



HDK-VALAND – ACADEMY OF ART AND DESIGN

# **Desanctifying the ancient Norse runes with modern art**

Author:	Martin Agge Augustsson
Title:	Desanctifying the ancient Norse runes with modern art
Programme:	BFA in Metal Art, 180 credits
Course:	SBMGEX 22,5 hp
Level:	First Cycle
Term & Year:	VT23
Tutor:	Marcelo Ferreira
Examiner:	Heiner Zimmermann

**Abstract:**

This bachelor thesis delves into the process of bringing the ancient Norse runes into a modern art context and using them as an integral component in the making of a series of metal art objects. This was done as part of a re-appropriation of the runes and to make them more inclusive and interesting to people who have never been interested in them before.

By research, sketches and and practical tests, this thesis shows the growth and continued process of the project. It details the incorporation of kitsch and graffiti art into the project, explains why metal is so heavily featured in it and teases at what might be created in the future.

**Key words:**

Art, metal art, modern art, Runes, Norse, Viking, kitsch, graffiti art

## Table of contents

1. Background .....	4
2. Purpose .....	8
3. Goal/Objective.....	8
4. Question Formulation.....	8
5. Approach .....	9
6. Result of process .....	9
7. Discussion and reflection .....	26
9. Reference list.....	29
10. Image index .....	30

## 1. Background

I'd like to start by clarifying that the title to this thesis has nothing to do with the Christian definition of the word 'desanctify', but rather that of the more general use of the word in English. That is, to mean that something is to be stripped of its sanctified status even if it is not sanctified in a religious sense, more specifically that people can hold some things as sacred and frozen in time when the things should be allowed to change and grow with the times.

ƷŃƿƿŕ<

Those are the first letters of the runic alphabet and gives it its name, the futhark. More specifically, they are the start of the elder futhark which was used during the time right before the early Viking age, which saw a reform of the futhark and a reduction of letters from 24 to 16. Lars Magnar Enoksen, a Swedish runologist and author, says in his book "Runor" that this is believed to have been driven by Nordic traders who wanted to make things easier for the runecarvers by making the spelling simpler and use fewer runes due to several more sounds tied to each individual rune (Enoksen, 1998). Nowadays, most of the runes we encounter in museums or nature here in Scandinavia tends to be adorning stones and metalwork, which also means that there is considerable effort put into making them. Since the effort also most probably made it very expensive for the person employing the runecarver for the job, the messages found on stone monuments tends to be memorial in their nature.



1: U744

2: Rökstenen (the Rök runestone)

These are two examples of Swedish runestones, of which, the Rök runestone is the one more known internationally. As is evident, they have very different layout and are made roughly 200 years apart, with Rökstenen being made sometime during the first half of the 800's and U744 between 1050 and 1080.



3: Codex Runicus

The longest runic text we have from before the 1800's is the Codex Runicus, which is a medieval law book from around 1300 written in Denmark. It is most probably a nostalgic

throw-back to previous times as parts of it is written in Roman letters, but it provides a valuable insight into how the runes could have evolved if they were kept in use. They automatically get a softer look as they are written with a quill pen rather than carved into a hard material and that is an aspect that I will use in my work and continue to develop for a more modern look to the runes.



#### *4: Runic message stick from Bergen*

This stick is part of a large number of archaeological finds in Bergen, Norway. Finding preserved wood is very rare and this proves the theory that runes were invented to be carved into wood rather than stone as rounded shapes aren't particularly hard to make in stone as opposed to wood. This particular specimen is dated to after 1248 and has the inscription "Gyda tells you to go home", which has been interpreted as a message from a woman to her husband who has stayed a bit too long at the pub. This kind of mundane everyday interaction is something I would like to incorporate in my work as it shows the humanity of people at the time and that they were just the same as we are now, in both serious and joking moods. Although they are dated to the middle ages, the people who carved the runes into the sticks obviously still used them in day-to-day life in much the same way as in previous centuries and gives us some insight into how they were used and why they have the sharp and angular shapes they have. In fact, there is evidence that the runes were kept in use a few hundred years after the end of the Viking era (commonly set to 1066 and the battle of Stamford Bridge) as the commoner's writing system while the Latin alphabet became the new domain of the learned elite.

I've been interested in runes and the Viking era for a very long time and my fascination has only grown stronger in recent years. I'm especially interested in the cultural aspects of the

period, the similarities and differences between the culture in Scandinavia today and the culture in those days. This has led me to work with runes several times through the years of my metal art education here in Dals Långed, combining my interest in them with my love of working with metal. The artworks I have made have varied wildly, both in quality, style and inspirational source, but I would like to believe that I have made progress as an artist with each piece.

I look like what most people imagine a classic Viking would look like. This is partially due to my DNA, but also due to me leaning into the metalhead subculture with a lot of tattoos (some with Viking motifs and runes, admittedly), long hair and long braided beard. This in combination with me not being the smallest guy gives me a rather masculine appearance, which leads to people assuming things about me as a person and what I might be creating. In turn, I find it very amusing to mess with people's expectations and make things that are very different from what would be expected from me.

I have been working with runes on and off for the last few years but started to work with them in earnest last semester. By doing so, I laid the groundwork for this final project of my education. I had a fictive scenario where we in Scandinavia never stopped using runes as our primary writing system, but at the same time used the Roman letters as a secondary writing system to communicate with the rest of the world, much like countries who today use Cyrillic letters as their main writing system. While this was useful as a starting point, I had to scale down my ambitions a bit for my exam work due to time constraints and basically drop the narrative aspect of it for a more pragmatic way of working.

