

Shahin Zarinbal
Muskauer Straße 24, 10997 Berlin

Sitara Abuzar Ghaznawi

Ich kenne Sitara nicht so gut. Sie macht mir wahnsinnige Angst.
13 September – 25 October

Exhibition text by Shola von Reinhold

This text is in part adapted from an ongoing series of works about a winged mystical entity (found primarily in alchemical texts and their illuminations) known as a Rebis. I was in fact reworking it from an earlier text before I spoke to Sitara Abuzar Ghaznawi ahead of this very show. With its stamped floral motifs made in a hypnagogic state, alongside other features – a scrolled journal, burgundy beribboned and sheathed in plastic and nestled in an acrylic glass vitrine the ornamental glimmers began to feel serendipitous. Then there was the fact that Sitara spoke to me of a character behind the work who reminded me of the piece's own character, a slipper-in to a palatial space who becomes hypnotised by ornament, learning to read its patterns as not only symbol but also something beyond – a rhythmic and musical language that in turn recalled Ghaznawi's descriptions of working with her own personal ornamental lexicon. I scrapped what I'd been planning to write for this show and decided to rework this piece which began its life as a sort of closet-drama about ornament and archives, then was adapted again and became the libretto for a fictional opera about grottos and ornament. I was then mid-transforming for an ongoing collection. Now, here, it finds itself a gallery text. Traces of all its past lives exist and glimmer in response to Ghaznawi's Ich kenne Sitara nicht so gut. Sie macht mir wahnsinnige Angst which itself invokes, resituates previous instantiations of work and biography.

Rebis Lore

In their early days of retreat, in a region known as the Bronze Atrium Pools, they encountered another Rebis known as Mottinne who had already been living in the cave networks. From, they presumed, another generation of Rebises. She was wingless, and it was the first time they had encountered such a Rebis, though they had heard of them. At first, they thought she might be an ancestor, from millennia before, but they could still not get their head around Time. "Perhaps", one of their party suggested, "she is of a newer generation of Rebises, millennia ahead of us." And Mottinne hearing this all speculation said she was indeed of a different generation to them, millennia in time away from them... but without being before or after, but along – sideways in time. They asked her how she had come to be in these subterranean chambers. She told them how before this she had found herself living in the dilapidated grounds of an old palace and its parks. She did not know that it, in a former life, was Princely Residenz – nor did she care – nor did she know how long she had been living there. She observed, though, how strange it was that the courtly fixtures were all out-of-bent. These ornaments, she said, were formed for things other than Life Exquisite and were also

not used coherently with the very place they were in. Take that cornicing up there... it seemed to be real ornament, but cornicing and such ornament as she knew it, was for swimming in, as it were. Then there was the fountain which had mosaic creatures not so dissimilar from her, but mermaids or at least some kind of oceanic deity whose faces and bodies were composed of black shellwork.

Still she presumed it was all some ill-formed version of something approximating Rebis life from another generation and takes up residence in the palace as best she could. Sometimes she made her rooms up in the Antiquarium, or the Hermitage or the library, other times in the Residenz grotto which was a little different from day to day. Some days water literally trickled over the rocaille faces of the figures and lilies floated in the waters, others it seemed to be in total disrepair: shells cracked and statuary crumbling... it was as if time is slipshod... or perhaps time is passing normally but its strangeness is more apparent.

She told them about how once she stood in the library directly above the grottenhof, her mind hovering, floating among and between the carved finials and painted ceilings... everywhere she witnesses heraldic devices and emblema and she thought, "even here – right now – these dead monarchic signs stir a little" – she saw their vestigial beams at play beneath now obsolete emblems, seemingly shorn away from power, they wheezed and strained to drive their old functions... And yet for a moment, was as if she caught it all from a different angle, and the light hit it differently, it all seemed to trickle and flow like the fountain with its braids of water... patterns leap up and about in a different manner.

In the grottenhof one day the fountain water rippled and caught the light in such a way that its motions trellised and chained and meshed over the faces of the nymphs and the other statuary. It rippled and moved and as it did Mottinne realised she could read the walls, the shells, the light chains, the liquid quivers, the rocaille. She could read the grotto. The patterns of shell moved and swayed and were legible... not as a language really but as a feeling... more like seeing music... it clanged and cracked here and there because these were after all copy and pasted quotes from other ornaments... foliate patterns over there jangled and played rustily because the makers had no idea what they was transposing... but still Mottinne saw it, heard it and the motifs made a kind of musical story about how later she would descend the grotto's caves through the passage and swim its illuminated caverns with the grotto nymphs.

