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Nanna Melland's *Fleurs du Mal*

Translated by Constanze Kirmse

Remember, my soul, the thing we saw
That lovely summer day?
On a pile of stones where the path turned off,
The hideous carrion-

Legs in the air, like a whore – displayed,
Indifferent to the last,
a belly slick with lethal sweat
and swollen with foul gas.

Thus begins one of the most emphatic poems out of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*. In *Une Charogne*, Baudelaire describes, obsessed with detail, a stinking putrefying carcass, and depicts not only his young companion's disgust, but also the fascination with the morbid and the ugly, his words creating bewitching images of an iridescent swarm of flies hovering about and of a black heap of maggots filling the abdomen. In this poem, contrasting forces are at work, forces of reluctance and of lust-laden voyeurism, adding an erotic connotation to the look into the opened dead corpse and at the same time confronting the lover's desired body with the inevitable decay of the flesh.

In her jewellery work, Nanna Melland develops a similar fundamental tension between attracting and repulsing forces. Her *Fleurs du Mal*, paying tribute in their title to Baudelaire's evil flowers, depict orchids, for instance, not in shimmering gold or silver, but in lead, a grey poison that destroys the environment and brings death. It induces the metamorphosis of a plant, by many considered as queen of the flowers and as a symbol for female beauty, which is turning into its own toxic livid copy. Like in Baudelaire's poem, death and decay are not only connected with an aesthetic compound, but are also closely associated with an erotic element. The orifice of the pulpy petals resembles a vulva, and the blossom directs the onlooker's eye to the heaving low neck-line of the adorned woman, the aerial roots playing around her breasts. Here suffices the mere imagination of Melland's *Fleurs du Mal* being worn on the body. Moreover, the confrontation – albeit merely imagined – with the living human body transforms the leaden flowers into a *memento mori*. The *Fleurs du Mal* are a reminder that not only life, but also love must fade away – an admonition once more intensified by Nanna Melland through brutally flattening some of the lead blossoms.

In other objects by the artist, the original motif itself is more unsettling than its further processing or than the casting metal being used. The motifs are often beset with taboos or at least seem to be out of place on the surface of the body. Thus, also these pieces are radiating an ambivalent attractivity and make the onlooker shiver lustfully. In *687 Years* Nanna Melland used a considerable collection of the most various galvanised spirals and arranged them to a picturesque pendant. The birth control instruments, actually reserved for the intimate caverns of the female sexual organs are thus converting to archaic looking metal conglomerates of suggestive beauty. In *Ave Maria*, however, the spirals are woven into a filigree necklace, located

somewhere between crown of thorns and rosary. For *Decadence*, the artist filled the lost forms of her cut-off nails with gold, thus ennobling the unclean formations of dead horn cells by means of shining noble metal. Also *Heart pin*, *Fragment of life* or *Heart rings* – similarly to *Decadence* – depict unconventional organic casting forms commonly considered as impure by using precious metals and plastic partly died red. This piece consists mostly of blood vessels from hearts torn out of dead bodies and cut into pieces. Liberated from body secretions and transferred into other material, they suddenly shine in the brightness of precious coral fragments.

Most of Melland's objects are not designed for being really worn, yet a woman or a man wearing them must always be imagined – like in the *Fleurs du Mal*. The pieces of jewellery open an ambiguous dialogue about content corresponding with their contrasting aesthetic. It is a dialogue in which not only immediate sensual sensations, but also the knowledge of old symbolic, ritual or magic meanings of jewellery are vibrant. Powerfully the weight of *687 Years* is resting above the ovaries, *Decadence* sharply cuts the skin, and our blood seems to be pulsing outside through the *Heart rings*. *687 Years*, however, not only cuts into the skin like a grave hostage for 687 years of preventing new life and hampers the step, but in an erect posture it can also be worn as a proud trophy for the progressing emancipation of woman and as a talisman against undesired conception. *Decadence* may ironically be interpreted as an amulet that is supposed to attract the cat-like pugnacity of female nails or to protect against their dangerousness. The heart-vein-objects evoke a common symbol of love and life. They are presented with the cruel verism of a medical compound, and, applied to a person still breathing, they unveil at the same time the fragility of life and love and bring to remembrance the very poem by Charles Baudelaire. It ends with the words:

Yet you will come to this offence,
this horrible decay,
you, the light of my life, the sun
and moon and stars of my love!

Yes, you will come to this, my queen,
after the sacraments,
when you rot underground among
the bones already there.

But as their kisses eat you up,
my Beauty, tell the worms
I've kept the sacred essence, saved
the form of my rotted loves!

(Translation of Baudelaire by Richard Howard)