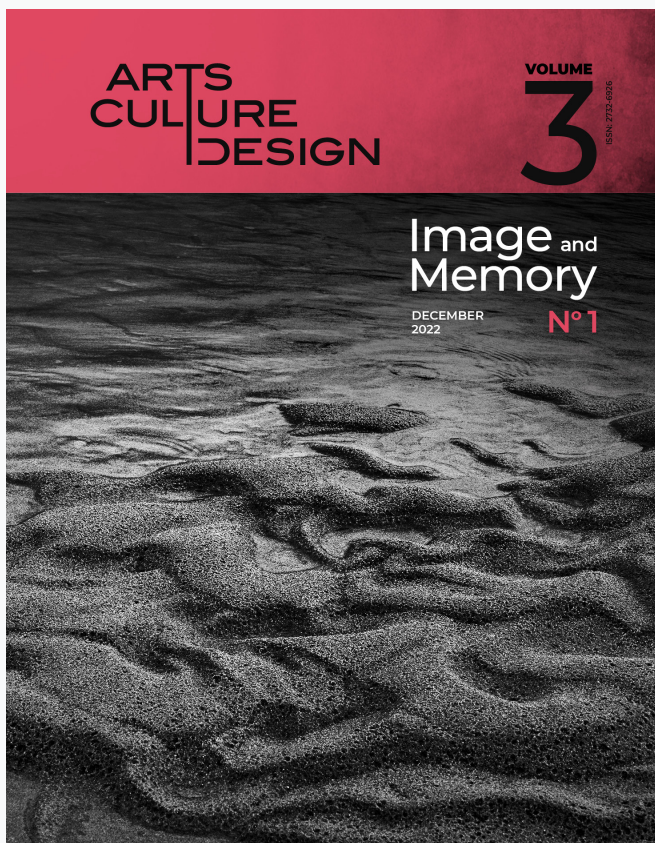


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SOMNIFERA

Elin Tanding Sørensen

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SOMNIFERA

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Sørensen is trained in art, animation, environmental sustainability, and landscape architecture. Her practice within eco-social art is characterized by in-depth cross-disciplinary and co-creative processes. Her doctoral thesis on rewilding urban sea areas through innovative architectural solutions is being published by Routledge Explorations in Environmental Studies, with the working title “Multispecies Design in Urban Sea Areas: Placemaking and Storytelling in Scandinavian Environments.”

“Somnifera” explores interactions between the opium poppy and humans. The artistic research seeks to return to Mother Earth and ancient practices: Through the opium poppy’s rich multitude of narratives — in a society alienated from the cycles of nature; such as life/death, the raw materials of life and species’ own life histories — my practice examines how multispecies storytelling can connect us emotionally to our ancient, distant past. “Somnifera” is her contribution to the artistic research project *Matter, Gesture and Soul*, Faculty of Fine Art, Music and Design, University of Bergen Norway.

SOMNIFERA

Abstract

“Somnifera” explores interactions between the opium poppy and humans. In their exploration of new habitats, human tribes curiously tested out plants that could help them transcend their “normal” state into expanded experiences, possibly communicating with their ancestors or gods, as part of their experimental quest for knowledge.

Since the dawn of time, we have milked the benefits of the opium plant, while politics, religion, and a cynical multinational drug and pharmaceutical industry have assigned the plant a controversial role on the world stage. The plant’s power to both save life and take life is the essence of this artwork with the intention to contribute to a holistic debate about the opium poppy’s potential: To lift it out of the shadow of condemnation and give it its rightful bright place among us.

This narrative dips in and out between trance-states and every-day-states-of-mind, while the author’s alter ego Sigma Woman enters love and grief – transitioning from emotional breakdown to possible healing. The figurative language of this text, and its accompanying images, are from visions emerging from ecstatic trance – described as the *primaeval* technique of a safe, natural physiological transition to direct experience of the eternal now and ancestral wisdom. In one of the trance-sessions we concentrated on the three-thousand-year-old figurine “The Poppy Goddess and Patron of Healing.” This inner journey gave rise to the idea of exploring reenactment, inspired by experimental archaeology.

