



TOTEM

CATHRINE
RABEN DAVIDSEN



TOTEM

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*A myth is far truer than a history,
for a history only gives a story of the shadows,
whereas a myth gives a story of the substances
that cast the shadows.¹*

ANNIE BESANT

¹ Annie Besant, quoted in “Esoteric Christianity”, 1901 pp 152

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By AUKJE LEPOUTRE RAVN

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Fig. 1
SOPHIA, 2019

TOTEM

– Animism, spirituality and rhizomatic connections

By AUKJE LEPOUTRE RAVN

“Art is (...) the most powerful means of putting into practice some aspect of the chaosmosis, to plunge beneath the subject/object division and to reload the real with new possibilities”

– Jean Claude Polack¹

Dating back to the 1820s the Royal Danish porcelain company Royal Copenhagen has a long-standing tradition of working closely together with artists. Continuing the ambition to explore the creative partnership potential of sharing ideas and knowledge about ceramic production, that tradition lives on today. Contemporary artists are regularly invited to imagine, experiment with and co-develop new ways of making ceramics, using and learning from the technical know-how of the in-house specialists.

In 2017 the Danish visual artist Cathrine Raben Davidsen was invited by Royal Copenhagen to be the artist in residence at the company’s workshop and factory in Glostrup. Over the course of two years Raben Davidsen worked in close collaboration with the ceramic specialists and designers where she experimented with various forming techniques, glazes, and firing methods. The collaboration has resulted in more than 150 unique artworks comprising vases, jugs, lidded jars and plates. Together with a series of new paintings, drawings and prints, a selection of these works is presented in Cathrine Raben Davidsen’s solo exhibition *Totem*, which will be on view at Royal Copenhagen Flagship store in Copenhagen from February 7 until March 29, 2019.

IN SEARCH OF SPIRITUALITY

Throughout her artistic career, the work and practice of Cathrine Raben Davidsen (b. 1972) has gravitated towards the larger existential questions of human life and death. Understanding life as an imminent process of continuous transformation, Raben Davidsen explores the essential traits of being human, asking not only how we as humans are connected to each other, but also how these connections extend towards other living organisms and earthly entities. With an elementary curiosity that connects the knowledge of the past with present-day thinking, Raben Davidsen proposes to us, through her art, to broaden and diversify our sense of historical continuity.

¹ Jean Claude Polack, quoted in Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato: “Machinic Animism”, 2009 pp. 54.

Caring little about the traditional hierarchies among fine art, craftsmanship, design and other creative disciplines, Raben Davidsen is concerned in her artistic oeuvre with multiplicity and intertextuality. Drawing on a wide variety of visual and philosophical references - implementing both modern and renaissance art history, ancient mythology, non-western religion, science, 20th century feminist literature along with personal experience - Raben Davidsen juxtaposes loosely connected elements from diverse cultural realms. Her works most often take form as paintings, drawings, prints or ceramics, but she also engages in collaborative formats such as costume-making, stage and lamp design, and artist books.

In recent years, Raben Davidsen has focused her interest on how we perceive and understand mankind's relationship with nature. She reflects on the modern loss of spirituality and contemplates how we can better pass on the worldly wisdoms of ancient epistemologies that are not influenced by the dominant paradigm of Western capitalism.

ANIMISM AND TOTEMISM

In the pursuit of giving form and visuality to a new notion of a “spiritual beyond” Raben Davidsen draws inspiration from religious and spiritual traditions of indigenous cultures, in particular the belief systems *animism* and *totemism*.

The word animism stems from Latin “animus”, which means “soul” or “life”. The concept is related to the early anthropological research of the 19th century, when the English anthropologist Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917) proposed a theory of animism². He described animism as the religious worldview that natural, physical entities, including animals, plants and often even inanimate objects or phenomena, all possess a spiritual essence. The concept of animism is most often used in anthropology to describe the religions of indigenous tribes, especially before the development of civilization and its organized religion.