It is my firm belief that runes are for everyone, that no one group can claim ownership of them, even though several hatemongering groups have attempted to do so throughout the last century. The runes are simply an alphabet and a way to communicate, after all. This project is part of my personal efforts to rehabilitate the image of the runes here in Scandinavia and hopefully give a different view of them to people from outside the region than the pop culture one from media.

I feel that if I manage to make objects that truly are bringing runes into a modern art context I can contribute to the rehabilitation and normalization of them and won't have to explain my continued use of runes in my future artistic practice.

## 2. Purpose

My wish to change people's perception of runes and the automatic connection to the Viking age is, like I mentioned previously, connected to how I myself is perceived in a social and creative context. I want to play around with the preconceived notions that everyone has by making things that wouldn't fit into the narrative of Vikings in popular culture the world over.

I want to change people's perspective of runes in the modern-day setting by using them on more everyday items than they are usually associated with. I don't want to make big, epic and warlike objects adorned with runes, that would defeat the entire purpose of attempting to change the image of the runes. I am planning to use runes as part of my creations in the future as well and I would like to do so without having to justify my use of them and constantly having to explain that I am not connected to hate-groups or perpetuating any kind of hate-speech with my work.

There is no point in being openly confrontative towards the right-wing elements, it hasn't made them go away or stop using the symbols already appropriated in the past. I will, however, do my best to oppose them in a subtle way by making interesting artworks that is unpalatable to groups who see the runes as sacred and unchanging but interesting to people who might not otherwise have been interested in them as a step on the way to normalizing the use of runes in modern art.

## 3. Goal/Objective

My goal is to create a series of art pieces that manage to convey my message of runes being for everyone and that gives at least a few people a new way of seeing runes that is less tainted by the hate groups that have appropriated them in the past.

## 4. Question Formulation

How can I change the perception of runes inside and outside of Scandinavia through my work?

How can using metal strengthen the expression of my objects without undermining the point behind?



What kinds of object can be made of metal and adorned with runes without them being thought of as “cool” and “manly” or feel forced, but still work well?

## 5. Approach

I will do some more research on the subject of runes in different contexts and also consult with an expert resource of mine (Dr. Maja Bäckvall, librarian at Uppsala University Campus Gotland) roughly once a month through video calls to get everything right. There is a fine line between being mildly educational and heavy-handedly browbeating people with my notion of rehabilitating the image of runes in today’s society and I intend to stay on the right side of it. Part of the research will be to find out what kind of objects will work with the premise while adorned with runes, I do intend to try to make a difference (however small) after all. To further my understanding of the theoretical side, I will be looking into Roland Barthes semiotic theory to gain insight into the usage of signs and the psychology of communicating with signs and signifiers. This will probably be put on hold until after my exams, so I have time to delve into it properly.

One of the immediate limitations I have decided on is not to make objects that are reminiscent of the things normally associated with being adorned with runes, to take a step away from the aforementioned line and falling into the traps of the Scandinavian national romantics of the 1800s.

I will continue to work mostly in metal, but there will definitely be mixed media objects among my creations. How the runes themselves are applied will be determined by what kind of object they are applied to, but I will probably tend towards more industrial application methods (water jet cutting, industrial acid etching etc.) which will be contracted out to professionals with access to such methods. Using paint is also something that I will explore, applying runes with overlays and spray cans, for instance, is an idea I have slowly warmed up to.

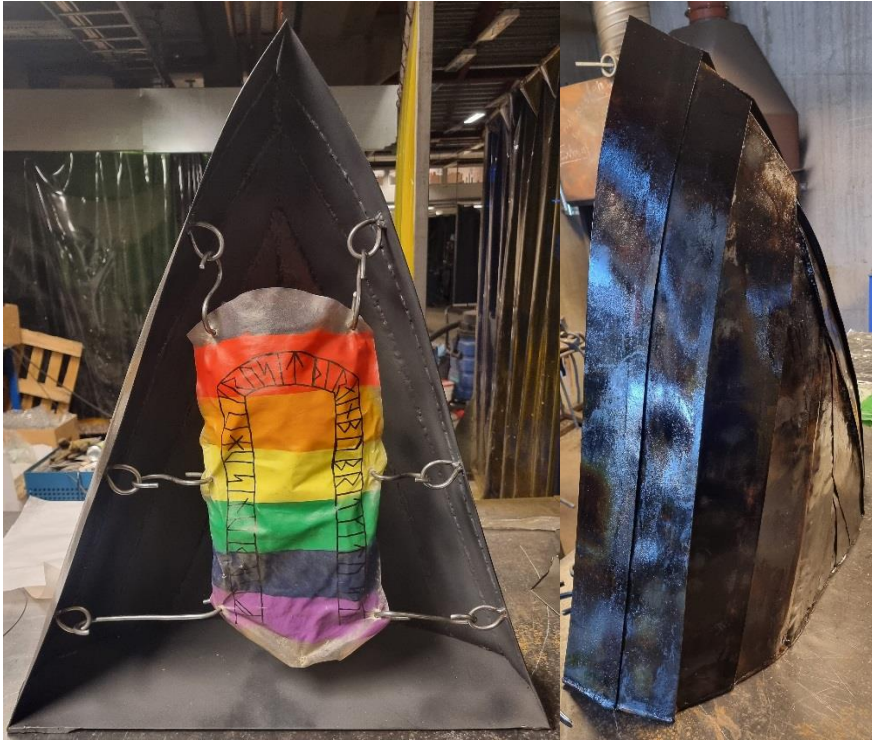
## 6. Result of process

This project has evolved quite a bit since I embarked on the journey to bring the Scandinavian runes into a modern art context. Starting out wanting to find a way to educate people who otherwise would only be exposed to runes through popular media (TV-series, movies, games)

as a means to distance myself from the image of runes and Vikings in general as an embodiment of the ideal of many right wing groups in Scandinavia, as I have a quite Viking-like appearance and often gets lumped in with them because of their delusions. This has since changed, mostly because I have realized that it is an impossible task to succeed with without heavy-handed and extensive explanations, which will most probably be seen as talking down to people. I still want to create works of art that reappropriates the runes from extremist groups, but with more focus on the modern art aspect rather than the educational since I am not an educator, but a material-based artist. I also want to impart some of my interest in and passion for the period where the runes were used, basically make the objects show some love for the runes and bring them into a modern art context for real, which I have never seen done before. This in and of itself will be a part of the fight to help bring the runes back into use that's not automatically judged at a glance as right-wing leaning.

