

Like The Long Shores Of The Clouds

Over a century ago, Finnish rune-singers such as Mateli Kuivalatar, whose folk poems appeared in the published Kanteletar collection, sang songs of yearning depicting the work-filled life of peasant women and its related supra-individual emotional experiences as defined by tradition. Finnish folk poetry is reserved in its expressions of love and affection, with South Karelian songs of mother-related themes as an exception. In addressing existential issues, women made rich use of metaphor related to natural phenomena and the animal world. In some of Mateli's songs the yearning for a real home gains cosmic dimensions; where others had their familiar farmyards, the singer trod a rainbow as her path to the well and the stars of the heavens were her doorway.¹

The concept of homesickness, sometimes paired with 'nostalgia', has a varying history of use. In early written contexts, this pair of words suggested serious illness and pain, and even the threat of death. The term was coined by a Swiss student of medicine named Hofer, who in his doctoral dissertation from 1688 noted that the symptoms of "Heimweh" particularly threaten young men residing abroad. In the early 1900s the diagnosis of illness declined, as the concept was made to serve nationalism by fostering communality and affection for a geographical area important for the individual's identity.² Postmodern "multi-ego" thinking marked the final blow to local patriotism bound to a single place, although it will hardly ever become extinct. For modern people, Mateli Kuivalatar's distant clouds are more a symbol of boundless opportunities than of being an outsider: the home has become a fluid definition shaped by memories of the place of origin but above all by the pleasure of things of one's own, created by oneself.

The painter Kristiina Uusitalo describes as a core motive of her work an internal state of residing at home, a home with no postal address. It entails something of the same intimation of origin and goal as the saying "next year in Jerusalem" – you must still wander, Jew, Palestinian or anyone with a pilgrimage in mind. One of the main rooms of Uusitalo's imaginary home is associated with experiences of art and her own professional image. *"I became committed to painting as a form of expression from a very early stage. Admiration of openness and things new have always been central to my work. The desire to see and experience art has thus guided many of my choices and departures."* The most far-reaching departure took place in 1986, when she was given a Fulbright grant to the United States. Her stay there continued for ten years, first in Philadelphia and later in New York. Although Uusitalo defines herself as an explicitly European artist, the most fundamental appeal to her mentality was made by American abstract expressionism and the Asian collections of American

museums. Challenges were also provided by seeing and studying contemporary photography and painting in America.

Another room in that artist's home combining cultures and history is nature as both a geographically defined and a fictional landscape, and as the material of sublime experience. Over the past decade, the ecological focuses of her earlier works have evolved into identification with the phenomena and dimensions of nature. Enjoying the twin role of artist and viewer, Uusitalo underscores the importance of daring and passion in her work. According to her, moments of insight with regard to art and nature replicate the experience of something originally good. Although being at home or stemming from somewhere belongs to the pendular movement of leaving and returning, people identify with their original setting with surprising loyalty. *Maisema Suomesta* (Landscape from Finland), Uusitalo's large series of works from the mid-1990s, was not only a kind of homecoming project after her years in America, but also an homage to the co-ordinates of her home regions.

Uusitalo spent her childhood at Sulkava on Partalansaari Island in Lake Saimaa in East Finland. After returning to Finland in 1996, she spent periods working as an art teacher in Imatra, where the conflicting coexistence of industry with the lacustrine environment created a contradiction both ecological and visual. Memories of landscape reactivated in a familiar environment led to the realization that the landscape provided an existing playing field for the dualism of existence, for matter and the immaterial, and for permanence and transience. A natural landscape as such was no reaction against a past spent in cities. Both milieus provided the spaciousness appreciated by the artist: the countryside in terms of square kilometres, and the metropolises in their mental and intellectual dimensions.

The classical visual cultures of the Far East that the artist came to appreciate while in the United States and a trip to Japan in 1992 deepened Uusitalo's interest in Oriental painting techniques and iconography. Although she had already studied Buddhist religious philosophy and meditation in the early 1980s in Finland, and multicultural New York provided spiritual nourishment with all the trimmings, Uusitalo's own Christian heritage began, at the same time, to find concrete form in paintings in which east and west sought the possibility of a dialogue: *"There is a great deal in Asian art and Buddhist thought that I find to be close and important to me, but since it is not my own cultural background, admiration does not suffice to open up understanding"*. The most necessary and personal aspect of an internal state of being at home is the presence of that unknown which is true and sacred. Visual art is bound to the sense of sight, while faith is based on sound confidence in the unseen, A similar intuitive expectation is expressed by an altarpiece made by Uusitalo for Tainionkoski Church in Imatra in 1997: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face...(1 Corinthians 13:12)".

