

spekyng rybawdy

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Melanie Jackson

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“Spekyng Rybawdy”

eMED s.v. “ribaudi” (n.), (b): “obscenity, scurrility, bawdry; coarse speech; an obscene story”;

DMLBS s.v. “turpiloquium” (n.): “foul or offensive speech.”

Pilgrim badges are small cast tin or lead alloy brooches. Thousands have survived from the high and late middle ages. They were mass produced and easily affordable, part of a vast and profitable pan European trade. They are often discovered in the banks and the beds of its rivers. They are exquisite, rough hewn and lively sculpted reliefs - the moulds carved directly as negatives into soft stones. This quick, direct carving often makes detail ambiguous. When this is amplified at a larger scale it adds to their sense of protean impulse. They were collected across lifetimes, and worn on outdoor clothing, hats and coats. They travelled across the continent via their pilgrim hosts, made and bought at sites of devotion and at festivals and fairs. They played a large part in the circulation of imagery from the 12th to the sixteenth centuries. A group of these - of which little was written or acknowledged but many made and found - are known as the bawdy badges, or the secular badges, sexual badges, or the erotic pins.

These badges delight in hybridity - an extravagant imaginary of social and sexual reproduction. Independent makers would share and elaborate on salient and popular motifs, drawing on folk culture, profane subversions of religious imagery, subversions of permissible sexual conduct, Greek and Roman fascinum, erotic jokes. Not all are explicitly sexual but many are, featuring either a penis or a vulva, often as ambulatory independent beings. Penes and vulva sprout from trees, fully assimilated into animal, vegetal, social worlds. Human women forge penises in their foundries, they grow them, ride them. Cocks are farmed as root crops, cooked on skillets, and even spit roast, dripping with juices into a vulva tray. There are persistent images of locomotion, and motility, farcical assemblages, dissolutions and transformations of gender and class. Penes and vulva are often held aloft by wings, stilts, or each other. They travel by foot, barrow, peacock, beast, horse, ship, flight. Monkey apothecaries piss into mortars, Phyllis rides Aristotle like a well hung horse. Lords of the manor spy enviously on their tenants fucking with abandon in the fields. It is a world of absurd and inventive beings, rich with humour, dissent, subversion, delight, hilarity, titillation, surprise.

As many texts of the period act out, obscenity has many conflicting functions. It can express judgement and control over sexual practices, class and gender roles through mockery, exaggeration and contempt. As in our time and every time, obscenity was used to uphold political interests, degrade the marginalised (women, peasants, religious minorities), and to reinforce the morality, work, and permissible sexual behaviours that reinforced them best. Certain professional livery and trade badges were unambiguous and obligatory. Beggars, prostitutes and Jews were all forced to wear identifying badges and patches at some point in this period. Ruling elites would wear family heraldry in precious metals and high value coins. Stories used in (male) educational contexts often used obscene materials to attract interest, to titillate - whilst imparting the need to dominate and control (women) to



avoid abandonment or shame. Mass populations elected to wear pilgrim and secular badges though, and despite being part of a shared semiotic, they had complex (and conflicting) associations.

Many defamatory texts existed then, as now, about insatiable and available pussies and more objectionable cunts but as Judith Butler notes in *Excitable Speech* “being called a name - being reduced to one’s organs can be the site of injury, but that name-calling may be the initiating moment of a counter-mobilization... insurrectionary speech becomes the necessary response to injurious language, a risk taken in response to being put at risk, a repetition in language that forces change.” Obscenities can also create a space for unwitting subversions - whereby other realities are made legible. The virulence of obscene comedy seems to have set out some spaces for other forms of political discourse in the late medieval period - a space for writers and artisans to experiment, to examine and interrogate the established order under the less regulated auspices of humour. By the sixteenth century, with the armed brutality of the iconoclastic reformation and the prevalence of the printing press, pan european popular visual culture was very changed, authorities were easier able to recognize the source and danger of popular insurrectionary imagery. Pornographic and erotic content was channelled to focus on privately consumed personal arousal rather than irreverence or collective public dissent. Until relatively recently museological material classified as obscene was considered unsuitable for the uneducated to access publicly and was cloistered in special inaccessible collections. The very public, motile, wandering agency of these body parts as beings is as surprising and satisfactory to the contemporary eye as the medieval one. They are at once comical, self mocking, judgemental, generous, cruel, rapturous, emancipatory, banal, profane, erotic, ridiculous, devout, secular and cut through with an erotic drive for the divine. The erotic in itself may not be transgressive, but in these images desire, gender, sex power, violence and submission are contested, made tenuous and unstable.

The badges were produced in times of plague and in times of remission, and could have had an apotropaic function - protective amulets, to shock with humour or profane inversions of the sacred to ward off the evil eye, or transmission through sight. A Montpellier doctor recorded in 1349 how looks could literally kill: “[T]he greater strength of this epidemic is such that it kills almost instantly, as soon as the airy spirit leaving the eyes of a sick man has struck the eye of a healthy bystander by looking at him, for then the poisonous nature passes from one eye to the other. And this occurs particularly when the sick are at the point of death”. The badges persisted in the post plague era gripped as they were with witch trials and fears about women’s new freedoms of movement and conduct - when new regimes of productive work were being enforced. Fears of castration and female agency emerge in the *Malleus Maleficarum*. The authors strove to convey that witches did not literally remove men’s penises, but through *prae stigium* - acts of illusion, men were convinced that their penises had been stolen, which was as bad a crime as if the theft had been actual. Their crime is not merely sexual, or criminal but ontological. They bring new realities into thought. The badges seem to acknowledge this illusory harvesting of organs and the absurdity and the extent of this ontological dread.

Throughout the period the widely adopted theory of the interaction of the four humors explained differences of age, gender, emotions, personality and informed representation. The influence of the humors changed with the seasons and times of day, and within the human life span. A new form of a temperament index, also

controlled by four systems has been established today, that has found traction in certain medical, legal and psychological contexts to define and organise bodies and acts. Known (and copyrighted) as the Fisher Temperament Inventory (FTI) it establishes four collections of behaviors associated with specific neural systems: the dopamine, serotonin, testosterone, and estrogen/oxytocin system. “These four temperament suites have been designated: (1) Curious/Energetic, (2) Cautious/Social Norm Compliant, (3) Analytical/Tough-minded, and (4) Prosocial/Empathetic temperament dimensions”. But as we also know, genetic code, hormones and neurons are underexplored as well as over simplified in many contexts to underscore ideological agendas. Hormone therapies can do emancipatory work in mental health, contraception and gender realignment settings but hormone and neuron altering substances are relatively crude, overproduced and under-researched in contemporary medicine and manufacturing with devastating result. One thing that remains constant is that bodies and the locus of desire changes and transforms through the span of a lifetime, our identities are fleeting, partial, transitory.