I have found several ways to achieve this, one is taking elements from kitsch and using them together with runes on different objects. Partly due to the high probability of making something that is unpalatable for the people who like to think about the entire Viking culture as "manly, warrior-like", but also to be true to the period and use lots of colours, humoristic meanings and silly banality because that is exactly what people back then did and would do if they were alive today. I do believe that combining kitsch and runes in a single object will make it something entirely new, giving it a feeling of modernity and bringing it into a more modern context simply by using that unexpected combo.

Another way is to look at graffiti art and the way they use letters to make large art pieces that almost don't resemble letters anymore. Taking runes and using them as a backdrop or a texture, entirely covering objects with them, not necessarily with any kind of meaning to the runes, just having them as a repeating pattern. This will also be a quite different way to bring the aesthetics of the runes into a new art context that I would like to explore with this project. Using entirely free-standing 3D runes alone or in conjunction with 'background runes' as a means to get closer to a kind of typographical art will also be explored.



5&6: *“Psychopomp”*

The first runic work of art I have finished in this exam project is something of a one-off, a fact I blame the way my own mind works for. Sometimes I get an idea in my head that I just have to make, and it gets in the way for any other ideas that might be more useful. I also needed to just start making something relevant for the exam project as I was just panicking about time slipping away without me getting anything practical done, which calmed me down considerably. The idea was to make a house-altar or spirit house along the lines of the scenario I set up for myself in my previous course, but it evolved early on to include some memorial aspects. After working through a few sketches, I settled on the front part of a boat as the main shape, with rings along the insides to attach a painted piece of parchment/drumskin as the center piece. Boats are very much a part of the Viking identity, so it felt appropriate to have in there, as well as using a natural material that can be organically manipulated as I did with the skin. Since the skin is fairly translucent, I decided to paint the back of it in rainbow colours as they would show through the skin and write runes with ink along the front for better clarity.

About my usage of the rainbow; it is an integral part of ancient Norse mythology, Bifrost being the rainbow bridge that connects the home of humanity, Midgard, with the home of the gods, Asgard. Referring to someone as having crossed the rainbow bridge is a way of saying that they have died. Another inspiration was a Facebook post a friend of mine posted early on

in my sketch process, they were remembering a friend of theirs who had been murdered for cross-dressing and being different in the wrong neighbourhood. I didn't know the person myself, but I felt inspired to make it more into a memorial shrine dedicated to the fact that way too many people who just try to be themselves get targeted and murdered by people who can't accept other people being different from them.

I consider myself an LGBTQ ally, but I also acknowledge that it might be problematic that I use something quite close to the Pride flag in my work without being part of the LGBTQ community. I do not have any intentions of making this art piece into a series, which means that it has been a bit of a learning project for me to gain insight into what I should and shouldn't do in this project. Since it doesn't really utilize more modern techniques or have modern artistic expressions it also doesn't help achieve what I want this exam project to achieve; using runes as an integrated part of series of art pieces in a modern art context.

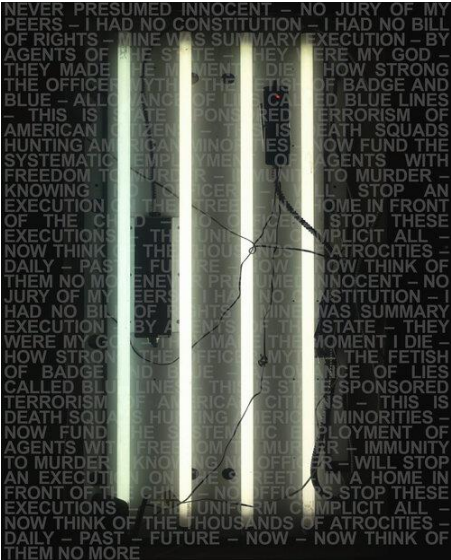
Moving forward, I started researching graffiti art and using text as a texture. Since the vast majority can't read runes (myself included, not fluently at least), it was a natural step to take and move away from the runes actually having a meaning rather than using them as an easily identifiable decorative element. I did find more than a few artists who worked with text as a background or as texture, some in a way quite close to what I was planning on working and some quite different. Here are some examples of the artists I found and their work I find inspirational;



7: Amber Goldhammer – “I like to draw happy faces”

Amber Goldhammer is a graffiti artist working out of Los Angeles whose work I find quite inspirational, especially her works with a repetitive style as that fits well in with a direction I

want to take with my work. She uses colours very much to her advantage and that is also something that I will be using myself as well, although from the perspective of a metal artist.



8: Adam Daley Wilson – “I Have No Constitution Left For Executions On My Street (State Sponsored Terrorism Colored White And Blue)”

Adam Daley Wilson is a conceptual- and text-based artist working out of Portland. His work is inspirational in a different way for me; although I find it very interesting and powerful, it represents a path which I have chosen not to take. The texts are full of meaning and the pictures incorporated are a representative extension of them, sometimes called activist art. This is precisely what I don’t believe would work for the runes, partially since most of what we have left is full of meaning and partially because there is no burning discourse about minorities who use runes as their main writing system and no need for anyone to champion the oppressed voices of anyone using runes today.



