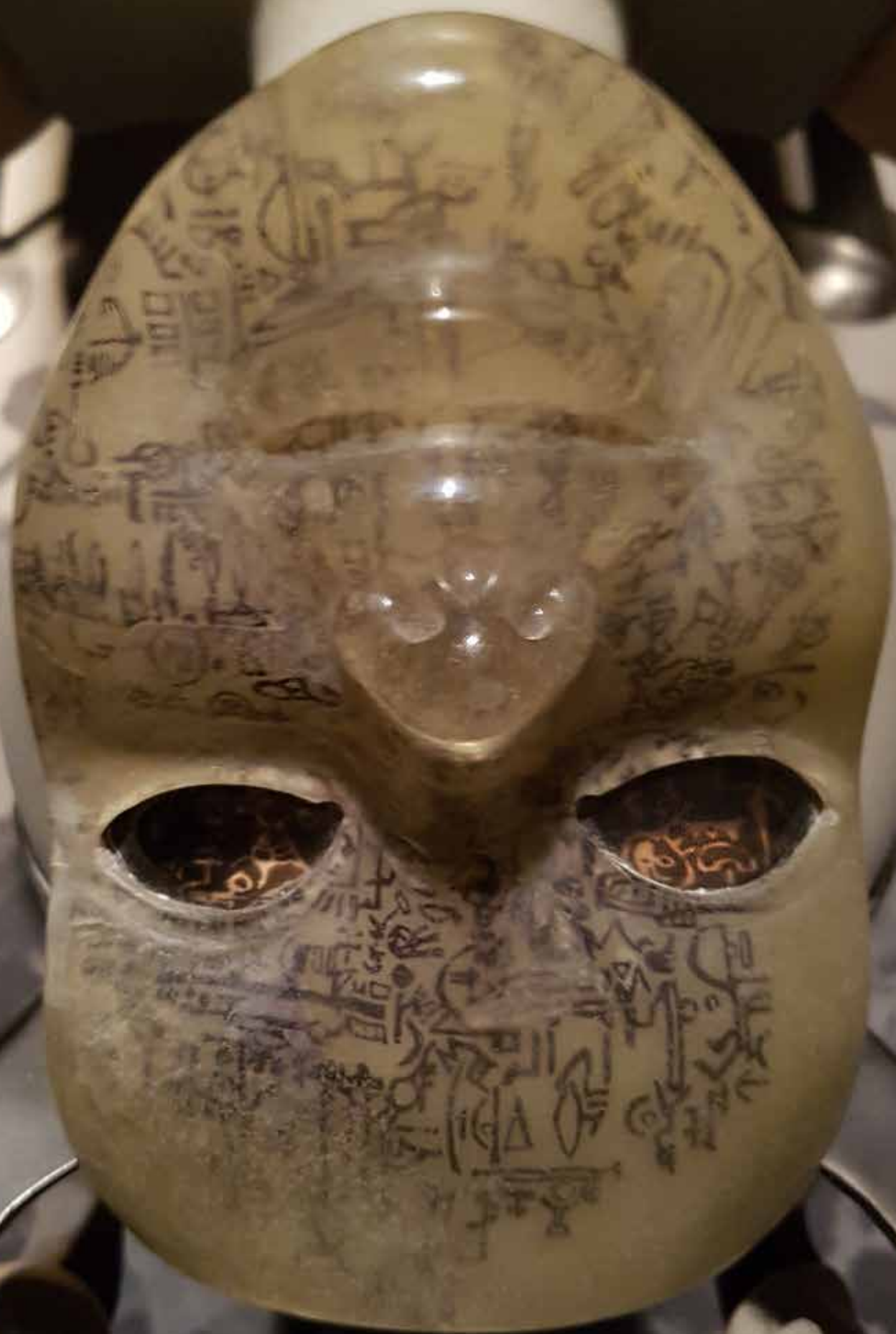






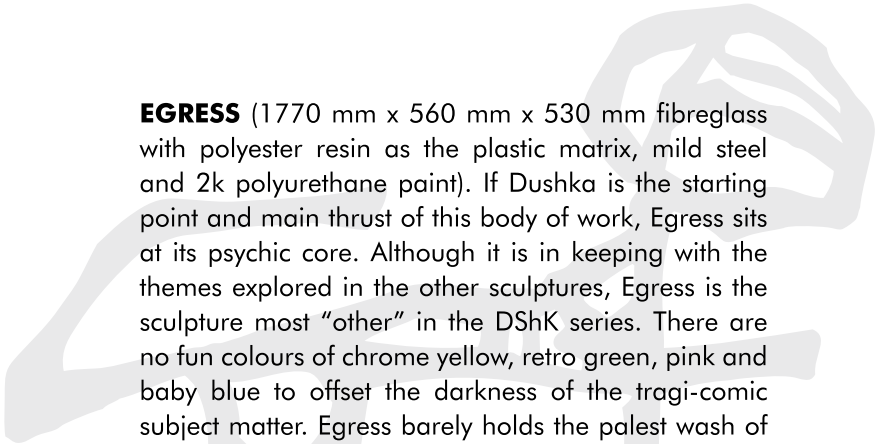


SWEETIE was first exhibited in the tight confines of a small room in a gallery. The stressed floor, cement coloured walls and the light of a single naked bulb elicited the atmosphere of an interrogation or torture chamber. The Dushka of Blom's conception took the form of a stereotypical curvaceous female shop mannequin in battleship grey and prosthetic-limb pink colours - part of the palette which appears in all the sculptures from this series. She lies in a upwardly- tilted prone position on top of a tripod suggestive of the spider-legged tripod necessary to stabilise the original weapon. Her position can be manipulated in all directions by her handler but any individual movement on her part is inhibited by the fusion of her limbs. And from her groin she births a heavy artillery muzzle aimed at the wall, its sights set firmly on a rough graffiti- like drawing of a naked winged male.









EGRESS (1770 mm x 560 mm x 530 mm fibreglass with polyester resin as the plastic matrix, mild steel and 2k polyurethane paint). If Dushka is the starting point and main thrust of this body of work, Egress sits at its psychic core. Although it is in keeping with the themes explored in the other sculptures, Egress is the sculpture most “other” in the DShK series. There are no fun colours of chrome yellow, retro green, pink and baby blue to offset the darkness of the tragi-comic subject matter. Egress barely holds the palest wash of embryo pink with the strongest pigment of dark indigo colouring at the sculpture’s base. Whereas all other DShK sculptures are based on the adult figure, this is the only one that suggests the attributes of a small human “child”. There are no heady conceptual inversions or subversions, for Egress is a direct exploration of the at risk, vulnerable human being. Egress could be seen as having psychically birthed all the other sculptures.



Egress's small, distended, two-part body, is shaped like an old fashioned spinning top, rests surreally on barely supporting, spindly tripod legs which end in a semi-circular base. In keeping with the sculptural approach of 'DShk', 'Egress' is without arms and feet. Blom has given it a perforated gas mask nozzle in place of a nose and mouth. The locus of pain is not in the eyes which are sealed behind a clear skin of resin and look impassively out onto the world, but at the sculpture's base. The pain lies in the half-ball, the colour of a mottled, indigo bruise marked with threads of diluted red. The psychic wounding may have come from outside but it manifests inwardly. If one is to look carefully through the gaps of translucency created by the pictoglyphs of Blom's private language written on Egress's body, you will catch glimpses of a group of fighting toy soldiers –a self at war with itself. The toxic fallout of this internal civil war seems to be funnelled out through a small pipe on the underside of Egress's body. It falls directly below into the slotted drain located in the base of the sculpture onto which the sculptor has written the words "exit only". Egress means "to exit". But in this incarnation there is no indication of a way out. The internal war and the fallout will continue.

