MYSTERY OF MATTER AND MAGIC OF PRESENCE

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Abstract

This paper investigates metaphorical and phenomenological aspects of shimmer, reflection, membrane and movement. By exploring the interface of knowledge through the lens of materiality, the aim is to examine how the plasticity of light and shadows might create animating reflections and dissolving surfaces. Of particular interest is the undefined quality of shimmer and how it can be interpreted as a transitional in-between stage of displaced and fluid boundaries. Further on, the work explores the power of portals – both visually but also in the physical and emotional engagement with materials and techniques.

The installation *Mystery of Matter and Magic of Presence* is based upon a dialogical method where the atmosphere might be understood as a space-filling materiality itself. The work expresses the material’s state as well as the ephemeral qualities around it. It offers a counterweight to a hard, violent and narcissistic aspect of the material biographies of metals in general, and aluminum in particular.

The research consists mainly of sources on Byzantine and Medieval Art history. Sources that also engage with the role of language, poetry and etymology for our understanding of material culture and history.
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Introduction

Our world has never been as lit as today. And when everything’s made visible, perhaps some of the enchantment has disappeared. In my project, I aim to leave the fully visible behind and search for the mystery lurking in the shadows. To look for animation, awe and wonder in a transitional stage between light and darkness.

A way to search for this is to work with the metaphorical and phenomenological aspects of shimmer, reflection, membrane and movement. One of the questions I ask through my work is how the plasticity of light and its reflection in dissolving surfaces can develop a sensuous experience of materiality and time. Can these surfaces even be understood as membranes of sight, and interfaces of knowledge? And in a world full speed, does it have the power to be healing?

The reflections I work with are just reflections, not mirroring, because I am not looking for a double, or a confirmation on what is already there. We mirror each other in the objects around us anyways. I am looking to meet something else - to experience the mystery of matter and the magic of presence both in seeing and experiencing but also in the physical making. A way to do this can be to use serendipity as a method – attentiveness is also my craft. But, what is this something else? If science can describe a lot, but not all - what is that other then? That which cannot be described through language, that is beyond words?

Sometimes the world escapes descriptions and explanations, denies being measured and understood. Swedish philosopher Jonna Bornemark writes in her book “Pedanternas herravälde” about our modern society where the willingness to measure everything is juxtaposed to the Italian renaissance philosopher Giordano Bruno’s ideas about inner causality, magic and mystery.

My research has mainly been around light, shadows, shimmer, movement and materiality. When looking at my own work through the lens of these notions I am able to find my own sense of inner causality, magic and mystery. I use the vague words light and shadows, aware that there is an infinite variety of differences and nuances depending on location, conditions and light sources. I will draw attention to some of these light sources in the essay, and further discuss how a certain kind of light or shimmer can have an animating effect on a surface. Of particular importance is Bissera V. Pentcheva's research on language and spatiality in the Byzantine world, in which she discusses how language - more specifically poetry, etymology and linguistics - can combine and connect materials, phenomena and contexts. To enhance a kind of imaginary undefinedness that I hope my work holds, some poetical and literary sources have been of use. The reason why so many of my sources are within an Art historical context around religious art is because the themes I am interested in are often dealt with in religious contexts; light and dark, transitional, transcendent, and liminal. Also, my background in Art history naturally came into play.

Through the work, a number of symbols have crystallized; stone, shell and water. These have been my portals into something else. Stone, because there is no material so broad and loaded within the history of human culture, and because the idea of a rock's surface and its inside can be a philosophical riddle. Shell, because just like stone, it’s at the core of human culture and is the
ultimate symbol for a defined space. Because it is shimmering. Water, because it is the opposite of a closed space, is in constant transformation and can assume an infinite number of guises. Because water is a prerequisite for all life. And because it holds stories like this: the amniotic fluid has the same salinity as the primordial sea.

I am using a phenomenological perspective, in the sense that my work is sensuous and experiential. Phenomenology emphasizes the experience, and the experience in a first-person perspective - it’s about how a phenomenon appears for someone rather than the thing in itself.
Leaping into a shimmering sea

When I applied for the master’s, I did so with a project description based on the concepts of reflection, horizon, echo and imprint. I perceived in these concepts a thought about how something exists in and encounters the world, and how this encounter is fluid and mobile. I do believe relations, transformation and changes are continually happening, and that there are no limits and boundaries - we are the ones who create them. Instead there are leaking and floating areas and networks, deeply entangled with each other. Perhaps the sea shore could work as a symbol or metaphor, for a place where the limits continue to change? A territory of uncertainty. The very intersection between stable and floating, the ever floating area between land and sea, in the midst of what we think we know and the projection surface of our imagination.

