

Olof Marsja

The Nameless One

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Press Release

*As our own species is in the process of proving,
one cannot have superior science and inferior morals.*

Arthur C. Clarke(1)

A towering figure stands tall in the centre of the room. It has an alien looking, strange, Cyclopean head, and their gaze is powerfully haughty and pointed high above us. They are dressed in a quite laborious way, reindeer fur covers their neck, torso and shoulders and a seemingly ritual dress covers the rest of their body, the dress is patterned in flowers, yet also hand stained and coloured in red with a natural process.(2) Pants, gaiters and shirt sleeves come out of the mixture of fur and dress in a style that mixes what looks like a weird *gákti*(3) and the functional clothes an explorer would use for some arctic, or high mountain travelling. The towering figure has in fact a backpack and a whole range of ropes and gear hanging from their shoulders and belt, they seem equipped both for exploration and for a magic ritual. If one wouldn't read them as trendy accessories as many school-kids have hanging from their bags (which would be also a correct interpretation with Marsja's practice),

there is definitely something shamanic and mysterious in the heads hanging from their belt and from their backpack, maybe a memory of the fact that once upon a time also humans, with features like a nose, two eyes and a mouth, existed? Or are we looking at a figure from before humans were even roaming on Earth?

Sámi culture, as a matter of fact, has an origin that is grounded *that* far in the past. Being the only surviving indigenous people in Europe, their culture, religion, language and knowledge reaches us from a time inexplicably antecedent our “civilised” cultures. It is well established that history's idea of progress in technology, or politics, don't always entail cultural progress. That civilisations like the Romans just predated and were remembered for their diluted and poorly understood version of knowledge stolen from the cultures they destroyed and colonised militarily, like the Etruscans. It should be time in countries like Sweden to recognised how poor and limited is the hegemonic Germanic-Christian culture that has been worshipped and used as a reason first to destroy most of the indigenous peoples living in the North, and then, now, weaponised by the political forces running this country to do even more damage to everybody, indigenous, or not, native, or immigrant (as the people writing, and running NEVVEN). Even considering its valuable contributions and excellence, Swedish culture is quite young and limited compared to most other Western cultures, then one can just try to imagine how it would rank if compared to the knowledge and glance over thousands of years' of (pre)history and life in these landscapes that the Sámi people can offer us. Yet again, close to nothing

is done to help this precious knowledge from disappearing. Sámi languages, traditions, and uses are disappearing, and with them the physical and intuitive knowledge in which such a culture expresses itself. The way you collect wood or thread on soft snow might open to worlds of deeper practical and spiritual knowledge, more than many Western philosophy books. The way a language expresses and describes the world is said to contain in itself a whole ontology. All of this is fast disappearing in the North, among the few Sámis that still try to make their culture survive. A lot has already been lost forever to racism and the hegemonic supremacist ideas Sweden has been unfortunately famous for.

In many different ways during the past years Olof Marsja's art has been speaking about the relation a person with Sámi background in Sweden has with their own identity and this disappearing process. He comes from a family where the language is spoken, yet he can't speak Sámi, he grounded his studies and practice on the traditional Sámi crafts, *duodji*, yet he has become famous for his contemporary art. He lives in an apartment in Göteborg, and all in all the way we all live here, but his art, like his life, brings us both in a world we know, where we can relate with the markers of fashion or the experiences of any father with two kids, yet also somewhere else. That somewhere else is where we can meet, in a certain way, what is left living through him of this fantastic culture, but also the rage, sadness and fear of a person witnessing his own background fast disappear, eroded by modernity, fascisms, and negligence.

This is what *The Nameless One* brings to us, in all its complexity, with no need of simplifying it into a political message, nor to stay at the surface of its humour, and gamer references. The title of the show comes, as a matter of fact, from a video-game Marsja used to play as a teenager in the Nineties, a story based quest, where the protagonist, known as The Nameless One, was an immortal man who forgot everything if killed. The game focused on the protagonist's journey to reclaim his memories of previous lives, and to discover why he was made immortal in the first place.(4) One doesn't also need to explain more, then, on how to look at this titanic figure gazing above us in the room, and in his hand a trove of objects that is presenting to us. We can easily understand also what that offering is and why his arm is missing as with most of the marble sculptures coming to us from the long gone civilisations of the past. Completed by two silvered glass heads hanging mirrored on the walls, respectively a solar and lunar symbol, *The Nameless One* creates a place to feel and experience, bodily even before than intellectually, visually and physically, without the need of so many words. This is how many indigenous cultures and most of the best contemporary art communicate to us.

Mattia Lullini

(1) A. C. Clarke, *Voices from the Sky*, London: Hachette, 2011, p.87.

(2) The clothes of this sculpture, as much as with most sculptures by Marsja, are designed and sewn in collaboration with stage and textile artist Matilda Söderling. In this case, the plant staining process was made with horseradish root and oak gall.

(3) *Gákti* is the Northern Sámi word used by non-Sámi speakers to refer to many different types of traditional clothing worn by the Sámi in northern areas of Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. The traditional Sámi outfit is characterised by a dominant colour adorned with bands of contrasting colours, plaits, pewter embroidery, tin art, and often a high collar.

(4) *Planescape: Torment* is a 1999 role-playing video game developed by Black Isle Studios and published by Interplay Entertainment for Windows. The game takes place in locations from the multiverse of *Planescape*, a *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* fantasy campaign setting. This information and more from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Planescape:_Torment (Accessed on April 9th, 2026).

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Olof Marsja (b.1986, Gällivare) holds a BFA from Konstfack University of Arts, Crafts & Design in Stockholm (2017) and was a recipient of the Stena Foundation Culture Scholarship in 2023 and the Maria Bonnier Dahlin Stipend in 2019. With upcoming exhibitions at Bergen Kunsthall (Bergen, 2026), Konsthallen Trollhättan (Trollhättan, 2026), Copenhagen Contemporary (Copenhagen, 2026), Somerset House (London, 2026), and Kunstsilo (Kristiansand, 2027), he has recently exhibited at Accelerator (Stockholm, 2026), Wereldmuseum (Leiden, 2026), NEVVEN (Gothenburg, 2026, 2021 and Bologna, 2024), 1646 (The Hague, 2025), Scandinavia House (New York, 2025), Public Service Gallery (Stockholm, 2025), Gammel Strand (Copenhagen, 2024), Buffalo AKG Art Museum (Buffalo, 2024), Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma (Helsinki, 2024), Gothenburg Museum of Art (Gothenburg, 2023), Göteborgs Konsthall (Gothenburg, 2023), Galerie Nordenhake focus (Stockholm, 2023), Moderna Museet (Stockholm, 2022), Lyon Contemporary Art Biennale (2022), Luleå Biennial (2022), The Sámi Center for Contemporary Art (Karasjok, 2021), Röhsska Museet (Gothenburg, 2021), and Bonniers Konsthall (Stockholm, 2019) among others. Marsja lives and works in Gothenburg, Sweden.

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