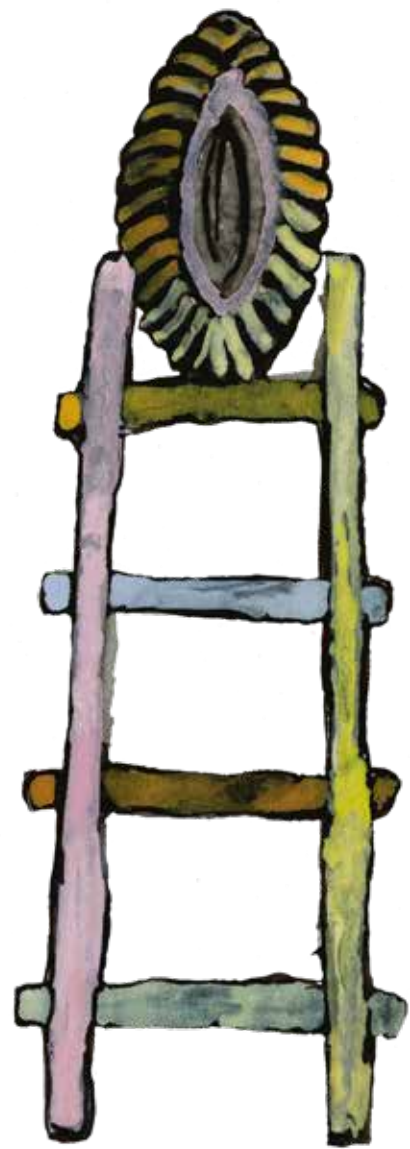
Until recently hormone and neuron crystals were invisible to the eye but now can be imaged using electron microscopy and polarising filters. Through polarised filtration we see a super imposition of spectral tessellations and alluring glinting formations to draw out their crystalline structures. The badges are now greyed with age but would have been bright, may well have been colourfully painted, and studded with fragments of crystal and glass. In *Spekyng Rybawdy* a retinue of figures has been re-imagined and re-drawn through an imaginary prism of polarising filters with all their spectral diffractions. The drawings have been rendered with ink and pigment, - to join once again in public assembly. In our own time of pandemic it is not transmission by the eye that we fear, but proximate breath and touch. So here characters assemble en masse, in the public places that we currently have available to us, albeit at distance, where the eye and hand can wander - in print as a succession, a parade.