Ingrained in many animistic cultures is the tradition and practice of totemism. The totem is a symbol of worship that is thought to possess supernatural powers and aims to gather and strengthen a group's identity and cohesion. The totem may be a tree or an animal or some other natural phenomenon such as a river or a mountain. Each group of people in an animist society may have its own totem and associated ceremonies.

² Edward B. Tylor: *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*, 1871.

Although the animist communities have often been associated with so-called ‘primitive’ cultures, philosophers and sociologists of today attribute far greater importance to the practices of animism and totemism. Abandoning the colonial pre definitions and seeing animism more generally as a useful and inspirational source of knowledge, it is largely considered a pertinent reference in rethinking the planet's contemporary ecological challenges.

THE MAGIC WITHIN CERAMICS

For the collaboration with Royal Copenhagen, Raben Davidsen has been inspired by prehistoric ceramics from central Europe, Mexico, Japan and a type of stoneware from the late Bronze Age in Scandinavia commonly referred to as ‘face-mask urns’. However, it is the German stoneware from the 16th and 17th centuries that has inspired Raben Davidsen the most. Originally ceramic objects in these German styles were known as ‘Bartmann jugs’, ‘Bellarmine’, or ‘Greybeards’. They were typically made of brown or grey stoneware glazed with salt and were characteristically embossed with a bearded face³.

In some regions these containers were also referred to as “medicine bottles” or “witch bottles”, as they were used to practice witchcraft. The medicine bottles were said to contain potent liquids that could consist of abject bodily substances such as saliva, blood, urine, and even of hair. These bottles were assigned magic powers and used in occult ceremonies to expel evil spirits.

The myths around these vessels have fed directly into Raben Davidsen's processing of her own ceramics – both formally and in their embedded mythological subject matter. In the exhibition *Totem*, the ceramics are presented in series of large and small jars, vases and vessels – some with lids, some without. They are displayed in categorized groups almost resembling types of people or families. Most of the jars are glazed in earth colours such as red, green, white, and black, all considered as having symbolic or spiritual meanings. Red refers to blood, birth and life; black is associated with power, change and rebirth; and white symbolizes purity and death. Some of the darker jars are decorated with 24 carat gold, making them look as if they have been touched by a gleam of divine light when seen from afar.

³ J. H. Macmichael: “The Bellarmine or Greybeard”, *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, First Series. Volume 49, 1893 – Issue 4



Fig. 2
ANIMA MUNDI, 2018

By playfully adapting the stylistic expression of the Bartman ceramics, Raben Davidsen creates a direct link with the magical ‘world’ inside the jars and pays homage to the ghostly, esoteric and mystical qualities embedded in the historic ceramic tradition and its cultural use.

SUBMERGED FACES AND ELEVATED BODIES

As an overall project, *Totem* includes a larger body of work besides the ceramics. Raben Davidsen has also made a series of new paintings, drawings, prints and animation film, all of which together expand her abstract visual language and reach beyond previous motif worlds. The prevailing subject matter in these works is the synthesis of human, animal and cosmos. We encounter shadowy images of ambiguous floating bodies, owls with pierced-out eyes, a young deer hovering in the air with its hooves growing like tree branches, lightweight birds, ethereal jellyfish and whales moving around in liquid, formless spaces.

All of the paintings are soaked in earth colours such as deep oranges, blood reds, turquoise blues and maroon browns from a palette similar to the chakra colours Raben Davidsen has used before. Out of the saturated colour fields, these delicate, almost invisible faces appear. The usual parameters of identity such as gender, race or age seem erased; rather, we see these androgynous creatures outside time and space, ostensibly in a state of flux towards a new dimension. With these enigmatic, mask-like features, the faces look like transitioning souls or spirits inhabiting another dimension in another world. All this gives the paintings a dreamlike quality and a strong sense of spiritual mystique.