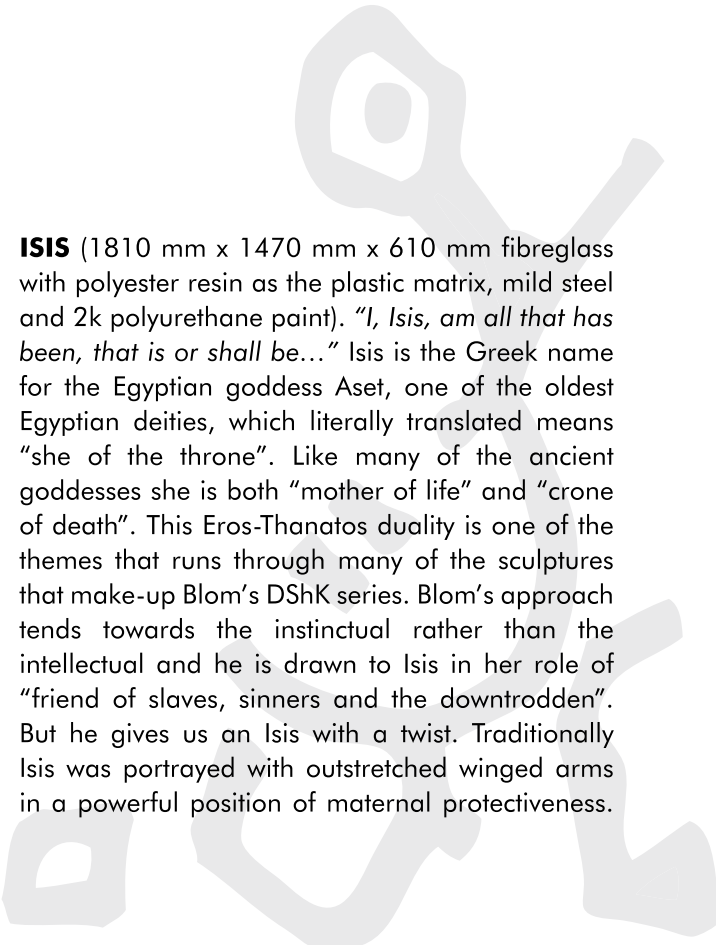










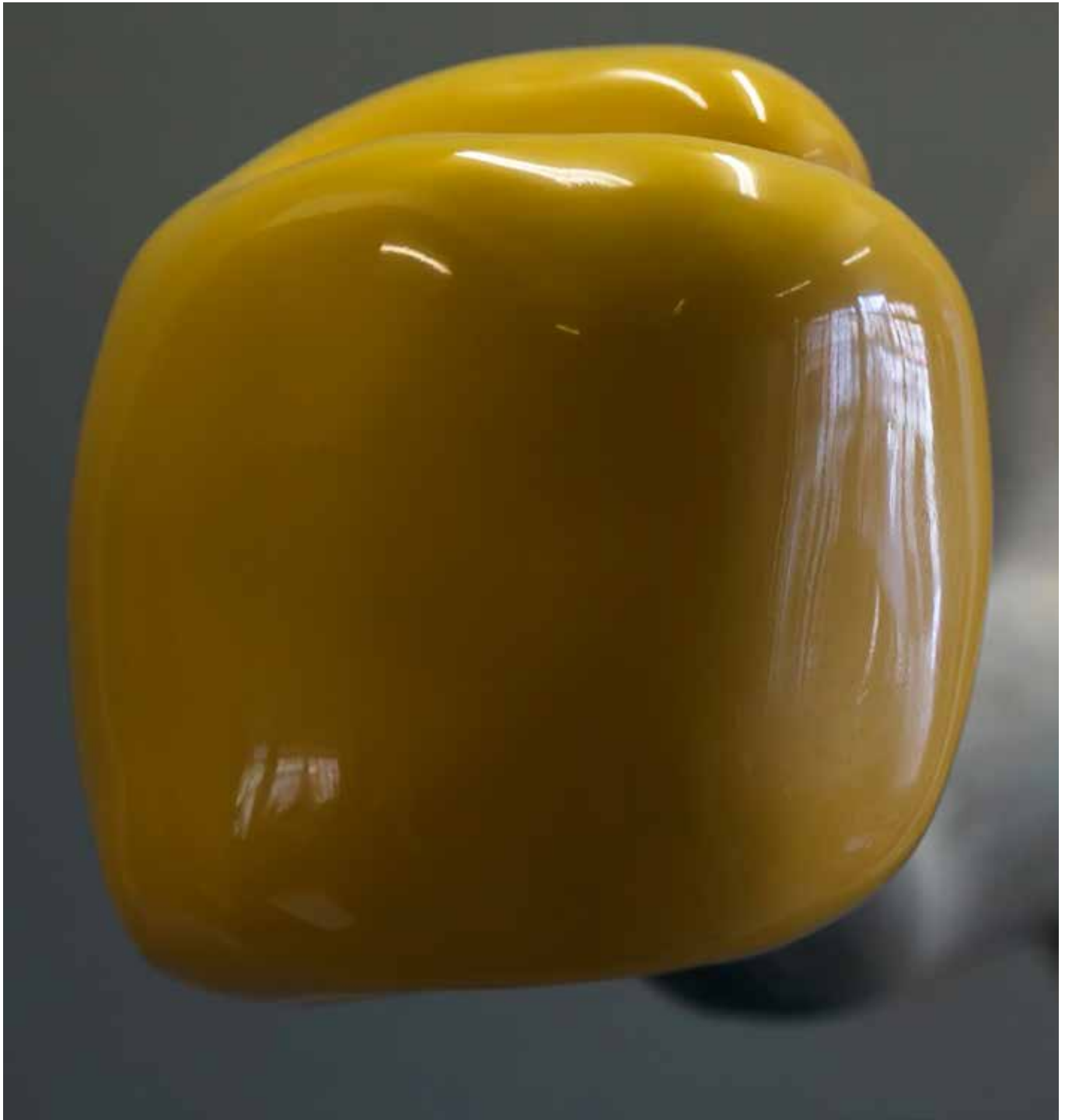


ISIS (1810 mm x 1470 mm x 610 mm fibreglass with polyester resin as the plastic matrix, mild steel and 2k polyurethane paint). *"I, Isis, am all that has been, that is or shall be..."* Isis is the Greek name for the Egyptian goddess Aset, one of the oldest Egyptian deities, which literally translated means "she of the throne". Like many of the ancient goddesses she is both "mother of life" and "crone of death". This Eros-Thanatos duality is one of the themes that runs through many of the sculptures that make-up Blom's DShK series. Blom's approach tends towards the instinctual rather than the intellectual and he is drawn to Isis in her role of "friend of slaves, sinners and the downtrodden". But he gives us an Isis with a twist. Traditionally Isis was portrayed with outstretched winged arms in a powerful position of maternal protectiveness.



In Blom's sculpture her outstretched arms are wingless and end in a pair of absurdly oversized, bright yellow boxing gloves, the same colour as domestic rubber gloves used in kitchens. Although the gloves signify aggression there is something absurd, even mocking in their brightness and size, reducing her goddess status or powerful female role to that of the tragi-comic. This approach is furthered by her shop mannequin body - a form used in all of Blom's female sculptures from this body of work. The insertion of a partial mask suggestive of comic characters on her distorted face makes her a comic rendition of herself. The strange inclusion of a half circle of metal thorns suggestive of the crucifixion completes the disjuncture. Although her double row of breasts would suggest her fertility referencing the rows of fertile pupas found on the statues of Diana of Ephesus, it is hard to believe in her ability to nurture. There is no evidence of Horus her son traditionally shown suckling at her breast which historians cite as the prototype icon for the Christian Madonna child iconography. Instead the ball which encases her feet and prevents her agency is not her familial cow, but a small pig wearing a tie in a pose of adoration.

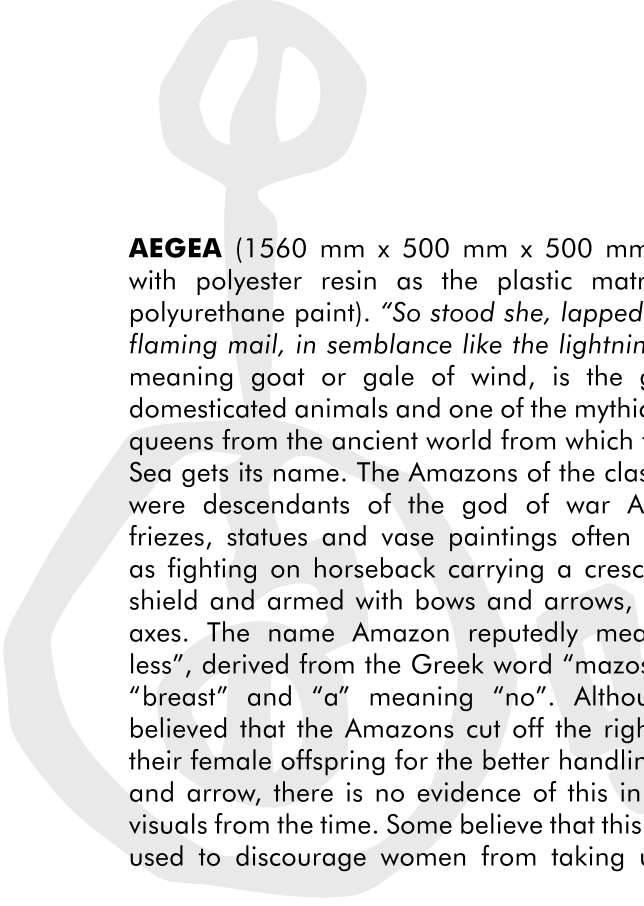




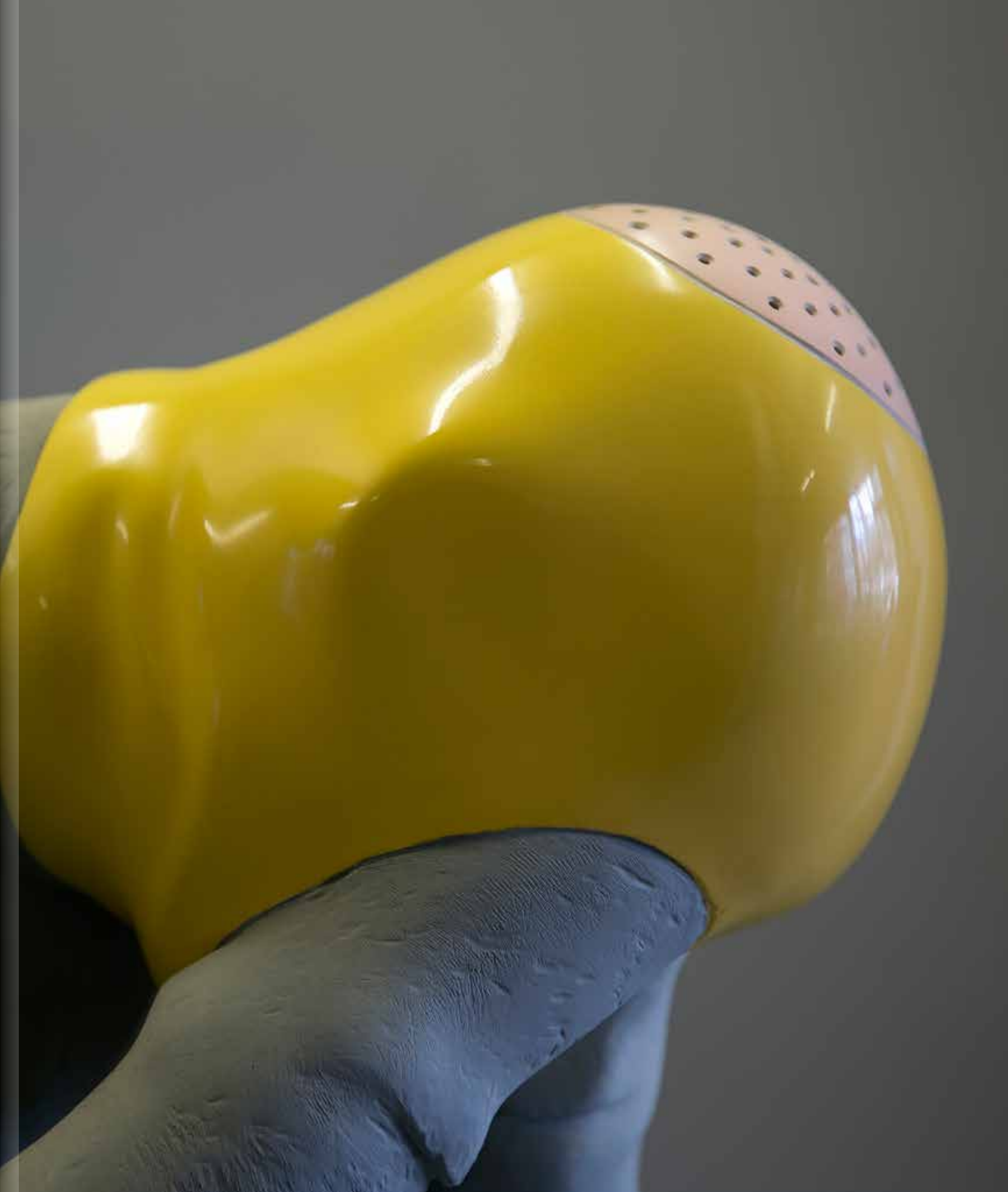








AEGEA (1560 mm x 500 mm x 500 mm fibreglass with polyester resin as the plastic matrix and 2k polyurethane paint). *"So stood she, lapped about with flaming mail, in semblance like the lightning"*. Aegea, meaning goat or gale of wind, is the goddess of domesticated animals and one of the mythical Amazon queens from the ancient world from which the Aegean Sea gets its name. The Amazons of the classical world were descendants of the god of war Ares. Greek friezes, statues and vase paintings often show them as fighting on horseback carrying a crescent-shaped shield and armed with bows and arrows, spears and axes. The name Amazon reputedly means "breast less", derived from the Greek word "mazos" meaning "breast" and "a" meaning "no". Although it was believed that the Amazons cut off the right breast of their female offspring for the better handling of a bow and arrow, there is no evidence of this in any of the visuals from the time. Some believe that this was a story used to discourage women from taking up archery.



