



ELSA SALONEN

To My Alchemical Garden, Welcome

7.12.2024–5.1.2025

My new solo exhibition '*To My Alchemical Garden, Welcome*', explores flowers and plants from a broad cultural, scientific and esoteric perspective; it brings together alchemy, Finnish nature worship, still-life paintings, botanical collections, medicinal plants, herbal spells, plant intelligence and spagyrics. The works reflect on the power of all plants to connect this reality to other metaphysical levels.

Many of the works are guided by a technique I developed a decade ago, in which I distil colours from flowers, leaving them pale and colourless. I conserve the extracted colour pigments in laboratory glass vessels, displaying them alongside the white plants. Withering flowers lose their colours in death; as if the life itself were hidden in the colours. In traditional still-life paintings, the painted colours of blossoms captured a moment in time and 'defeated' death. In *Still Life with Flowers*, I reinterpret this tradition by poetically separating the vivid life energy (the preserved colour) from its empty, pale body (the decoloured flower). Also, *Spirit Collections*, named after the botanical collections, refers to this separation.

The series *Plants, Healers: Deep Sleep* consists of sleep-inducing medicinal plants that I collected during the last two summers in my home region, the Turku archipelago, and around my studio in Berlin (imperforate St John's-wort, field horsetail, small-leaved linden, valerian, meadowsweet, common hop, rosebay willowherb, chamomile, raspberry, common St John's wort). Suffering from insomnia from time to time, I feel grateful to these plants for many well-slept nights. Healers have relied on herbs for centuries. In the Finnish tradition of tietäjät (seers/healers), the knowledge of the required medicinal plant was often obtained from a sprite during sleep. An imaginative idea of interspecies communication through dreams is glimpsed in the exhibition.

For the works, I have researched several old beliefs about plants. The flowers of *Delphinium Spell*, larkspurs, are familiar from many European protection spells. According to a medieval myth, delphiniums grew in the patches of grass where knights had wiped their swords after slaying a dragon. The dragon's blood and venom mixed to form a beautiful but poisonous flower. The dragons in the *Lullaby* paintings are gentler. The dragons, familiar from alchemical illustrations and combining bird and reptile features, represent the union of this and the otherworldly, the heavenly and the earthly, or the journey between them. The sleep-inducing medicinal plants act as similar travelling companions between sleep and wakefulness.

For the last decade, I have painted exclusively with natural pigments, which define the conceptual message of each work. This time, the paintings in the exhibition are made with colours ground from stones and meteorites, extracted from plants, and burnt from bird and reptile parts. In the first laboratories in history, alchemists prepared colours for artists and through the natural materials sought to understand the surrounding universe and the human beings' role in it. The glass vessels I use in my works refer to this alchemical tradition and its illustrations. The painting *Heavenly Herbs* sketches spagyrics, a medieval alchemical method of preparing concentrated medicinal extracts from herbs. The recipes took into account the favourable position of the planet ruling each medicinal plant.

The installation *Metsänpeitto* focuses on the mythological powers of the forest, the fortress of the plant kingdom. In Finnish nature worship, metsänpeitto (lit. forest's cover/blanket) meant the disappearance of people and cattle into the forest's otherness: one did not get lost in the forest but drifted out of sight of this reality. This was counteracted, for example, by hiding salt in hollow bird feathers or, after Christianity had taken over the worldview of our ancestors, by building barns in the same direction as the church. One way to escape metsänpeitto was to invoke the power of death or to tie the tops of three young trees together. According to an old tradition, those who spent the night in the forest avoided metsänpeitto by asking: '*Good earth's wights, give me sleep to sleep, rest to rest, I do not want forever, only for a time!*' (1).

1/ Heikki Roiko-Jokela: Ihminen ja metsä - kohtaamisia arjen historiassa, 2012

Thank the Arts Promotion Centre Finland and The Alfred Kordelin Foundation for supporting the exhibition.

Salonen (b.1984 Turku, Finland) graduated from the Fine Arts Academy of Bologna, Italy, and has since worked mainly in Berlin. Salonen's art has been exhibited internationally with institutions including, KINDL Centre For Contemporary Art and Villa Merkel in Germany; Art Sonje Center in South Korea; Kunsthall Aarhus and Kunsthall Viborg in Denmark; Galleri F 15 in Norway and Miguel Urrutia Art Museum in Colombia. Her artworks are included in collections including Wäinö Aaltonen Museum of Art (FI), Saastamoinen Foundation (FI), and Lissone Museum of Contemporary Art (IT). A Permanent Public Artwork by Salonen is situated in the Quiet Room of Meilahti Bridge Hospital, Helsinki. Salonen is represented abroad by Galerie Jochen Hempel in Germany and Le Clézio Gallery in France.

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