

A Lifetime in a Moment

The first idea that enters my mind when I think of Kristiina Uusitalo's paintings from the last ten years is the consistency in their intent and construction. A consistency which definitely echoes the artistic perseverance with which she repeatedly returns to the conventions of modern art. But Uusitalo's present work isn't just about the abstract movements of the western art in the 20th Century; the free forms of abstract Expressionism or the constructionality of Constructivism, although there lies a formal synthesis of both in the background. For Uusitalo, painting is a dialogue with superhuman spiritual forces.

Uusitalo renders the movements of modern art into symbolic signs, the combinations of which she calls "calligraphies". Brushwork reminiscent of handwriting is not far from orientalism, which has been the artist's interest for years. An extended period of studying and working in the U.S. (1986–1996) offered Uusitalo a remarkable opportunity to deepen her knowledge of Asian culture and arts in American museums.

Adopting an idiolect has been a multiplex process that took years to complete. While the Finnish Academy of Arts had trained Uusitalo into the best legacies of Finnish constructivism, in America she found abstract Expressionism, whose ideological and spiritual background opened to her gradually. Along with it arouse her interest in Buddhism, especially in its meditative attributes. Getting acquainted with ancient Chinese and Japanese art altered her way of viewing the world, and also her relationship to art. She became interested in nature, but in a different way than in her youth, when she had painted the landscapes of her native area at Lake Saimaa.

Nature as a sublime, superhuman force is one of the core ideas in Uusitalo's art. Her paintings impart precisely this – the magnitude and omnipresence of nature – although in varying ways, in large and small paintings, and using different forms. Lately Uusitalo has begun to apply figurative elements in her paintings.

As a spectator I find it interesting how two culturally separate ideas of nature overlap in Uusitalo's abstract paintings. On the superficial level they appear as dissimilar abstract, semiabstract or figurative elements which the artist arranges either in layers or next to each other. But they are much more than that. Uusitalo's method also reflects different concepts of time, since her calligraphies represent culturally diverse ways of perceiving nature.

At this point I would like to return to the point in the history of western art when the modern man

indicated first signs of self- observation and focused on themes such as his relationship with nature. In the renaissance heritage of Central and Southern Europe nature is presented by the surrounding view unfolding behind a window glass, which also had the purpose of implying geographical location. On the other hand, that view from a window also represents something that opposes man made culture, something unknown. It represents nature which modern western man aspires to master and subordinate.

According to the ancient oriental philosophies man and nature converge. However, in Japan for instance nature has a singularly ceremonial role. Consider for example the traditional landscape look-outs where nature is worshipped as if an altar – their very purpose is to provide a place for meditation. Many oriental characters, and certain abstract forms, which are repeatedly presented in oriental art, have the same function.

Repetition has fascinated Uusitalo as well. She for instance painted a certain oval form repeatedly for almost two years. She was captivated by the simultaneous delicateness and unpredictability of repetition. The discovery of her own idiosyncratic style also brought about a sense of liberation. When Uusitalo repeated painting one single form on Japanese paper with acrylic paint, imitating the hand movements of old ink painters, she noticed that sometimes the paper would go to pieces or the form fail. It was no catastrophe though, accepting the situation helped realization - this could happen in everyday life. Uusitalo defines the oval form as a window of a “space ship” or “ship” with an unforeseen, unknown view.

In the summer of 1992 she went to Japan to contemplate these unknown views. The ancient Japanese culture can only be found in old Buddhist monasteries, where one can still sense the values underlying the whole culture. Although these values seem foreign to westerners, recognition of the oriental, nature bound concept of time may help in understanding them. It has to do with the relationship between light and shadow – those subtle moments, which define the location of change.

As Uusitalo became aware of the different concepts of time, she began to study their realization in certain themes and used religious motifs as interpreters of her own life experiences. She became interested in the God figures of both Buddhist and Christian art. Later she moved onwards to studying more mundane subjects, and began for instance to study the fan as a form. The fan is an ornamental subject, but also a fascinating abstraction in its constructionality.

Constructionality and expressivity merge into a dynamic expressive entity in the altar piece of the Imatra

church. Elements of the nature have played an essential role in Uusitalo's paintings for a long time. The essence of portraying nature is in the use of color and its own light. Uusitalo has always felt these forms of expression as her own. In her most recent paintings she has also used photographs from the cherished Lake Saimaa as motifs. It is from Lake Saimaa where her early experiences of the omnipotence of nature and of its constant movement originate. The translucent impression of light is further enhanced by the use of transparent plexiglass as painting surface.

Portraying the movement of water functions as a pictorial symbol for moments of change. There is something forcefully divine present in the mood. The tranquil light gleaming through the water portrays stepping from one consciousness to another; the sky reflects on the water reminding us of forces larger than humans. We study them in order to find ourselves. There is a lifetime in a moment.

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