The role of the Amazon in ancient Greek society has been interpreted by some contemporary classical scholars as providing a "negative role model" or warning to those going against the dictates of the patriarchy. They may have lived outside of society's patriarchal mores, and rejected traditional marriage and male offspring, yet it has been pointed out that there is no record of them winning any battles against Greece. Bound in grey swaddling she is portrayed in an attitude of deep distress. She holds her handleless arms up to her featureless face, her head encased in a tightly fitting yellow chrome hood. Blom's Aegea has both her highly stylised exposed breasts intact and in the vicinity of her womb, the face mask of a doll-like infant. Like many of Blom's sculptures, Aegea carries a heroine's name but is not heroic. His Aegea will never lead others into battle. For the feet from her bound legs end in the half medicine ball shape that typifies many of Blom's sculptures.



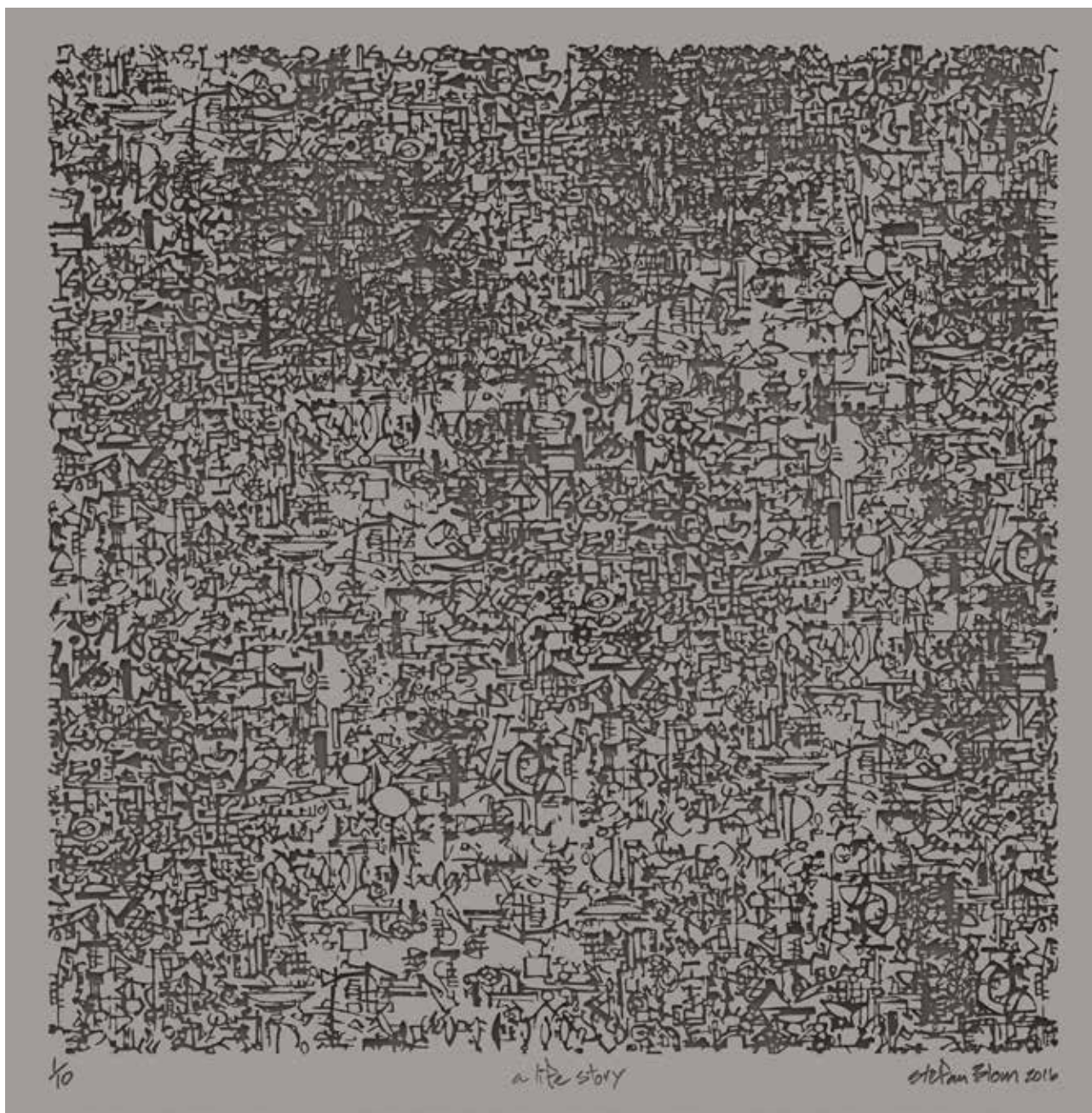








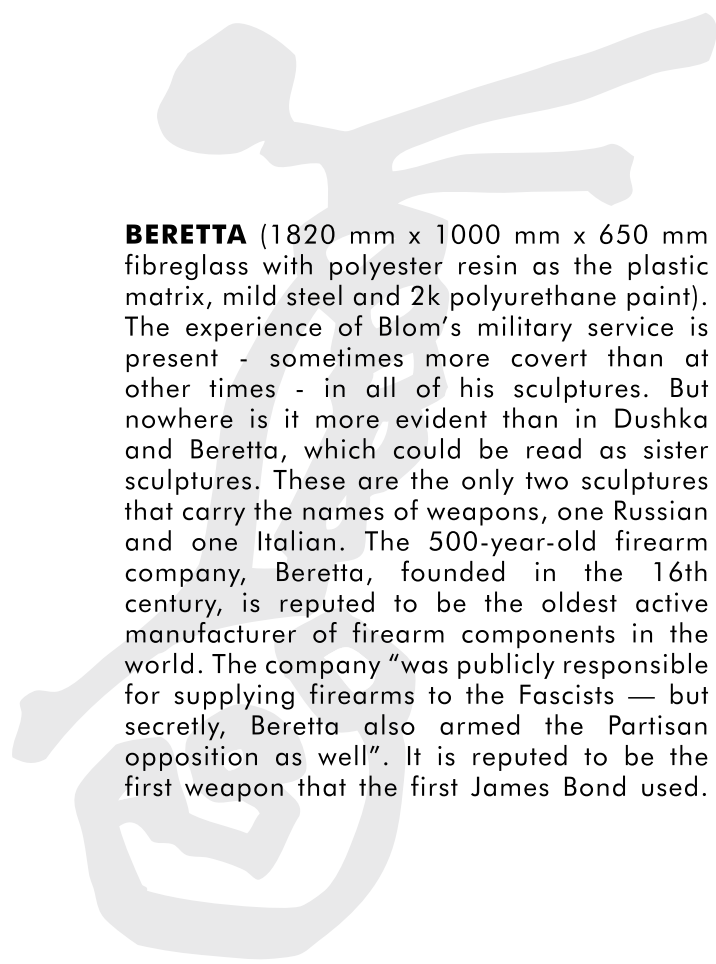
Stefan Blom's SECRET LANGUAGE by Lucinda Jolly *"To have another language is to possess a second soul" – Charlemagne.* The late Cote Ivorian Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, also known as Cheik Nadroor "he who does not forget" created a 448-character alphabet of monosyllabic pictograms to represent phonetic syllables. He used the pictograms to transcribe the phonetic and oral tradition of his people, the Bété. Closer to home is isIsibheqe (isiZulu for beaded Zulu love letters) Sohlamvu, also known as Ditematsa Dinokoa. Made up of triangles it has been described as a "syllabic script similar to that of Japanese". The units are based on the symbolic design traditions of southern Africa found in Sesotho mural art or Zulu beadwork. They are considered to be similar to the "Adinkra symbols of west Africa that have informed the development of ancient African writing like Egypt's hieroglyphs, or Nigeria's nsibidi". Sculptor Stefan Blom also has his own visual language. But whereas Bouabré's language and Isibheqe Sohlamvu is interpretable, Blom's is as closed as a tight fist and as impenetrable as the sealed-off hideaway in between the bedroom cupboard and the roof of his childhood home. Between the ceiling and the top of the cupboard he "cut a little lid in such a way that when you opened it you could not see it". There he could be without any disturbances. Blom is dyslexic, Bouabré was not.