9: Mel Bochner - “19”

10: Mel Bochner- “38”

Mel Bochner is a conceptual artist working out of New York with a quite prolific career behind him, the two examples being made in the 90’s. These specific ones also contain

elements of what I would like to use in future objects, repetition and overlapping until the text is basically just a part of the background and almost illegible.

Armed with fresh ideas, I am going to use the inspiration I have found in the aforementioned sources and others to introduce a more modern artistic approach to the runes, combining metal with other materials and paint to create something hopefully no one else has done before.



*11: Test painting with stencil*



*12: Templates and cutouts*

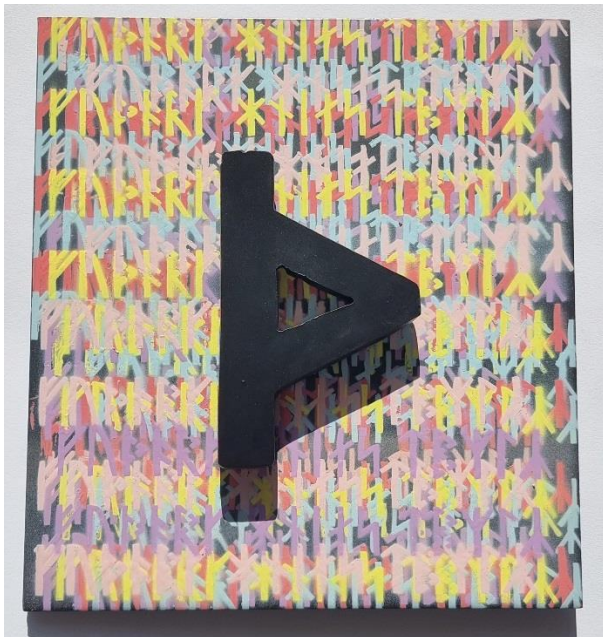
I started with printing out runes on transparent plastic sheets and cut them out with a scalpel to be able to use them as stencils for spray paint. While this worked well, I wanted something extra to make the pieces stand out more. The solution was to literally add a 3D-element to them, so I made templates of the entire younger futhark for use in our automatic plasma cutter and proceeded to cut out a lot of them in both 6mm and 10mm steel sheet.



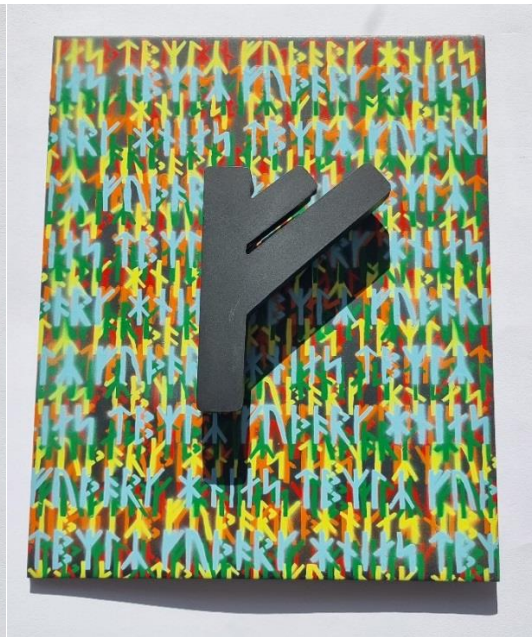
*13: Work in progress “Fehu” and “Thurs”*



14: Painting in progress, "Fehu"



15: "Thurs"



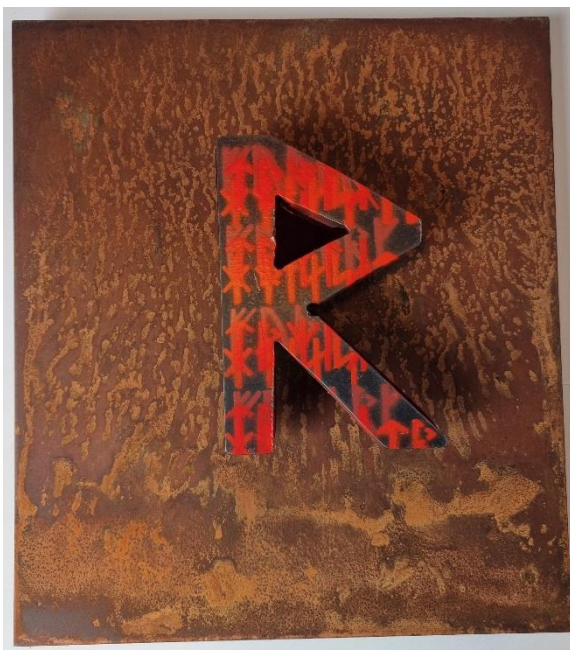
16: "Fehu"

My next two objects were made side-by-side with some variations to them, rather inspired by my research. In both cases, they are wall-hung pieces consisting of a 6mm steel sheet with runes spray-painted on them and a plain patinated metal rune offset from their surface. The reason that I went with that is the simple and graphical nature of the runes that are repeated in



different colours until they become read as a textured part of the background instead of as actual text. To further this, I am using the futhark repeated over and over again to avoid any kind of meaning to be read into the runes. It basically just says “ABCDEF…” repeatedly. The addition of a contrasting three-dimensional object that is offset from the surface was necessary to highlight the actual material that I am working with and to give the objects more depth.