In *A thousand names for Gaia* (fig. 3) we glimpse an angelic face totally submerged in the turquoise colour plane so only the lips and one eye appear clear, and in *Sophia* (fig. 1) a brown, reddish and ochre palette makes up the abstract landscape. On top of these are watery white dots, looking like a petri dish of bacteria starting to grow over the surface, evoking an impression of organic life in process.

Vehicle (fig. 33) and *In and of the Earth* (fig. 6) depict two silhouette bodies pushing out of the horizontal space and ascending into the sky. The motifs of the paintings show similarities to the work of the Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, which likewise revolved around the body, nature, and the spiritual connections between them. Her series *Siluetas* (begun in 1973) used a typology of abstracted feminine forms, through which she sought to access an “omnipres-

⁴ Ana Mendieta, quoted in Petra Barreras del Rio and John Perrault, *Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988), p. 10.

ent female force”. Mendieta carved and shaped her figures in the earth, with arms overhead to represent the merging of earth and sky; floating in water to symbolize the minimal space between land and sea; or with arms raised and legs together to signify a wandering soul.

Delving deeper into an underworld ambience, the painting *Nightshade* (fig. 9) depicts a rather aquatic milieu. In the foreground, with white tentacles extended, a floating organism resembling a dissolved jellyfish appears. In the background, from behind a horizontal purple line, the silhouette of a resting androgynous face is rising (or setting) like a sun. The painting seems to suggest the merging of elements as the common source of all living creation, and makes the point that we are all descended from the same biological entity.

Raben Davidsen’s newly produced animation film *Tentacular* stands out in the exhibition as the only moving image. In the 3-minute black-and-white looping film, we see series of subtly drawn milky-white jellyfish, spreading out their umbrella-shaped bells as they appear and disappear like magical ghostly creatures. Adding more layers we see figures, birds, spiders and plants performing the same organic movements, from physical dissolution to cosmic integration. The animation is accompanied by an underworld-like soundtrack and takes the form of a meditation on transformation.

RHIZOMATIC CONNECTIONS

“To reclaim animism is to recover from the very separation, to regenerate what the separation itself has poisoned, to learn what is necessary in order to inhabit once again what was destroyed, to restore life on what it had been infected, to strive and heal.”⁵

– Isabelle Stengers

In *Totem* many of Cathrine Raben Davidsen’s themes coalesce into an ethereal spirituality; an elegy on the forces of nature and the cosmos. There is a persistent anthropomorphizing quality at play where the attributes of the human, animal and cosmic elements morph into combined subjectivities. The totality of the works evokes an almost electric atmosphere. By creating a visual language that goes beyond the rationally tangible and comprehensible borderline of subject/object, Raben Davidsen calls attention to the magic within the very process of transformation.

⁵ Isabelle Stengers: “Reclaiming Animism”, p. 9

⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987

This mode of thinking has parallels with the ideas of the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who in the late 1970s developed a concept they called the “rhizome”. The rhizome connects practices, concerns, and heterogenous modes of making sense, without privileging any of these modes. The idea of rhizomatic connections to other practices and entities that likewise explore a metamorphic (rather than a representational) relation to the world is very much a part of animism.

Combining this knowledge of and these references to ritual practices, ancient belief systems and modern philosophy, *Totem* tells us a story of the fruitful powers of the “worlds beyond” and their rhizomatic and holistic connections. These worlds and worldviews have helped shape human beings’ understanding of their own subjectivity and their relations to their natural surroundings in the past, and should continue to do so with renewed strength in the future!