An illustrative scene of this floating borderland might be the beach at dusk. In this symbolic landscape, I looked for material imprints that exist on the border between the seemingly stable and the ephemeral, between what we know and what we think we know. Material expressions that work as an interface of our knowledge - a membrane perhaps, between what we see or experience and what is hidden for us.

One day I got stuck. I was sitting at my jewelry bench and at random I picked up the closest thing. A small baroque pearl. A shadow fell from the light of the lamp. I followed the outline of the shadow with a pen, tilting the light slightly, over and over again, repeating the line. Through the urge of catching the shadows of the pearl I by accident had developed its missing shell.

I found the pearl and the seashell as helpful figures to talk about notions of interest to me; the relation between inside/outside, layers and growth, time and movement and stillness. In my works *The principle of pearls I and II* (2021), I searched for the principles of pearls - how they grow and how they glow.

![Image 1. Principles of the Pearl I. (Miriam Johannesson, 2022)](image1.png)
![Image 2. Process photo of Principles of the Pearl II. (Miriam Johannesson, 2022)](image2.png)

I created a new baroque pearl, half a meter, and used electrical light to enlarge the shadows. But when reflecting on the work and studying it at different times of the day, the electrical lamps came to bother me. Their static stillness wasn't calming. It was just fixed. The shell was too obvious, and the shimmering surface of the pearl died when it was too strongly lit. When looking at the pearl in a light that varied - in various times of the day and night with the sun, the moon, a moving electrical lamp or a candle - the surface of the pearl and its form came to life. The shimmering surface in relation to a more dim light made an impact on me. It is as if the pearl needed to be not too visible in order for its mysteriousness to be visual. It was a paradox how the moving light had an effect of stillness on me. The shimmer almost had its own life - a shimmer that made the boundaries of the object hard to define and grasp. The movement of the object allowed me to experience the plasticity of light even though I was still. I got to rest in stillness, and still experience movement.

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Much of my work has since then come to explore spaciousness and reflections in matter, moving lights and flickering shadows. During the process I have come to explore animation and what it takes for something to come into life. Can the undefined area and the constant changes that we find in the beach or the sky also could be found in the surface of metal? The works are influenced and activated by the room and by the viewer due to either daylight, electricity or candle light. It shifts depending on if the viewer is still or in motion, whether it is a space full of life and movement or a quiet contemplation. The plasticity of movement and the changing light becomes part of the work and is needed to create animation and calmness at the same time.

When researching the shimmer of mother of pearl, I found the essay Matter and Meaning of Mother-of-Pearl: The Origins of Allegory in the Spheres of Things by art historian Beate Fricke. Fricke discusses the material mother of pearl in relation to a reliquary from a Paris workshop ca 1400. The aim of her article, she claims, is to present the object's ability to oscillate between multiple possible meanings, and to oppose the idea of only one possible interpretation since that would deprive the object of its ability to function in different contexts - both secular and sacred. Fricke presents the many various layers of the object's meaning through an analysis of its iconographic motifs, and its cultural and artistic origin.

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The reliquary shows the upper body of Christ carved in extremely fine relief of mother of pearl. The angel holds its wings almost like a seashell, like an oyster. Fricke presents the idea that the shimmering iridescence of the body of mother of pearl enhances the transitory state he is in; the enigmatic stage between life and death. To enhance this, the eyes of Christ are half open.  

My search soon shifted from the material mother of pearl towards a more open sense of a lustrous glow, but still bearing in mind how shimmer has been understood as something exemplifying a spiritual and transitory state. From this point on, I have leaped into a shimmering sea.

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REFLECTIONS

In my search for shimmer and animation in matter I have come across many writings in a religious and Art historical context. Shimmer seems to often be referred to as a spiritual, mysterious glow that extends beyond the visual. The art historian Bissara V. Pentcheva writes extensively about the audio-visual relation when it comes to shimmer.

This glow is an interesting phenomenon because it requires both light and darkness and is defined by a kind of boundlessness. One can look at a glittering surface and have difficulty determining the outer boundary of the object. It creates an effect of undefinedness - almost of light that evaporates. Perhaps the shimmer is a variant of the beach - a difficult border to define because it is ever changing. Shimmer, glitter, gleam, glistening, luster, coruscating. These are all closely related words that seem to hold something indefinable, indeterminable and in between. In this text, I mostly use the concept of shimmer because I feel that it relates to other senses to a greater extent than the other concepts do. However, they are all very related and the word coruscating also appears frequently.