I wanted to go simple and without a deeper meaning to this, which breaks away from what runes are usually associated with (memorials and suchlike) and bring a more modern feel to the work. They are also in a smaller scale than the memorial shrine sculpture, this time more suited to be hung on a wall in someone’s living room, just to make them more mundane and relatable to more people that might not otherwise look twice at an art piece with runes as the central theme. This is also one of the things I have learned by studying briefly, which I fell into as a means to contrast what runes are usually associated with in today’s society and media. The kitsch aspect is an interesting one, as it can be a way to take away the “power” of the runes and render them unpalatable for right-wing groups and their ilk, since I want to help reclaim the runes from the perception (at least in Scandinavia) that they are associated with hate-groups and therefore generally a bit ‘dirty’ to use if not used in a situation where their dissociation is explicitly stated. I have chosen to use these two objects as the starting point of a series with a similar theme to the pieces so I can explore it further within my time limit.

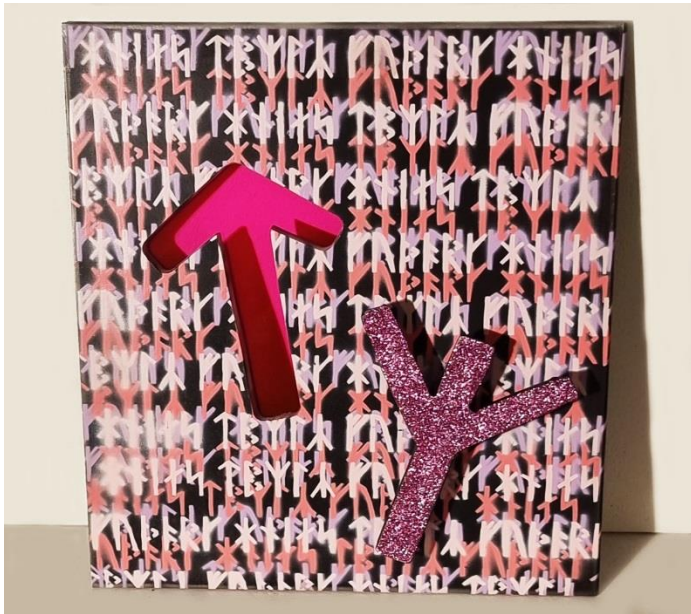


17: "Raidho"



18: "Bjarka"

These two came next, shaking things up a bit with showcasing the patination of metal in mind. “Raidho” has a rusted cor-ten backing and “Bjarka” has a blue patinated back plate of regular steel. They also have runes offset on the front, but they feature painted runes and a backing of coloured acrylic plastic for extra effect.



19: “Algir”

Last but not least among the square pieces of the series is “Algir”, featuring both a cut out rune with acrylic accent and an offset rune adorned with glitter. I felt that a piece that featured both runes and the colour pink in heavy measures was a fitting addition to the project.



20: Work in progress “Ehwaz”/”Odal”



21: “Hagal”

Moving into a new phase of the ongoing series, I started playing around with the shape of the outline of the steel sheets and came up with the next three objects. They do not feature offset runes on top, but rather being comprised of runes cut out of the sheet itself in one piece.



22: "Ehwaz"









This piece was used as an overlay on top of the last piece in this phase (see pic 20 above) and will be displayed upside down compared to how it was used. This is because of a slight miscalculation on my part, I managed to weld on the keyhole-shaped fittings for hanging it upside down and did not notice until after the painting was done. Luckily, this can easily be fixed by using hooks I've made to hang it instead of screws. The first set of hooks (which I made for all of the flat hanging pieces) were converted into display hangings for our examination exhibition, so new ones will have to be made eventually.



23: "Odal"

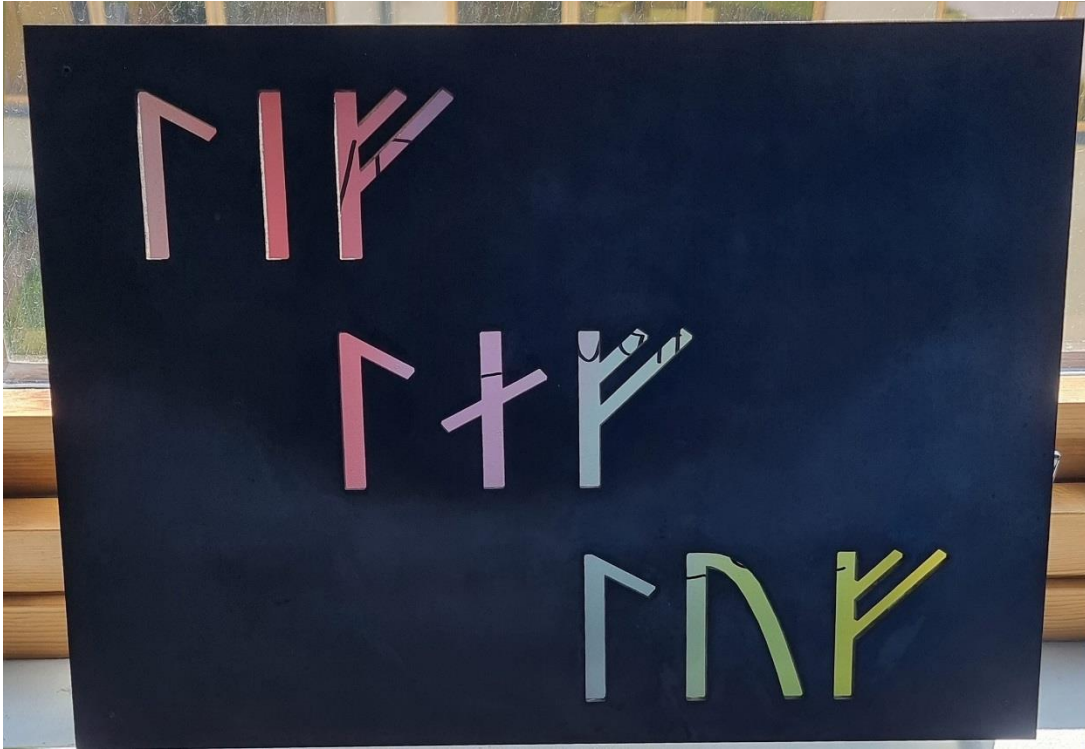
This, along with "Ehwaz" are the two pieces most inspired by graffiti. It is a sizable 6mm steel sheet with an irregularly cut outline and a lot of layers of painted runes.