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SELECTED WORKS



Fig. 3
A THOUSAND NAMES FOR GAIA, 2018



Fig. 4
TALISMAN, 2019



Fig. 5
FORMATION, 2018



Fig. 6
IN AND OF THE EARTH, 2018



Fig. 7
CARRIER, 2018



Fig. 8
TOTEM JUG, 2017



Fig. 9
NIGHTSHADE, 2018



Fig. 10
TOTEM FACE, 2017-2018



Fig. 11
TOTEM FACE, 2017-2018



Fig. 12
NIGHT SIGHT, 2019



Fig. 13 (fig. 43)
TOTEM HEAD, 2017-2018



Fig. 14
THE GARDEN OF HEALTH, 2019



Fig. 15
ERCE, 2018



Fig. 16
DEER, 2019



Fig. 17
ANIMAL, 2018



Fig. 18
MANDRAGORA, 2019



Fig. 19
TOTEM HEAD, 2018

Fig. 20
TOTEM JAR, 2017

Fig. 21
NIGHT CREATURE, 2019



Fig. 22
TOTEM FACE URN, 2018-2019



Fig. 24
TOTEM GOLD JAR, 2017-2018

Fig. 25
TOTEM JUG, 2018

Fig. 23 (Fig. 26)
TOTEM HEAD, 2018

Fig. 26 (Fig. 23)
TOTEM HEAD, 2018





Fig. 27
TOTEM FIGURINE, 2018