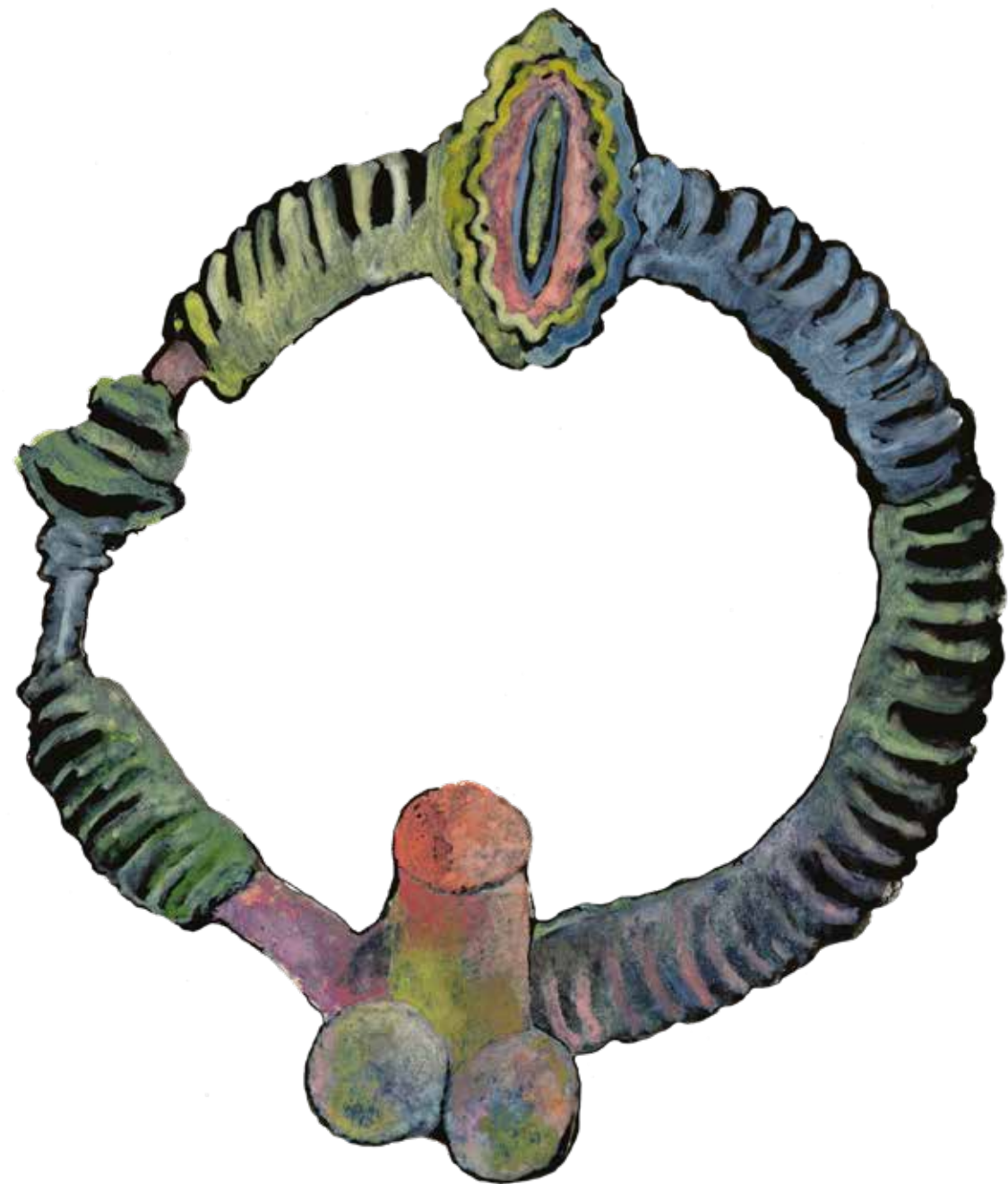
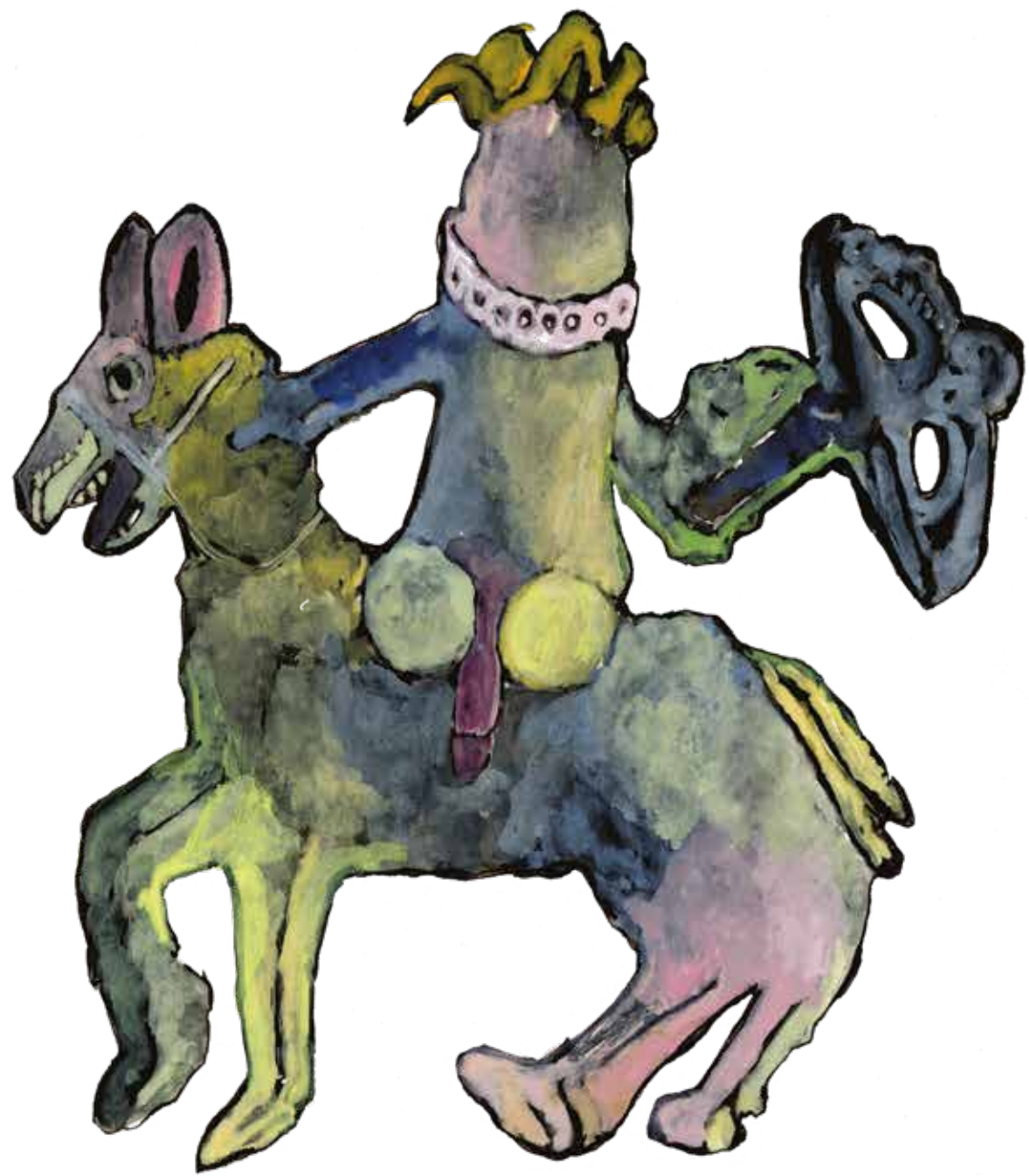