In a world where we have never been as lit as today, I find something of the sublime mystery in a soft, gleaming surface. It makes me wonder; can shimmer make something come alive, be sublime and mysterious and create an aura through a dissolved surface, if so - how? And in a secular society, what role do these surface and material qualities play?

The material of use has mostly been aluminum. That most of the works would be in aluminum was not my plan from the beginning. But as I have been working with attentiveness, format and conditions around the work, it has also included the very material. I believe that one can write a thesis on a grain of dust. The world is so rich that even the aspects around something as seemingly insignificant as this are infinite. When I started working in aluminum, the material unfolded every time. It revealed a new surface, a new way to crack or to fall apart. Not the least, it offered a shimmer. One could work a whole life with one material and constantly make new discoveries. The only question is whether it says what you want it to say, and therefore in a couple of the works, I have used other materials such as pewter and plaster.

Aluminum is interesting because it is the third most abundant element in the earth's crust. We are surrounded by aluminum in so many ways; food containers and beverage packaging, means of transport, kitchenware, weapons, cosmetics and electronics to name but a few. But it has not always been like this. The 1540 treatise Pirotechnia by Vannoccio Biringuccio is considered one of the first printed books on metal and metallurgy in Europe. In this tract, aluminum is not mentioned for the simple reason that it had not been discovered yet. Aluminum is not found in its pure form in nature like gold, silver and copper, but the aluminum oxide exists in many minerals. During the 19th century, chemists struggled with this enigmatic element that was everywhere but could not be made into anything. It was not until 1825 that aluminum metal was successfully produced through a very resource-intensive process using both bauxite ore and

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cryolite. The manufacturing process was so costly that for a period it was more expensive than gold and was used as cutlery at the court of Napoleon III. The price plummeted as the process became cheaper to carry out, and in 1886 the process that is still used today to produce aluminum metal was patented.

Aluminum is sometimes referred to as the plastic of the metals. It behaves differently than many other metals. When aluminum melts, it simultaneously oxidizes the surface and creates a skinlike veil in which the metal melts. That it melts from within makes it very difficult to detect with the naked eye. Because of this toughness, almost a malleability, there is an uncontrollable aspect and a hard-to-detect breaking point in the metal. At first nothing happens, then the sheet metal surface begins to pull away, becomes rough, and then suddenly everything happens. To engage with it requires great patience and precise timing.


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10 Öhrström, Lars, Den siste alkemisten i Paris och andra egendomliga episoder ur det periodiska systemet, p. 122.
When working on The Well, I found myself as a low hanging cloud. The hammer blows fell down like heavy rain drops on the adaptable surface. Metal is softest and easiest to work with when heated, but while working with it, it becomes stiffer, harder, and more vulnerable. It cracks easier. The common procedure is to heat it, work, heat it, work and so on. As the structure of the metal changes, so does the sound. When heated the hammer sings in a beautiful tone with a long singing echo. Not only can one hear when it is time to heat it - but the sound grows dense, harsh, and so the short vibrations in your hand. Just as the rain peters out, so does the singing of the metal. It is time to heat the metal when your ears and your hands hurt.

The Well consists of a forged aluminum plate roundel of approximately 100 cm in diameter, suspended in a 5 meter high plaster-covered cotton thread. The Well hovers very low above the floor, with a slow oscillating motion. Like a pendulum searching for a core. Together with the movement, light and darkness reflected in the metal surface, an effect of animated water, of rippled waves, is created. At twilight it comes across as a still and resting water, during a dark night a heavy and deep water and in the morning sun an evaporating mist. The oscillating movement might also be seen as the symbolic equivalent of twilight itself.


In the silversmith’s and goldsmith’s material and technique biographies, one tradition emerges particularly clearly; the pursuit of the highly polished narcissistic surface. An artist who in her work has challenged this common notion of the self-reflective surface of metal is the artist Jenny Edlund.

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Image 10. Corpus, Jenny Edlund.13

The soft surfaces in Edlund's corpus works consist of matt shiny and glistening surfaces. That it can be understood as an object not to be visually reflected in is enhanced by the folds of the metal instead of a flat polished surface. The light bounces differently on this silver surface - you are not blinded by it, but can let your eyes rest just as on a soft, dim light day. The interplay of movement in relation to light and shadows leads us into the next chapter.