The above work contains a visual symbiosis typical of Uusitalo's works of the 1990s: translucent water reflecting the light of the sky together with a graphic labyrinth design; two different worlds of meaning expressing a turning point, the moment of achieving awareness. The strategy of a picture within a picture was expressed not only as the contrast of themes and the artist's hand but also in the simultaneity of structures. For the artist herself, the paralleling of expressive landscape and geometric form, the figurative and the abstract, and tradition and the genre of contemporary art opened up a way to more mature expression.

For Western man, the maze primarily brings to mind losing the sense of direction and the feeling of getting lost, and at worst peril to life itself as in the Ancient Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. In Uusitalo's paintings, this theme is given a basically opposite meaning; the path of meditation leads to discovery and clarity, albeit with the strain of the journey. A systematic yet decorative design brings to mind the mandala used as a means of meditation in Hinduism and Buddhism, a cosmic diagram with which the meditator proceeds towards the centre, the timeless and non-spatial harmony of the universe. Another model and example for the theme can be seen in the circular or meandering floor mosaics of the buildings of Antiquity and in medieval cathedrals in particular. One of the best known ecclesiastical works in this respect, the cross and rose themed labyrinth in the Gothic cathedral of Chartres, which was used as miniature path of pilgrimage or penitence. Uusitalo is of course aware of the global references of her formal theme, but the exit of her labyrinth led to her own background and its elements. The labyrinthine landscapes combined the artist's major routes of personal importance: nature, art and metaphysics. All the above elements summon to a broader existence, to a vantage point.

A thematic treatment modifying a basic concept has been characteristic of Uusitalo's paintings since the beginning of her career. Working periods of a few years' duration have produced ensembles of some twenty works each. *Hengenvetoja* (Breaths) painted in 2001–2002 still varied her landscape visions of the late 1990s, but the labyrinth design was increasingly matched with a new kind of calligraphic route. Fervent sweeps of brushwork express with their directions, the flexibility of their colours and the weight of the brush. All existence trembles with the rhythm of inhalation and exhalation as a kind of primal image of Genesis. A breath corresponds to a sweep of the brush, in turn corresponding to a step, an act of creation. In the artist's evolutionary process, the angularity and rectangularity of the labyrinth turns into swirls broken by a breeze or the vortex of a tornado. Assembled with a stencil, the labyrinths were slowly constructed within and on top of views of nature. In the *Breaths* collection, the pigment hyperventilates, aware of the impressive nature of its drama. The only arrested element in the composition is a landscape window resembling a picture postcard of Lake Saimaa, the imaginary opening of which ventilates the whole surface. In the artist's earlier works of the late 1990s, the impression of dynamics and movement was created primarily with the liveliness of water, but now by the impressions of the flow of air and wind. In the Bible, one of the metaphorical

forms of existence of the Holy Spirit is wind alongside fire. *“The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.”* (John 3:8).

Breathing presents itself as a metaphor of the moment of realization. The first thing that Buddhist novice monks learn is conscious inhalation and exhalation, the purpose of which is to calm straying thoughts and to place oneself in the present moment. The Vietnamese monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh says: *“When you inhale say ‘this moment’, and when you exhale say ‘wonderful moment’. This exercise can immediately help us touch peace”*.³

In her collection of works entitled *Häikäisevä pimeys* (Dazzling Darkness) on show at Forum Box in the spring of 2004, Uusitalo took distance from the strategy of painting with two contradicting elements. *“I want to say everything that I have to say with one image, not with any combination of pictures.”* The winter theme challenged the language of form and the world of colour to reformulation, although the focus of content still remain steady. Her retro-spirited studies of nature pointed to the vitality of the trailblazers of the 1960s, informalism and pop art. Uusitalo’s semi-figurative gesture paintings are related to the continuum of informalism and pop art that is represented, for example, by Mauri Favén’s cloud-like abstractions of the early 1960s and the Eurasian informalism of the Chinese-born artist Zao Wou-Ki that was on show in the spring of 2003 at Kunsthalle Helsinki. In some of her snow-covered tree themes, Uusitalo’s hand turns towards the anonymous surface texture of pop art, decorativeness and even subtle kitsch.

The images of the cold were not bound to any particular place but instead they created their own reality in the interstice of memory and immediate experience. Where the summery shores of the late 1990s were washed by the after-effects of the national-romantic masters of Finnish art, Uusitalo had to wean herself from the eternal summer and overcome the heaviness of the dark time of the year. In past years, she would have solved this problem by packing her bags, but having a family, the artist had to look at things with shared interests in mind.

To paraphrase the author Kirsti Simonsuuri, there are two possibilities: to go abroad or to lose oneself in the forest. For urban Finns, the forest is not necessarily a trackless wilderness, but often something within in plain sight of one’s home. The spark that arouses awareness can be smouldering in suburban shrubbery, along the way to work, or in a roadside rest area. In many of the paintings, of the *Dazzling Darkness* series, the original scene has undergone a deliberate metamorphosis from a run-of-the-mill view to a personification of the sublime. An inexplicable arresting moment arises from a light resembling revelation. Although in their “lyricalness” the shimmering golden lakes of the 1990s seem contrary to the electrified cold images of recent years, the nature themes have in common the element

of water, which, crystallized as snow and ice, reflects light in a variety of ways. Uusitalo's works break down light into its constituent parts, from invisibility to a mover of worldviews.

