

# Punk Pagan Trickster Feminist Sci-Fi Shaman: Kris Lemsalu

## CONVERSATIONS Mousse 64

by Andrew Berardini

*Lately my work feels more like a lone man's smoke signal at sea, trying to find other humans.*

—Kris Lemsalu

In a grand Edwardian opera house in London last year, a single voice rose from the darkness. As the lights slowly came up, the singer emerged standing on the balcony wearing only her makeup and an open, sky-blue caftan scattered with pink feathers. Like pure light through crystal, her song beamed with an ethereal beauty, rising in force as she chorused over and again, “In Heaven everything is fine.” One at a time, four figures (listed as archangels) emerged from the wings: David Bowie, Leonard Cohen, Prince, and George Michael. All of them had just died. A tribute to be sure, this message did not belong to them, but to all those grieving these musical heroes: the joyous outsiders, space oddities, and beautiful losers, those who bend this way and that, with no right angles or gravity to hold them down. Though it was only four actors playing these legendary song-makers, this song of mourning softened the tragedy of their deaths with the beauty of the performance. There’s a certain silliness in impersonators, but these stand-ins underlined the enormity of what we’ve lost. All we’re ever going to have of them now are copies, recordings playing over speakers, covered here and there with our own voices singing along as we always have. The singers have died; we sing on.

The singer like a broken bird in clown makeup, she was just as much a shaman, a priestess, a witch. Alighiero Boetti once said an artist is both a shaman and a showman. The singer here was the musician Glasser, and her collaborator and the author of the performance was the Estonian artist

Kris Lemsalu, who is a shaman and a show-woman indeed. An authentic vision made with the motley theater of a harlequin and the visceral ritual of a tribal sorceress. There was humor, for sure, but more truly a laugh squeezed with bravery from vulnerability, broken but jubilant, mournful without forgetting its heart in solemnity. Clearly a performance, but the line between action and object blurs for Kris Lemsalu. Even when they are things, they fill with bodies. And just as easily bodies break down into things.

Elaborate sculptures begin with ceramic and porcelain emerging as creatures that swallow all other materials, from pigskin to seashells to xylophones to the artist herself, at last becoming performances that just as easily shatter into sculptures. Her performances range from demanding endurance pieces to haunting musical collaborations, including the one with Glasser organized by the David Roberts Art Foundation and the latest with Kyp Malone of TV on the Radio, which premiered in 2017 at Performa, New York. These creatures and accumulations, chimeras with hard shines and tangles of bones and junk, both alluring and gross, transformative and decadent accumulate into pagan ossuaries and hypermodern memorials, stand-ins for what's lost and gained through death and renewal.

A dozen feet poke from under a green and yellow blanket into white bowls surrounded by tossed roses and pennies. Follow the folds of the blankets and two giant lips poke out, cast remnants of more ephemeral balloons, oversize puckers in a smear of colors dusted white. A beggar with her baby, an absurdist Pietà, perhaps a shrine—are the pennies tips or charity? The roses accolades? The only guide is the title like a prayer—*Mysteriously conceived and deeply felt*—and a year, 2017. The lips and the feet shimmer with the vitreous glaze of porcelain.

Porcelain, a delicate and enduring material. This glassy white ceramic makes American toilets gleam with sanitary cleanliness and Chinese dishware look exquisite. An incredible heat burns kaolin clay, feldspar, and sundry other materials into this impermeable pottery, capable of lasting

centuries or smashed in seconds with a single well-placed blow. The most common porcelain is mixed with bones—or more precisely the ash of them. Bones, the architecture of vertebrates and a stand-in for the creature itself. A shapely phosphate of calcium, colored by its content, stained by the passing of our flesh and the kiss of earth. Once a creature, now a thing. And in Kris Lemsalu's, toothy jaw bones circle into waists and pussies, a monkey skull from a voodoo market stands in for and summons a faraway friend. She adds pants and parachutes, boats and balloons, clothing both loose and infused with porcelain, all becoming creatures out of things. And porcelain marks purely this fusion: bone ash cooks with clay into ceramic binding the organic and the inorganic, the synthetic and the natural into art. Lemsalu's practice privileges both and together equally, and does not distinguish between their powers.

