

Meeting a Gaze

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When I think of art, I think of beauty.

Beauty is the mystery of life.

Agnes Martin

Every artistic endeavour stems from an experience of art and possesses a rich system of roots leading back to colleagues of all eras. Kristiina Uusitalo's impetus originates from an encounter she experienced as a little girl while visiting an art museum with her father.

Here she found herself standing before an icon from the middle ages, and encountered the gaze of the madonna that was to change her life forever. Just the thought that it was even possible to convey such sadness and such hope through purely pictorial means...

Art is marginalized in our modern society. It is something that is often only embraced when all practical needs have been fulfilled, but things must have been quite different in the past.

Art's age has been declared by some to be approximately 30,000 years old. A few years ago, however, researchers found a fossilized lump of ochre in a cave that dated back at least 100,000 years. Ochre is a colour pigment that has no other use than to paint with. One can imagine people applying patterns on their bodies and surrounding environments. Although we can only speculate as to why our ancestors did this, it would hardly be a stretch to say that they were presumably driven by a strong desire to decorate as a means of paying tribute to and marking a connection between themselves and everything else around them.

Such is the nature of creating images, a primordial drive to make visible that which cannot be seen or create a symbol for something that is a part of one's life. When a modern-day artist applies paint to a surface, three hundred thousand colleagues from previous generations gaze intently over her shoulder.

It is said that we live in the era of the image. A dramatic change from the period when that anonymous colleague created the image that so decisively dictated Kristiina Uusitalo's life direction. But what an unfathomable difference with regard to how we use images. We have long since passed a quantitative threshold, but what about the qualitative?

Today, many artists and viewers recoil from the notion of beauty and especially the decorative, despite the fact that this presumably lies behind mankind's original drive to create images, and possesses value in folk art in and of itself. Within Islam it is a way to worship in the world and hail creation.

Other colleagues, besides the anonymous icon painter, who have helped lay the foundations for Kristiina Uusitalo's artistic universe include Kandinsky, Malevich and Barnett Newman. Kandinsky, for liberating Western art from the canons of depiction, as when he, via his studies of folk art, came to the conclusion that colour, shape and line possess meaning in and of themselves. And how wonderfully apt his analogy is of comparing the surface of the painting to the skin of a shaman's drum. Empty and mute, it lies waiting to come to life by someone striking it.

Kazimir Malevich for his black square on white background that he positioned, similarly to the icon, in the corner of the room, thus marking the borderline where language stops short in face of the mystery.

Barnett Newman, for his Stations of the Cross that made such an enormous impression on her. The series of fourteen paintings with the captions Lema Sabachtani and Why Have You Forsaken Me? The last words of Christ on the cross, according to legend. The paintings' measurements correspond to human proportions and are executed exclusively in white and black. Black vertical stripes, alternately applied with razor sharp edges and expressively blurred contours, while both dividing and joining the white canvases and filling their space with absolute calm and pure energy. Kristiina Uusitalo has described how that encounter actually brought her to her knees.

The same was true when, after having seen reproductions of Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece, she became dead set on travelling to Colmar to see it in real life. Once in front of the painting she was overwhelmed by how the space behind the figures was painted in such a way that it literally vibrated with energy. No reproduction technique on earth can faithfully convey an art work. Its measurements are an aesthetic choice, as is the movement of the hand and the tactile quality of the paint. In order to truly experience the piece, one has no choice but to embark on a pilgrimage.

Regardless of whether one espouses some religion, is an agnostic or atheist, these are truly wonderful works of art. They have the capacity to disrupt the habitual gaze and break through the trivia and practicalities of everyday life. For a vertiginous instance, the images allow us to experience the largeness of life in the world and the unbearable insight that we are destined to leave it at some point. This gift of art, that we can also access through music, poetry, science or in mid-step without really knowing how this takes place.

In her incessant quest in her own work for ways she can provide such an experience, Kristiina Uusitalo avoids manipulating the colour as much as possible. She lets it manifest itself on aluminium and prepared wooden panels, materials that do not hinder the paint's own propensity for achieving balance and rest. The traces of the hand's movement is at times reminiscent of asian ink painting or calligraphy, and motif-wise we are faced with nature and the four seasons. Sometimes we encounter an abstract form, such as the labyrinth, an object such as a hand-held fan or a rustic jetty leading out into a lake that could lie on some strange planet.

Sometimes she inserts an image within an image, thus introducing an element of insecurity in the viewer regarding what is real and what is illusion. At times she juxtaposes an illusory central perspective with swathes of paint that physically lie on the pictorial surface. As a viewer, the experience is akin to walking on thin ice that threatens to crack under one's feet at any moment. The interplay between illusion and fact, image and symbol forces the viewer to sharpen her gaze, and in certain images Rorschach-like reflection effects prompt new associative meanderings.

In other images, such as the monumental painting *Carried by Light* in Malmi Hospital, the simplification and opacity has been taken to its limits. Against a yellow background with white verticals and round shapes, brittle stems stand out, and on the surface a sculptural necklace of large drops. By painting the drops with a glossy paint containing pigment made from true mother-of-pearl, an exceptional lustre is achieved that reflects the world and gives rise to associations to the protective shell of an oyster and the fragile contents within, thus establishing a link between micro and macrocosm.

The images convey a feeling of energy and eternal transformation, from one state to another. We often experience a bedazzlement of sorts, as when looking into the sun and everything turns black. Or we encounter the reflection, that bridges the gap between the image's space and the one we occupy.

Kristiina Uusitalo's images are beautiful, decorative in a primal sense, and can—if we succeed in achieving the proper wavelength as we beat the drum skin—offer us the chance of experiencing an epiphany.

Translation: Richard Griffith Carlsson