A LIFE STORY (760mm x 770mm acid etch on 2mm aluminium plate)

In his book "David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants" author and New Yorker journalist Malcolm Gladwell unpacks our preconceived notions about what constitutes advantage and disadvantage with a skill worthy of a Zen master practising kōans. Gladwell informs us that an extraordinarily high number of successful entrepreneurs are dyslexic –about a third. One of the chapters is titled "You wouldn't wish dyslexia on your child or would you?" Gladwell explains that the dyslexic's brain has less grey matter in the areas of the brain associated with reading and processing words and neurones end up in the wrong place. He looks at cases of two dyslexics who have succeeded, in fact thrived, in spite of their debilitating condition. Gladwell goes so far as to suggest that their success is because of it. David Boies is a top litigation lawyer who in the absence of being able to read easily learnt to listen and retain information extremely well. Gary Cohn is a really good shares trader (he happens to be president of the American bank, Goldman Sachs). His dyslexia gave him the chutzpah of someone with nothing to lose. As a successful sculptor, Stefan Blom may share some similarities. The effects of dyslexia may have marked his psyche like the secret pictogram language tattooed on his forearm and which runs under the skin of all his figure sculptures. Blom grew up at a time when it was believed dyslexia was just being lazy and the so-called treatment was to "beat the crap out of you repeatedly" which "happened again and again" to Blom. Blom was extremely self-conscious of his "inability to write" and found "it was quite painful for me- and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it despite the fact that I was trying to learn more - it just wouldn't get better." At eight years old he started drawing little symbols that described events

"just to remind myself -because there was nowhere else I could tell a story". The earliest symbol describes a situation involving a tonsillectomy. When the three-year-old Blom found he couldn't communicate, it resulted in a humiliating situation. Years later when Blom looks at the symbol he can still vividly recall every detail of the circumstances - from the colour of the walls to the windows. The symbols allowed him to hide in plain sight from anybody who wanted to know everything, and from curious others. "For every single event whether good or bad, I started making little symbols". His dyslexia may have prevented Blom from writing a story but later when he started combining the symbols that reminded him of creating things or an emotion, he could record them as a drawing. Luckily for Blom his peers didn't care whether he could read or write. He was good at sports - athletics, rugby and water polo - and he could draw well which buffered his compromised self-esteem. "When I finished the army I decided to do art because basically, it was all I could do-I couldn't go in an academic direction, couldn't study, couldn't get through one single book and the subject of the history of art would have dragged me down completely." Ironically while studying he worked for the organisation that published Harvey comics where he was required to write into speech bubbles. "I can write beautifully". Although Blom had always drawn and painted he first started sculpting by carving into the dried woody roots of plants that grew in the veldt near his parent's home which he transformed into small figures and lizards. But his attraction to sculpture really took off when someone gave him a ball of clay. Blom's sculptures with their complex subject matter and superb workmanship and finish are light years away from his early experimentation with wood and clay. **(This is an amended version of the one that first appeared in the South African newspaper Cape Times on 30 March 2016 titled , A SECRET LANGUAGE by Lucinda Jolly).**



BERETTA (1820 mm x 1000 mm x 650 mm fibreglass with polyester resin as the plastic matrix, mild steel and 2k polyurethane paint). The experience of Blom's military service is present - sometimes more covert than at other times - in all of his sculptures. But nowhere is it more evident than in Dushka and Beretta, which could be read as sister sculptures. These are the only two sculptures that carry the names of weapons, one Russian and one Italian. The 500-year-old firearm company, Beretta, founded in the 16th century, is reputed to be the oldest active manufacturer of firearm components in the world. The company "was publicly responsible for supplying firearms to the Fascists — but secretly, Beretta also armed the Partisan opposition as well". It is reputed to be the first weapon that the first James Bond used.



Once again, the female form of this sculpture is based on the stylised one associated with shop mannequins. She points her heavy artillery, barrel mouth earthward like a tracker in search of its target. Her strange featherless wings are a-twitch, hands encased in ineffectual oversized boxing gloves hang loosely at her side at the ready. The line where her head is attached to her body is clearly visible as if to suggest a disjuncture between the two and a disconnect between the mind-body dynamic. Her body is parti-coloured; pink and grey, the colour of prosthetic limbs and war ships. Her pale pink base is perforated by stylised bullet starbursts like pale blue eyes that seem to look out at the viewer wide-eyed. Although we have seen tracts of Blom's private pictograph language on many of his sculptures this is the first time its dark tattoo-like marks feature so densely on the head and barrel of the sculpture.

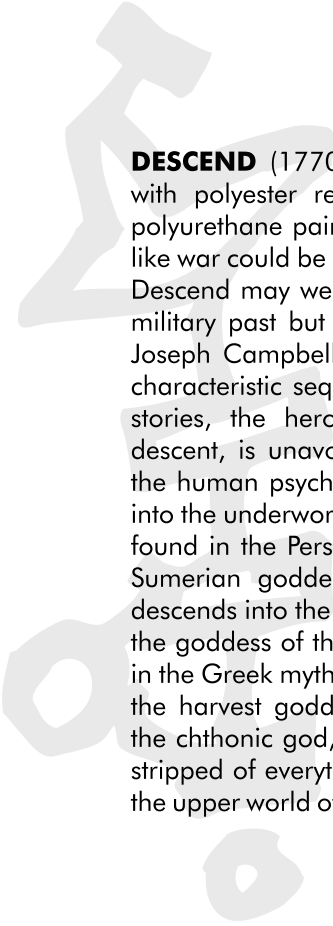












DESCEND (1770 mm x 490 mm x 490 mm fibreglass with polyester resin as the plastic, aluminium and 2k polyurethane paint). For many men, military conscription, like war could be seen as a type of initiation into manhood. Descend may well have references to Blom's parachuting military past but it also has other symbolic associations. Joseph Campbell, the American mythologist, termed the characteristic sequence of events that are found in many stories, the hero's journey. One of these stages, the descent, is unavoidable and vital to the development of the human psyche. Many ancient tales tell of the descent into the underworld as a journey of initiation. Examples are found in the Persian myth concerning Inanna the ancient Sumerian goddess of love, procreation, and war who descends into the underworld to meet her sister Ereshkigal, the goddess of the underworld. Another example is found in the Greek myth where Persephone, daughter of Demeter the harvest goddess was abducted and taken by Hades the chthonic god, to the underworld. It is here that one is stripped of everything and suspended, before returning to the upper world of the everyday with the gifts of the descent.

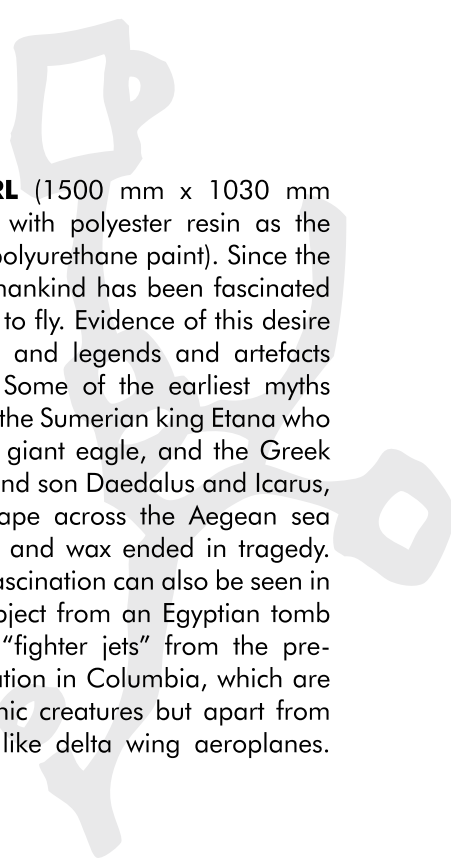


There is something of the Russian Matryoshka doll (a set of wooden dolls of decreasing size placed one inside another) about Descend, in the way the Barbie-doll-styled female parachutist, arms outstretched, descends on the close-to-life-size amputated lower body of a female. It's as if instead of descending earthward toward matter or the great mother she descends into herself just above the navel, a position associated with the sacrum. When in balance it's a position on the body associated with desire, creativity and sexuality. However, when out of sync it can lead to frigidity and impotence.





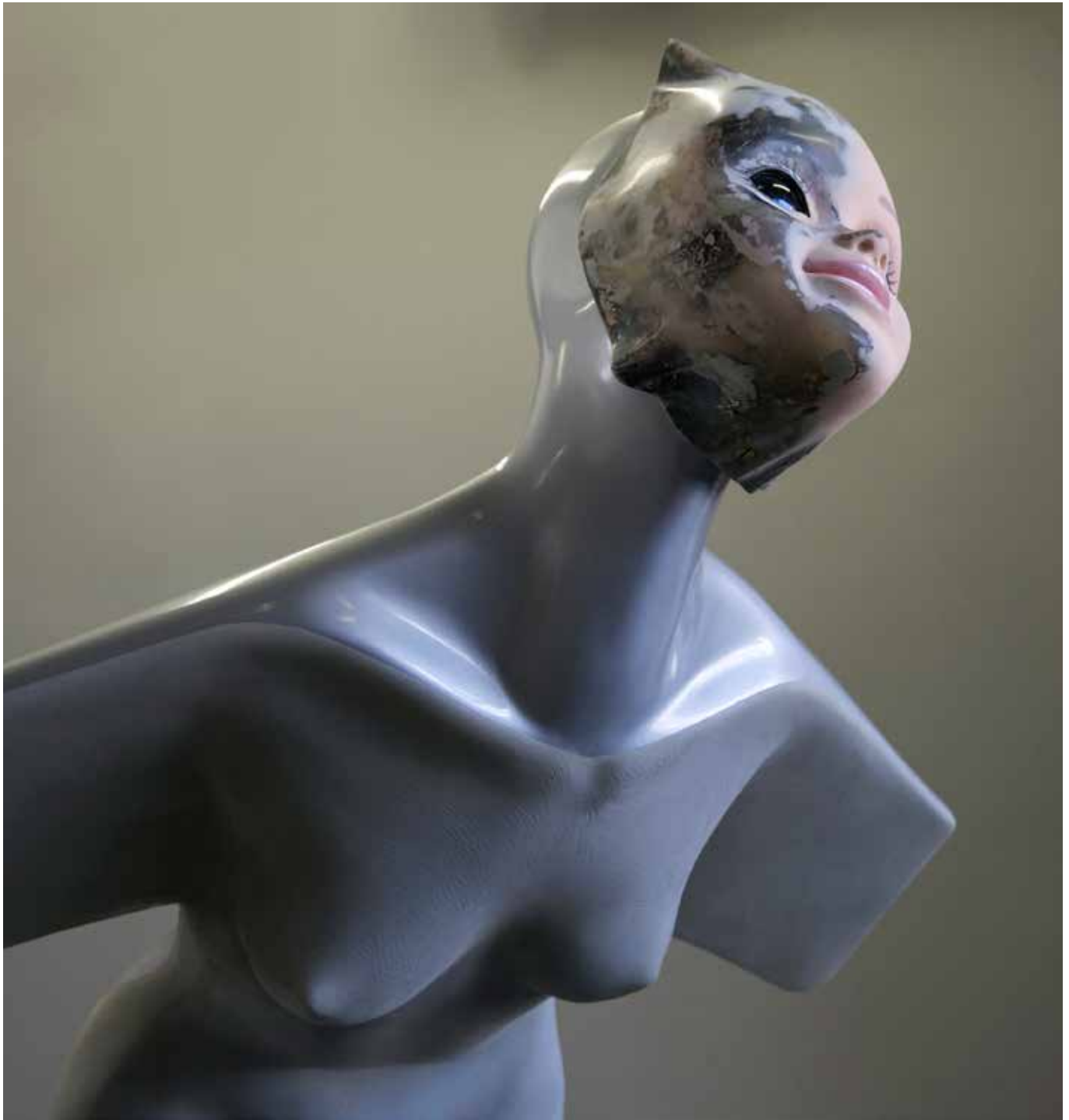




FLY BY NIGHT GIRL (1500 mm x 1030 mm x 850 mm fibreglass with polyester resin as the plastic matrix and 2k polyurethane paint). Since the beginning of time humankind has been fascinated with flight and wanted to fly. Evidence of this desire is found in the myths and legends and artefacts of many civilisations. Some of the earliest myths involving flight include the Sumerian king Etana who flew on the back of a giant eagle, and the Greek myth involving father and son Daedalus and Icarus, whose attempt to escape across the Aegean sea with wings of feathers and wax ended in tragedy. Evidence of this early fascination can also be seen in The Saqqara-“bird”-object from an Egyptian tomb and the gold Tolima “fighter jets” from the pre-Inca Quimbaya civilisation in Columbia, which are classified as zoomorphic creatures but apart from their large eyes look like delta wing aeroplanes.