In her hands, fine porcelain erupts into tangled nests, coils of octopus arms snarl around sea birds, pearls and jewels, guardian animals and body parts. The material isn't the hard, cold, clean of dishes but the raw magma that makes a universe, like stem cells that can be made to mimic any living tissue, erupt into any form of life, the pure manna of creation. With colors that reflect a hard shine in their wet splatter, hers is a porcelain that's far from the pure, perfect delicacy of teacups but the gooey visceral mess of life, as if we all bled and sneezed and shat colored glass from broken and bulbous bodies. The difference between things and bodies disappears here, as they can in a bed nest made of clothes infused with porcelain and topped with a mop of dreadlocks acquired in trade by the artist. Elsewhere, surrounded by towering cartons of eggs around a waterbed in the middle of some art fair, beneath the heavy polychrome of a giant porcelain tortoise shell, the hair and appendages of a living body—the artist—poke out. There is something troubling about her stillness, her ritual, albeit mostly a hidden one, of endurance. In the middle of the thrum and cacophony of industry trading, of flashy luxury goods mixed with authentic heart songs all for a price, who wouldn't want to turtle? (Interviewers always asked Lemsalu: "How can you stand it in there?" I'm always waiting for her to reply, "How can you stand it out there?"). In the center of it all, but hidden. A tender fleshy body pinned by its hard creation. A kind of costume, a

protective amulet, a weird meditation that's surely a hideout but in the most public milieu of wandering buyers and sellers, scenesters and tourists.

Maybe all costumes are like this. Lemsalu wears many. The bulbous folds of a body like a Venus of Willendorf, a celebration of curvy female fecundity made in a second skin for a body birthing Venus like a giant balloon, filling with air and growing into a huge, bulbous egg. Loose, garish fabrics and translucent, skin-tight bodysuits. The dangling teats of a she-wolf, wigs and furs, inflated latex gloves and duct tape like bandages, the occasional branch, rippling with green leaves. And though there's a laugh in Lemsalu's throat, there's raw female power behind it all, and when looking at some of her costumes it's hard not to think of Valie Export, pussy bared and gun cocked. A feminine force not to be fucked with. Valerie Solanas flicking a razor between her fingers. Kathleen Hanna roaring through "Rebel Girl": *In her hips, there's revolutions.*

And if Kris Lemsalu is some punk pagan trickster feminist sci-fi shaman, what spells might she be casting? Under the tortoise shell, it's hard to not think too obviously of protection, soft tissue finding an impenetrable form. So many appear as spells for travelers, nomads forced to wander for love, pilgrims moving between life and death, those lost at sea, all the spacemen who let go of gravity ("And I think my spaceship knows which way to go / Tell my wife I love her very much she knows"). With madness, color, and humor, hers are spells to collapse time and space, life and death. When she says she feels like a lone sailor setting smoke signals to find friends, the boat is one she stole from Chiron, the underworld ferryman, blowing smoke to keep others from getting lost over the Styx or falling, forgetting and forgotten, into the Lethe. As with any good shaman, if her spells work at all, cast as they are in song and sculpture and action, they're not to control the spirits or manipulate your soul, or force love or find fortune, but simply, beautifully, powerfully, she casts her spells to set you free.

Kris Lemsalu (1985) is an artist based in Berlin and Tallinn. She studied at the Estonian Academy of Arts in Tallinn, The Danmarks Designskole in

Copenhagen, and the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Lemsalu's recent and upcoming exhibitions include solo shows at Secession, Vienna (November 2018); Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London (November 2018); *There and Back Again*, group show curated by Kati Kivinen and Saara Hackli at Kiasma, Helsinki (2018); *The Wild Ones* at Koppe Astner, Glasgow (2017–2018); *Steps to Aeration*, group show curated by Sarah McCrory at Tanya Leighton, Berlin; CONDO London, together with Josh Faught, Koppe Astner hosted by Sadie Coles (2017).

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Originally published on [Mousse 64](#).