

Anna Helm: The Fish DiMension

30 Orchard St, Gallery 1 & 2 ▪ June 5 - July 3, 2021



The human tongue is like a fish in a river. Navigating currents of thoughts, feelings and fleeting impressions. It swims, leaving ripples of meaning in its wake. It tastes, and it shapes.

I can't help thinking about Häagen-Dazs ice cream when looking at Anna Helm's work. In a 1990s documentary about Häagen-Dazs ice cream, Reuben Mattus's daughter Doris remembered her father sitting at the kitchen table late one night in 1959 sounding out different combinations of made up words, trying to find the right sounding name for his new Bronx based ice cream brand.

'Mattus himself would say he wanted the name to sound Danish, since it seemed fancy, and because he wanted to acknowledge Denmark for its kindness toward the Jews during World War II. The title he eventually settled on, Häagen-

Dazs, was essentially gibberish—the Danish language doesn't even use an umlaut over the letter a. But what did that matter to the American ice cream consumer? Mattus forged ahead with the idea, even printing maps of Scandinavia on the first tubs.' [1]

Reuben Mattus realized that people needed to wrap their mouths and tongues around a concept as much as the premium butterfat content in his ice cream. He did what all effective product branding does, basically, making sure that the idea of a word and the product become fixed and closed in a symbolic circuit. He also, in my mind, made a conceptual artwork in the form of a mass produced ice cream brand. Fiction seemed to get at something closer to the truth of what the tongue could feel and taste.

In a similar origin story, Anna told me about a friend's 7 year old daughter trying to spell out the word *unusual* for the first time. Her mother came across the word *Unhushuwule* written on a piece of paper in her daughter's bedroom and sent Anna an email that read: *Nina just spelt unusual - Unhushuwule*. This word opened a door in Anna's mind that seemed to confirm something, and in 2017 she made a facsimile of a picnic table draped with a hand-painted picnic tablecloth titled *Unhushuwule Picnic Table* - the word *Unhushuwule* imperceptibly legible in relief when viewed from certain angles on the top surface of the sculpture. More recently, in *Unhushuwule T-shirt*, the word has returned, on the edge of legibility, spelled out on a string floating above a t-shirt. Unlike Häagen-Dazs, locked in a branded identity, Anna's more interested in letting words mutate, shape-shift and evolve. But as unrecognizable as they might become, they do still hint at some origin, as if one could know what they mean through reverse engineering.

The ouroboros eats its own tail to sustain its life in a continuous cycle of regeneration and renewal. In this image of a snake eating itself - creating a continuous loop where the head and tail meet - it's easy to understand why this symbol is so enduring. It visually embodies our experiences of thinking about all kinds of literal and metaphorical cycles. Cycles of time, cycles of life and death, and in the case of Anna Helm's work, cycles of language, identity and meaning. This seems most direct in her wreath works where there is an ambiguity about where things begin or end, as in the wreaths that read:

ANNANNANNANNANNANNANNANNANNANNANNANNANNANNANNANNANNANNA...

Where does Anna or her friend Ann begin or end? Not only does the circle visually create an ouroboros of Anna's name, but the name ANNA itself is a palindrome that also reinforces the impression of a head that devours its tail. Cycles of time are pointed to in the work *Orange Cycle Clock Wreath* where the ripening of a fruit is conflated with phases of the moon, with both neatly fitting into the schematics of a wall clock. In this wreath the celestial and the terrestrial are united, and cosmic time and human time are overlaid over each other.

Throughout the works, things can *be*, and *mean*, many things at the same time, simultaneously. I wonder, if this means that all things are essentially arbitrary, or that all things are interconnected? The 5th dimension is a theoretical model that suggests, in the case of Hugh Everett's *Many Worlds* quantum mechanics model, that every possible outcome for our universe is equally possible and real, but as observers at a fixed point, we can only see one of those possibilities; one of those universes at a time. In *DiMatteo Tomato*, we can understand that *Mimi DiMatteo* is both Anna's mother's name and a tomato. Maybe the closest the work can come to modeling the 5th dimension is through a visual and cognitive equivalent of synesthesia where the stimulation of one sense or cognitive association automatically triggers a different

sense and cognitive association at the same time? A multi-dimensional cognition of what things are and can be.

Why do I think of caprese salad and a life-ring ceremoniously hung on the side of a boat in a sea side town overlooking the Amalfi coast? Or imagine a DiMatteo family crest on a can of tomato sauce? A ribbon that looks like uncooked pie crust? Where do these wreaths go? On a front door welcoming friends? In a kitchen? Isolated in the empty space of a white wall clarifying its status as an artwork? What occasion do these wreathes celebrate?

Anna mentioned that the idea for the wreaths began as a gift idea for family and friends. Eventually, they spiraled outward beyond her circle and started to exceed the particular origins and inside jokes of her family.

All things have beginnings and endings, but at some point in that journey, it starts to become less important where something started or where it is going. What seems more relevant in this case is *what else* can it be? *What else is it?*

—Michael Queenland, June 2021, Los Angeles, CA

[1] *Häagen-Dazs Sounds Fancy, But What Does It Really Mean?* Jeff Wells February 9, 2016 - [Mentalfloss.com](http://mentalfloss.com)