Contrary to what is generally believed, winter is not the darkest time of the year, although the day is then at its shortest. The deepest darkness is before the snows. During the late winter, which is an active period of work for Uusitalo, as for many other artists, the amount and intensity of light tests her limits of reception. One could imagine offhand that winter landscapes are devoid of action and of a simplified monochromatic nature, but Uusitalo's forest attacks the senses like the character of Frost in Hugo Simberg's art. The surrounding nature of total cold has not frozen the desire of the brush to run or the sense for material. A single instance of fallen colour takes up, in passing, the word, to which the environment immediately reacts with compliance or opposing gestures. Metal pigments, waxes and pearl glazes give alkyd and oil paints an ice-queen look. Uusitalo complements her brushwork technique with the methods of action painting: the pouring, sprinkling and spraying of pigment, creating the illusion of the surface "painted without hands" known from icon painting. Despite the spontaneous and even ecstatic impression, the results are rarely misdirected. "The finished work contains what I have considered it to contain, but the form has almost always changed. The work is finished when the theme is present with sufficient coherence."

For experts of the aesthetic gaze, the landscape is not any arbitrary conglomerate of elements, but instead an organized and focused whole. Pruning and felling familiar from forestry also come to the aid of the artist. While the beauty or representative nature of the view could be motive enough for the traditional landscape painter, the theme was often related to more metaphorical aspects. It is hard to regard Uusitalo's landscapes as typical of their genre, let alone disinterested, if the viewer is even slightly aware of their connections beyond art itself. Nonetheless, all due respect the trees, expanses of snow and the sun – the point of encounter of the material and the immaterial exists ready-made in the landscape.

During the dark months of the year, when light remains low, sunshine seems like an unexpected gift. The title "dazzling darkness" comes from the name of a book on Christian guidance by the Swedish theologian and psychologist of religion Owe Wikström. In his book Wikström, outlines the seven stages of spiritual life that spiritual counsellors have observed in the experiences of people seeking God. Christian literature often mentions the so-called dark night or wilderness stage, which the believer is stripped of all spiritual emotions, gifts or experiences so that he or she could learn to reject excessive control of his or her life and to look only towards Christ. A minor amount of light transfers the substance of belief from the effects of faith to the object of faith.

With the title 'Dazzling Darkness' and the name of her latest series of works 'Cloud of Ignorance', Kristiina Uusitalo wants to give her works a context that enriches interpretation. It is no coincidence that the teachings of 'Cloud of Ignorance', a classic of medieval religious literature comes close to the content of 'Dazzling Darkness'. The cloud of faith that masks understanding first leads to grief, but its fruit is the grace of total seeing and contact. In the Buddhist tradition, true awakening is described as a slightly similar process, in all views and ideas about the world of phenomena and nirvana must be rejected for contemplation to lead more deeply into selflessness and temporariness⁴.

The 'Dazzling Darkness' series brought about, like a sub-heading, the 'Foretaste' theme, combining painting and photography or executed solely with the means of painting. The concepts of two elements have now shed their skin in the form of collage technique. *"All the central themes that touch more deeply will return, but in a new form"*. The camera has accompanied Uusitalo ever since her early years as a painter, but over the past decade the role of photography has expanded from a means of sketching and recording to become part of the painting. *"The transient nature of the moment is oppressive. You can take a picture so fast, but the very choice of what is photographed expresses my way of thought and my temperament to a great deal"*. The contemplative, layered concept of time in painting is paralleled by the quickly triggered assessment of the photograph. Comparing the two techniques, Uusitalo feels that despite its malleable material nature, painting is less material than photography and as such it lies closer to essential concepts.

The paired elements of the 'Foretaste' collages, such the hand of the artist and the mechanical product, general view and detail, light and shadow, static and changing, and horizontal and vertical tell of the one in two voices. In nature, the seasons and the times of the day are linked to each other like a snake eating its tail – sometimes the extremes seem to be too distant, and sometimes they seem to be passed to quickly. One can adapt to even the most severe cold and lack of light, if one knows that growth and florescence require a time of rest. Moreover, gold never shines in a more beguiling manner than in the dark, as taught by Japanese aestheticians of the past, for whom strong Western lighting was not only a waste, but also a sign of the darkness of understanding.

The sections in italics are from an interview with Kristiina Uusitalo on 5 April 2005. Bibliography

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¹ Sallinen 2004, s. 81–84

² Thich Nhat Hanh 1997, s. 29

³ Ibid. s. 127