



MARI SUNNA TURKU, FINLAND

Everynoansome One, Mari Sunna's exhibition, takes over an aptly-named space: Studio [Turku Art Museum; May 11—July 29, 2007]. No editing here: the paintings are hung as found in the artist's studio, showing artistic experimentation at its most vulnerable. The exhibition emphasizes painterly process. Sunna's delight in the physical pleasure of handling paint reeks of Abstract Expressionism's fascination with unrestricted artistic impulses, without the pathos. Here, a genuine joy in painting replaces the agony of creative expression: Sunna is an artist who relishes sweeping paint about, without any Freudian hang-ups.

Amy, 2006, stares at us from the wall opposite the entrance. Rimmed with dark blue, her black eyes shine from her cold, purple face. Gapped teeth protrude from her mouth. A simple, quick brushstroke sculpts her bobbed hair, much like Helene Schjerfbeck's portraits of young girls from the 1920s. *Amy* also brings to mind Marlene Dumas' portraits, and the reference to Bacon's teeth further heightens the psychological charge. *Amy*'s eyes are mere black holes—is she dead?

Amy's greyish tones are distinctly different from Sunna's other paintings, such as *Two Stories*, 2006, which depicts a seated girl opening a curtain. While the colors behind her are dark, she faces a pop-ish landscape with a bright pink sky and green grass—like a Nordic summer evening. Does the painting depict the Northern seasons: the two dramatic opposites of summer and winter? Or does it visualize the girl's inner and outer worlds?

Like these two divergent color schemes, Sunna's handling of paint ranges from flat blocks of color to expressionistic blobs, swirls, and lumps. It hardly looks as though the same artist has painted all the displayed works. Art exhibitions rarely reveal such a lack of a unified, signature style. This makes the experience of Sunna's show more like a studio visit than a traditional

exhibition. Similarly, her paintings reference various artists of the past and present rather than a specific art historical figure or era. In *Capture*, 2005, and *Explosions III*, 2004, the expressionistic, almost violent markmaking brings to mind Baselitz, while *One Shot*, 2003, invokes Bacon's paintings with its composition, mint green background, and the focus on teeth. While *Amy* could almost pass for a Dumas painting, the girl in *Two Stories* looks like a flat, slightly abstracted figure with clean colors by Nicola Tyson.

Ultimately, the element that unites Sunna's paintings is an unresolved narrative, which often implies her figures' psychological instability. Despite their traditional technique and materials, the works' infectious, unpretentious, and pleasantly humble focus on the human condition speaks to the contemporary viewer. Without exception, her work entices our imagination. In this, the universal becomes the specific and the visual becomes conceptual: a depicted woman turns into the woman down the street, a character from your life, your crazy neighbor or a figure from the past. Similarly, the paintings' relatively small scale, and the traces of the artist's hand—even the smudges on the sides of the canvas—give them intimacy.

Contemporary artworks often require precise verbal mediation in order to gain meaning. Here, the visual reigns over the verbal, and contains everything. Neither too neat nor too controlled, the work gives us much interpretative leeway. Standard explanations, readymade interpretations, and supportive statements become superfluous. In front of Sunna's work, each viewer constructs her own narrative. It is liberating to realize that artists can still produce works so thoroughly visual.

—Ilona Niemi

BUILDING WASHINGTON

If a building could speak, what would it say? Would it choose to convey information about itself, the history that unfolded within its rooms or the events affecting its surroundings? Generically titled, the exhibition *BUILDING* tackles these three questions and more to provide a poignant multimedia portrait of a defunct electrical switching station in Belfast, Northern Ireland, just before its renovation [Project 4 Gallery; June 22—July 28, 2007]. In D.C., OAR—a group of five artists from Belfast and Brooklyn, New York—present a pared-down version of the original Irish exhibition. While an elegiac dimension is certainly at play, *BUILDING* manages to let the site speak, allowing us to experience its often humorous, somewhat disorienting, and overall provocative character.

Christopher Heaney's photographs show the interior as the artists found it. The first works encountered upon entering the gallery, his views aptly introduce the exhibition. A dead weeping fig tree with leaves scattered across the floor, furniture pushed out of place, an isolated evergreen air freshener, and other such incidentals never yield any real notion of the building's layout or operation. Windowless rooms trigger claustrophobia. Heaney's reliance on a standardized square format regardless of his subject—from a large control panel to details of unobtrusive wall fixtures—confers equality on major and minor features with an ironical air.

Contrasting with the rigidity of Heaney's systematic documentary approach, Mac Premo and Oliver Jeffers reorder the site's materials to deliver an element of surprise. Premo's fast-paced and visually rich stop animation video *Building*, 2004-2005, turns charts of census data into the liveliest of affairs. Bits and bobs march into containers and needles jitter on voltage dials, distracting us from the voiceover's emotionless, Irish-accented recounting of the facility's abandonment for a near quarter century. Though the narrator makes no direct reference to former political turmoil, particulars

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: **Mari Sunna**, *Two Stories*, 2006, oil on board, 122 x 100 cm [courtesy of the artist and The Approach, London]; **Christopher Heaney**, *Untitled #1*, 2005, archival digital print, 48 x 48 inches, ed. 1/6 [courtesy of the artist and Project 4 Gallery, Washington]

such as the rise in vacancy and dramatic decreases in birthrates imply the period of instability. Oliver Jeffers' rearrangement of found objects takes an entirely different tack. Lured by the secrecy surrounding the building's function, Jeffers explores the notion of imperceptibility by painting replicas of some of the archaic dials in unexpected places. Surprise comes into play when viewers find them tucked away in boxes made to hold keys or first aid supplies. This gesture reminds us of the many utility stations intentionally designed to become invisible by harmonizing with surrounding architecture.

Personal comments drive the exhibition's two strongest works. Rory Jeffers' painting *Connection*, 2004-2005, depicts the signal station as a nerve center by juxtaposing map-like circuitry to a quote from transcriptions of employee interviews. Suggesting rust or dry blood, the reddish-brown diagram and words "nothing happened in Belfast that we didn't know about" lead us to ponder what occurred, where, and when. The painting's earth tones, together with its support of discolored fiberboard panels, present a visual opposite of the control room's institutional green walls, the so-called hard facts delineated in Heaney's *Untitled #1*, 2004-2005.

Finally, Duke Riley's moving-image installation *Building*, 2004-2005, breaks from the site's interior and the exhibition's predilection for circuitry, figures, and dials. The work ventures to the receiving end of the station's function, focusing on individuals who have literally found themselves in the dark. The installation combines messages left on an answering machine during a 1985 power outage with low-resolution video footage of the callers' locations. As voices reverberate in the gallery's resonant space, images pass before our eyes, taking us to a Chinese restaurant, a gas station, brick dwellings, and a vacant lot. Any desire to associate a caller's voice with his or her address proves futile. In

general, the caller's age, race or social status eludes the available audiovisual data. Their feelings, however, resound clearly. Many express frustration, sometimes repeatedly. While some make the effort to identify themselves, one says nothing and slams down the receiver. Grasping the absurdity of the situation, another merely whistles a pleasant tune.

BUILDING proves fascinating for the way in which it reveals the social, political, and technological impact of a structure that, ultimately, cannot be identified. Casting the viewer as an amateur archeologist, the exhibition opens up a cultural field requiring interpretation and analysis. In doing so, it challenges our assumptions about the recent past. While we can easily relate to the callers' predicament during the power failure, the outdated equipment suggests the facility hails from a more distant past. Given the current state of urban renewal in Washington, D.C., *BUILDING* gives us pause to consider what we may learn from the rediscovery of forgotten structures in our midst.

—John Gayer