Approaching the goddess figure, the author anoints her body with *Caput Mortuum*-colored oxidized magnetite, adorns herself with poppy capsules, and mimics the statue’s apparent hibernation. In the attempts to find “surfaces of contact” between today’s imaginary world and prehistoric times – through speculation whether we and our ancestors can “meet” in some way – the methods used to develop the artwork range from knowledge acquisition through scientific papers to techniques for embodying knowledge.

As part of the artistic research project *Matter, Gesture and Soul* (MGS), which seeks encounters and alignments between art and archaeology, my artistic contribution seeks to question how multispecies storytelling may connect us emotionally to our ancient distant past.

Keywords

artistic research

ritual body and ecstatic
trance

opium poppy
(*Papaver somniferum*)

breakdown-based art

multispecies storytelling

traditional ecological
knowledge

euthanasia

SOMNIFERA

“Come. Fiery Sun, come, with your beams of light – whizzing at 300,000 kilometres per second to reach us. Light-energy captured by the green leaves that turn water, carbon dioxide and minerals into energy-rich organic mixtures and oxygen. Fire. Heat. Come, I’m your child. Come to me! Now! Come. Swirling winds that let the lightest seeds and grains of sand travel on your air currents: drifting across the earth’s surface directed by the Sun’s uneven heating. Winds, in winter, chilling us to the bone. Whirling Winds: strong enough to sail ships across the ocean and rip huge trees from the ground. Equalizer of the Atmosphere. Shaper of landforms. Winds. Come, I’m your child. Come to me! Now! Come. Water. Streams. Flow my tears falling from your springs. Flowing juices and fluid exchanges. The ocean: ebbing, dripping, coursing, traversing time and space. Come Water, I’m your child. Come to me! Now!”



Figure 1.
Trance.

The abalone shell represents water, the burnt incense of Artemisia distributed by an eagle feather is earth: water, fire, earth, air.

The sound of the drum is the shaman’s horse that carries us through the ritual.

The snake embroidered on the Peruvian Shipibo rug is a symbol of transformation.

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They stand in a circle, in “Bear Pose”, enveloped in clouds of incense from the dried leaves of *Artemisa vulgaris*¹. The body’s weight flows down to the soles of their feet. To the ground. Beyond the ground. To the rhythmic beats from the rattle and drum: Mother Earth’s heartbeat “lub-dub – lub-dub – lub-dub.”²

1. The dried leaves of common mugwort can be smoked or drunk as a tea to promote lucid dreaming. This supposed oneirogenic effect is believed to be due to the thujone contained in the plant. Common mugwort is native to temperate Europe, Asia, North Africa, and Alaska, and is naturalized in North America (Ekiert et al., 2020).
2. The drum sessions took place in August 2022 to contribute to artistic concept development as part of the artistic research project: *Matter, Gesture and Soul*. The sessions base on anthropologist Felicitas D. Goodman’s method “Ritual Body Postures & Ecstatic Trance,” and artist Nana Nauwald’s teachings on this tradition (Goodman, 2008; Goodman and Nauwald, 2003).

Sigma Woman³ feels the grass under her feet. It's growing fast around her. Grow taller than her, or maybe she becomes a little person in the grass: surrounded by their leaves that sing with a fluttering sound as the slender leaves hit each other in the wind. In her mind's eye, Sigma Woman tears the petal of an opium poppy in two, manifesting her broken heart. Love struck. Beaten. Crushed by the heartless wrath of Sigma Male⁴. She remembers him saying that poppy petals feel like crepe silk: making her want to enter the petals' microcosm. Allowing her body to be soothed and safely enveloped by the flower's super thin, soft, and billowing petals.



Figure 2.
Heart.
Papaver somniferum
petals.
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Sigma Male is a force of nature – fire and thunder – a shapeshifter in duration and strength. Nature is never a safe space; its forces can never be tamed. Sigma Man burns his body from the inside: each cigarette shortens his life by seven minutes. The inhaled tobacco narrows the coronary arteries that supply blood to the heart muscle.