The same day she walked all around the place reading the patterns everywhere... Untranslatable, but went, musically, something like this: "Palaces, cathedrals, parks, state, authority, power... trefoil... acanthus... floral patterns with references to the names of kings and queens... rosecrantz (crown of roses, but what about a literal crown of roses on the head of cupid, of aphrodite, astarte, Inanna etc etc)... gyldenloves (gold lions ... alchemical green lions touching on something predating lions couchant rampart and so on though she did like to be couchant – that surely was very ancient and beyond petty heraldry) birds perching... starlings... hummingbirds... wrens... and those... emissaries: angels... who are really here to be androgynes, here and everywhere supplanted onto multitudinous aspects... and referencing also their counterparts, another lost archetype the winged hermaphrodites ofc... so far

removed... but winged... as cherubs...cherubim much related absurdity that putti – cupids...the children of venus... babified but alluding to the...retinue of.... roses, roses, roses, birds birds birds, waves, waves. But more importantly then her eyes trace a serpentine line... a curlicue up there on a ceiling... and she felt her whole spirit move along the swoops... a rush of further music... each swoop of an arch motion a motion a feeling-knowledge... moving textures:

Walking between walls thick with friezework or tapestries she no longer knew if she was

*Walking through hedges, a garden avenue lined with whirling masses
One became the other... so she could recall a floral maze from a
passageway no longer.*

Walking around garden grove tapestry hall the chutes, arches, volution, fountain-hedges, branches led her inevitably to the immemorial grotto space so now she could now spy grottos through a small ornamental jumble in an interior cornice corner or a niche in a maze. They all join together... passageways open up ... quadrangles ... walled garden ... archway ... arcade, arcadian and you are in another garden ... grove or grotto. Perhaps, Mottinne thinks, this is a holding space... reached by thousands, millions over the years...to escape... it is no utopia but it is dreamy... fountains...trickle.... forgotten registers of knowledge lie in wait and so on and so forth and gardens and groves and grottos and pink fonts.

Mottine moves a hand black beshelled and fountain-wet glimmers... and all this light on water becomes legible once more to Sylvestra... she gets into the fountain, a fretwork of shimmering... of trellises... she lies in it... dissolves... becomes waved... crystal... She passes through a crystal channel a passageway... the liquid, shells swirling make her in turn swirl. She passes as it were into crystal... merges in the crystalline grotto... a part of it... faceted she becomes faceted... waved she becomes waved.¹ It was thus she came down the passage of a dark arcade and found herself in the grottos.

¹ “You see”, she said, outside of time (– she was very peculiar this Rebis, they all thought). The way she did go on! But they couldn’t help but listen “An idea is accumulating around ‘ornament’ – one I’m still formulating (and want to trace some of that here whilst being aware I won’t be able to fully articulate it yet) but amounts to the sense that even when given over to forms dominance and other unscrupulous, violent applications, ornament leaks stray glimmers that have been the recurrent unintended source of escape and survival by those it was meant to dominate or exclude. Thus I am by no means interested in the perpetuation of these forms of ornament for the sake of stray glints, but want to linger over the fact that there is, in other words, I think, a waywardness in much ornament that can be taken up: loopholes, an impreciseness, a psychic availability that issue from the unmeant, unintended, the misused. Both a semiotic and sensory messiness in the ornament found in, made for, palaces, stately houses, civic parks, libraries – a whole assemblage of decorative arts put to the purpose of reifying state, monarchy and other bodies of power. Even when supposedly obsolete, such as monarchic ornament which remains when monarchy technically doesn’t,

or when devices and heraldry and ornamental grammars are severed, meaningless, illegible to contemporary viewers or interlopers far removed from its language (because its codes were not taught them, were meant to be hermetic, a language of power) it can continue to transmit, signify, operate as part of a brutalising machinery (intimidation, exclusion, reification etc). On the other hand it is also at its most obsolete or illegible that other layers become available. Its second (or 1012th) skin of legibility comes to the fore. Representations that were absorbed and embedded into this or that schema from other places and periods begin to glimmer anew. Traces, residues, symbolic and stylistic quotes, as it were: acanthus, rose, unicorn, grapes, 'arabesque', grotesquerie... ornamental quotes of ornamental quotes trailing off into semiotic oblivion... And then there is the loss of sensual reading that occurs when the ornamental is instrumentalised as solely a symbolic strata of decoration." They didn't know 90 percent of what she was talking about.

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Shola von Reinhold is a Scottish writer. Her debut novel, *LOTE* (2020) won the Republic of Consciousness Prize and the James Tait Memorial Prize. Von Reinhold was briefly a princess, having married into a minor branch of the Grimaldi family at the age of 17. She divorced her husband after discovering anarcho-communism.

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Biography

Sitara Abuzar Ghaznawi (born 1995 in Ghazni, Afghanistan) lives and works in Basel, Switzerland. Recent solo and two-person exhibitions include: *Kiefer Hablitzel | Göhner Kunstpreis*, Swiss Art Awards, Messe Basel (2025), *Sitara Abuzar Ghaznawi & Sem Lala*, Forde Geneva (2024); *Public Sculpture*, Amore Basel (2024); *Sin City*, Auto Italia, London (2023); *Don't Build Picturesquely* (with Marina Xenofontos), Hot Wheels, Athens (2022); *Hymn and Silence*, LC Queisser, Tbilisi (2021); *LOVE / Terms and Conditions*, Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zurich (2021); *Emmy Hennings / Sitara Abuzar Ghaznawi*, Swiss Institute New York, New York (2020); *Stars are blind* (with Ser Serpas), LC Queisser, Tbilisi (2019); and *Underworld Classic*, Luma Westbau | schwarzescafé, Zurich (2019). Her work has been included in group exhibitions at Cibrían, San Sebastian (2025); Shahin Zarinbal, Berlin, and LC Queisser, Tbilisi (2023); Antenna Space, Shanghai (2022); Cordova Gallery, Barcelona; Galerie Maria Bernheim, London (2021); Kunsthalle Zurich, Zurich (2020); and Édouard Montassut, Paris (2019).

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