The way I usually work when I make a series of artworks and have them all planned out is side by side in batches, this makes gauging how many hours I work on each piece pretty challenging. I would say that the three latest mentioned pieces took the least time to make, roughly 15-16 hours in total, of which they were in the painting stage a full 8. Batch making decreases the actual time I have to spend on each piece since I can just jump to the next in line with the same technique that I am using, but it also requires more planning beforehand. I would say that the artworks in this series take on average around 20 hours from sketch to finished piece. This does not, however, include the making of tools necessary to make parts of them, for instance the templates for the automatic plasma cutter (see pic 12) took me easily an extra 8 hours to make. After using the templates, I have to clean the slag from the newly cut runes and that added a few hours after the latest batch (which consisted of 24 runes). The stencils that can be seen in pics 14 and 20 are equally time-consuming, seeing as I print them out on clear plastic sheets in A3 format and then cut them out with a scalpel. This takes on average three hours per A3 sheet that is filled with runes.

<p><b>Titel: Vikingar och erövringar</b></p> <p>Drakarna på just denna målning är en avbild av en plåt i sten från Birka, Stockholm vilket var en av vikingatidens största handelsplatser. Skeppet är en detalj från Stora Hammars Bildsten, Gotland.</p> 	<p><b>Orginalet: Stora Hammars Bildsten, Gotland</b></p> <p>Vikingarna upptäckte under två sekler nästan alla bebodda öar mellan skandinavien och Labrador. De uppträdde såväl som handelsmän, nybyggare och krigare. Speciellt i England fick de snabbt fäste och människor fruktade vikingaskäppen med deras hotfulla drakhuvuden.</p> 	<p><b>Titel: Midgårdsormen</b></p> <p>Midgårdsormen sades ligga ruvandes i havsdjupen tills den vid rangnarök (jordens undergång) väller upp och spyr ut sitt gift.</p> 	<p><b>Orginalet: Midgårdsormen</b></p> <p>Midgårdsormen, en av gudarnas värsta fiender, avbildad på ett bronsspänne från 600-talet. Funnet i Runsten, Öland.</p> 
<p><b>Titel: Oden till Häst</b></p> <p>Rekonstruktion av en hjälmplåt från 600 e kr. föreställande Oden beväpnad med spjötet Gungner samt korparna Hugin och Munin</p> 	<p><b>Orginalet: Gravfynd från Vendel, Uppland, Sverige</b></p> <p>Del av hjälm, tunn, pressad bronsplåt från vendeltiden, nordens guldålder. Funnen i Vendel.</p> 	<p><b>Titel: Runsten, Fotevikens Museum, Höllviken</b></p> 	<p><b>Orginalet: Runsten, Fotevikens Museum, Höllviken</b></p> <p>Texten på stenen lyder: "Göran, Stellan och Björn satte sten där många drängar dog. Pugna Forensis lever åter. Erik den Röde ristade". (Ny produktion)</p> 

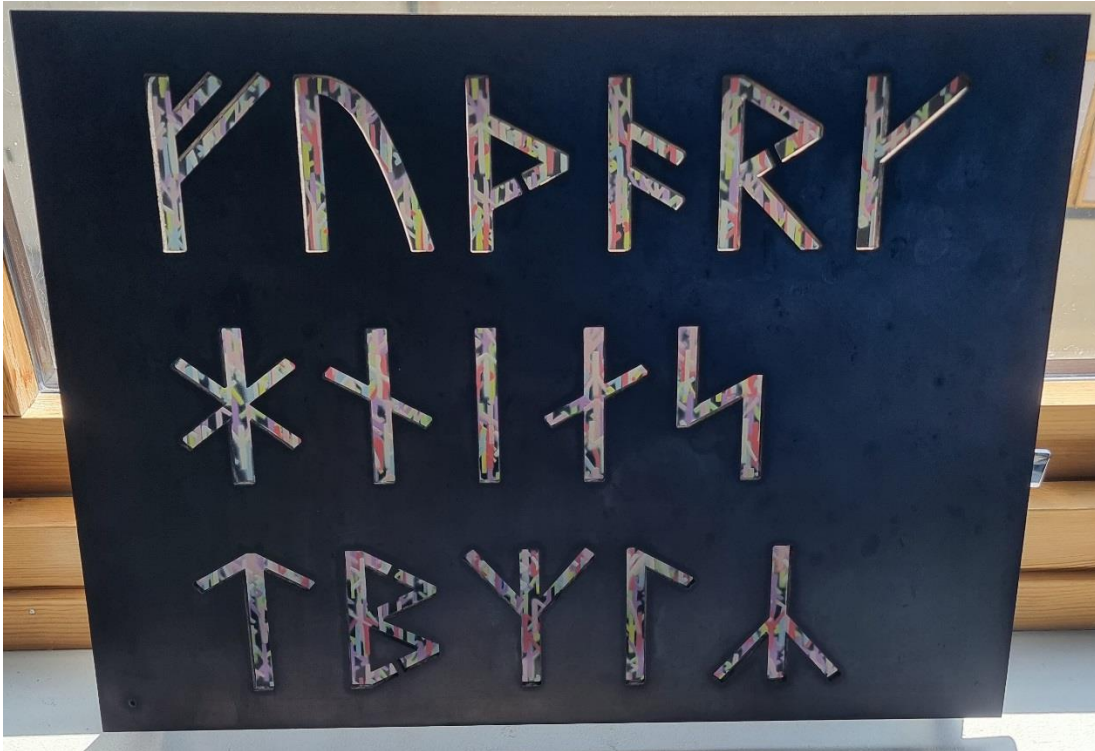
24 & 25: Georges Becherel, montage of several works of art and their inspirations