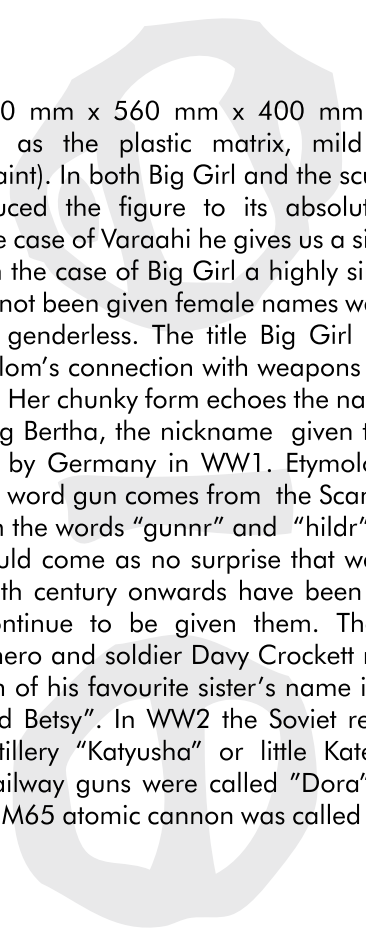
The suggestion of flight is apparent in another two of Blom's sculptures; the featherless wings of Brynhildr and the parachute of Descend. But it makes a more direct appearance in Fly By Night Girl. The sculpture is a hybrid or therianthrope combining the female form with the wings and rudder of an aircraft. Blom has positioned her in take-off position and given her the smiling face of a cartoon character. But her ability to fly is in question. Firstly, while the subject of this sculpture is flight, the title is a dubious one, suggesting one "undertaken to evade responsibilities". And secondly, in spite of her strongly muscled back and the eager smiling look on her corroded cartoon face, her stumpy silver wings make a mockery of her ability to ever soar.











BIG GIRL (790 mm x 560 mm x 400 mm fibreglass with polyester resin as the plastic matrix, mild steel and 2k polyurethane paint). In both Big Girl and the sculpture Varaahi, Blom has reduced the figure to its absolute fundamental essentials. In the case of Varaahi he gives us a simple skittle-like pig form and in the case of Big Girl a highly simplified human form. Had they not been given female names we would assume that both were genderless. The title Big Girl can be seen in the context of Blom's connection with weapons and fascination with goddesses. Her chunky form echoes the name Dicke Berta, translated as Big Bertha, the nickname given to large artillery Howitzers used by Germany in WW1. Etymology dictionaries suggest that the word gun comes from the Scandinavian name Gunnhildr, from the words "gunnr" and "hildr", both meaning "war" so it should come as no surprise that weapons from as early as the 14th century onwards have been given women's names and continue to be given them. The 19th century American folk hero and soldier Davy Crockett named his rifles after a variation of his favourite sister's name including "Pretty Betsy" and "Old Betsy". In WW2 the Soviet red army named their rocket artillery "Katyusha" or little Kate, the German Wehrmacht's railway guns were called "Dora" and the 1950 American army M65 atomic cannon was called "Atomic Annie".

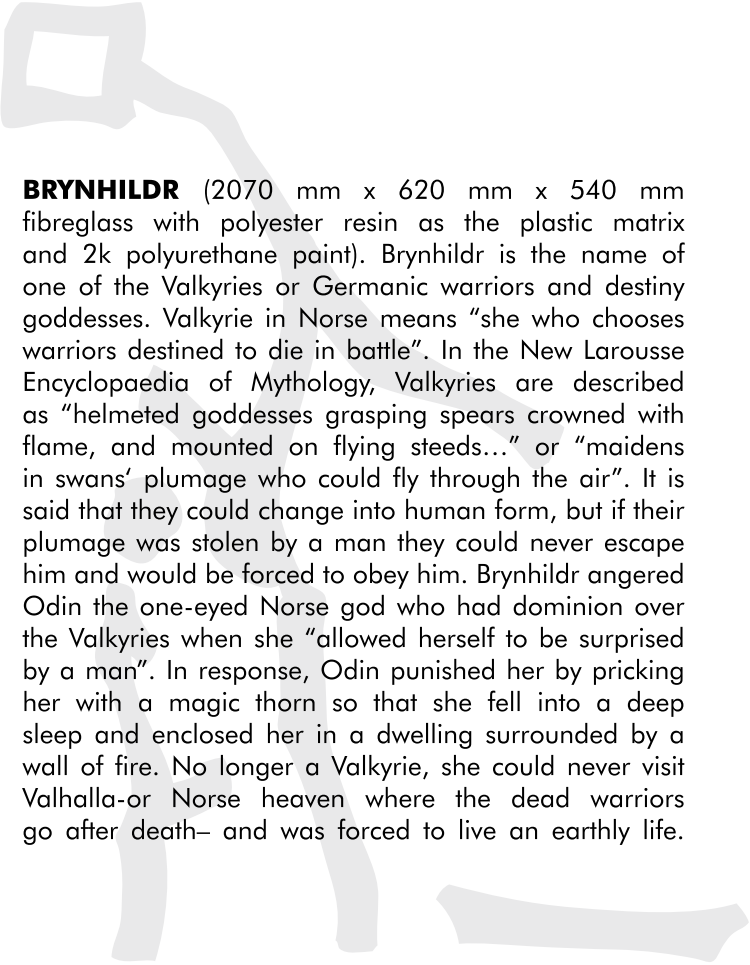


Giving weapons female names continues in contemporary society. In his essay "Winona had been very reliable: female gendering of weapons in fact and fiction", from the book "The Worlds of Farscape: Essays on the Groundbreaking Television series" edited by Sherry Ginn, scholar and critic Ensley F. Guffey writes about "Vietnam- era" marines being forced to give their M14 weapons a girl's name by their superior in Stanley Kubrick's film "Full Metal Jacket". He mentions a number of current popular TV programmes where the weapons are given women's names, for example a tranquiliser rifle and a sci- fi pulse- pistol both named after actresses - Megan Fox and Winona Ryder respectively. Or Jayne Cobb from "Firefly" who named his weapon "Vera". Guffey draws our attention to how the objectification of women is transferred to weapons and the contradiction that the weapons are also powerful enough to save your life and your nation. Ironically, Blom's Big Girl with her genderless body and matchstick arms ending in miniature boxing gloves, is difficult to objectify. It's even harder to believe she could save one's life.









BRYNHILDR (2070 mm x 620 mm x 540 mm fibreglass with polyester resin as the plastic matrix and 2k polyurethane paint). Brynhildr is the name of one of the Valkyries or Germanic warriors and destiny goddesses. Valkyrie in Norse means "she who chooses warriors destined to die in battle". In the New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology, Valkyries are described as "helmeted goddesses grasping spears crowned with flame, and mounted on flying steeds..." or "maidens in swans' plumage who could fly through the air". It is said that they could change into human form, but if their plumage was stolen by a man they could never escape him and would be forced to obey him. Brynhildr angered Odin the one-eyed Norse god who had dominion over the Valkyries when she "allowed herself to be surprised by a man". In response, Odin punished her by pricking her with a magic thorn so that she fell into a deep sleep and enclosed her in a dwelling surrounded by a wall of fire. No longer a Valkyrie, she could never visit Valhalla-or Norse heaven where the dead warriors go after death- and was forced to live an earthly life.

