



Between life and death

by Sinziana Ravini

“Dying saved my life”, she said. Her beautiful red hair was flowing around her shoulders, making her look like a pre-Raphaelite goddess from the past, or was it the future, considering the objects we were surrounded by? The black spiky arm chair she was sitting in, whose back was covered with multiple shields, like the throne of a true warrior. The black table standing between us, ready to serve with its legs adorned with metal spikes and elegantly hanging chains. And the incredibly uncanny yet serene objects hanging on the walls, looking like a mixture between empowering totemistic trophies, bats, butterflies and fossilized living forms coming from an entirely different dimension.

She continued unfolding the story of her sudden death, provoked by a misdirected brain surgery. What she felt and saw while she was dying. The absolute bliss. The symmetric landscapes and the dynamic shapes of motorcycle wind shields who appeared in front of her, like angels or spiritual guides. The magic tricks the brain, or was it someone else? produces as a final gift to help us over the threshold. She returned to life some minutes later. Her story sounded so mesmerizing and gentle, yet she was talking about the most horrifying experience there is. Dying. And the art of dying. The art of coming back to life as a better version of oneself. The way her art radically changed after this twilight experiences. No wonder her work looked like props and praying devices from a secret religion, preparing us for the other side, telling us that a human being is not completely born until she's dead. I was thinking of Vladimir Nobokov who said “Life is a great sunrise. I do not see why death should not be an even greater one”.

I was completely under Yngvild Sater's spell who started to look more and more like a modern version of Jean d'Arc, ready to affront new fears. And I have been spellbound by her ever since, for one seldom sees an artist hovering so well on the threshold between life and death and combing so disparate worldviews and visual languages as shamanism, neurological science, punk, biker, straight edge and SM cultures, biomechanics, alienhood, psychoanalytic journeys, gothic symbolism, medieval legends, and Wagnerian Wunderkammer aesthetics with the softness and magic wonderlands of venuses in furs.

It's only later, after having spoken with her again, that I understood that she had been the director of her own near death visions. Yngvild had chosen to see Matrix the day before her brain surgery and meditate on the choice that Neo has to make between the real and virtual reality. She then became fascinated by the boldness of the female character, who races through life on a motorcycle without wearing a helmet. Weren't the motorcycle fairings she saw during the brain surgery, her own unconscious telling her, that she was going to make it, if she was fearless enough? I think so and I tend to think that art can be both the incitement and the result of psychonautic journeys when we like Yngvild let the unconscious show the way. In Yngvild's journeys art becomes not only a portal into the unknown, but also an amulet, an armour, a symbolic structure against the desert of the real.

One can most certainly also draw a link between Yngvild's protective devices (metallic windshields, polymorphic plastic, piercing, chains and furs), and Joseph Beuys favorite survival- and work materials: fat and felt, that the tatars supposedly wrapped him in when they found him lying in the snow after the airplane crash in Crimea. Or Frida Kahlo's transformative accidents and suffering. Yngvild's psychonautic aesthetics is in this sense a rite of passage, comparable to the crossing of agonies and ordeals that both saga heroes and most of us have to endure, before we eventually overcome ourselves.

One can also easily see parallels between Yngvild's story and Bastian, the little boy in *The Neverending Story*, which withdraws in the realm of fantasy. Bastian both reads and contributes to the fantasy world he is reading. *The Neverending story* helps him eventually both overcome the fears and obstacles in his personal life and become the active hero of his own story. A journey similar to the "working through" of analysis. Storytelling is what holds our personal worlds together and the stories that Yngvild is telling about her works contribute to what most artists dream of – the creation of a world of its own with its own secret rules and tensions between protagonists and antagonists, good and evil forces, we've only started to see the beginning of. Which forces will win? What is at stake? We only see what we want to see.

Wandering through Yngvild's total work of art, is like being in a *Mad Max* universe without the dust. And her intricate, reptilelike lamps, especially the spiky black ones, are like encountering *Metalhead* in *Black mirror*, without having to lose one's head. We get danger without the negative side effects. And aren't the fury lamps looking like small *Chewbacca* babies?

Her newest works are more voluptuous and fragile than the opulent altarpiece fairings from the past. They make me think of exoskeleton of combat armours, the sensuous spines of anatomical wax doll Venuses from the 17th century in Italy and aliens under molting season. In a way, they're sending us back to the cultural angst that came in the 70s, when the No future punk generation embraced the disillusioned futurism of Science Fiction. An angst that is flourishing more than ever, if we look at the cornucopia of science fictional but also fiction inspired sciences today.

In Ridley Scott's film, the alien is a being of pure negativity, and as Ash famously declares "a survivor... unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality". In Yngvild's world the alienhood is operating on several levels. The first and most direct one is the physical level with the alienating experiences of sickness. The second one is on a mental level since the alien is fore and foremost within us, (which the films *Alien II* and *III* exemplify more than well). Alienation is last but not least manifesting itself on a spiritual, extatic level, since aliens always resurrect like phoenixes from their ashes. Crucified on the wall, they look like a mixture between gigantic butterflies and immersive Rorschach tests. The butterfly was thanks to its metamorphic qualities as we all know also a symbol for Christ, and to a larger extent, a symbol for life and hope. For everyone dies, but not everyone lives. Perhaps we could see Yngvild's exhibition as a place for neverending renaissance, a space for positive alienhood where we're all invited to become friends with the alien within us. How else can we become the heroes of our own stories and enjoy life to its fullest here and now?

This text was originally written in conjunction with Yngvild Sæters exhibition Butterfly House, at Andréhn-Schiptjenko, Stockholm in 2020.