I found an artist who is working with runes through a link provided by my expert resource Maja Bäckvall, his name is Georges Becherel and works more directly with inspiration from the runestones and other artworks contemporary to them. He is reinterpreting the ancient finds with the eyes of a modern painter to reinvigorate interest in the Nordic cultural heritage. Though I do agree with his intentions, since mine are similar in spirit but with a different direction, I think that his methods are too close to the source material for what I would like to achieve with my project. While he does mix and match a bit from different sources, it is not really bringing the expressions into a more modern context and creating something new. I am aware that this is not his intention, but rather to show the ancient works of art in a new light to spark interest in the historical period he is inspired by.



26: “Wunjo”

This is one of a pair consisting double steel sheets offset from each other, the outer sheet being water jet cut to allow the viewer a peek onto the inner sheet which is painted. “Wunjo” features a gradient of pastel colours on the back plate with the actual meaning of the runic words written in plain text underneath each word, it is impossible to capture in a photography but works in real life. It is also the only object in the runic series to feature an actual meaning to the runes, “Live, Laugh, Love” in this case. It is a very common wall decoration in a more modern kitsch sense, and it fits very well into this series. I have written the runes in a phonetically correct way, spelling out “Lif, Laf, Luf” but since the runes in the younger Futhark have several sound values it is pronounced the right way.



27: "Ansur"

Following the same principles as most of the other works in the overarching series, "Ansur" features runes painted over and over again on the back plate, but also the same runes in the exact same order on the front plate since it is the entirety of the younger Futhark on display there. This is the second of the two steel plates I ordered water jet cut from a local machine shop since I felt I needed the extra precision to make it work best conceptually.





28: *“Kauna”*

The second to last piece I made for the project is a one-off. I simply couldn't let go of the idea that I wanted to use the hefty 10mm steel sheet I cut out some of my runes from and had to make something out of it. Since it was way too heavy to use in a wall mounted fashion, it is now a floor decoration with large runes painted on in between the even larger cut-outs of runes.



29: "Gebo"

The final piece of the project is also standing alone, but only because of time constraints. It stands half a meter high and is quite the eye-catcher with its crown of rubber ducks and glittery front. This will have some siblings in the near future, especially since a lot of people have said that it is their favourite of the entire rune series.

## 7. Discussion and reflection

On the subject of lifting the runes out of their context and inserting them into a more modern art context, I found this quote while reading up on kitsch: "In other words, it is wrong, or at best very risky, to transfer a work of art from its own particular and characteristic language into another which is not suited to it." (Dorfles, 1969, p. 87). The statement that it is wrong to transfer a work of art to an unsuited environment is something I don't agree with, although he is right in saying that it is very risky as it would be exceedingly easy to do one mistake and fail with the entire endeavor. This quote stuck with me through my reading of its anthology, mostly since it is exactly the thing I am attempting to do with the expression of the runes and is a good reminder of the possible pitfalls along the way.

“At the heart of discussions about kitsch lies a concern about authenticity and value, as kitsch is often understood to stand opposed to “real art,” opposed to “true” aesthetic experience, offering instead only enervated and inauthentic approximations, merely syrupy, sugary surrogates for the more robust fare of “real” art.” (Kjellman-Chapin, 2013, p. xi). Monika Kjellman-Chapin was in the workshop as a visiting artist for a period during the beginning of my exam work and really helped me realize that kitsch was a powerful tool to use in my project to achieve the effect I wanted with my objects. As kitsch is generally considered bad taste, it felt perfect to use elements from it as part of the expression of my objects to deter people who see runes as something that should remain frozen in time instead of being brought into the modern era and given a place among art with modern contexts and expressions.

I am among those who feel that the runes are precious to me and treasure them for their cultural heritage value, but I am also of the opinion that they simply are an alphabet and shouldn't be considered sacred. The same people who have appropriated and co-opted them are usually of the opinion that they are not merely sacred, but sacrosanct and should not be used as anything other than a reminder of the national romantic Viking narrative (which gave a quite false picture of the Vikings themselves) and in the same kind of context, i.e. highly conservative. That made me want to create modern art that they would never approve of even more, so I am attempting to smash their grasp of the runes bit by bit with “bad taste”-art that appeals to people who wouldn't be drawn to art featuring runes in the more traditional sense.

The place I would like to see the objects I make in this series placed is in an ordinary persons home, not necessarily someone who regularly collects art or is extra interested in history and runes, but someone who might just appreciate the art for its decorative aspect. This is where I believe the kitsch aspect comes in and is important, as it is a kind of art that is easily understood and digestible without necessarily delving after deeper meanings in the individual art pieces. I mean, of course I will have a meaning with my art objects, but I also want to make them interesting to people who usually don't care about finding a deeper meaning. As I've stated before, my ulterior motive is to normalize the use of runes in a broader social context so that they lose some of their appeal to hate-groups. I believe I can do that by showing that runes can be used in a different way than is usually thought of as traditional and predominant in media today, without being preachy and arrogantly try to educate people about it. I have had to take a long hard look at what I've considered a good plan for this, and I've realized that my initial thoughts and ideas have been situated on way too high horses. Taking a humbler approach has been quite necessary since I myself really dislike having

someone try to jam their worldview down my throat and would only become contrarian if I found myself on the other end of such an arrogant lecturing. It has also been a humbling experience from my at times very idealistic point of view to take the project down a few notches from having the ambition to try and fight the right-wing groups for ownership of the runes more directly to what is actually reasonable for one person within my allotted period of time during the exam semester. I feel that I have a better perspective on things for the sake of this reflection, and that it is much better to chip away at the image of the runes as the dominion of extremist groups bit by bit in the spirit of the Latin words of wisdom by Giordano Bruno paraphrasing Ovid: “Gutta cavat lapidem non vi, sed saepe cadendo” – “The droplet makes a hole in the stone not by force, but by falling often” (Wistrand, 1999).