MOVEMENT

In *Moving eyes: surface and shadow in the Byzantine mixed-media relief icon* Art historian Bissera V. Pentcheva highlights the phenomenological aspect of the perception of medieval objects. Based on a number of greek concepts, such as epiphaneia (meaning appearance or surface), poikilos (meaning diverse), chias (meaning glitter), she argues that the eikons comes to life through the presence in the church room and the interaction of subject and object. For instance, when the prayer holds a candle in his/her hand and moves around the icon, the flickering light from the candle and the breath of the prayer casts animating shadows and light on the diverse surface, making the icon seem animated.14 Such polymorphic surfaces create phenomenological effects sensually understood - poikilia was understood as animation, as a spectacle of change and as the presence of spirit in matter. The phenomenal presence effects experienced by the senses therefore meant; to perceive the divine mystery means to experience its reflection in matter. Pentcheva concludes that the presence in medieval objects lies in the visual, not in the visible; “it's lurking in the shadows, being animated by human gesture and breath”.

Pentcheva describes how it is the human breath in relation to the wax candle that agitates the glitter of gold, and that this shimmer itself “manifests a trembling fire, which in turn marks the entry of the divine spirit into matter”.16 It is this glitter, or chias, of gold and moving shadows that veils and therefore paradoxically uncover the presence of something ineffable and evanescent. And here, she shows how the light and shadows make the eyes of the icon move, looking directly on the prayer if he/she is close with the candle, or up towards heaven when he/she backs away.

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Furthermore, *atechnes kinesis* - understood as a sense of animation and lifelikeness achieved through changing phenomenal effects is useful in order to use ephemeral effects to achieve a sort of liveliness. It is about paying attention to the darkness and the shadows, the discreet, which creates a feeling of "otherworldly presence", a higher presence. To leave the fully visible beyond and to find the mystery in the hiding darkness. It is something that also David Thurfjell, Professor in religious studies, has articulated in an interview in Dagens Nyheter: “Ljuset är viktigt för mig. Att uppleva skymning och gryning, ta vara på öppningen mot något förtrollat som finns i mörkret.”

I understand the quality of *atechnes kinesis* as more a question of the plasticity of light and movement, rather than the necessity of a wax candle. However, human breath hardly can have the same effect on electricity as the breath on a candle, but the movement of the viewer and certain light conditions could work as well. As we can see in the work The Well, it is the movement together with the surface and the light that creates an experience of animation. The movement of either the light, the viewer or the icon/The Well is needed. It is relevant for my work to understand how animation can be born from the interaction between the object with a changing environment and the person present in the room - how the viewer perceives the icon's *poikilia* as full of life.

18 “Light is important to me. To experience dusk and dawn, cherish the opening/portal to something enchanted that exists in the dark.” (My translation.) Dagens Nyheter, 22 januari 2023.
A similar take on electrical light versus a more shady light can be found in Junihiro Tanizaki's small but very influential book *In praise of shadows*, in which Tanizaki reflects on the electrical lights' effect on Japanese art, culture and interior. Tanizaki presents many examples of the mystery and poetry in the play of dark and light; how the lacquer ware and the miso soup shines in the dark, and how the highly polished metal "screams" in a highly lit room. Instead, the more polished a work of metal is, the darker the room needs to be.¹⁹ In this sense, the work of Jenny Edlund might be experienced as a whisper. Tanizaki presents a sensuous approach to spatiality and its phenomenological effects on the human being in the room, similar to Pentchevas discussion in *Moving eyes* where she explores the mysterious, lively play in natural light and the lurking shadows.

Pentcheva further explores the sensual materiality of the space and its metaphysical dimensions, and she focuses on how glitter - which is linguistically related to the root marmar- structures the spiritual practices of the space. The transitive terms marmaroi, marmara, marmarymata and marmario also refer to coruscating water, marble and metal. Pentcheva presents how the iterative marmar- shows "the perceived transformation of different materials - light, metal, and stone - into water, and it is this image of water that offers a kinetic dimension" to an imagined world.²⁰ The research of Pentcheva shows great examples of how language can transform materials too.

Pentcheva describes how the marble floor at sunset glows with the luster of mother of pearl, that recalls the opalescence of the Bosphorus at certain times of the day.²¹ It is the same poikilia in the marble as she saw in the byzantine icon earlier described, embedded in movement and change and how the surfaces interact with light, creating animation in the space as well as in the icon. Marmarymata marks the animation of matter, it is a light that both reflects and absorbs, it is the true core of shimmer - a phenomenon that triggers the viewer to mark the inanimate as animate.²²

While trying to find this animation in a number of different metal surfaces, I came across a tool created to measure the immeasurable - the Secchi disk. The Secchi disk is a useful instrument for those who need to measure the depth of visibility in a lake or an ocean, often used by marine biologists. The disk is designed in a graphic black and white pattern, attached at its center to a rope with specified dimensions written on. When the disk is lowered into the water depth and can no longer be seen, it is easy to look at the gauge to read the visibility depth. I feel there is such poetry in this, but I couldn't really articulate it other than trying to make a secchi disk myself. But instead of the hard black and white shapes, I wanted to see how a shimmering light like mother of pearl would be expressed. I sought to imitate the structure of the aragonite plates by refracting the light in different directions on the metal.