Sigma Woman imagines attaching poppy petals to a hand rolled cigarette – transforming it into a butterfly. Her heart shrinks and beats faster. Rhythms from the rattle, the drum “lub-dub – lub-dub – lub-dub”. Our Mothers’ heartbeat. The grass leaves sing in Artemisia’s smoke. “Reconnect me to Mother Nature: I’m your child. Let me come back to you! Now!”

3. The *Sigma Female* acts with a sense of mystery that draws people to her. If the Sigma woman gets attached to someone who turns out to be worse than she originally thought, it is difficult for her to break off. This eventually comes back to bite Sigma Female, as her emotional attachment leads to feelings that are harboured for a long time without resolution (Jackson, 2022).
4. The *Sigma Male* is an internally focused sibling of the alpha male. He refuses social hierarchy and the need for external validation, and instead pursues internal strength: essentially as a “loner” or a stray man. He simply focuses on himself, accepting that he needs to preserve his own autonomy. Sigma Males are often reserved, paranoid, secretive and selfish (Urban Dictionary, 2022).



Figure 3. Butterfly. Joint art created with *Papaver somniferum* petals.
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MILK OF PARADISE

The desire for the flowing milk of the poppy and her hypnotic effect has been known since ancient times. In the Swiss Lake Dwellings of the Neolithic Age, there are fossils showing poppy seed cake and poppy pods. *Papaver somniferum* was believed to have magical as well as poisonous power and was used as food, in religious ceremonies, and in the art of healing. The Greek divinities Hypnos (Sleep), Nyx (Night) and Thanatos (Death) are depicted wreathed with opium poppies or carrying poppies in their hands. Herakleides of Pontus (340 BC) describes the “Keian custom” performed on the Greek island of Kea. Here those who reached a certain age voluntarily ended their lives by drinking poison after a ceremonial feast.

Herakleides tells that “especially the women, they do not wait until they are very old for death to take them,

but before they grow weak or disabled in any way, take themselves out of life, some by means of the opium poppy, others with hemlock (*Conium maculatum*)” (U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration and Office of Intelligence, 1992, p. 1; Kritikos and Papadaki, 1976, pp. 17-18). Such deliberate hastening of a person’s death was supported by Socrates and Plato, while Hippocrates seems to have spoken against the practice (Kritikos and Papadaki, 1976, pp. 17-18).

This moral debate is old. Yet illegal plantations of deadly poppy monocultures around the world continue to drain the soil where they grow, and the pursuit of the opiate causes continuous war and violence. In this game, the beautiful *Papaver somniferum* she is just another innocent species. An existential need that drives humanity to seek the temporary relief that opiates provide has been with us for as long as human tribes have explored new habitats: curiously testing out plants and fungi that can help us transcend our “normal” state into expanded experiences, to possibly communicate with our ancestors or gods. The use of mind-altering experiences to produce deep, spiritual, and cultural understanding was part of human’s experimental quest for knowledge (Merlin, 2003, pp. 295–296). One of the myriad threats that connect us to the natural world is that which links plant chemistry to human consciousness. How amazing it is that so many types of plants have found the exact recipes for molecules that fit snugly into receptors in human brains (Inglis, 2019; Pollan, 2022)! The fact that humans have opioid receptors in our bodies helps to blur the distinction between us and the opium poppy.

I – a creature, that travels through the umbilical cord and transforms into a seed in my mother’s dark soil.
Born into the light and passing into the darkness.
I – a creature, that since the beginning of time has hunted for something to satisfy my hunger, ease my pain, and erase my memories.
I who gives and takes blessing and stumbles in my own curse.
I – a creature, that pours out love and clings to hate.
I who can drown in my sorrows and ride on my euphoria.
I – a creature, that can bathe in the light of the moon and be consumed by the sun.
I – a creature, who can praise healing and blissful power.
I who can resist this most beautiful life form and see her as an ugly and evil force.
I – a creature, that merges with her seductive and sweet voice from my very outermost to my very innermost.
I – a creature, who lay down in her heavenly petals, never to return.

Figure 4. Somniferum-microcosm.

