MacGuffin

The Life of Things

Nº 11

The Chain

70 TRAPPING BEARS IN THE SÁMI HIGHLANDS

Salvaged from the wreckage of colonial encounters, *What if the Bear Is the Sun and the Sun Is the Bear*, artist Olof Marsja's enigmatic constellation of objects and figures suspended in chains, alludes to an identity assembled from scraps.

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Photography by Carl Ander

Chain-making is a milestone. A fairly recent development in human history, the invention of chain-driven machines such as water pumps in Hellenistic Greece marks the moment when ancient peoples mastered the art of weaving metal rings together, in order to braid a rock-hard material into a strong, yet flexible, rope. Since a chain is essentially a 'stone rope', this device conflates two competing narratives about humanity's early stages of technological innovation—a prehistoric drama that unfolds around the figures of 'Man the Hunter' and 'Woman the Gatherer', lead characters in one of the most extraordinary mythological sagas invented by 20th-century science.

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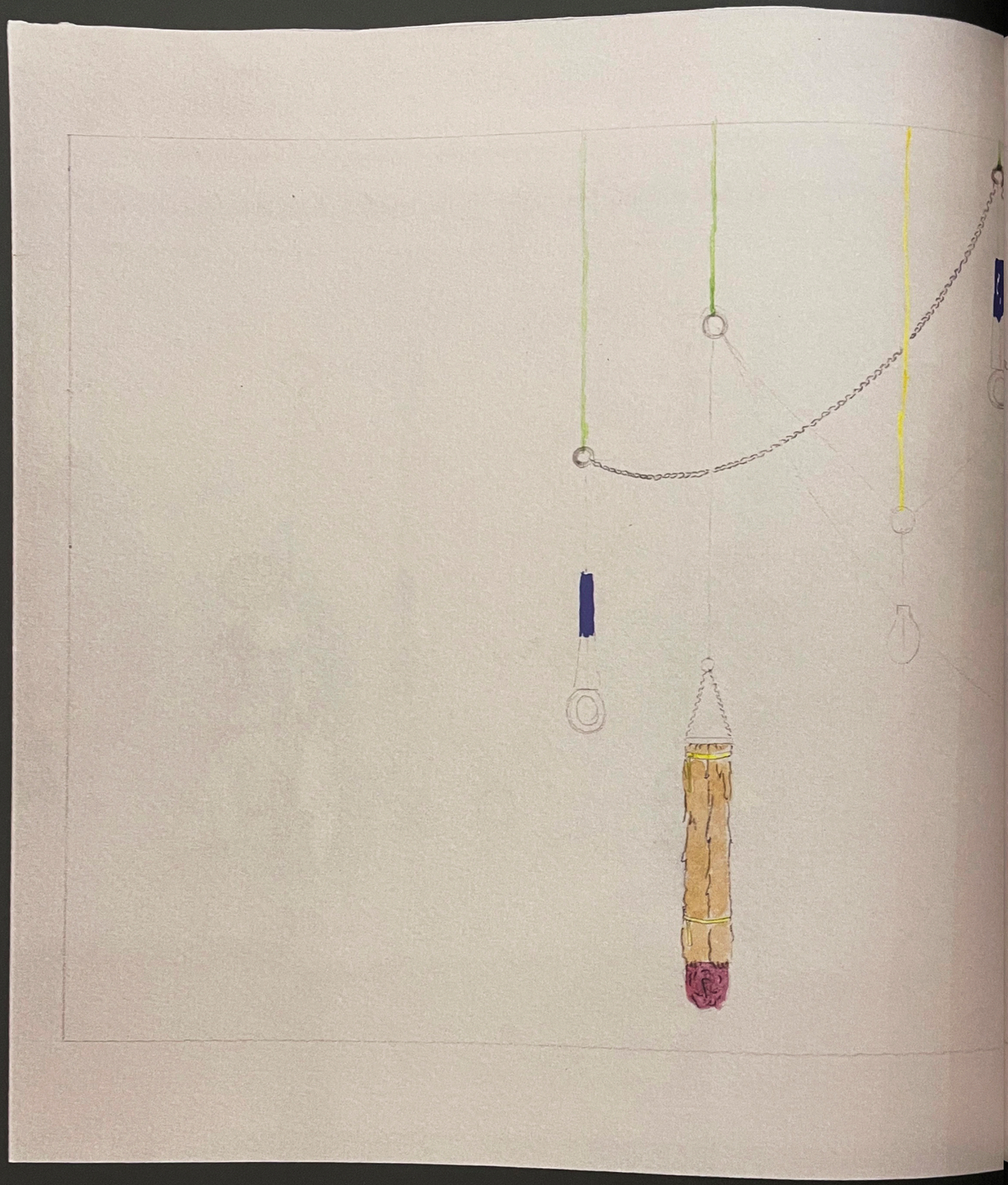
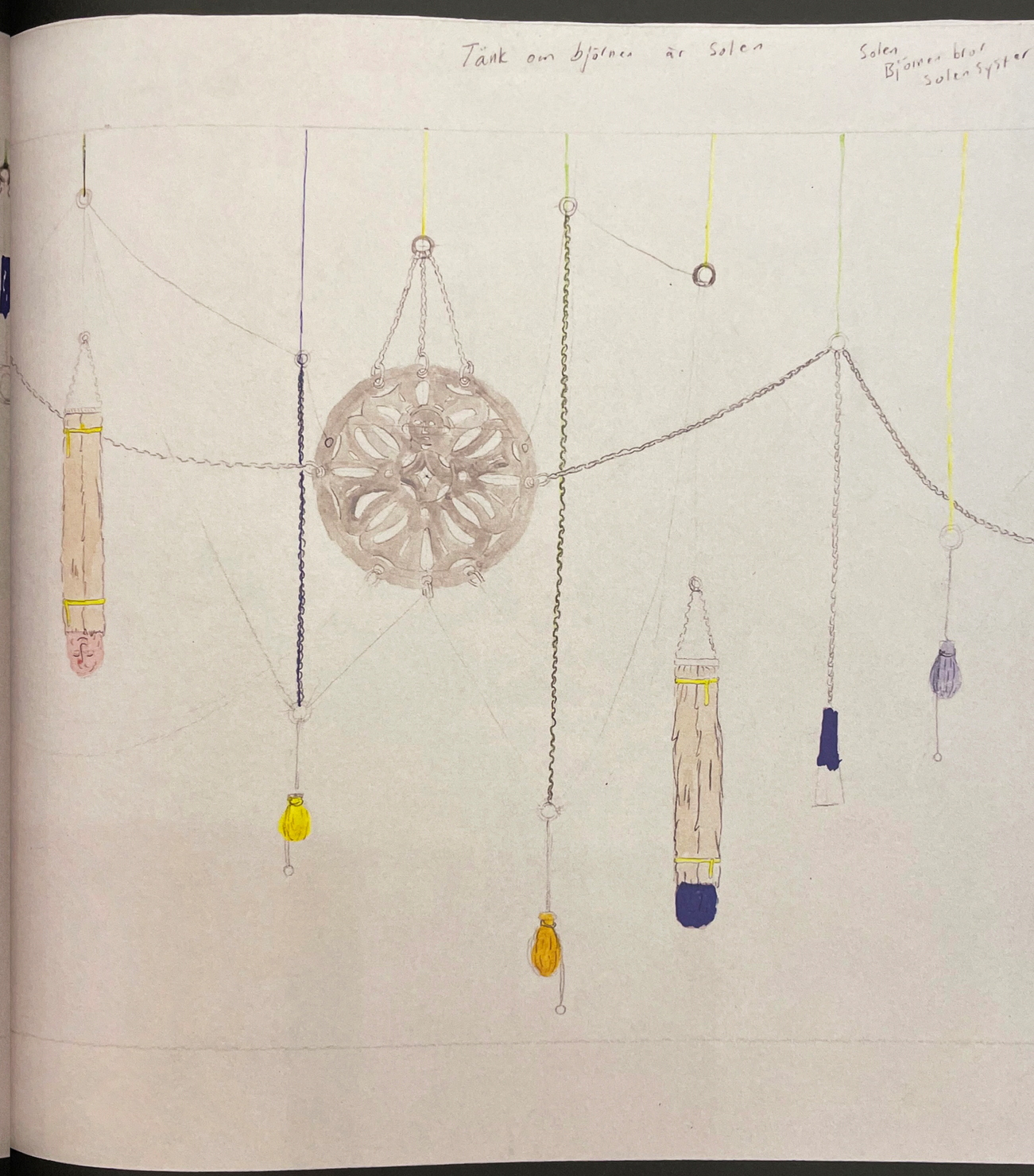
When tracing the origins of human culture, archaeologists and cultural anthropologists have for decades focused their scientific imaginations on Palaeolithic stone tools such as hand axes, spearheads and flint blades. Hunting came to represent a motor of evolution and its tools were linked to men's work, assuming a rigid sexual division of labour. This narrative of Man the Hunter, a contested theory of human origins, finds its purest expression in the philosophy of the late Vilém Flusser, the father of media studies in Brazil, for whom, "the first tool produced by man at the very instant of becoming man was the stone knife. Human reason produces knives because it works like a knife, and it works like a knife because it produces knives." Sharpness is, after all, the measure of human intelligence. We operate through clear-cut distinctions and take pride in cutting-edge technology. Hence, the tool and its maker mutually constitute each other, entangled in an evolutionary feedback loop: "To reflect as a human is to wield a knife, and the stone knives of the Paleolithic era —the earliest human instruments—indicate when it was that we started to reflect." Flusser's vision of technological progress is unequivocally modernist, cutting us off from the natural world: "A human being surrounded by tools (...) is no longer at home in the environment in the way a primitive man using his hands is. He is alienated from the environment, and he is both protected and imprisoned by culture."