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²¹ Pentcheva, “Hagia Sophia and Multisensory Aesthetics.”, p. 98.
²² Pentcheva, “Hagia Sophia and Multisensory Aesthetics.”, p. 100.
For this, a brass scratching brush was used which brushed the surface. In many ways this inner space, or the spectacle beyond the surface, is reminiscent of painting. Here also, a brush has been used to create a room on or beyond a flat surface. But no color has been applied here, it's just light. Light that sweeps over an incredibly low relief. With how little impact can something be accomplished? Sometimes a sunny summer day with blue skies and light clouds appears. A light sweep and the storm moves in. The pearl as the sky, the sky as deep sea. Created to measure, but resting in the immeasurable.

In the round shape rests the possibility of movement. The round can be set in motion in a different way than the angular and static. Around is also the tool of vision; our eye, pupil and iris through which we try to perceive the depth of the surface. When looking at clouds, the infinity of space can be overwhelming. Such a thin cover of water in between us and infinity, constantly in motion. No one can catch clouds.

When it comes to seeing the sky in metal, I feel a kinship with one of the women who first graduated from Konstfack's metal department, Olga Lanner. Lanner attended Konstfack, which by then was called Tekniska skolan, in the years 1903-1906. Her own workshop was commissioned to carry out an altarpiece for the Engelbrekt Church in Stockholm, which was inaugurated in 1914. The altar piece consists of seven shields in chiseled silver. Initially, the

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shields had lighting behind them, but on my visit to the church in October 2022, it could not be lit. However, it is hard to imagine how much more they can shine than they already do. They capture candles, electric light and sunlight that can flow in thanks to the large church windows made of white transparent glass. Six of the shields show stylized clouds against a background of forged and polished silver plate. The uneven surface behind the clouds creates a peculiar luminosity, a shimmer like the inside of a seashell. On the central shield showing Jesus Christ, no clouds are visible. He just floats in a brilliant shimmer. The symbolism of this makes me recall the reliquary mentioned in the introduction, where the shimmering mother of pearl enhanced the transitory state of Christ.

Image 16. Altar piece in Engelbrektskyrkan, Olga Lanner, 1914.24

MEMBRANE

A glimmering silvery container floats in the room. The shape is difficult to determine, like a piece of snow. If you look closely, you can see lots of shiny, irregular convex surfaces. Like water drops settings. The small domes in which the water rests sparkle like frosted snow crystals. The full of water in the silver mount is not from the container leaking - it just has an opening at the top. Nothing can flow out unless you turn the container over, and barely even then because the contents consist of ice. It is the temperature difference that occurs between the ice and the warmer air that distills the room's invisible fog. When the dew has filled up the settings, they eventually fall off their own weight. The dramaturgy of the water drop is waiting to fall.

But where does the waterdrop fall? Does it fall heavily, lightly, hard? If it falls into water, there is a sound - the sound of the part being absorbed into something bigger. The sound of circles repeating on the surface. If they fall into plaster, they fall silently. And when water drops on plaster beneath, a very slow casting occurs - thus recreating the forces of rain and mountains - and the resurrection of how life on earth once rose.

Regardless of whether the drop falls into water or plaster, a sensory effect of a tempo occurs. A tempo of the rhythm of the fall. A format becomes visible, both in form and in time. The thread from which the container hangs describes the eternal cycle of water and its connection with the plaster. The container changes appearance depending on whether it is covered by a thin condensation fog, heavier water droplets, or has dried. If it is covered in moisture, its outer layer is constantly changing. The metal is visible through the water, but even the metal is somewhat difficult to define due to the way the light hits its glittering surface. The object is liminal, or transitional. Its outermost layer is ever changing with the environment.

In *Creating sensory spaces* Barbara Erwine cites Juhani Pallasmaa; “Anyone who has become entranced by the sound of dripping water in the darkness of a ruin can attest to the extraordinary capacity of the ear to carve a volume into the void of darkness. The space traced by the ear in the darkness becomes a cavity sculpted directly in the interior of the mind.”