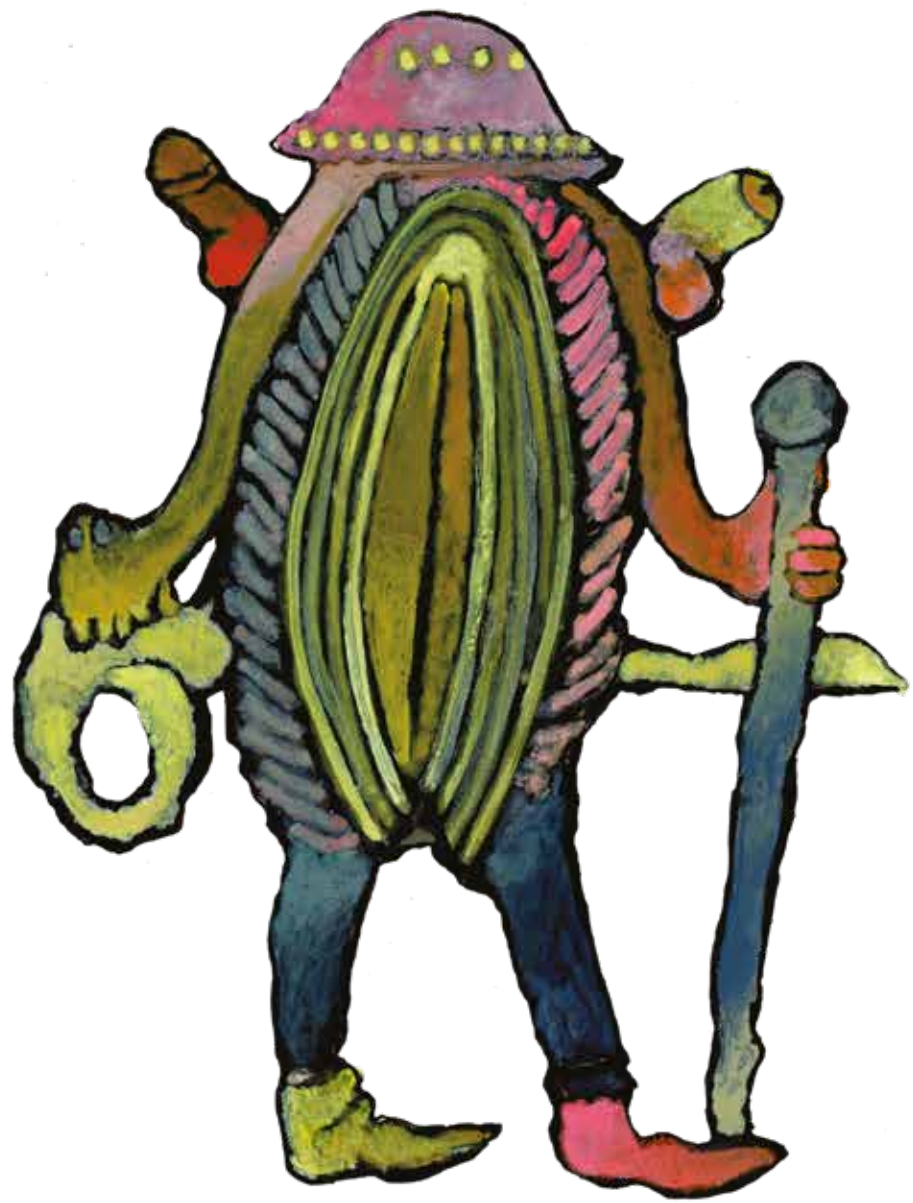
















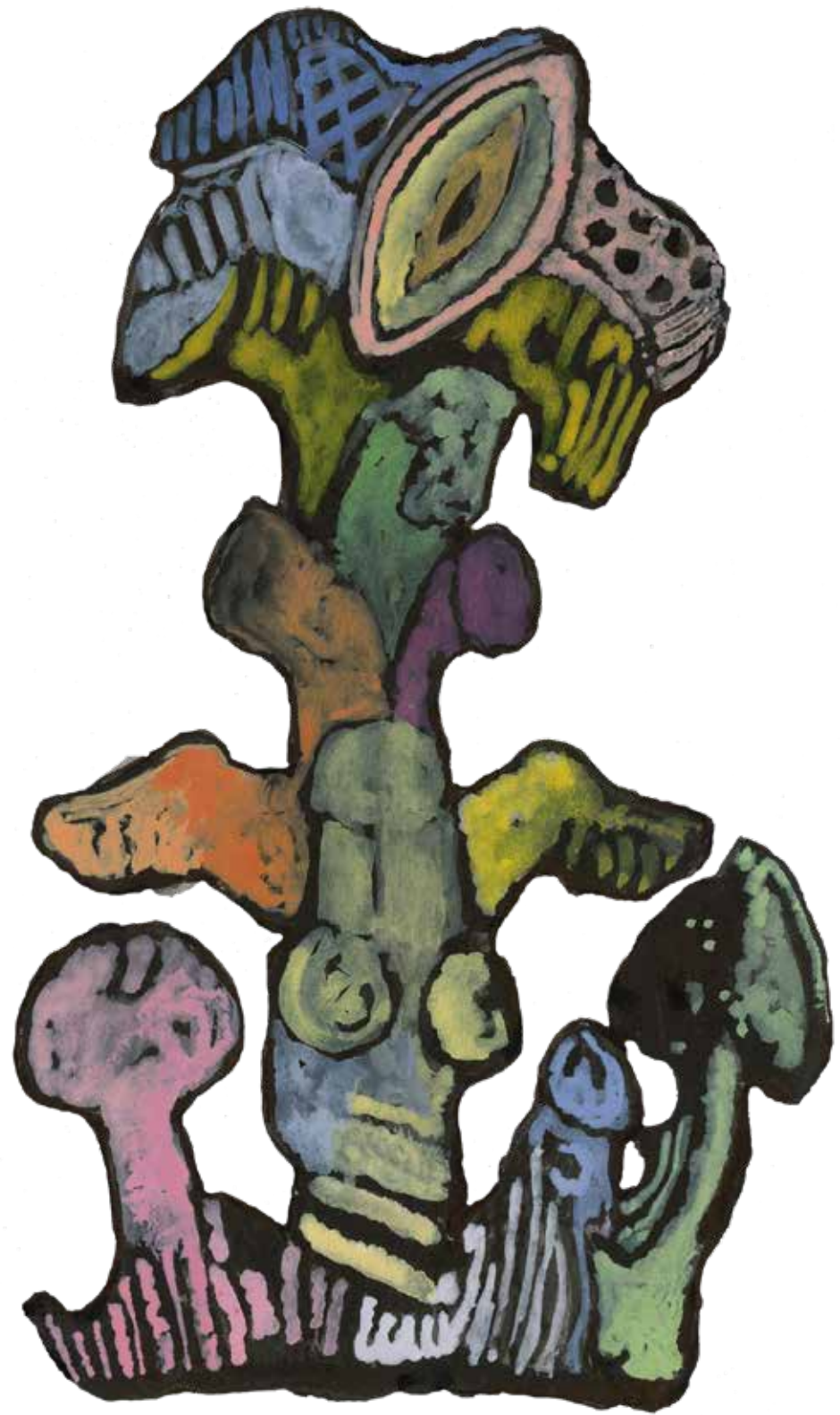






