

GALLERI

NICOLAI WALLNER

Carola Grahn, Frida Orupabo, Man Yau, and Pearla Pigao

Nordic Threads
January 30 – March 14, 2026

Galleri Nicolai Wallner is pleased to present the inaugural edition of Nordic Threads, a series of exhibitions exploring practices across the Nordic art scene over the past decade. These exhibitions will trace the connective tissue between artists working in the Nordic region, attending to the preoccupations, methodologies, and material languages that have crystallized in this geographic and cultural milieu. Rather than condensing this multifaceted landscape into a neat summary, Nordic Threads emphasizes the many shapes and lines of inquiry that begin in the area. The series operates as an ongoing inquiry, each iteration offering a cross-section of contemporary practices.

This first iteration of Nordic Threads brings together works that engage with domestic and utilitarian traditions through material and formal reinterpretation. Drawing on established cultural forms such as the table, the textile, the room divider or the family photo, the artists employ processes of transformation rather than direct appropriation. These works reference histories of use, craft, and socio-political significance while deliberately suspending functionality. In doing so, they activate tradition as a living material, capable of generating new meanings within contemporary artistic practice.

Carola Grahn (b. 1982) recruits the skills of seventeen traditional Sami knife-makers (*duojárat*) in the making of an unflinchingly physical poem taking place at a long table. **Frida Orupabo** (b. 1986), reaching into personal, historic, and contemporary digital archives, reimagines violent histories and more intimate negotiations of agency of the Black female body with wall-based collages. With delicate pressed flowers, stained-glass and illustrated Tengujo paper panels, **Man Yau** (b. 1991) presents an allegory of classical European monarch garden, replacing carefully controlled shrubbery and roses with *pingfeng*, spatial dividers originating in China, exploring ideals of beauty and the exotic. **Pearla Pigao** (b. 1984) employs Norwegian hand weaving techniques as a mode of describing and translating soundscapes, exploring the presence of breath and voice in a single expansive tapestry. What emerges in these four practices is less a unified aesthetic than a shared attentiveness to how materials carry histories and how those histories might be activated, short-circuited, or remade.

Upon entering the exhibition space, the audience is embraced by **Pearla Pigao's** undulating tapestry hung from the tall ceilings in the main gallery space. Its Norwegian wool composition dampens the sound around it, creating a sense of stillness and motion at once. The texture ripples and puckers just so, golden and yellow filaments glinting with the light of the room. The three-dimensional tapestry can be read as a new take on the centuries old practice, harkening back to deeply seated traditions of weaving and textile artistry in Norway used as an artistic, domestic and narrative building tool. However, Pigao takes the abstracting of a visual tradition and turns it on its head. 'Weaving Voices', originally exhibited in Pigao's solo exhibition at Kunstneres Hus in Oslo, takes the human voice as its point of departure.

Being a musician as well as a visual artist, Pigao translates sound into matter, each textile a nearly direct translation of a musical score into a pattern for weaving, created through the innovative manipulation of computational programs. Pigao's works refuse categorization; each one, woven by hand, blurs the lines between expression, digital technology, and craft that is considered "women's work".

For this work, a composition of vocal recordings reflected on the meditative, corporal, and collective experiences that come from the act of singing and breathing. Scientifically speaking, singing in groups elevates human mood and binds a sense of unity. Humming and other forms of low octave of singing commonly used in meditation or religious practices have been proven to stimulate the vagus nerve, bringing the human body into a sense of stability and rootedness. At the same time, the human voice can be used for great violence.

Removed from the sound from which it was born, 'Weaving Voices' leads the viewer to speculate on the musical input. Some of Pigao's works invoke patchy images of a woven basket, some like a topographic map or charting of heat waves on the horizon. Through this synaesthesia, 'Weaving Voices' reveals a new mode to read into time, creating something of a new media - a new language for understanding sound, a physical archive of our sonic world. Pigao provides a kaleidoscopic peephole from which to view a vast landscape of human expression.

To the left of Pigao's work, stands a nearly eight-metre-long table, into which seventeen knives have been rammed, creating a spine along the table's surface. In this work 'Luhkietjijhtje nejpieh (Seventeen Knives)' by **Carola Grahn**, knives by seventeen *duojárat* (Sami craftspeople) each bear a line from the artist, creating a poem within the installation. Actions that might characterise life in Sæpmie echo like footsteps: "chopping wood, boiling meat, making a fire, bantering, yelling, staring at the ceiling".