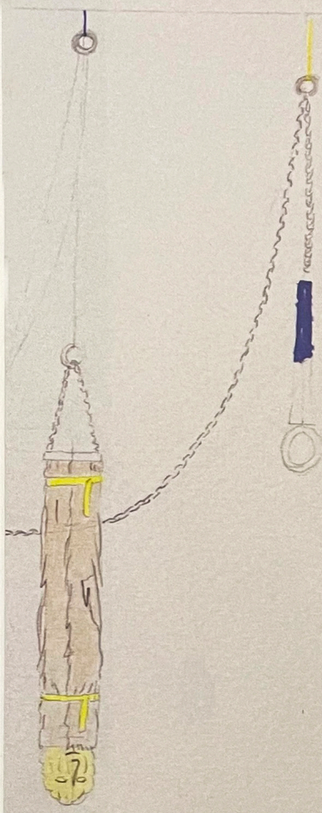
Androcentric accounts of Man the Hunter were to be disputed by female anthropologists whose research would tell a different story. One where rope and twine became critical technologies for human development. Archaeological evidence of sewing needles made from bird bones 60,000 years ago coincides with the earliest recorded examples of string, produced by twisting vine fibres together. Twining and knotting made it easier to join distinct elements into compound tools. This prompted a revolution based on creating attachments, combining materials and assembling devices. Woven basketry and nets, huts and tents, projectile weapons and fishing lines all emerged from a technological acceleration in the Upper Palaeolithic. Enjoying a greater power to carry around offspring, food and tools, hunter-gatherer communities gained access to new ecological niches. Cordage provided ample opportunity for passive hunting, as ancient peoples learned to set up traps and hunting snares. Compared to simple stone tools, the advent of twining and knotting involves an imaginative leap into a world of connectivity and interdependence—a process of becoming ever-more attached to, and intimate

Olof Marsja, *Tänk om björnen är solen, och solen är björnen* (What if the Bear Is the Sun and the Sun Is the Bear), 2021. Glass, silvered glass, brass, epoxy, steel, aluminium, reindeer fur, polyester bands, woven bands, pu silk, chain, alder, oak, lasso, reindeer leather, axe, water cut steel, 350×800×100 cm.





Olof Marsja, sketches for *Tänk om björnen är solen, och solen är björnen* (What if the Bear Is the Sun and the Sun Is the Bear), 2021