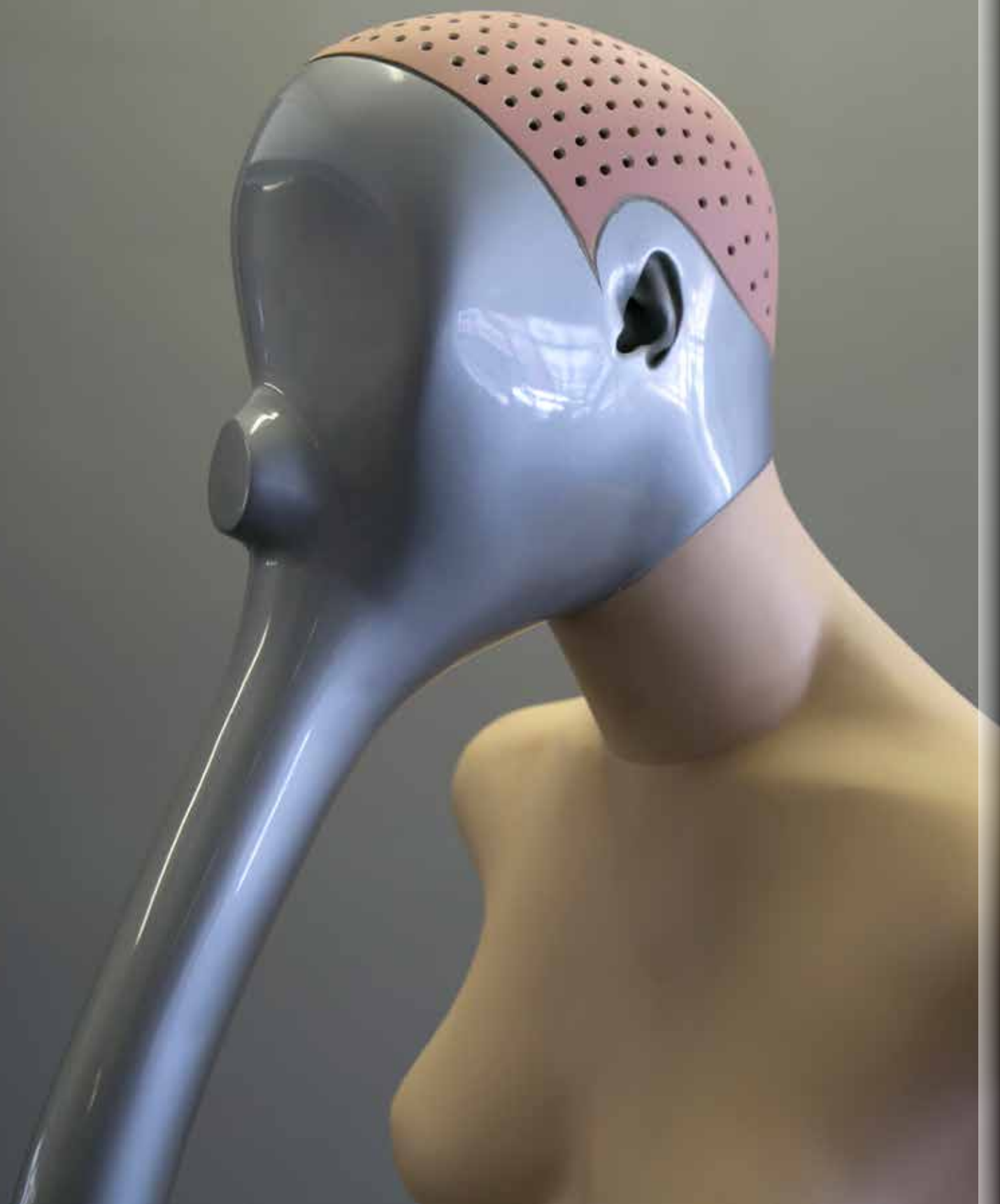


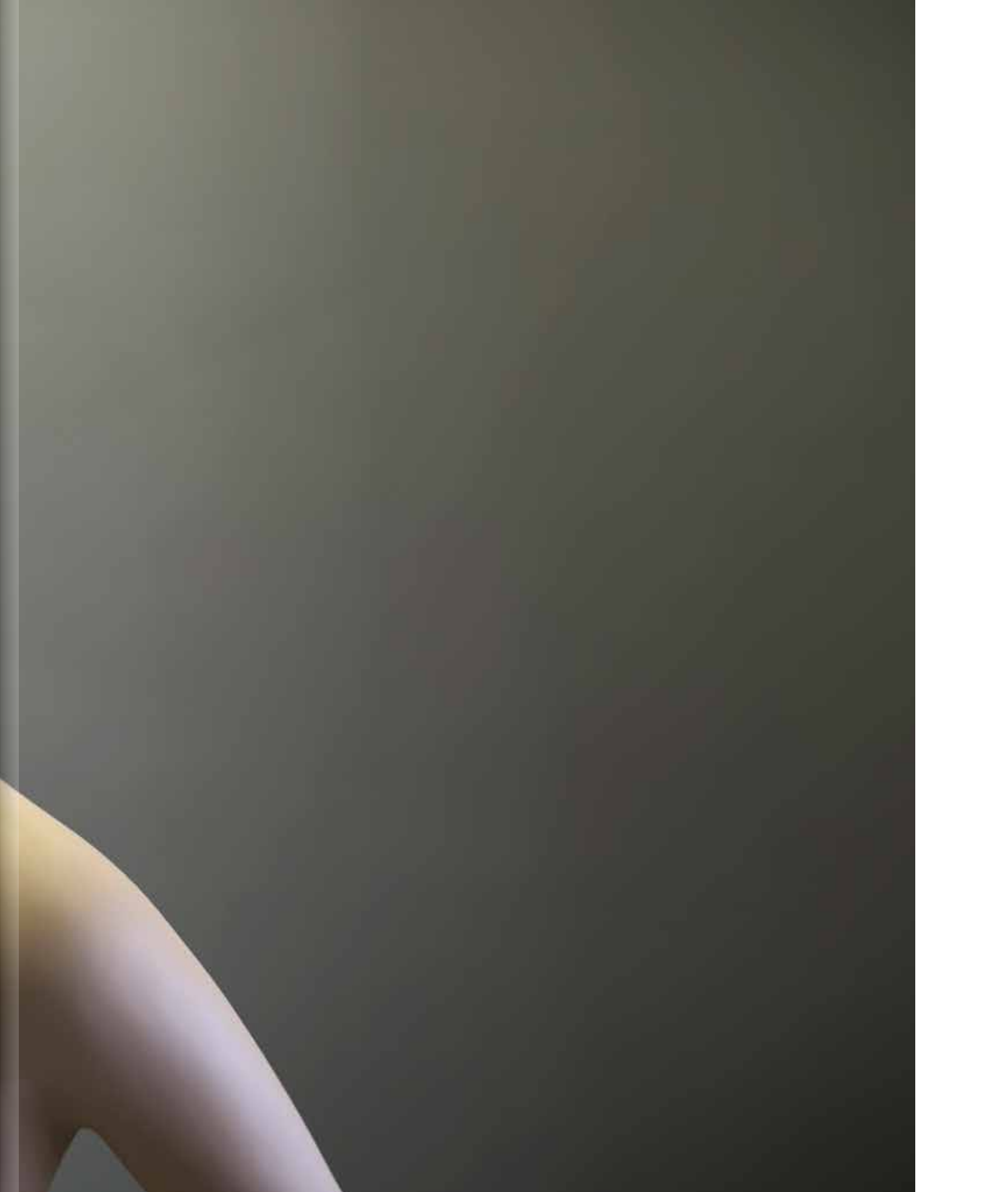
Blom gives us a contemporary Brynhildr who is nothing like the original depictions of the highly schematic, fully-robed figures found on Viking pendants or the highly sexualised creature of the imagination popular in contemporary computer games and Anime. Steedless, she is armed with the outsized yellow boxing gloves that make their appearance in a number of Blom's sculptures, instead of a spear. She is depicted as a semi-naked woman whose femininity is enhanced by wearing a pair of oversized men's grey trousers. The rippling fabric is in strong contrast to her surface which has a highly finished quality synonymous with a factory finish and appears more animated than she is. Although she follows the other sculptures' mannequin form there is a quiet self-possessed sensuality in Blom's Brynhildr, absent in the other warriors and goddesses that make up Blom's firmament. As with the Palaeolithic fertility fetishes and goddesses, Brynhildr's features are vague and hidden by what could be interpreted as a chrome breathing apparatus ending in an elephantine snout giving the sculpture a sci-fi feel. Arms drawn back in a pose of defence or attack, she too, is perched precariously on a round base, her feet trapped within or perhaps even non-existent.

