

Svava Thordis Juliusson
OUROBOROS etc., (Bitter as Her Name)
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Essay by Stephanie Vegh

In Svava Thordis Juliusson's hands, that which is solid melts into possibility, only to reassert itself with steely resolve. The commonplace object passes through the eye of ritual and is estranged in the translation. This process is laid bare by plaster poured into plastic bags and inner tubes, sinking into creases and folds as the vessel gently gives way. The resulting forms are pinched short of their full solidity, made fragile by soft edges at risk of crumbling.

By contrast, sharp certainty shines in Juliusson's aluminum casts of rope fragments and balls of yarn, their finest details preserved beneath boisterous layers of pigment. Her skein of yarn is heavily weighted with a strength that transcends craft and curls into itself with the quiet satisfaction of a human brain, confident in its intellect.

This rope and string thread their way to cast plaster circles held tantalizingly open, stretching towards their own completion — the ouroboros that reverberates through all these works, the great serpent of alchemical tradition that devours its own tail. As an artist of Icelandic descent, Juliusson's ouroboros is *Jörmungandr*, the sea serpent of Norse mythology who is destined to release his encircling embrace of the earth and unleash Ragnarok — the end of the world.

This appetite to stretch open one's jaws, let go of that eternal tail and unmake the world bears a distinctly feminist imperative to overcome the silence of women entrenched in the trappings of civilization: none so pervasive as religion. Juliusson confronts this inheritance of her Jewish faith through the writings of *The Women's Haggadah*, an underground adaptation of the traditional Passover Seder that first appeared in Ms. magazine in 1977. The breaking of the matza in this Haggadah is charged with new meaning: a shattering of the old order that reworks the pattern of the past, the better to redeem a ritual's broken heart from its brittle pieces.

The Women's Haggadah reorients the Passover story of Exodus through the experience of Miriam, sister of Moses and first prophet of the Old Testament. Her name simultaneously translates as bitter and rebellion: qualities that are entangled in this new ritual. Bitterness is held in careful balance in the tradition of the Seder, embodied in the Maror or horseradish that speaks of slavery and exclusion — conditions that have plagued women far beyond the flight from Egypt. The Women's Haggadah honours the traditional Passover story while couching its narrative, its Four Questions and Four Cups of Wine, in the recognition of silenced women:

Why have our Mothers on this night been bitter?

Because they did the preparation but not the ritual. They did the serving but not the conducting. They read of their fathers but not of their mothers.¹

Just as *The Women's Haggadah* crafts a new ritual from its traditional parts, Juliusson charges familiar forms with transformational playfulness. She builds towers from baking forms found in domestic kitchens, stacked as monuments to the generational labour of women and served on a platter of drywall sheets that refuses the floor in favour of the potential verticality of architecture. Spires and plinths are proposed from household furnishings that elevate her objects as sacred offerings — dressed in festive fringe and bearing concrete cushions that deny any hope of comfort.

In their borrowing of Brancusi's sculptural vernacular, Juliusson's towering structures are phallic uprisings that usurp a masculine history of art and flip a defiant middle finger in response. In their laborious reproductions of cast multiples, they perform an urgent murmur that has the cumulative weight of a Passover prayer:

*If our foremothers had not been considered
as hardened roots
or fruit-bearing wombs
but as women in themselves,
Dayenu.²*

Dayenu – it would have been enough. For an artist of Juliusson's convictions, enough is a destination constantly in the making – a search for something greater than what was once deemed sufficient.

– Stephanie Vegh, april 2018

1. E.M. Broner with Naomi Nimrod, *The Women's Haggadah*. Harper San Francisco, 1994. p.24.

2. *Ibid*, p.58.