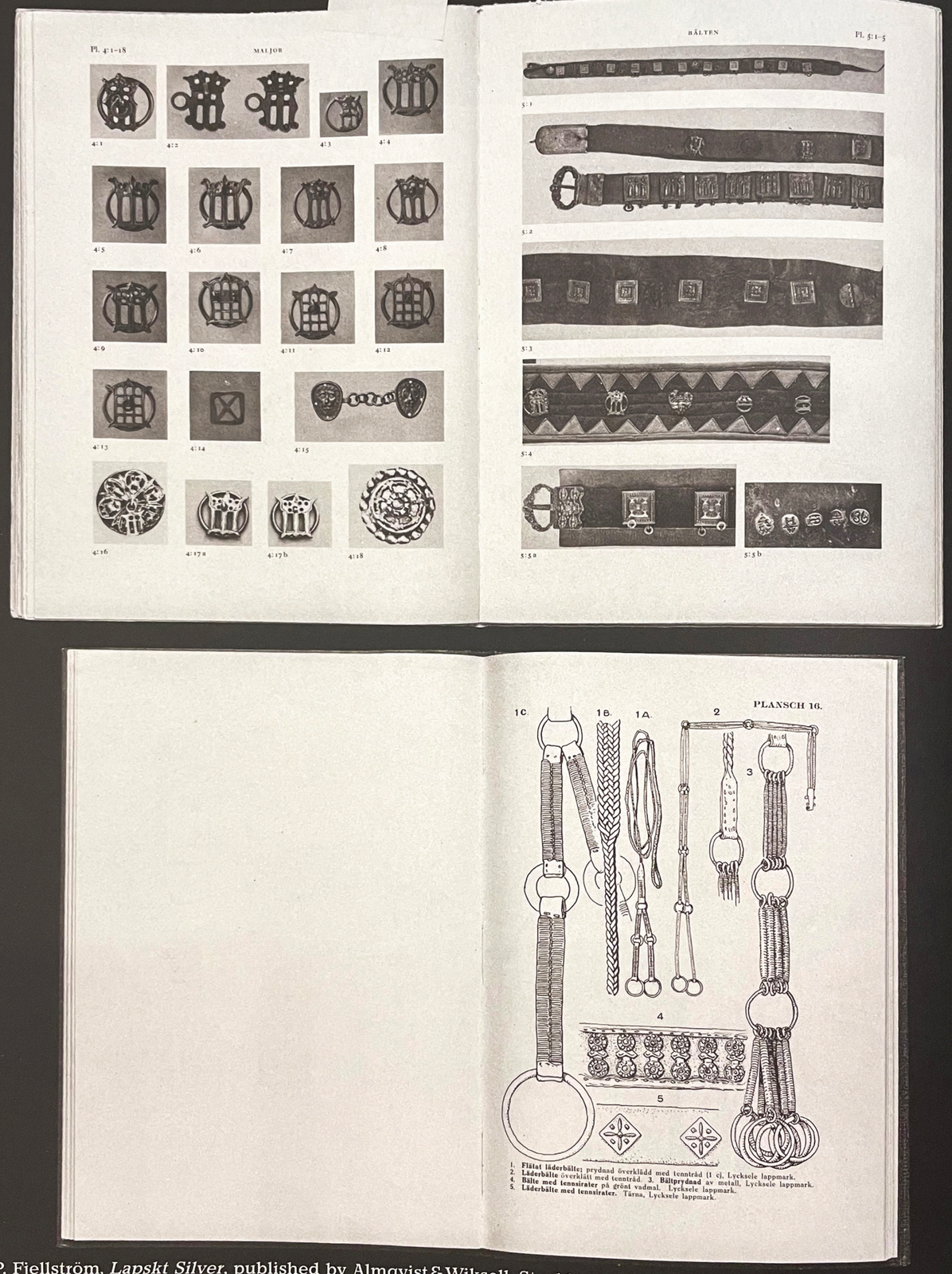
4st större glas-
former till
tullarna.
Ansikten?

4st rör/konor

Glas pärlor?
Många!
olika storlekar

Guldtopaz
som törsilvias

4 rör → Fäst klargls.
4 "huvuden"
4 "pungar"
4 glas ringar } klar
x1.
4 gl.s ringar
3m.



P. Fjellström, *Lapskt Silver*, published by Almqvist & Wiksell, Stockholm, Gothenburg, Uppsala, 1962. H. Hampusson Huldt, *Mönsterbok för Lapsk Hemslöjd i Västerbottens Län*, Published by Schmidts boktryckeri, 1920

with, one's environment. It allowed humans to spin out, like the spider's threads, their relation to different lands and bodies of water, their changing weathers and seasons, stars and spirits, plants and animals, hence weaving their lives together into a dense biocultural web, which carries human existence.