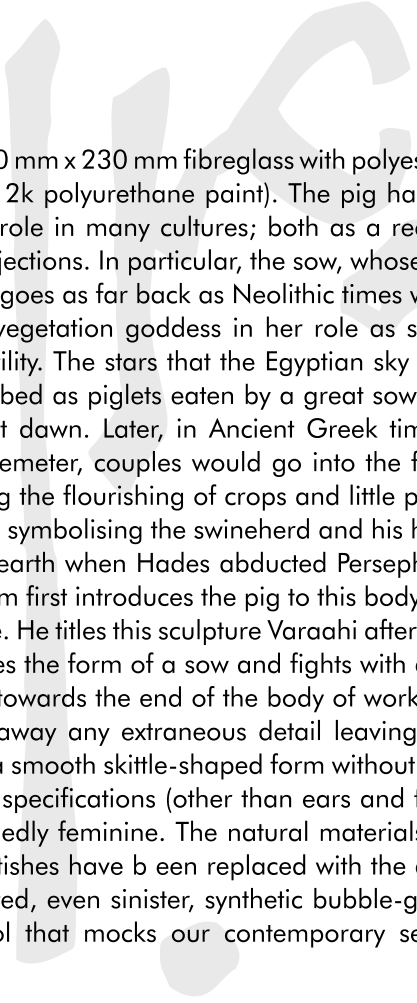




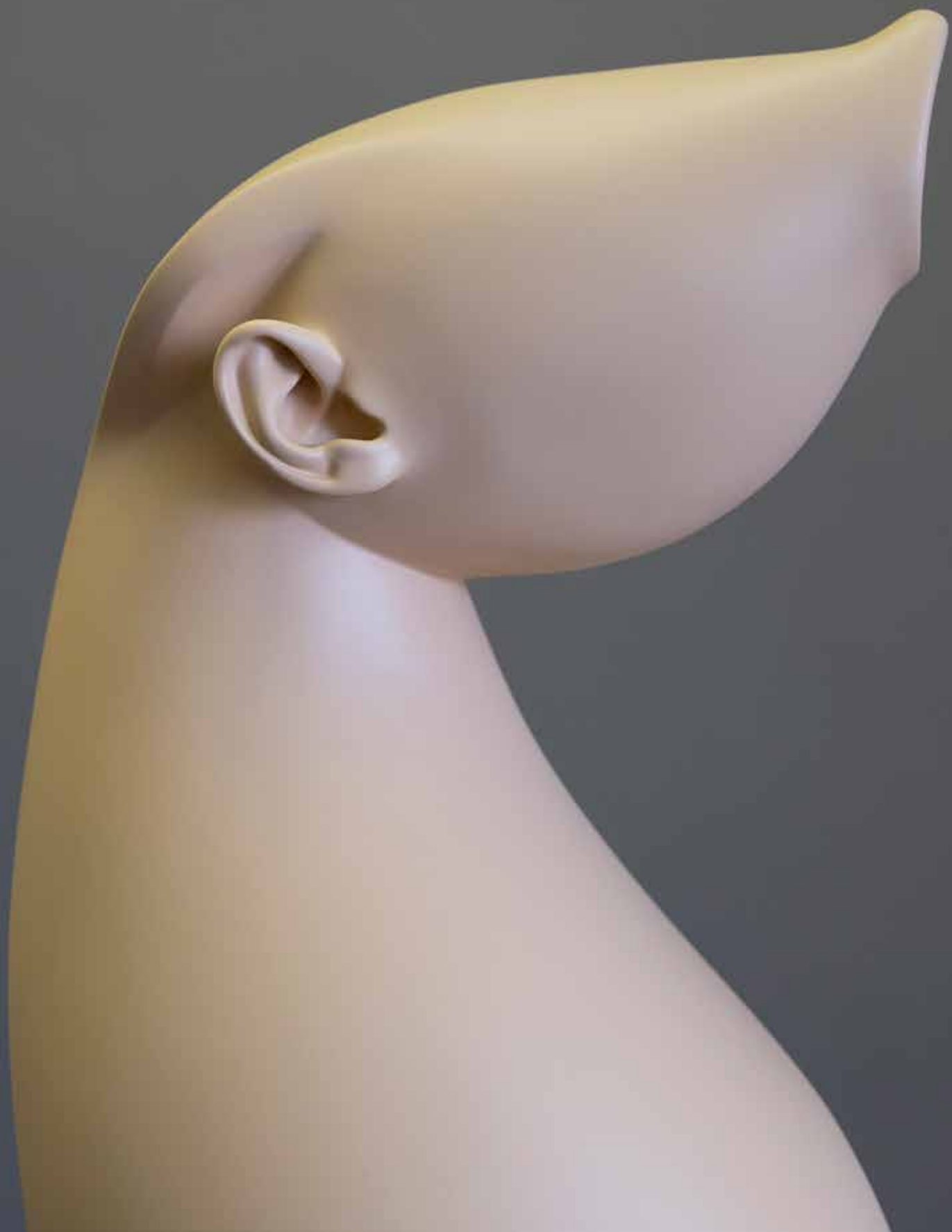






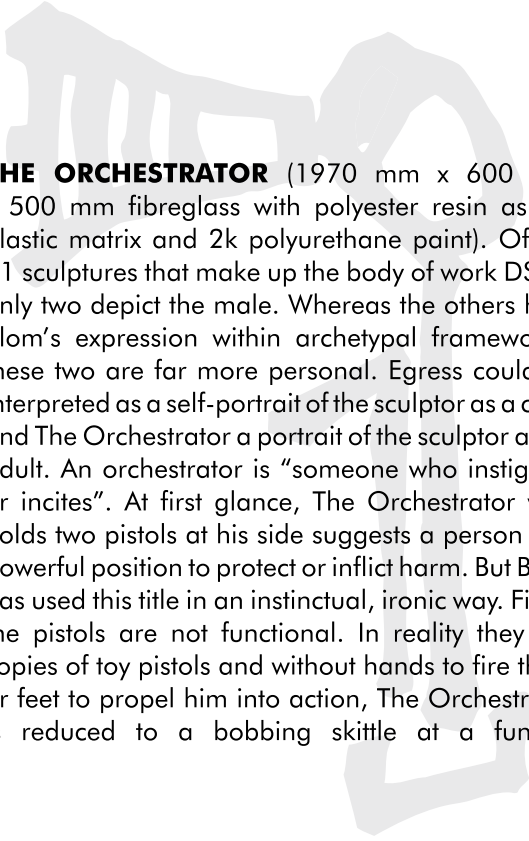


VARAAHI (500 mm x 290 mm x 230 mm fibreglass with polyester resin as the plastic matrix and 2k polyurethane paint). The pig has always occupied an ambivalent role in many cultures; both as a receiver of negative and positive projections. In particular, the sow, whose sacred, feminine, lunar presence goes as far back as Neolithic times when the pig was linked with the vegetation goddess in her role as sacrificial creature representing fertility. The stars that the Egyptian sky goddess Nut swallowed are described as piglets eaten by a great sow at night to be re-birthed again at dawn. Later, in Ancient Greek times after the festival celebrating Demeter, couples would go into the furrowed fields to copulate ensuring the flourishing of crops and little pigs were thrown into earth crevices symbolising the swineherd and his herd that were swallowed into the earth when Hades abducted Persephone the daughter of Demeter. Blom first introduces the pig to this body of work as part of his Isis sculpture. He titles this sculpture Varaahi after a Hindu mother goddess who takes the form of a sow and fights with a sword. The sculpture was made towards the end of the body of work and it's as if Blom has stripped away any extraneous detail leaving just the essential form providing a smooth skittle-shaped form without limbs or facial features or gender specifications (other than ears and flattened snout); and yet it is decidedly feminine. The natural materials usually associated with fertility fetishes have been replaced with the artificial. The outcome is a subverted, even sinister, synthetic bubble-gum pink prehistoric fertility symbol that mocks our contemporary sensibility.









THE ORCHESTRATOR (1970 mm x 600 mm x 500 mm fibreglass with polyester resin as the plastic matrix and 2k polyurethane paint). Of the 11 sculptures that make up the body of work DShK, only two depict the male. Whereas the others hold Blom's expression within archetypal frameworks, these two are far more personal. Egress could be interpreted as a self-portrait of the sculptor as a child and The Orchestrator a portrait of the sculptor as an adult. An orchestrator is "someone who instigates or incites". At first glance, The Orchestrator who holds two pistols at his side suggests a person in a powerful position to protect or inflict harm. But Blom has used this title in an instinctual, ironic way. Firstly the pistols are not functional. In reality they are copies of toy pistols and without hands to fire them or feet to propel him into action, The Orchestrator is reduced to a bobbing skittle at a funfair.



His powdery opaque pupa-like sarcophagus body, suggestive of possible transformation, becomes in this context one of incarceration. Engraved onto the gridded opaque surface are window-like translucent pictograms taken from Blom's secret language. Another strip runs along the back of the sculpture's shaved head. Blom's pale, frowning features form the mask seamlessly attached to The Orchestrator's face. Down the length of the back of his body runs a thin lipped, bloodless, cross shaped wound evocative perhaps of religious sacrifice. It's a scar that reads less as a secular infliction than a deep psychic wounding—The Orchestrator as a wounded assassin.











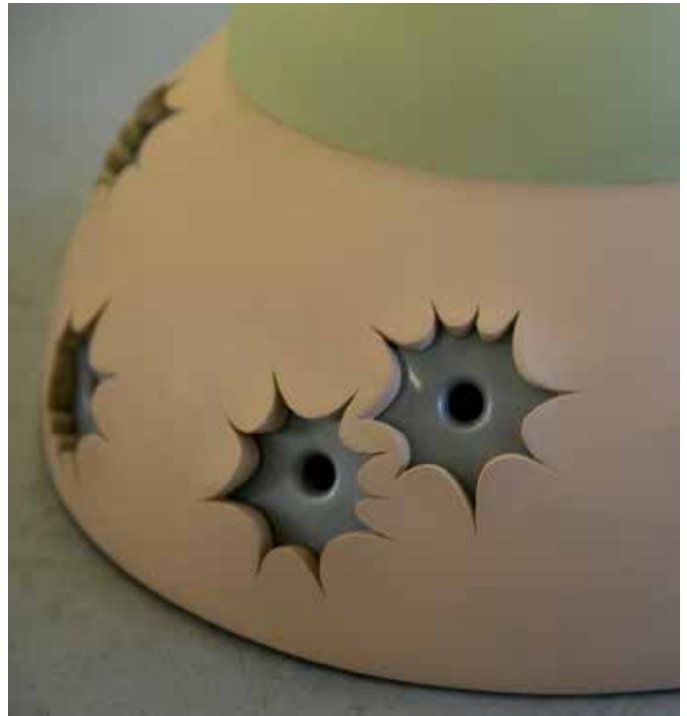
EMOTION
OVER INTELLECT
THE PORNOGRAPHY
OF TRAUMA IN
PASTEL SHADES

By Lucinda Jolly

While researching Stefan Blom's exhibition DShK, I came across some amateur film footage in which a group of young civilian men in an open, unspecified field fired heavy ammunition into the distance. The weapon, an oblong contraption with a long perforated muzzle stood precariously on a spider-legged tripod. It shook and rattled, shooting out flames with the force of each emission. Each man was given a chance to shoot. And intoxicated with the power of it all, they sprayed round after round of bullets into a target-less distance like rogue tom cats on a steroid rampage, falling about with laughter, whooping with pleasure and egging each other on. Their weapon was a DShK, the acronym for "Degtyaryova-Shpagina Krupnokaliberny" and the name of a Russian-made heavy machine gun invented in the 1930's. Blom titled his exhibition after this piece of weaponry. The irony is apparent in the weapons nickname "sweetie" for its phonetic sound of the abbreviation – similar to the Russian word "dushka" – and one that runs throughout Blom's exhibition. It starts on the surface. Blom's sculptures have a pastel palette of lemon curd yellow, ice cream pink and baby blue; a palette at odds with the hardcore subject matter of the eleven fibreglass sculptures. Although the young men operating the DShk harmed no one, their orgiastic delight is bound up with the godlike power to potentially destroy at most, or maim at least, that this weapon can provide. It's the same pornography of violence between perpetrator and quarry which Blom explores in pastel shades. The cracker of the Enigma code Alan Turing, who was severely bullied as a child, is quoted as saying about violence: "Do you know why people like violence? It is because it feels good. Humans find violence deeply satisfying. But remove the satisfaction, and the act becomes... hollow".

It's been 10 years since Blom had his last solo exhibition in Germany. Although he has added new work Blom regards this exhibition as "reworking older work" and "a culmination of my technical skills, knowledge and maturity". His aim is to promote an emotional rather than an intellectual response to his subject matter in an atmosphere that at first invites the viewer in and then shifts to discomfort. As the press release suggests, Blom's latest sculptures continue to "channel his first-hand experience of psychic wounding inflicted by personal trauma, around themes of sexuality and gender - into the more impersonal and largely unstable area of political and social forces". His work "investigates the victim and perpetrator continuum bound together as one entity in an eternal symbiosis". His current sculptures may still show his concern with the dark side of sexuality and gender but his modus operandi has moved light years away from the drama of raw, cathartic blood-letting - ashy and scabby bandaged surfaces - that characterised his earlier work. In their place are the highly polished surfaces that have more in common with the slick duco finish of a high-end sports car - not a speck of dust in sight. It's the pornography of trauma in pastel shades. Apart from three figures, Egress and The Orchestrator which are both self-portraits and Varaahi a pig-like creature with a blunted face, all the sculptures involve the manipulated, amputated female form as victim and conduit. The sculpture Egress could be interpreted as the portrait of the artist as a child. His little sputnik-shaped body is armless, supported by the spindly legs of a tripod. His face is tattooed with the dark glyphs of Blom's private symbolic language only known to him; his mouth is plugged closed with a perforated nozzle. Speech is not Blom's natural metier. The capsule of his body is crowded with warring toy soldiers. We catch a glimpse of them through the sputniks-fogged walls. Ironically Egress - which means "to leave a place" - will never move from its fixed base. From a steel pipe in the child's middle some unseen vital essence will continue to drip into a drain in the base of the sculpture carrying the words "exit only".

