

## Anna Pajak

*The Laugh of the Medusa*

Wetterling Gallery

Medusa had sex with Poseidon in the Temple of Athena and was punished by having serpents in her hair and glaring eyes that could turn the beholder into stone. Perseus overcame Medusa with a mirror shield and then used her head as a weapon. When he cut her head off and the blood mixed with the froth from the waves, Chrysaor and Pegasus appeared. So strengthening, Anna Pajak explains. They try to kill her but out of this grows something even more powerful. Medusa was simply too much, just as many other women like her, and Anna Pajak wants this exhibition to be like this too. Loud, eye-catching and sharp. The paintings draw you in but then you prick yourself; the paintings are intended to be reflective like Medusa's shields. Anna Pajak's previous exhibition was permeated by a darker palette, darkest blue from black irises. It was called *Ghost flowers arrive through water*, and it entered into a dialogue with Georgia O'Keeffe's art. This is something that she often undertakes: inviting women artists, authors and pioneers into her artistic process and, on this occasion, it turned out to be Medusa.

Symbols, dreams and abstractions. An echo of modernism, Tarot cards and science fiction. Shards of well-known items that cleave the surface whereupon they whirl away, sinking and disappearing. One can stretch out a hand, an idea and almost grasp items that are reminiscent of what we have seen yet which do not portray anything in our usual world. Shaped representative elements without given points of reference encounter running paint and, suddenly the reality that has been magically created loses its balance. Illusion or painting? A narrative or something that cannot be cast in words? *Metamorfos* [Metamorphosis] is an airborne altar, with dark petals or shells in hovering formation around a jewel. Perhaps female genitalia. I was reminded of Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, Anna Pajak explains, but the naked woman turned into a sword. Or an egg – I suddenly realize, a free upside-down version of Piero della Francesca's altar in Montefeltro. The painting was done in a ripple between times, billowing through layers of knowledge and levels of consciousness. *Havet hör mig* [The sea hears me] circles round the twined horn of a unicorn out of a dream Anna Pajak had, but she also encountered a unicorn in the mediaeval Musée de Cluny in Paris where the story of *The Lady and the Unicorn* is played out on six large tapestries forming an allegory of the senses. The horn in Anna Pajak's painting stands in its full majesty against the depths of the night, surrounded by ceremonial objects or indefinable signs. We see it as on a theatre stage with drapes in the corners, like the view from the window in a spaceship. Before us opens a door, a birth and a path.

The paintings are symmetrically calm and powerful, but are also imposing and dramatic, reminding one of icons and of earlier religious paintings. Magic is created but with prevalent methods, with new overtones and a feeling that remains among the enormous canvases is a sort of holy presence. I love painting on a large scale, Anna Pajak notes. There is something divine about it and increasing one's scale has both physical and psychological repercussions. "Large paintings are the intimate ones" Mark Rothko wrote and he thought that his abstract compositions enfolded the beholder. A painting that is as large as oneself can be experienced as a counterpart and a soulmate. When Hilma af Klint talked about the most important things she knew her paintings grew in size and she refined and stylized her imagery. It is seldom that I am so taken by painting, Anna Pajak exclaims, but with Hilma af Klint this was the case. It is, I suggest, as though Hilma decided that now I am going to be as clear as I possibly can, and she provided us with didactic explanations of something that was inexplicable. I can see similarities, Anna Pajak

explains, when I in my writing wanted to explore the fall and described falling and hovering with a range of shades of blue and that blue was mixed to form lilac in one's veins. The painting of *Medusas skratt* [The laugh of the Medusa] is in shades of red, blue and lilac and it radiates, flowers and creeps. Opens up to form a brain in section, a heart or petals. A rope divides it and it fixes us with its gaze from the holes of wilted parts of plants.

At times when I am painting, Anna explains, it feels as though I suddenly fall into the picture. It is only when I am in the process of falling and that I don't really know what I am doing that it works, when I follow the painting rather than the opposite. Precisely this act of falling, both sensually and metaphorically, is of great importance to Anna Pajak. The fall as a guiding star, as working methodology and transformative force. She is describing a movement that totally goes against being in a specific place and knowing everything. In the fall anything can happen; fantastic and dizzying we are drawn into it. To fall in love, to fall from grace, the fallen woman. Perhaps there is nothing other than the fall for us. Anna Pajak rests there, in an ongoing, in a sense of longing. Her painting *Fallen ur tiden* [Fallen out of time] seems controlled, rectangular and precise, but at a second look it opens itself up with its fruitful imperfections, crookedness and gaps in and out of infinity. It is both, not either or, and becomes alive.

*The Laugh of the Medusa* is also the title of a book by a favourite author of Anna Pajak, Hélène Cixous who started the movement known as *Écriture féminine* in Paris in the 1970s. The aim was to promote women's writing freed from patriarchal structures, filled with poetry and philosophical power. Their texts paved the way for an apparatus of concepts that was not linear and not grounded in assertions. Rather, ambivalence was welcomed and seemingly contradictory aspects were able to coexist. People are not soluble equations even though we attempt this and force ourselves upon our complexity. Our language and our thinking are built on either/or statements and they follow a logic that seldom agrees with decisive events in life. *När tårarna kommer skrattar hon* [When the tears come she laughs] is a painting in which senses leak and colour each other. Two green-yellow rills or twined horns trickle from a lilac cave in the middle of the painting. Round this epicentre angular rings spread across the water, echoing with pink laughter and beating blue wings. Women were long excluded from official further education while the witch appeared as a self-fulfilling prophecy. She who rules over intuition, sensibility as silent knowledge. In Anna Pajak's interpretation *Språket* [The language] is a painting of a flower with a fleshy centre and schematic leaves. The body of the flower is penetrated by a pattern of lines that both stake out and retain, perhaps also infusing life.

*Förstenad* [Petrified] is a glittering golden jewel with a red triangle like a warning sign. The lilac coloured folded membranes that are pulled aside open themselves to the heavens in a sense of wonder or they split in a cry. The hard and desirable beam of the jewel and the sky behind which cracks open and melts. A piece of coal or a person who, over time, has become a diamond. *Dödsdans* [Danse macabre] juggles with suns, moons or planets bound together with snake-like ropes between chemical ice and supernatural flames. Do we really want to know how everything is connected? How do you relate to the horizon of our field of consciousness? I ask Anna. I want to upgrade that horizon, she answers. "A large part of my praxis is about this, a longing for a different reality." But you never turn away, I add. When you include the supernatural in your art you link up closely and self-evidently to bodily expression and to that which surrounds us. In this way you strengthen the experience that we all share. It is just like you said, what supernatural? This is my reality and it can be yours too if you dare to feel it. Yes, she reflects, to speak of the spiritual force or contact with superior powers can be a way for people to understand the abstract or

that which we do not understand. It is in such a state of mind that I want to exist and to seek to regain the imaginary.

*Magdalena Ljung*

Translation by William Jewson