

In the Grains and Folds of Time

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Light flickers in the pool of darkness. Dripstones grow and gather gradually into sedimentations of time like visceral folds of skin and bones or like clusters of mushrooms in the depths of the earth. The ground ripples, bubbles and fumes, its surface appearing as a porous contact zone rather than a sealed boundary. The rock erupts into liquid fire; gaseous clouds drift along the barren land. Rain and ice sculpt stone gently into smooth curvaceous bodies of rock. The elements interlace in the cycles of ceaselessly morphing matter.

Saara Ekström's work in the exhibition *Through the still eye of the timestorm* guides us to the sources of life, yet these origins no longer seem remote, in the past, but intimately enmeshed within the here and now, even within our bodies. Emergence is in the exhibition re-enacted, time and again, through various rhythms of renewal and transformation. Geological deep time is at play here in radically different yet interdependent paces of eruptions and erosions. Stability is a mirage for some, and a foundation for others, depending on the perspectives grounded in distinct lived temporalities. Hierarchical distinctions between life and non-life dissolve as the lifegiving power of that which has been deemed the opposite of life, the inanimate matter, gains centre stage.

"The inert is the truth of life, not its horror."¹

Fossils act as mediators, inviting visceral encounters across temporal and geographical distances. They are time travellers carried by the tectonic plates and drawn from the sediments of oceanic archives to the shifting shorelines by the age-old choreography of expanding and retreating glaciers. In their uncanny appearance of lively softness, the fossilised skins of ancient lifeforms put us in touch with another time and place. The long-extinct life vividly persists in the present as mere impressions of skins and scales, yet their presence is anything but superficial. Fossils hovering in front of our eyes, on film and in the exhibition space, momentarily suspend us as if outside of all fixed coordinates of time and space.

Human bodies carry their own deep time memories as material traces of our relations to now-extinct lifeforms that inhabited the primaevial seas. The *longue durée* evolution replays itself in fast forward in the formation of the human body, Ekström reminds us, as her work captures an otherwise passing phase in the development of a human foetus. Alongside casts of fossils, the atavistic muscle appears in the installation like an ancient creature itself. It haunts the present like a mythical protagonist or a material witness in an origin story,

1 Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies. A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, 2016, 45.

where our humanity turns out to be not only mammalian but also amphibian. This muscle memory, like the salt in our bodily fluids or “our lime-hardened skeletons”,² stands as evidence of our marine inheritance.

In various stages of solidity and fluidity, we are also mineral, entangled within and dependent on the perpetual processes of materialisation and dissolution happening all around and within us in a multitude of temporalities. Similarities are written into different bodies as patterns unveiled and juxtaposed in Ekström’s works. Likenesses of forms in the exhibition draw out resonances across spatial scales, like enfolded landscapes of myriad embodiments, mountainous and minute, elementary and intimate. These kinships must also be coded in human minds and imaginaries, as suggested by the mandalas of dynamic figurations emerging as sound vibrates through bodies of water. “Fingery eyes”³ sense the reverberations in the silent images as the hypnotic forms trigger associations ranging from microscopic to cosmic, cellular to planetary.

Resisting the impulse to penetrate or capture, the gaze of Ekström’s camera approaches the world with a lingering caress. Moving between light and shadow, in and out of view, her films tenderly weave a sense of proximity across irreducible differences. The film camera acts like a beacon drawing into visibility phenomena which usually appear merely as part of inanimate backgrounds or as passive stages for events. Meanwhile, the drama of volcanic eruption turns into a meditation on all that cannot be contained in its image or narration.

Film and photographs have a spectral presence here, simultaneously ghostly and like a prism drawing with and to light a multitude of perspectives. Light allows for the emanation of forms yet also intensifies the shadows, detaching the objects of its attention and letting them waver right at the edges of visibility. In Ekström’s films, the images seem to be sculpted as if out of grains of time. A cyclical rather than linear sense of time and timelessness is woven into a haunting experience of being a witness to something already gone yet constantly emerging, fleetingly present in the flickering images. Moments and encounters are also literally materially engraved in film. Scratching of the film with rocks re-enacts the transformative movements of bodies, of earth and water or ice, against each other. It is reminiscent of the constant wearing of skin and bones, in the depths and on the surfaces of human bodies.

Ekström works against the grain of modernity’s disdain for “nature” as inert. In her earlier work, decomposition becomes indistinguishable from composition in eternal cycles of formation of both matter and meaning. She has thus given life back to *still life*, which as a European art historical genre (*nature morte*),

2 Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us*, 1950/2018, 13.

3 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 2008, 5.

encapsulates the transition from animism to colonial and industrial capitalism's extractive relationship with the Earth and its myriad inhabitants.⁴

Yet the vital potentiality of matter has not only been regarded as dead but also monstrous. Moreover, why is feminine morphology, the meanings attached to the form of a female body, associated with all that erupts, spills and mutates? Ekström's work can be seen to subtly reclaim this curse as a gift, not unlike Ursula le Guin writes about mud as that which "lies around being wet and heavy and oozy and generative".⁵ Here granite stands no longer as an opposite in its perceived hardness to the adaptive and impressionable viscosity of mud. In the photographs of morphing, nascent forms of clay sculpted by hand, surface and depth further entwine. With gentle force, hands have moulded the clay like the glaciers have carved the rock. Curved shapes twist into labyrinthine configurations, where the smooth surface flows effortlessly between inside and outside, while softness and solidity appear as purely temporal matters.

"The planet will never come alive for you unless your songs and stories give life to all the beings, seen and unseen, that inhabit the living Earth."⁶

The animate force and agency of the earth and its atmosphere, the geological and the meteorological, demand to be reckoned with in the face of the accelerating ecological emergency. In Ekström's exhibition, the focus on geological time does not deem human impact insignificant, merely a momentary blip in the aeons of ceaseless change, even if the human figure is absent here. Rather deep time is intricately interwoven into human embodiment. Different temporalities entwine as the *longue durée* is inscribed in the ephemerality and intensity of faster-paced existence, whether of ancient marine creatures or contemporary humans.

Similarly, the exhibition challenges the understanding of humans as a geological force, as defined by the notion of the Anthropocene in terms of monumental marks left by terraforming humans in the landscape, in the atmosphere, and in the strata of earthly memory. Ekström poses another view on the human relationship with the deep time, where the temporality of human lives, in their inter- and intradependencies with all other modes of life, appear as part of geological folding and unfolding in the cycles of birth and death, materialisation and dissolution.

Light seeps into the depths of the unseen. It floods through the screen and the skin of the film like a thickening cloud of gaseous matter. The image vanishes at the cusp of its emergence. An end is yet another beginning.

4 Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse. Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, 2021, 40.

5 Ursula le Guin, *Being Taken for Granite*, 2014.

6 Ghosh, 84.