Like the shimmer, it is described how even sound can have an animating effect on the world in that it both surrounds us and comes from us; “as we hear and feel sound vibrations, we enter into an active relationship between our bodies and the beings and objects around us.”

In this case, the sound arises from an object that, together with the conditions in the room, is in constant renegotiation of its boundaries - an undefinedness in where it begins and where it ends. A membrane in disguise.

The container with the water drops settings makes me think of a study visit I did at the Natural history museum in Stockholm. Down in the basement they have the formaldehyde department, with endless animals and plants in glass jars. In some of the containers, you could see how the snails in a very, very early stage of life live in roe-like clusters. In its earliest infancy, the snail's shell consists only of a transparent, enfolded veil, a shell as protective as the surface tension of a

drop of water. The snail in its water drop age. Soon the membrane becomes a little harder, a little less transparent, but still so soft and so fragile that it resembles a newborn baby’s first fingernails. Over time these shells harden, over time they become opaque, impenetrable, impossible to see in and out of. The conch shell becomes a form that hardens itself. Life casting itself.

In the following piece, the membrane was born out of an event that appeared serene to me. I wanted to melt an aluminum plate over the casting table in the workshop, and imagined it would fall down like an altar cloth over an altar. I had seen both aluminum and zinc do this before, but on a much smaller scale. The desire was for the draping sheet to form a bowl, or perhaps a baptismal font, that could carry the room.²⁷ The workshop room is for me a magical place filled with mystery, surprises and frustration. The bowl would carry all this. But having such a clear idea of what should happen can seem to be the opposite of the artistic process. In moments of stress, hyper-directed focus and tunnel vision, it can be easy to rush past the necessary presence and attention required for the accidental discoveries - serendipity. Serendipity is often described as a positive surprise, either in the search for or in the performance of something else.

The aluminum sheet did not behave as it did earlier when it sank like a heavy blanket over a rock crystal. Rather, it lifted from the heat of the gas flame, seeming to oppose the forces of gravity. Raised and lowered as a chest breathes.


²⁷ I'm quoting Professor Anders Ljungberg when he says: “a bowl has the possibility of carrying a whole room”.
The surface of the plate was dented by the gas flame, cracked in scars where the stress of the heat became too great. Its edges came loose in shock, violently tearing off and plunging to the ground with a wet sizzle. There is something so irrevocable about the torn edge. The ruthlessly worn away in such strong contrast to the soft, velvety, undulating texture of the sheet metal surface.

Frustrated with the outcome, I put the failed baptism pound away. Let it rest. One afternoon I suddenly see how the sun is reflected in the facade opposite the workshop. The light sweeps over the metal, causing it to float as if it were caught in an invisible wind about to lift from the circle of the casting table. And it reminded me of the old custom when someone dies to cover mirrors and paintings with cloth so that the soul does not wander. Here the fabric metal is in transit, the fabric has not fallen down but solidified in the air, a frozen moment, that is the exact moment of melting. Time stopped.

Image 18. Detail of Untitled, Miriam Johannesson, 2022.²⁹

²⁹ Miriam Johannesson, Detail of Untitled, 2022.
An important reference to all of my work - not only the snow skin - is *Pissflowers* by Helen Chadwick. The iconic feminist work is made by casting plaster in the holes in the snow, formed by the artist's friends peeing in it. With her work, Chadwick can seem to comment on the unpleasant tradition around mostly males of peeing on sculptures. But more importantly, through the work she shows that the invisible - be it a tradition or a negative form - can be made aware. This awareness comes through in a very specific sense of materiality. When Chadwick flips around the sculpture so that the ingot becomes the podium, she does the same with our understanding of both the materials, the form, and ourselves.


By materializing the void itself in the snow (the snow understood as the former object of vision) and through a material displacement, Chadwick has made visible a previously invisible object of vision. She makes us see something that was hidden for us before. With this in mind for my own work, I hope that the work will displace a notion of a definitive surface and demarcation of where the object begins and ends. With the silvery container *Membrane of Mist* covered in disappearing drops of water, the outermost layer vanishes and changes due to time and its constant changes in the environment.

**SHIMMER**

The shimmering mother of pearl is the twilight and dawn of the mineral world. Neither bright, nor dark. The nacre of the shell and the pearl build in the same way, layers upon layers with endlessly thin veils that let the light shine through. But a pearl is the result of a trauma. A trauma which the mollusc handles by a defense mechanism which means growing the layers around and around the intruding fragment. The pearl grows in a protective film, in a small thin pearl sac consisting of calcite and organic matter. The layers cover the intruder, making the surface soft. The last layer consists of hexagonal plates of aragonite allowing the light to be refracted in several directions at the same time so that the mother-of-pearl shimmer occurs. It is a shimmer that can deepen the surface.