The importance of thread and needles may be a recent 'discovery' for anthropologists, but it's old news for Arctic peoples in the polar regions, where sewing has always been a matter of life and death. Not repairing a tear in your clothing means you could die of cold, and not mending your bags and straps means you are putting vital supplies at risk. Thread and needles play a central role in the traditional ways of life of the Sámi people, the indigenous inhabitants of Sápmi, formerly known as Lapland. Embroidered in pewter, the belt traditionally worn by the Sámi featured a metal ring from which all kinds of tools hung on twines. Attached to this belt ring, hunting knives and reindeer-horn needle cases —each containing a sewing kit for leatherwork—would hang alongside various other implements such as spoons, bowls, whetstones, fire utensils and protective amulets. The Sámi belt ring is a multipurpose connecting device that made it possible for each individual to carry around an entire universe of ecological relations. An indigenous lifeworld hanging from one's belt.

This technology inspired the artist Olof Marsja to create *What if the Bear Is the Sun and the Sun Is the Bear* (2021), a large-scale wall installation centred around a giant ring with the raw appearance of industrial manufacture, from which an enigmatic constellation of objects and humanoid figures are all suspended in chains. Weaving this artwork together is a spiderweb of bright orange silicone cord, which reimagines the colourful lassos used among the Sámi reindeer herders—a husbandry tool that opens up, too, into a world of ecological entanglements.

The intricate design of the central ring in Marsja's installation is reminiscent of the rose windows in the numerous Swedish churches built during the early colonization of Sápmi, which marked the enforced conversion of its native inhabitants to

Olof Marsja explores how colonial erasure continues to haunt the present

Christianity. The ring is bookended by three animistic 'Bear Sun' figures in the shape of sleighs or boats, alluding perhaps to the endless circulation of objects and ideas between indigenous peoples, settlers and missionaries. Punctuating the installation is a group of pendant-like sculptures made from glass and metal, which draws inspiration from the adoption of Christian amulets among the Sámi. Marsja's work incorporates both natural and synthetic materials, traditional crafts and industrial production. This amalgamation of cultural references bears witness to an identity that must be assembled from scraps—salvaged from the wreckage of colonial encounters. Peruvian anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena (whose surname, incidentally, translates into 'Chain') has interpreted the history of colonialism as the reduction of many worlds to one world. A plurality of ways of knowing and living are distilled into a single, streamlined modernity that "grants itself the right to assimilate all other worlds and, by presenting itself as exclusive, cancels possibilities for what lies beyond its limits". In his work, Marsja explores how this colonial erasure

continues to haunt the present, while rescuing traces of a world suppressed by capitalist modernity.

Ancient bear graves found in mountain and forest regions throughout Scandinavia are testament to the fact that circumpolar peoples believed there was something supernatural about this animal. Together with the sun, this sacred creature would disappear in the late autumn, as darkness took over the Arctic, only to resurrect months later in the spring, perhaps accompanied by cubs. The bear embodied the idea of rebirth and connected the worlds of the living and the dead, moving between these planes of existence in an eternal cycle. Marsja's installation can be described as a spiderweb where disparate worldviews and overlapping cosmologies are woven together. Since it's a spiderweb, this is also a cunning trap—a pitfall for the unwary. In fiction, the term 'MacGuffin' refers to a device that sets the plot in motion despite lacking any real substance. Alfred Hitchcock famously illustrated this with a story about two men on a train:

> *One man says, "What's that package up there in the baggage rack?" And the other answers, "Oh, that's a MacGuffin." The first one asks, "What's a MacGuffin?" "Well," the other man says, "it's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands." The first man says, "But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands," and the other one answers, "Well then, that's no MacGuffin!" So you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all.*

There is a MacGuffin-esque quality to Marsja's work. A sense of ontological lack or groundlessness results from the artist's refusal to invoke facile conceptions of identity, speaking instead in more oblique ways to elude any fixed, static, romanticized visions of indigeneity. Neither an 'authentic' expression of *duodji* (a term for Sámi crafts and material culture, as well as the indigenous worldview these are a vehicle for), nor a postmodern pastiche of identity politics, Marsja's work sits in an uneasy position within the global art world's representational economy. His installation is best described as an epistemic trap—an interface between many worlds. Making use of cultural bricolage, his work ties together disparate elements into chains of translation where all relations of time and space are warped, twisted, complicated. This is not, after all, an object to be contemplated. This is something altogether more dangerous. It's an entrapment designed to hunt bears in the Sámi highlands.

Olof Marsja's installation was part of the exhibition *Migration – the Journey of Objects*, held at the Röhsska Museum of Design and Craft in Gothenburg, Sweden, from 23 October 2021 to August 2022, co-curated by MacGuffin.