The worst part of tackling such a vast concept as bringing the runes into a modern art context in the short period of my exam work is that I keep having to make choices regarding how to move forward and what paths to pause and come back to later, not always an easy matter and I keep having to remind myself of the way forward so I don’t get stuck on a specific part that isn’t relevant for the exam work. Sometimes I do get stuck on parts of the project for way too long time anyway, the piece I call “Psychopomp” is a clear example of that. I simply couldn’t let go of the idea and had to make it from start to finish before I realized that it really wasn’t relevant at all to what I wanted this project to be about. It is almost a homage to some of the prominent elements of the Viking era; boats, memorial monuments and runes. While such things have their place, it is not the way forward for bringing the runes into an actual modern art context. All in all, I would say that I have found several good ways forward with my ongoing work and I feel that I can continue working with the subject of runes in modern art for quite a long while and still not exhaust the possibilities and potential of it.

I would like to end by quoting the Hávamál, stanza 77 (The Poetic Edda, n.d.) in its original ancient Norse;

“Deyr fé,  
deyja frændr,  
deyr sjalfr it sama,  
ek veit einn,  
at aldri deyr:  
dómr um dauðan hvern.”

Translation: Animals die, family dies, you yourself shall also die, but I know one thing, that never dies, judgment over a dead man.

This refers to the fact that the legacy one has after death is the memory of their deeds and I would like to be remembered as someone who has made a difference for how the runes are perceived in today's society.

## 8. Conclusion and results

In conclusion; I have learned a lot and taken a bold step out of my comfort zone. The rune series isn't really one single family except for being related through runes and metal, I realize that I've made three distinct groups of objects and a couple of one-offs. This isn't a problem for me, more of an opportunity to expand them separately when there is inspiration for it.

I do believe that I have managed to create something entirely new and that I can continue working with this project for a long time. Any way I am turning this entire process over in my head I keep finding new avenues to explore, which is both inspiring and frustrating at the same time since I feel like I've barely scratched the surface of what I can do with it.

Successfully using the text element that runes actually are as an aesthetic element rather than a message bearing one in my work has been one of the results I was striving for. This opens up the way to incorporate runes in more designs and expand upon the distortion of them as part of a further exploration. I might test the limits of how little runic identity is necessary to identify them as runes, make them even more unreadable and symbol-like at a glance, not unlike how the band names of Black Metal bands might be perceived. The kitsch aspect with bright and happy colours is definitely also a way to go forward, who expects large runes painted pink with glitter on them? I'm confident that by doing what I do I am slowly helping the runes back from the cultural appropriation by hate groups with a soft kind of re-appropriation.

## 9. Reference list

Dorfles, G. (Ed.) (1969). *KITSCH An anthology of bad taste*. London: Studio Vista Limited, Blue Star House.

Enoksen, L.M. (1998). *Runor*. Lund: Historiska Media.

Kjellman-Chapin, M. (Ed.) (2013). *Kitsch: History, Theory, Practice*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

*Hávamál, part of the Poetic Edda*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 27, 2023, from <https://asasamfundet.se/havamal-den-hoges-sang/>

Wistrand, M. (1999). *Centum Aurea Dicta Latinum* [Brochure]. Gothenburg: Gothenburg University, department of classical languages/Latin.

## 10. Image index

1: Runestone U744, Uppland.

From <https://www.upplandsmuseet.se/>

2: Rökstenen, Östergötland.

From <https://www.rokstenen.se/historia/>

3: Codex Runicus, Copenhagen University.

From <https://www.e-pages.dk/ku/579/>

4: Runic message stick, Bergen Norway.

From <http://www.christerhamp.se>

5: “Psychopomp” front, artist’s own picture.

6: “Psychopomp” side, artist’s own picture.

7: “I like to draw happy faces”, Amber Goldhammer.

From <https://www.ambergoldhammer.com/>

8: “I Have No Constitution Left For Executions On My Street (State Sponsored Terrorism Colored White And Blue)”, Adam Daley Wilson.

From <https://www.adamwilsonart.com/>

9: "19", Mel Bochner.

From <http://www.melbochner.net/archive/1990s/>

10: "38", Mel Bochner.

From <http://www.melbochner.net/archive/1990s/>

11: Test painting with stencil, artist's own picture.

12: Templates and cutouts, artist's own picture.

13: Work in progress "Fehu" and "Thurs", artist's own picture.

14: Painting in progress "Fehu", artist's own picture.

15: "Thurs", artist's own picture.

16: "Fehu", artist's own picture.

17: "Raidho", artist's own picture.

18: "Bjarka", artist's own picture.

19: "Algir", artist's own picture.

20: Work in progress "Ehwaz"/"Odal", artist's own picture.

21: "Hagal", artist's own picture.

22: "Ehwaz", artist's own picture.

23: "Odal", artist's own picture.

24 & 25: Montage of several artworks, Georges Becherel.

From <https://www.yumpu.com/sv/document/read/19964954/text-bilder-georges-becherel>

26: "Wunjo", artist's own picture.

27: "Ansur", artist's own picture.

28: "Kauna", artist's own picture.

29: "Gebo", artist's own picture.