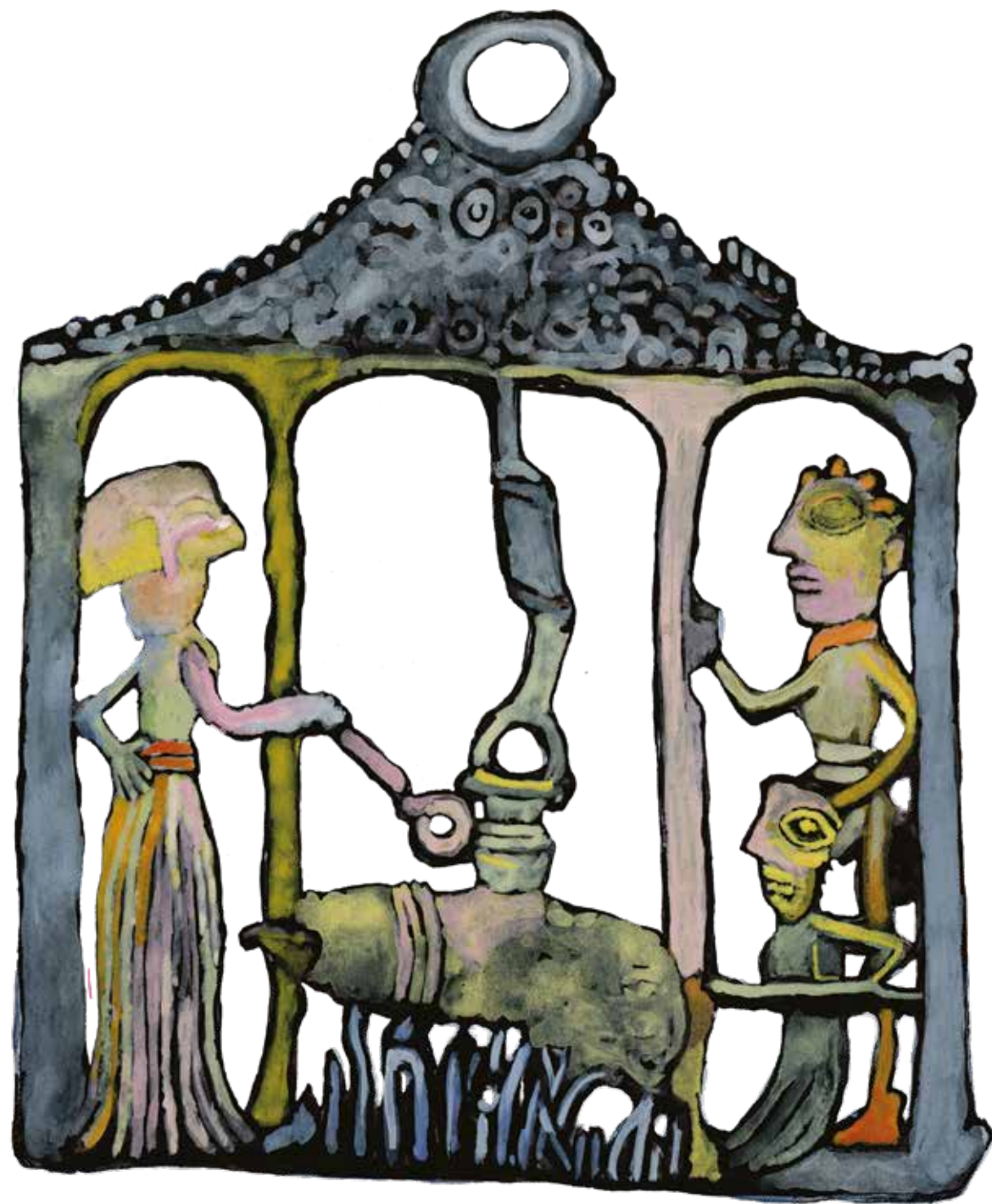


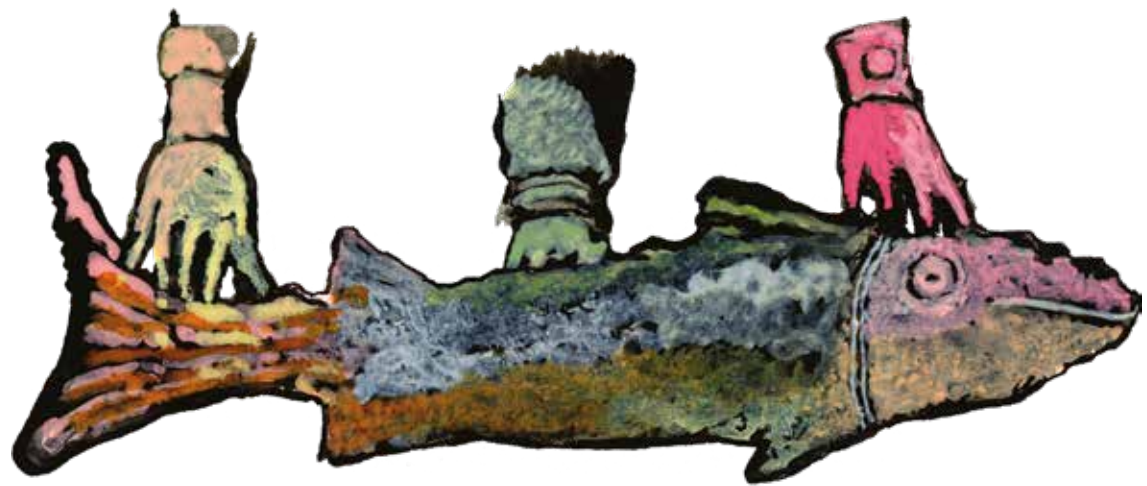


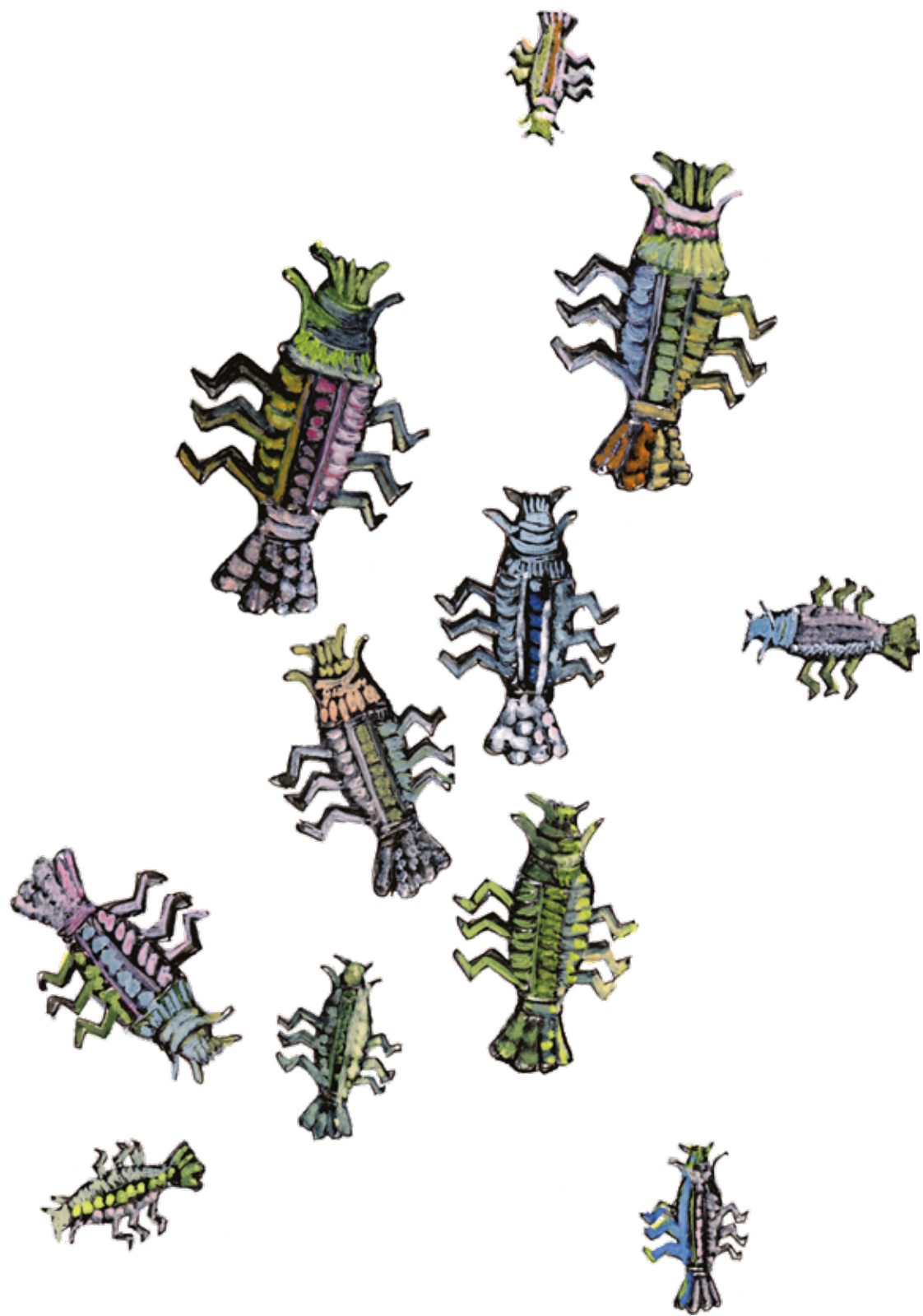