Fig. 28
TOTEM FIGURINE, 2018

Fig. 29
TOTEM JUG, 2018



Fig. 30
NEW FROM THE OLD, 2018

Fig. 31
TOTEM HEAD, 2017-2018





Fig. 32
IF GOD GIVES YOU SICKNESS HE ALSO GIVES YOU MEDICINE, 2018

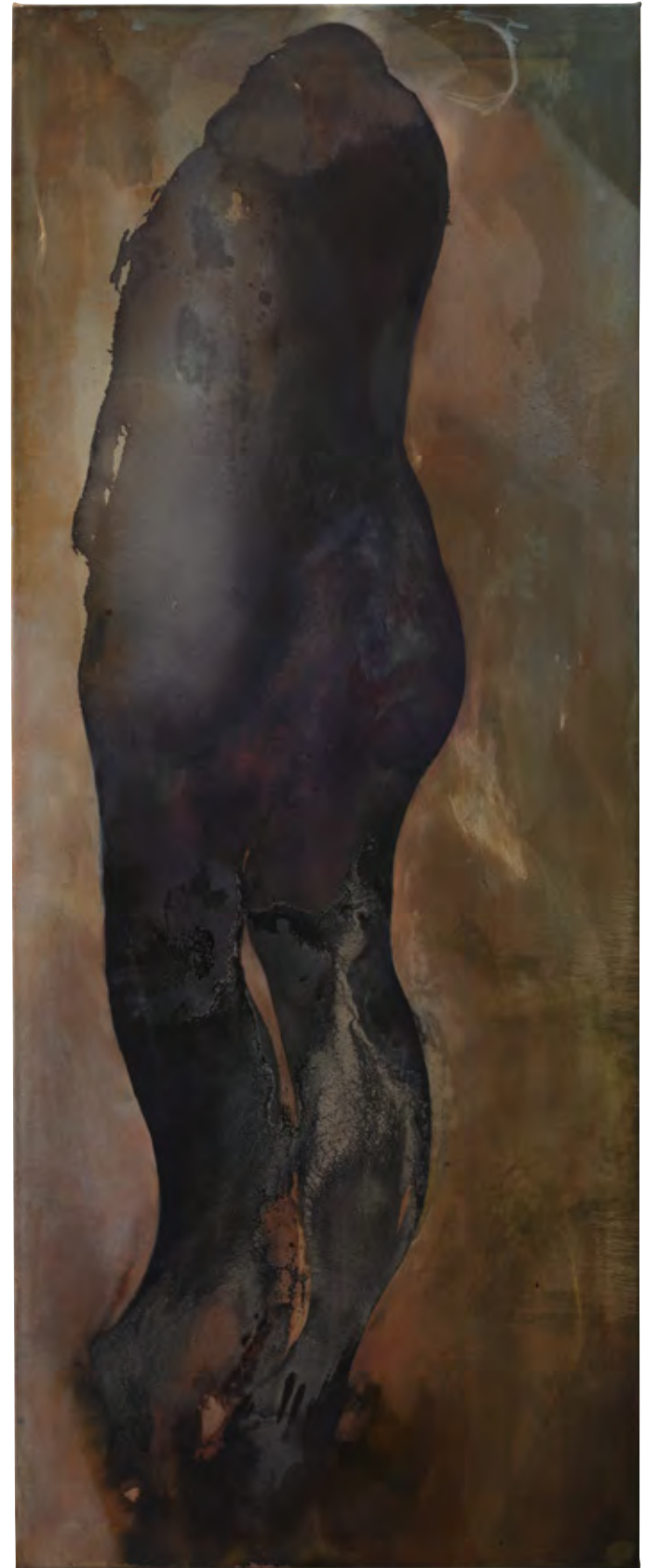


Fig. 33
VEHICLE, 2018-2019



Fig. 34
NIGHT CREATURE, 2018



Fig. 35
JELLYFISH, 2018

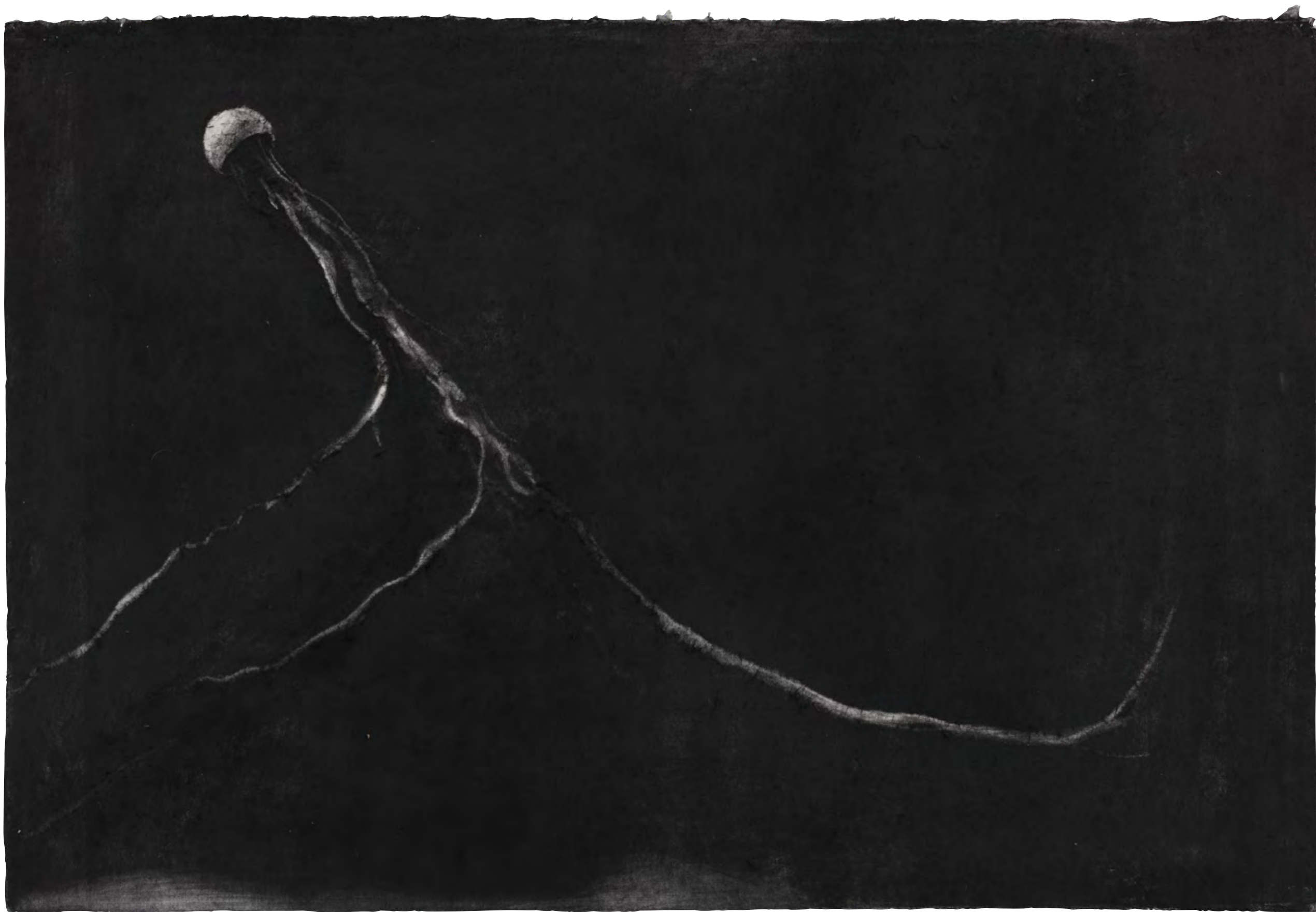


Fig. 36
TENTACULAR, 2018



Fig. 37
ANIMA MUNDI, 2018



Fig. 38
ANIMA MUNDI, 2018



Fig. 39
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Fig. 40
MEDUSA, 2018



Fig. 41
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Fig. 42
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A Fig. 49
HUMANISED, 2018



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Fig. 52
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TOTEM JUG, 2018



