



Expressionist Impulses in Helsinki

- posted by [John Gayer](#)

Unlike other European capitals that close down during August, Helsinki's summer holiday season closes at the beginning of the month and the city's cultural outlets spring back to life. An extra bonus is the compact city centre. Not only does it facilitate gallery going, the gorgeously fresh air and invigorating northern light encourages bicycle travel which, for anyone with a limited amount of time on their hands, can expedite the process. Moreover, locking up is a breeze. Most people don't bother to secure their bikes to a fixed object, but just leave it outside their destination with the lock going through the frame and a wheel.

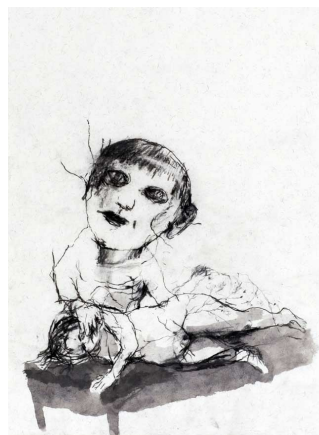


Erkkka Nissinen, detail Dialectic Illicit Cell Aid (courtesy of Joonas Kota)

Finns are known for their practical approach and taciturn presence. Their innate sense of trust and outwardly calm manner bestows an air of freedom to life in the city and predisposes attitudes to expecting, well... what is expected. This seemingly rosy state surprises many foreign visitors. It also doesn't prepare one for the art exhibitions, which along with expressionist tendencies, frequently exhibit darker aspects of the Finnish mindset. Shifting from a presumptive sense of well being to the nether realms of the imagination presents a challenge for the eyes and the mind. It introduces a complexity to the Finnish portrait that's not easily resolved. For example, take *Dialectic Illicit Cell Aid*, a two man show mounted by Erkkä Nissanen and Joonas Kota at Kluuvin (August 8 – 21, 2011). It hits with a gruesome punch. The video *Rigid Regime* includes a scene of a man dragging a dangling and blood stained foot down a hallway. The broken ankle bone is fully exposed. Cartoonish portraits exhibiting a host of protuberances – from clown costumes and fruit to suggestive splatters of paint and the depiction of genitalia – accompany the exhibition's videos. Mounted on crudely constructed easels, these works form a sculptural installation occupying the center of the space. Positioned one behind the other the canvases suggest an evolution of sorts: from ugly to uglier it could be said. Full of irreverent deadpan humor, this work is not to everyone's taste.

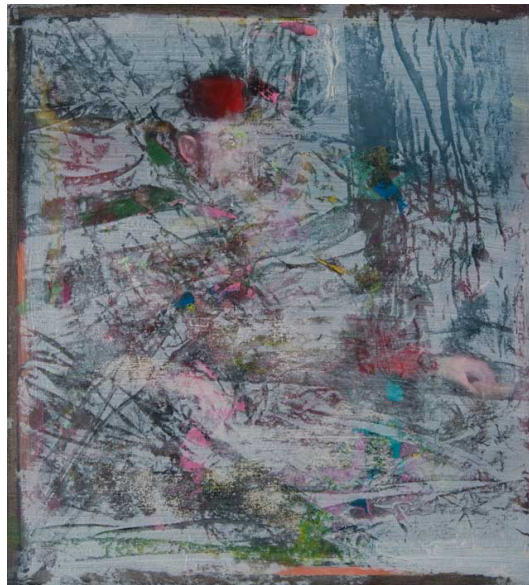


Arto Väisänen, *Sipulisilmät (Onion Eyes)* 2011, mixed media (courtesy Galleria Ama)



Arto Väisänen, *Nukuttaja (2010)*, ink and charcoal on paper (coutesy Galleria Ama)

Over at Galleria Ama, Arto Väisänen isolates fragmented figures or shows them caught in some perilous situation. The larger compositions contain several figures which are juxtaposed with erratic linear networks, dense dark patches of medium, or the odd insect, pineapple or onion. While the plight of his subjects catches our attention, it's the frantic energy pervading his mark making that draws us into these works. The lines twist here and there splintering the surface. They embody the intensity and unpredictability associated with atmospheric charges. Intensifying suddenly, they dissipate just as quickly. Linear elements also fan out to form much more delicate web-like networks. Presented under the rubric Yrityks lukea Kuelleita sieluja junassa (Attempting to read Dead Souls on the train) (August 8 – 28, 2011), the drawings come across as a series of nightmares. The psychological instability and sense of fear these works embody haunt the mind long after the viewer has left the confines of the gallery.



Leonor Ruiz Dubrovin, Wrapped Pope (2011) acrylic on canvas (courtesy of the artist)

Narrative and distortion also come into play in Leonor Ruiz Dubrovin's **Maalauksia (Paintings)** at Galleria Huuto's Uudenmaankatu location (August 3 – 21, 2011). But here the works are presented in what appears to be an advanced state of deterioration. For Dubrovin, the act of painting is as much a subtractive as additive process. Witnessed in their fragmented states, representations of skulls, animals and religious figures distance themselves from the viewer. The eye becomes drawn to paintings' surface qualities in an attempt to resolve the visual tension between the depicted subjects and the aberrations that occlude its perception. The act of looking involves parsing out each image's material history.

Galleria Huuto's Viiskulma home features Timo Tähkänen's **Naturellement** (August 3 – 21, 2011), what is a much more colourful collection of sculptural paintings. The artist's interest in nature – another favourite theme of Finnish artists – forms the basis of this abstract work. According to him, the works originate out of nature related experiences and the impressions cast by various colors. Those notions remained elusive to this viewer. The results do call up spatial explorations produced by Sam Gilliam and Lynda Benglis in the 1960s and 70s.



Anna Tuori, Silver Shoes II (2011), Helsinki Art Museum, Photo: Jussi Tiainen





Anna Tuori, Calm Down Dearest (2011) Photo: Jussi Tiainen

The survey of Anna Tuori's canvases at Helsinki Art Museum Meilahti, on the other hand, reveals an artist in the process of consistently refining her practice. **Blow Out Your Candles, Laura?** (May 13 – August 14, 2011) also celebrates her selection as Young Artist of the Year. On the surface these paintings demonstrate whimsicality. Tuori not only indulges in sentimental subject matter, but also depicts them in some of the most saccharine hues. The images begin as gestural abstracts that artist develops into she frequently sets the scenes adrift. They form irregularly shaped islands that float on monochrome fields. Though they convey the flowery qualities not unlike those that can be found on schmaltzy greeting cards, it

is difficult to dismiss them. Their unsettling qualities drew me into them. They evoke turbulence and the fleeting character of dreams. Contexts are deliberately vague and there is something disturbing about the way she negates the facial features of some figures. The titles of some paintings, such as *Never Happened* (2005) and *Kindness of Strangers* (2009), appear to contradict the content. Certainly the pair of figures in the latter work does not intimate charitableness or warmth. Though the meaning of many of these works remains elusive, one can marvel at the paint handling and – in true expressionist manner – reflect upon the moods the paintings evoke.



Anna Tuori, Blow Out Your Candles, Laura! (2010), The Saastamoinen Foundation Art Collection/EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art, Photo: Jussi Tiainen

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