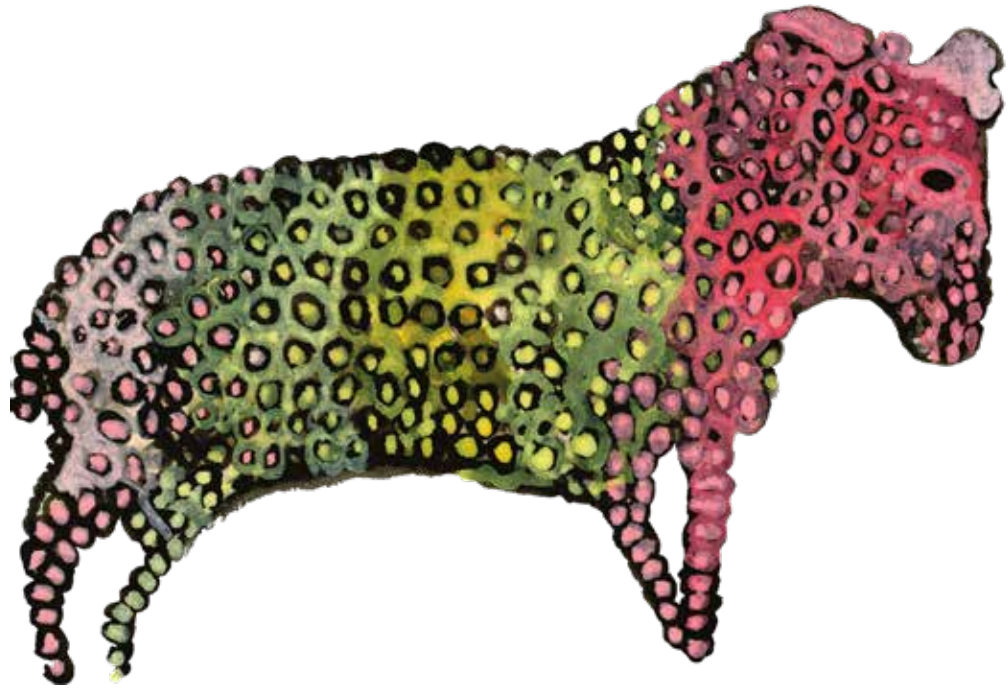








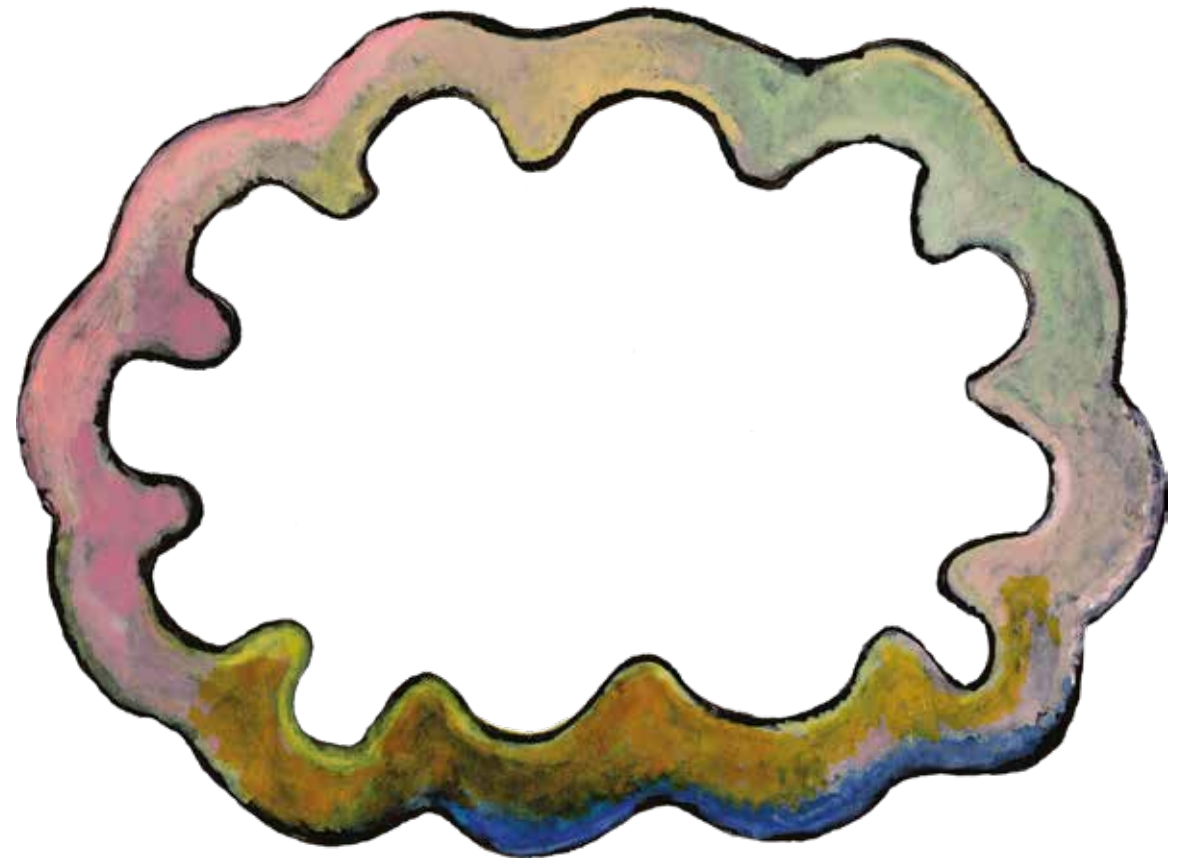