If Blom were a creature, he would be a pale gecko, gentle and extremely sensitive, so transparent you could see his inner organs and watch his hyper-vigilant view of the world through the palest of glass green eyes. The sculpture *The Orchestrator* is an adult self-portrait. Here the child has grown into yet another bound incarnation encased in a pale sarcophagus cocoon inscribed with his secret writings. Its back is scored with a cross-shaped, open wound, his arms ending in two Berettas. In the treatment of the female figures, there is some reference to the comic strip characters and the mannequins of the 1950's departmental stores. All contain elements of both victim and perpetrator. Proportionally they may have much in common with the ideals of fashion but the sculptor has turned these figures into cyborgs by including biomechatronic parts associated with transhumanism. Yet unlike the purpose of transhumanism, whose aim is to improve the organic nature of the human being, these so-called improvements compromise the humanity of these figures. And each contains both the roles of aggressor and victim. *Fly by Night Girl* has stunted aircraft wings that will never fly instead of arms, *Beretta* and *Dushka* sprout the perforated barrel of a heavy-duty machine gun. The arms of other sculptures end in chrome yellow boxing gloves to defend and *Diana of Ephesus* breasts for the nurturing of an infant and to provide pleasure, but they will struggle to caress another. Perhaps the most disturbing piece on exhibit is the sculpture, *Dushka* (Russian for "sweetie"). In it, a woman's form lies slightly tilted in a prone position on the top of a steel tripod similar to theta of the DShK weapon. It's a vulnerable position associated with intimate medical procedures. Instead of ending in hands, the ends of her arms merge with her torso and she has no lower legs. From her thighs she births a machine gun muzzle and from her head emerges two metal handles, with grips for her handler to guide her in whichever direction he pleases. Although 11 sculptures make up the body of DShK series, in many ways Blom has given us one work explored in 11 different ways. **This article is an amended version of "The Pornography of Trauma in Pastel Shades" by Lucinda Jolly which was first published in the Cape Times newspaper, June 10, 2015.**





Biography

Stefan Blom was born in Kimberly in 1963. He studied graphic design at the Witwatersrand Technikon in Johannesburg. Blom began his career in advertising, and lives and works in Cape Town.

His current sculptures continue to channel his first-hand experience of the psychic wound inflicted by personal trauma into the more impersonal and largely unstable area of political and social forces. His works investigate how the victim and perpetrator are part of a continuum. Bound together as one entity in an eternal symbiosis, the human spirit is trapped. A nominee for the FNB Vita Art Now Awards in 1996 his work is shown mostly in European and American galleries and museums. Blom had his first solo exhibition in 1995 at the Karen Mc Kerron Gallery in Johannesburg.

Blom's current sculptures have their early roots in the most personal pieces seen in his first solo show in 1995. There, bitumen dark, glazed figures, some wrapped in bandage strips showed the artist's preoccupation with bondage and amputation suggestive of the shattered human spirit. Creatures have wings that cannot support the human body and arms that end in stumps or are trapped forever in fixed substances. In 1996 Blom exhibited two works at the Johannesburg BMW gallery. These were like 3-dimensional renditions of Francis Bacon's paintings of suffering figures painted writhing against deliberately incongruent and highly stylised design backgrounds. The earlier tar and paper finished sculptures of Blom's first show morph into the ash-white also at-risk figures in his 3rd solo exhibition at Hänel Gallery.

In 2014 Blom exhibited an installation at the AVA gallery titled "sweetie". Given the particular ethos of his work, it comes as no surprise that the earliest painting executed by the artist as a young man was of a female crucifixion.

In Blom's current sculptures, the rough finish that was his original trademark has undergone a transformation. The figures are perfectly finished. Surfaces are as slick and glossy as a 1950's Cadillac. The sweetness of soft retro colours; baby blues, pinks and pale pistachio greens and silvers seem at odds with the seriousness of the subject matter. Yet this deliberate play creates an interesting tension through this incongruence. Unlike the product of transhumanism, the cyborg, a fictional being with both organic and biomechatronic parts functions often in a superior way to humans. Blom's sculptures suggest that the psychic damage has rendered them impotent and without agency.

In January 2016, Blom was honoured to have one of the sculptures from the "DShK" series, "Brynhildr" acquired as part of the permanent collection of the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (MOCAA).

Collections

Zeitz MOCAA Museum of Contemporary Art Africa.

St George's Cathedral, Cape Town, South Africa.

The District Six Museum, Cape Town, South Africa.

Private collections in South Africa, Europe, USA, Australia and Israel.

Curriculum Vitae

- 2016 • "The grey, grey horse" collaborative work with sculptor Daniel Blom.
 - CNN interview part of the Zeitz MOCAA Museum of Contemporary Art Africa documentary.
- 2015 • Solo Exhibition "DSHK" Gallery Commune.1, Cape Town, South Africa.
 - Sculptorvox. Online Magazine, United Kingdom.
- 2014 • "Sweetie" sculptural installation, AVA Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
 - Cape Town Art Fair, South Africa.
- 2013 • Commissioned sculpture for "An African Tale of the Mother City exhibition" at IZIKO museum of South Africa. The work re-surfaces a forgotten story about how groups of women and men living in places like Modderdam, Crossroads, Nyanga Bush and KTC during the late 1970s and early 1980s fought with bravery and tenacity for the right of African people to live with their families and work freely in the Western Cape.
- 2010 • Commissioned sculpture for "Glimpsing hope, marching for peace" to commemorate the peaceful march held in Cape Town, South Africa.
- 2003 • Solo Exhibition "Dressed for Love" Hanël Gallery Cape Town, South Africa.
 - Solo Exhibition "Dressed for Love" Galerie Frank Hanël, Wiesbaden, Germany.
 - Interview and self-portrait video, commissioned by SABC TV for the magazine program Pasella.
- 2002 • Joint Exhibition with A.R. Penck. Galerie Frank Hanël, Wiesbaden, Germany.
- 2001 • Solo Exhibition "In you face" Galerie Frank Hanël Wiesbaden, Germany.
- 2000 • Interactive exhibition curated by Stefan Blom, Seamus Wilson and Martin van Niekerk, Hanël Gallery Cape Town, South Africa.
 - Solo Hanël Gallery Cape Town, South Africa.
- 1999 • "Play Black time", AXIS Gallery, New York, USA.

- "Floor Show" Solo Exhibition Hanël Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
- "Floor Show" Solo Exhibition, Galerie Frank Hanël, Frankfurt, Germany.
- Joint exhibition, Lisa Brice, Andrew Putter, Beezy Bailey, Steve Cohen, Nigel Mullins, Roelof Louw, Rodney Place, Moshekwa Langa, A.R. Penck, Jorg Immendorff, Hanël Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
- "TONTELD00S" Installation by Stefan Blom and Martin van Niekerk, Bang The Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
- "Interactive 1999" with compositions suggested by artist Stanley Hermans and Stefan Blom, Hanël Gallery Cape Town.
- Cape Town Art Festival, South Africa.
- "Phlebo" Art Frankfurt' 99. Frankfurt Art Fair, Germany. This particular piece was also exhibited at an aids/HIV awareness exhibition in Frankfurt curated by a local Frankfurt Artist.

- 1998
- "N° __" Solo Exhibition Hanël Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
 - Selected works from "N° __" Solo Exhibition Galerie Frank Hanël, Frankfurt, Germany.

- 1997
- "Bird Dog" Solo Exhibition, Hanël Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
 - Joint exhibition with, Lisa Brice, Andrew Putter, Tracy Payne, Peet Pienaar, Bridget Baker, Barend De Wet, Hanël Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.

- 1996
- FNB Vita Awards, Johannesburg Art Gallery.
 - BMW Sculpture Exhibition, Sandton, South Africa.
 - 30 minute profile, SABC TV "Kunskafee", Cape Town, South Africa.

- 1995
- The District Six Exhibition, Cape Town, South Africa.
 - South African National Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.
 - "A railway to self" Shawco Exhibition Cape Town, South Africa.
 - "In Black" Solo Exhibition, Karen McKerron Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.
 - "On the light fantastic toe" Joint Exhibition with Stanley Hermans, Gallery De Lyon, Cape Town, South Africa.

Projects

2005 "It's About TIME" an exhibition marking the passage of time on the Greater Cederberg landscape, with John Parkington, Gwen van Embden, Neil Rusch, Richard Mason and Sandra Prosalendis.

2004 – 2010 Living Landscape Project an initiative by John Parkington, Professor of Archaeology at Cape Town University, Cape Town, South Africa. The Living Landscape Project is a community-based initiative to create jobs by using the results of many years of archaeological research.



Stefan Blom's studio, as it appeared during a interview by CNN, part of a documentary part of a documentary on the Zeitz MOCAA Museum of Contemporary Art Africa on Inside Africa.

Imprint

Authors

Lucinda Jolly

Lucinda is a graduate from the University of Cape Town (Michaelis School of Fine Art) where she majored in Fine Art and English.

Lucinda writes arts-related pieces for various newspapers and publications including; the Argus, Cape Times, the Mail and Guardian and Condé Nast magazine. She also hosts a monthly gallery round-up for Fine Music Radio.

Currently Lucinda is the head of the Journalism department and lectures Creative writing and Art History for CityVarsity, a film and media college in Cape Town. In the past two years she has had a number of joint photographic exhibitions and is working towards another exhibition and on various bodies of photographs. fire.paw@telkomsa.net

Simon Ofield-Kerr

Professor Simon Ofield-Kerr is currently Vice Chancellor of the UK's University for the Creative Arts (UCA). He has also been Executive Dean of Art, Design & Architecture at Kingston University and prior to this worked in a number of roles at Middlesex University. Simon has a BA in Fine Art (Exeter College of Art & Design, 1990), an MA in The Social History of Art (University of Leeds, 1992), and was awarded his PhD from Leeds University in 1997. He was one of the founding editors of the Journal of Visual Culture and writes on contemporary art, visual culture and the relationships between cultural production and social / sexual practice and identity.

Photos

Stefan Blom

Layout

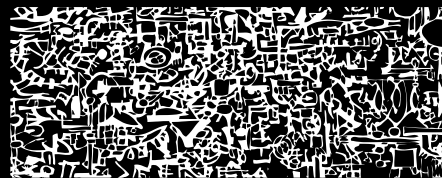
Gideon Engelbrecht
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DSHK

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TEXT BY LUCINDA JOLLY