Fig. 54
TOTEM FACE, 2018



Fig. 55
TOTEM FACE, 2018

Fig. 56
TOTEM GOLD FACE URN, 2018-2019



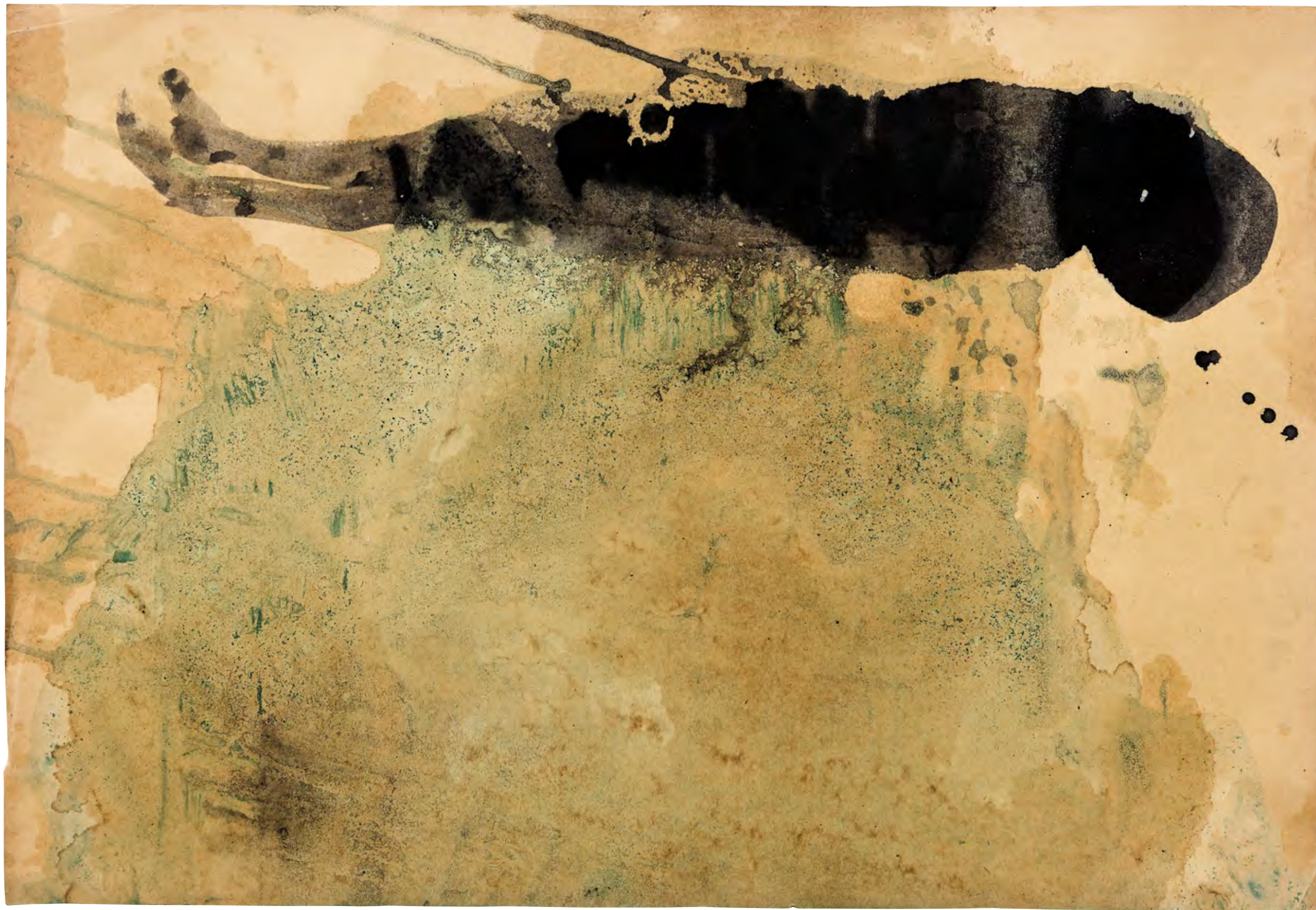


Fig. 57
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Fig. 58
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Each of the ceramic works featured is unique and made in collaboration with Royal Copenhagen 2017-2019.

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Fig. 2
ANIMA MUNDI, 2018
Monotype, unique.
Paper size: 50h x 35w cm /19.69h x 13.78w in
CRD845

Fig. 3
A THOUSAND NAMES FOR GAIA, 2018
Oil, acrylic, pigment on linen.
200h x 150w cm / 78.74h x 59.06w in
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Fig. 4
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Fig. 37
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Ink, oil on paper.
31h x 45w cm / 12.20h x 17.72w in
CRD851

Fig. 58
TOTEM GOLD JUG, 2018-2019
Stoneware lidded jug with 24 carat gold.
31h x 21w cm / 12.20h x 8.27w in
CRD/RCPH152

BIOGRAPHY

Historical accounts, mythological material and works of fiction together form the central points of departure for Danish visual artist Cathrine Raben Davidsen. Using and juxtaposing references from cultural traditions, ancient histories of craftsmanship, the great masters of European art history as well as the current social and philosophical thinking of our own time Raben Davidsen explores the essential traits of human nature. The predominant subject matter in her practice are the topics of life, death and transformation. Working primarily with painting, drawing, printmaking and ceramics, she incorporates animals, figures and narrative tropes from classical mythology and folk tales.

Cathrine Raben Davidsen was born in 1972 in Copenhagen, Denmark and lives and works in Copenhagen. In 2006 she received her MFA from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Prior to this she studied at Instituto Lorenze de' Medici, Florence and at Vrije Akademie, Den Haag. Raben Davidsen has exhibited widely in both Denmark and abroad. Her work is represented in numerous prominent museum collections and institutions including The National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen; Horsens Art Museum, Horsens; Trapholt Museum of Modern Art, Applied Art, Design and Architecture, Kolding; and The New Carlsberg Foundation, Copenhagen. She has made costumes and sets for the Royal Danish Ballet and has been awarded many prestigious prizes and grants such as Anne Marie Telmányi born Carl Nielsen Honorary Grant; H.H.Bruun Honorary Grant; Niels Wessel Bagge Art Foundation; and the Danish Arts Foundation. In 2015 she was appointed Knight of the Order of Dannebrog by Her Majesty The Queen of Denmark.





CATHRINE RABEN DAVIDSEN
TOTEM

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