Micrographs of a *Papaver somniferum* petal, 1000 μm , acquired at the Image Centre NMBU by Lene Cecilie Hermansen with Zeiss Axio Zoom.V16.
Concept: Märtha Soline & Elin T. Sørensen © BONO 2022



RIPPLING POPPY MEADOWS

Sigma Man has wandered through poppy meadows which appear as eye-catching bright flying carpets, and Sigma Woman longed to walk a little way with him. He has inhaled the vaporized opium fumes. And she became intoxicated by his seductive powers, wanting more and more.

Within his territory, around the Caspian Sea, Sigma Woman imagines the creation of a garden of wildflowers: *A Papaver somniferum* community of just the right size for a return that puts enough milk in the blood to provide eternal sleep. A garden where the white tears of the poppy can be harvested, processed and shaped like an umbilical cord – a string of just the right length to put enough flower milk into her blood so that she falls into an eternal sleep. Just like humans, poppies depend on beneficial relationships that are essential to their life cycle.

A variety of pollinating insects are its eager fertilization assistants, transporting pollen from one flower to another. Poppies live in a mutualistic nutrient-exchange-relationship with fungi too. And fossil records reveal that plants and their root symbionts share a long evolutionary history (Andrusczyk, 2017).

*Time is the substance she is made of time is a river which sweeps her along,
but she's the river; it is a furious force that destroys her, but she is this force;
it is a wild fire that consumes her, but she is the fire⁵*

The time she spends in Sigma Male's den feels like travelling in a spaceship at the edge of the universe. The seasons go from autumn to winter and the stars seem so much more alive under his sky. Here, Sigma Woman exists outside the reality and time she knows. A life she wants to slip away because she grows in poor soil. His environment appears to be fertile soil, of endless lyrical melodies as his beautiful language sounds like the soothing swells of the sea – and their conversations flow in continuous streams.

The encounters with Sigma Man vibrate deep down at a cellular level. Out of curiosity and wonder, Sigma Woman chooses to ramble into his wilderness instead of turning away.

We can all speculate whether there is a sixth sense. An internal signal system that unfolds halfway between the promising clairvoyance and the destructive demonic forces. A landscape where unrealized opportunities or imminent dangers can come into view (Bargh and Morsella, 2008).

On their journeys beyond time and space – Sigma Man appears as the mighty ocean. From a bird's eye view, Sigma Woman sees herself washing up on one of his shores, and in his tide, feeling she can rest safe and happy forever. Love is an unlimited feeling – a living being – like seaweed clinging to the rocks with the foam of the waves. But he protects himself behind an impenetrable fortress, and her mission in life is to move away from everything that shuts her out!

The antidote to his exclusionary fear is Pisces' openness and flow towards places where she doesn't have to hold anything back. And Leo's courage to step into the light: to let herself be showered in rays of golden honey.

Sigma Male opens a wound in her soul that is bound to time: a trauma that manifests as a vast, empty, yet claustrophobic environment. Here, Sigma Woman stands paralyzed in the centre of an undefined room.

The void crawls inside her, settling in the diaphragm and slicing her body into disconnected parts. Within these inner and outer realms of terrifying emptiness, time passes excruciatingly slowly. The abundance of time that Sigma Man's exclusion leaves her in is suffocating. So she begins to wander through the endless space.

5. The citation is freely interpreted by the authors after Borges, 1962.

After an infinite amount of time, she suddenly finds herself in a room without doors or windows – with a pile of coal on the floor, from which a scented cloud of smoke is coming. As the fumes are inhaled, her hands rise in an uplifted pose.

She appears to be in a state of vertigo. She is in ecstasy: The joy manifested in her face is doubtless caused by the beautiful visions awakened in her imagination. The passivity of her lips is a natural effect of opium intoxication (Kritikos and Papadaki, 1976, p. 23).

Sigma Woman whispers “Come to me Poppy Goddess, my Patron of Healing: I’m your child. Let me stay in your eternity! Now. Forever!”



Figure 5.
Poppy Goddess Patron of Healing.
Stills by Cristián Weidmann Cabrera.
Concept and performance by
Elin T. Sørensen © BONO 2022

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