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This enfolded shimmer resonates with me - a feeling of need to hold and be held. A quilt of aluminum mother of pearl covers the ground, protecting it. Or perhaps it rather shows what should be protected, because when the mother-of-pearl shell is lifted from the foundation that gave it its shape, only the earth’s crust itself is visible. A membrane between two forces: the substrate and the impression. The method is very similar to epigraphic squeezes, which are mainly used by archaeologists and epigraphers to be able to document the materiality of the immovable object using paper or latex. My version of this technique consists of aluminum.
The mother of pearl effect is born from aluminum foil refolded. Just as the mother of pearl shimmer occurs from many different small parts, the hexagons, I have kneaded small parts of foil together, rolled, burned and sometimes rolled again. In some parts the surface has been hammered, and the convex shape after the hammer blow creates a sparkly effect in motion, almost like glimmering rain drops. The variegated surfaces, textures and colors might have a quality of both poikilia and chiaris.

Over time, the rough edges wear down, small pieces of aluminum fall to the ground just like Rachel Carson's description of the eternal snowfall constantly going on in the depths of the oceans; white tiny fragments of calcium from dead animals, slowly sinking to the bottom of the sea through the dark water.

The technique reminds me of man's desperate attempt to protect glaciers from melting with the help of sheets of white wool or other reflective material. Our world has never been as lit as today, and we are trying to save it with light reflections.

The format of this patchwork is the extent of my own abilities. It is not decided in advance how big it will be or what form it will take. The metal has been allowed to spread like a lichen grows on a rock/mountain. Like a lichen gets nourishment from the substrate, the quilt has been shaped by my format - my energy and ability. The parts of the quilt stretch out into the world and spread out over time. Perhaps they are an enlargement of the many aragonite plates that create the mother-of-pearl shimmer I mentioned at the beginning. With such a slow way of working, I work as calmly and methodically as a growing lichen or a weathering mountain.

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CONCLUSION

With mother of pearl as a starting point, I have explored the notions of reflection and membrane in an installation of individual works that reverberates into a whole composition. Light and shadows, together with movement, shine through the whole work and are completely necessary - they make the work come alive. Through the process I have experienced how a transitional play between movement and stillness, light and darkness can create animating reflections and dissolving surfaces that have the possibility to offer sensuous experiences of materiality and time. The enhanced undefinedness of shimmer has been a key notion to explore an in-between state I have been searching for, or as Bissera V. Pentcheva concluded; the true core of shimmer is a phenomenon that triggers the viewer to mark the inanimate as animate. Even in a secular society it might be possible to perceive, if not a divine, but an enchanted or sublime mystery in its reflection in matter. In a wider sense I see reconciliation as an overarching theme of my work. It rests in the softness of the metal, in the transitory shimmer and in the opening that emerges from the dark.

Reflection, membrane, surface and shimmer have been stepping stones in order to approach what is often seen as being beyond description and therefore beyond language; the mystery, the serene, the holy, the indescribable, the unmeasurable. By researching art historical sources within a Christian medieval and Byzantine context, I have come across material biographies and theories upon language in relation to materiality and presented a few Greek concepts of light, movement, shimmer and surface. Magic and mystery are often described as the opposite of a linguistic logic, logos, but maybe it doesn't have to be that way? Magic could also be a linguistic wonder; for example the fact that water, marble and metal in Greek bear the same linguistic root, thus uniting them on a specific level. And calling something by its true name can change one's view of both the world and oneself. What is that, if not magic?

Together with the light settings, the distance between the pieces and the space they exist in all creates different atmospheres. Atmospheres that might be understood as a space-filling materiality itself; just like the silence between sounds and air between the objects. Different spaces have different colors that the metal surfaces can reflect, and the movement of people in the room creates moving shadows that grow and disappear. I see it as a strength and as an opportunity to explore how the works and their locations have the potential to change. I look forward to trying them outdoors, in dark environments, in colorful environments, and in places that have a strong historical presence.