Sami knives, as a sculptural material, are heavily laden with meaning: they are collectors' items, and each duojará has their own artistry and admirers. Each knife is crafted in the signature style of its maker, reflecting traditions tied to homeplace or ancestry. Motifs and patterns hold within them unique, and sometimes far-reaching, histories.

Grahn makes material the tensions between inner and outer landscapes of contemporary Sæpmie by etching daily, constant, and mundane vignettes onto objects that encapsulate prized and deeply connected ancestral traditions of duojarát. The work is one of many dualities: The knife, both a tool for domestic work and a weapon; the table a place for gathering and for conflict; each line in the poem holding within it a romanticism and a tedium. In this way, 'Luhkietjijhtje nejpieh (Seventeen Knives)' creates an image from which the viewer can catch both shadow and light from the material of their own lives, refracting off that which builds the day-to-day.

Directly facing the entrance hangs a diptych by one of Norway's most highly regarded contemporary artists, **Frida Orupabo**. Originally trained as a sociologist, Orupabo takes historical material as a starting point, working from an awareness of the cumulative documentation of violence that has produced a narrow, reductive image of the Black female body. Through acts of reconstruction, she intervenes in this archive on her own terms, challenging enforced objecthood and reclaiming the possibility of self-authorship. Drawing from domestic family photographs found on eBay, colonial image archives, and contemporary sources such as Tumblr, magazines, and pornography, Orupabo's practice moves fluidly across time and platforms, foregrounding questions of visibility, ownership, and viability on one's own terms within image culture.

Collaging multiple images together, Orupabo swings limbs into uncanny positions, warping scale and proportion so that bodies appear fragmented, spliced, or reassembled. Often hanging on the wall like paper dolls, these figures evoke a kind of Frankenstein-ian construction—at once wounded and newly animated. What might first read as mutilation becomes instead a strategy of resistance: reconstructed bodies possess an agency of their own, embracing the layered, malleable nature of the self. Digital collage, in this context, also unsettles assumptions of authorship.

The gaze is the catalyst in Orupabo's collages, sculptures, and films. She often selects material based on the character of their gaze, seeking ambiguity and confrontation rather than legibility. In 'Women' (2022), two faces stare back from a void, layered behind a scarcely traceable third—an image that insists on opacity and resists capture. As Orupabo has stated, "To look back is in a way to refuse objectification. It's a way of speaking without sound." This reversed gaze activates attentiveness, working against the hypervisibility demanded of Black bodies while exposing the gaps and silences within official archives and contemporary media culture. In intervening in the endless circulation of images today, Orupabo opens space for resistance, refusal, and the possibility of new narratives to emerge.

In the second room of the exhibition, the audience comes upon an installation of small-scale sculptures by the Finnish artist **Man Yau**. This series of works echoes its' symbolism and connotations from the materials used, the forms they take, and the way they direct the body of the viewer. This layered work considers, as its central theme, the sensation of being on display and the inevitable constriction therein.

Instead of perfectly trimmed rose bushes or draping lilacs, Yau trims petals into delicately arranged illustrations pressed between panes of glass. The petals' natural impressions are carefully clipped and placed to depict the desirable – demure fans, tightly laced corsets, and towering chopine shoes. Paper made to be as thin as physically possible displays drawings of forced and distorted body parts, bent into nearly impossible positions. Stained glass invokes fragility and a sense of the sacred.

The viewer walks through the installation as one might walk through royal gardens; through greenery carefully trimmed and coaxed into symmetry and out of its unruly nature. A garden as such announces the wealth of its owner by taking wild beauty – that which contains both life and death, colour and decay, and presenting it as groomed, sculpted and perfect. Beset with symbols of the feminine as expressed through precise control, cultivation, and pressure, 'Maze' short-circuits society's need to control and commodify that which it elects beautiful.

In a small showroom on the opposite end of the gallery, Yau's work 'M.Y. Chinoiserie' juts out from the wall overhead. Referencing similar themes of exotification, the series of ceramic sculptures refers to the porcelain cabinets often found all over Europe in Baroque and Rococo palaces. The cabinets were collections of Japanese and Chinese porcelain that represented the wealth and power of their owners. Instead of porcelain dishes, the installation presents sculptures resembling ceramic vases and sex toys with Baroque pearls and on-glaze decal details.

In Yau's work, traditional forms and structures are reappropriated to reflect upon her experience as a woman who is also visibly of a minority background. In both 'Maze' and 'M.Y. Chinoiserie', material and form create a commentary on the role that everyday objects and aesthetic values play in supporting racialized, gendered and commonly accepted narratives.