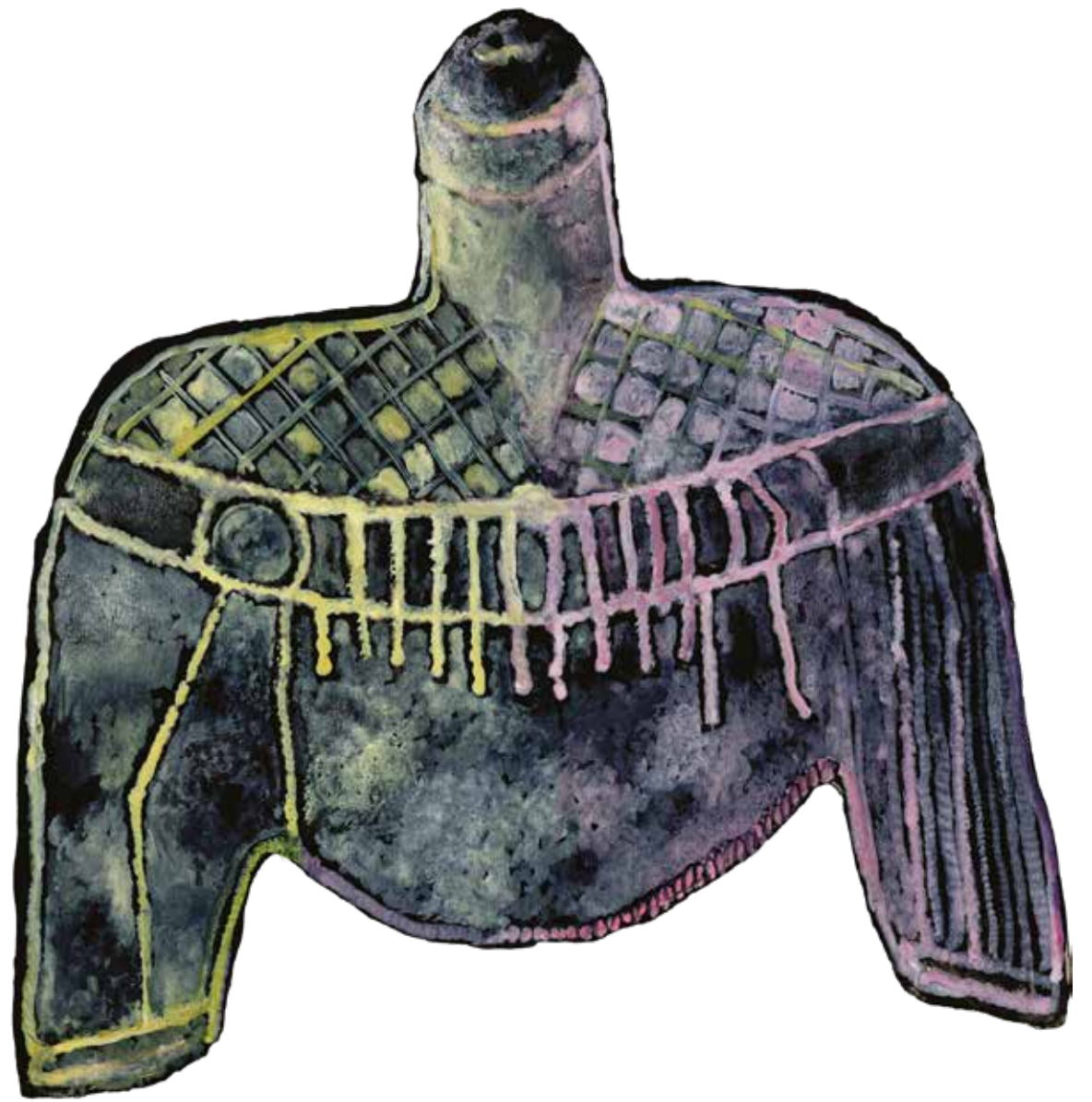


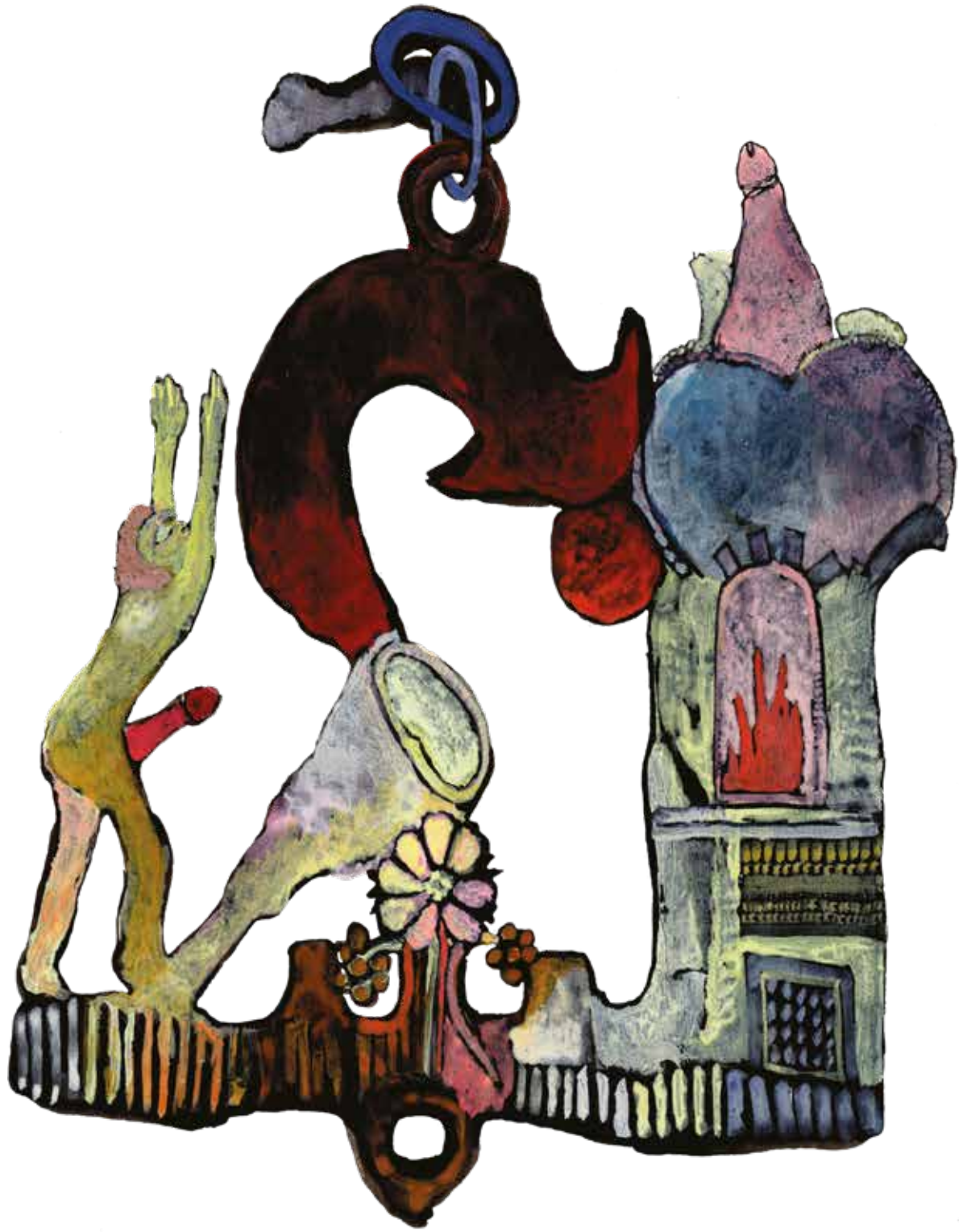