One might describe my installation method as based upon dialogue, a dialogue between the objects, the space, the choreography of bodies in the composition/exhibition. They connect to the room and the space by different attachment points due to whether they move or are stable; hooks, threads and weights thus recalling forces of gravity, of balance and ease. The works appear to me, both separately and as a group, as descriptions of conditions. Sometimes as a section, sometimes as a membrane, sometimes as something that is close to poetry in the sense that it is dancing on the edge of language. This twilight zone both in light/dark and movement/stillness, is not only about a specific presentation of the finished works. It also includes the making itself. I have made myself be highly attentive, thus experiencing an elevated flow and presence when engaging with the material and the techniques. Perhaps this is at the core of the interface of knowledge - to balance between expectations and the actual outcome in a liminal state of existence. By translating a natural phenomenon into another material, for example a water surface to an aluminum sheet, I have forced myself to really observe and experience my surroundings. The engaging work becomes my portals into the mystery of nature and existence, and due to the animated and dissolved surfaces, I can let my soul dive in.
Reference list

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Crowley, Patrick R., Roman Death Masks and the Metaphorics of the Negative, Grey Room, no. 64, 2016, p. 64–103.


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Bermudez, Julio, Transcending architecture: contemporary views on sacred space, CUA Press, 2015.


**Additional sources**


Image references

Image 1  Johannesson, Miriam, *Principles of the Pearl I.*, 2022

Image 2  Johannesson, Miriam, *Principles of the Pearl I.*, 2022

Image 3  Johannesson, Miriam, *Detail of Principles of the Pearl II.*, 2022

Image 4  Johannesson, Miriam, *Process photos of material tests in aluminum.*, 2022


Image 7  Johannesson, Miriam, *Process photos of The Well.*, 2022

Image 8  Johannesson, Miriam, *Process photos of The Well.*, 2022


Image 15  Johannesson, Miriam, *Disguise.*, 2022


Image 17  Johannesson, Miriam, *Untitled.*, 2022

Image 18  Johannesson, Miriam, *Detail of Untitled.*, 2022

Image 19-20 Johannesson, Miriam, *Untitled.*, 2022


Reflection

The spring exhibition ended yesterday. Reflecting over this period, I am surprised how little energy I had to stay in the room while the exhibition was open. Before it opened, I thought I would be there several hours each day but I just didn't have the energy. Due to the fact that I was on sick leave for a long while last winter, I am still proud of myself that I finished the degree. That I got sick was the best thing that could have happened to me. It forced me to start working in a much healthier way. And I feel the need to say that it is not the education that made me sick, the school and the teachers couldn't have done anything differently - it was my idea of working that wasn't sustainable in the long run, and sooner or later I had to learn how to work differently. I'm glad it happened now. My way of working is one of my biggest learning outcomes this year.

A few things that came clear from the examination was how an oral presentation together with additional text and images can be used in a more performative way. It offers a presentation of the themes and the work in a format that is something different than the exhibition. A spoken presentation also makes it possible to use sound and silence as tools in order to enhance the presence.

When reflecting over what worked well and what could be improved in the exhibition, I see the main themes of this conclusion as light and installation. I am happy that I had the chance to program the light so that it was oscillating between warm and cold. For the next time though, I will improve how the light works in the specific space. This time I used Philips Hue 1100 lm, but the light bulbs weren't strong enough and the angle from the ceiling didn't make it easier. Due to the large windows and the big, bright room it was hard to light the work properly. One thing that worked well was how we covered the lowest windows with white paint to remove some of the “visual noise” from outside and to make the room more calm. Installation wise I believe the different attachment points worked well, for instance the shimmering nail, the threads and the plaster. For the future I want to enhance the forces like gravity, that are now more suggested and to work even more with the conditions of the room and how the materials act. I am satisfied that I made the bowl with the dripping water, but will try different tempos of the falling water in the future. For the next time, I will figure out how to install the piece with the water bowl and the pile of plaster underneath so that it is not in such risk of breaking. During the exhibition period, several people stepped in it. But if that wouldn't have happened, I would have missed how the slowly dripping water created a perfectly round ball of plaster and in that sense mirroring the form of the bowl that the water came from. That such happy accidents can occur also during the exhibition and not only in the workshops before is a reminder that the works can be in progress for a long time.

If I had more energy to be in the exhibition space during its open hours, I would have had more discussions with visitors. But the ones I had were quite similar - a major theme in the discussions that came up during the exhibition period was the question of technique. In particular, how the work Disguise was made. Many people were puzzled by the depth of the surface and the flatness of the work - they wanted to understand what seemed to be difficult to comprehend. In that sense, the question of technique mirrors my work about mystery and interface of knowledge in a sense I couldn't have planned, neither guessed.
For the future, I will investigate how to use text as a complement to an exhibition. Not to describe my work, but to enhance and investigate certain ideas and topics and their contexts. I will also look into the field of public art and focus even more on writing as a tool for my artistic practice.

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