

## **Kristiina Uusitalo's Paintings Combine a Harmony of Opposites**

At first sight, Kristiina Uusitalo's work dazzles the viewer with its brightness of light in the midst of darkness, glowing winter landscapes and blazing colours. A vision wiped forth with pigment appears on watercolour paper, wood panel or aluminium. Her works involve spontaneous emotion and the freedom of the brushstroke, but also a precise plan, concrete discipline of form and the self-confidence provided by time.

Kristiina Uusitalo's (born 1959) career as an artist has already lasted some thirty years. It has included many different stages: in addition to work in Finland ten years in the United States, from where she returned to her native country in the mid-1990s. Her career has been one of study and discovery, of encountering questions that have returned year after year in slightly altered form. It has been a period of growth as both an artist and an individual

Uusitalo's works charm the viewer to look at them. They entice you to come before the image and suddenly you notice that you are trapped. You're no longer at the surface of the artwork, but within it. One begins to notice different brushstrokes, even conflicts that arouse curiosity and the desire to understand more. Nor are these conflicting elements revealed immediately; they, too, require time in order to open up.

Good art is often beautiful to behold, but it also requires depth, something that will arouse growing interest. In Kristiina Uusitalo's paintings, this aspect is created through numerous subtle contradictions. They have gradually condensed in her work; opposites have approached each other without losing their specific qualities, while fitting nonetheless in the same picture. Just like it has to happen in life.

Nature and the landscape have been present in Uusitalo's art since the very beginning of her career. Over the past ten years, she has mostly painted the forest in winter. Her form of expression is occasionally more figurative and at times more abstract. The whole issue of figurative and non-figurative art is not really meaningful in her case. It is no longer important where the boundary of figurative and non-figurative – abstract – expression lies. For Uusitalo, the subject is not a concrete place, although her works can be derived from concrete locations in terms of their starting points. She is thus not a painter of landscapes or nature in the traditional sense of these terms. The subjects of her works are internal events, apparitions or realizations; a shift somewhere forward in thoughts.

Informalism, liberation from form, emerged as a counterweight to concretist, structural expression. Kristiina Uusitalo's paintings have a structural starting point, even though they also display and represent the freedom of form. This creates a tension that is also typical of Oriental art. Her paintings combine the beauty of discipline and structurality with the illusion of force and speed of freehand work. In her technique based on brushwork and calligraphy, a free hand is absolutely used, but strength and freedom have been found and achieved through endless practice. This requires a great deal of work, but it provides the viewer with enjoyable and forceful results.

This combination can be seen in *Perspective in Reverse V* (2006). Its harmony is based on strong and distinct lines and the composition of planes of colour, but also on a stormy whirlwind permeating the whole piece and its above-mentioned elements and creating the thrill of speed and a sense of the spheres. The vortexes gain so much speed in this painting that one can almost hear them. Although music is not mentioned in connection with Uusitalo's art, it is included in her work as a quality that can be heard.

Kristiina Uusitalo's art has a strong underlying spiritual basis. In her earlier works of the 1980s, she painted the forces of nature – wind, fire, water and ice. In the early 1990s, images of saints and

divinities appeared. Over time, these elements of landscape and the sacred achieved a form through which the artist could tell of the human condition. Making a concrete landscape part of the painting was neither self-evident nor easy for her. These different focuses of interest have, however, merged gradually. Narrativity has been replaced by the image, which can tell of hope, strength and the presence of God regardless of what the picture represents. Kristiina Uusitalo's art has an inbuilt conception of a higher power, but this is not knowledge gained through understanding, nor is it unchanging dogmatism. It is something that can and may remain beyond understanding.

It is, however, impossible not to view the artist's works through the tradition of landscape painting. Although the subject is not a place, the issue of a so-called national landscape has emerged in Uusitalo's series of paintings of the early and mid-2000s, such as *Prescience*, *Home and Hearth* and *The Book of Our Land*. These paintings seem to form a continuum in which landscape separates itself from the requirements that are placed on it. The ideal image and beauty that a (national) landscape is expected to bear gradually become more solitary and personal. In this manner, the artist also explores the gap between a mental image adopted long ago and surrounding reality.

In *Hidden in the Barenness I* (2006) there are two single trees with only their top parts depicted against a bare sky. The perspective is from below rather than from an upper angle, underlining the independence of the trees, not the controlling grasp of the viewer. In the area between the trees there is a vertical brushstroke creating the feeling of something between the trees and the viewer and at the same time a connection with space opening up from below.

Although Kristiina Uusitalo's paintings do not contain images of humans, a painting is always an image of man for her in the sense that an artist must always address the subject that is the most important for him or her at the present moment. In order to create anything of significance for oneself or the public, the artist must remain honest at this stage, whatever it may be. It is then that one is involved with a thing from which it is worthwhile to create something. Something that is true.

To make art is always a creative act. It is making the immaterial material. This task calls for a concrete form, an object, in order to pass on the immaterial experience to others, to the viewer and the public. Kristiina Uusitalo paints in various techniques. Watercolour requires fast work, the brushstroke cannot be altered. From time to time, it is necessary to wait for the work to dry. The artist has transferred this method of working to other techniques; oil on aluminium behaves in a similar manner. Uusitalo's manner of painting entails a contradiction. It is at the same time fervent, forging ahead at full speed, while also waiting, pausing and considering. A painting can be created in two weeks, but in most cases it takes two months, sometimes even six. The ideas for her works already emerge during the previous ones, and she is thus always working on several paintings at the same time. She has a great desire to create and experiment with a wide range of things, and it leads – afar.

*Mikko Oranen*

*This article is based on conversations with Kristiina Uusitalo.*