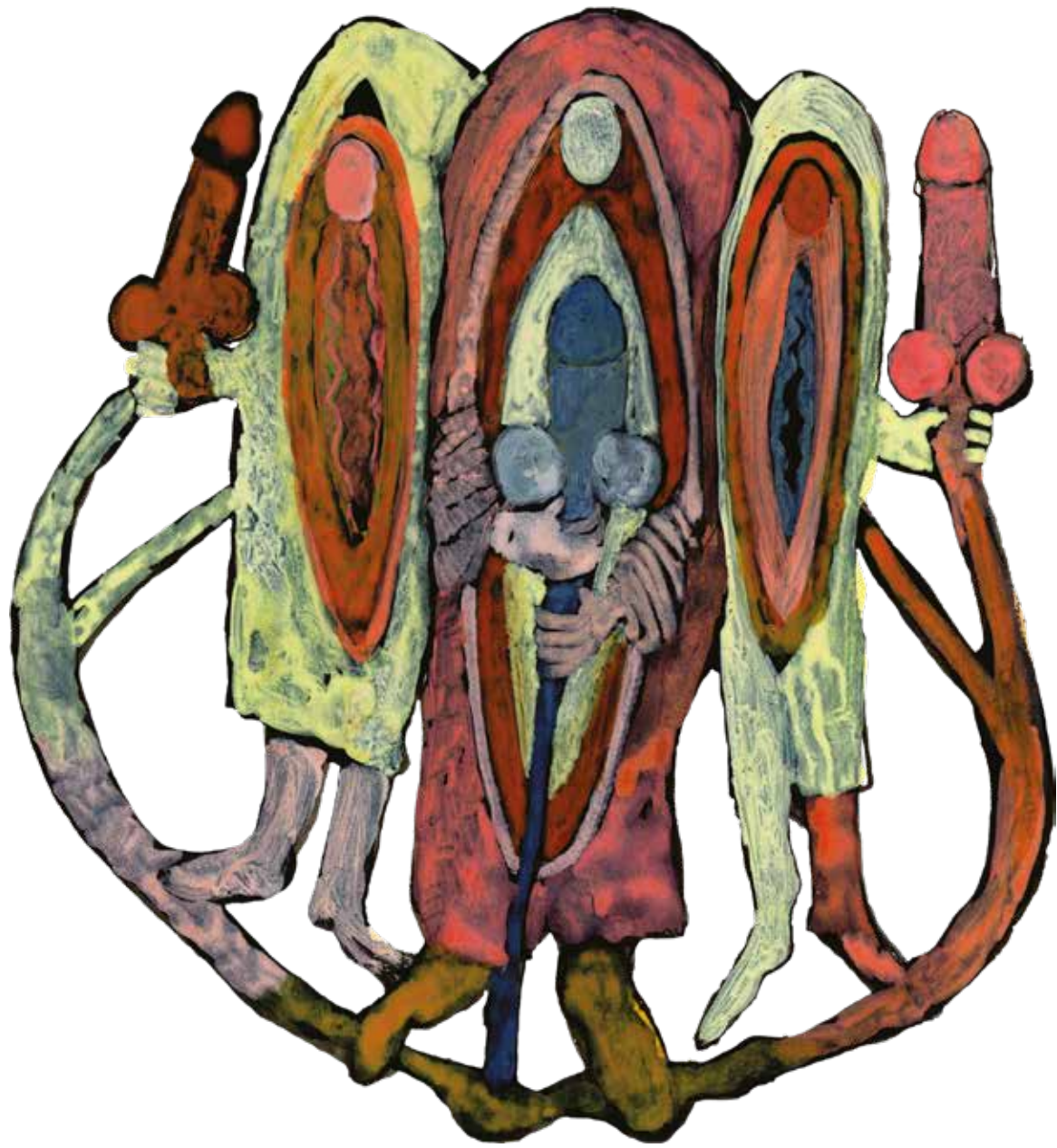
















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