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MUU WRITES 4

MUU Writes is a group composed of MUU members artists who share an interest in writing. The group has set themselves the task of publishing an essay on every exhibition scheduled in MUU's program autumn 2018, to be released both online and in the gallery.

MUU writes 15/09/2018

Text: JOHN GAYER – Rooms of Color – an Alternate Kind of Prism

Mari Hokkanen: Room of colors, 14.9.-21.10.2018, MUU Cable

The visible spectrum can be measured, which reduces these colors to a few cold hard facts. For example, the wavelengths for violet to red only measure from 380 to 750 nanometres, which comprises a very tiny part of the whole electromagnetic spectrum. This doesn't say anything about how we actually see, think about and feel these colors; these things can't be measured. These processes are conditioned by multiple factors. Personal makeup and current circumstances, preconceived opinion, culture and history ensure colors are rarely interpreted in the same way.

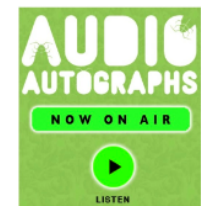


image: Mari Hokkanen

"It is strange how deeply colors penetrate one, like scent." [1]

Color can be fickle. It relies not just on the presence of light, but also the type of illumination, its intensity and the angle at which it strikes a surface and is reflected. It is an ethereal phenomenon. Describing a color's particular tone or degree of luminosity to others, for example, proves challenging and explanations typically fall short.

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Hokkanen, on the other hand, offers no wordy theories or explanations to substantiate Rooms of color. She simply exposed herself to colors and gauged her impressions. The images chart how the colors made her feel. It is an approach that I believe makes perfect sense. The proof of that resides in a series of nine modestly sized, intensely chromatic and dreamlike scenes that captivate and compel close scrutiny. Moreover, in being allocated the most unambiguous titles, the works are completely open to interpretation. There's nothing that suggests or solicits a particular point of view. Rather than providing answers, it could be said that it's the images that are posing questions to the viewer: How do you feel about black, or orange, or blue? Or, have you experienced this colour in this way?

The color in the images is so rich and varied that it takes a bit of time to come to terms with their vibrancy. Rarely have I seen a yellow, for example, that is so, so... (well, here we meet that wall of inarticulateness) – so truly, so beautifully yellow, it just glows. The other hues – a steely cerulean, a pale dusty rose, and the deep dark tones of the forest tempered by sap and mossy greens, umber and the viridity of emerald stockings – are equally potent.

Hokkanen has said that color, in a way, has always formed the foundation to her work. Working in her small basement studio, the physical act of painting to create a background for whatever scenes she would be making has always been her starting point. But in the earlier series, the content focused on other issues. Color always played a secondary role. Eventually, though, she became interested in color and its meaning, and this became her prime focus. She decided to keep the working space as simple and empty as possible, as this would help her explore its meaning.²

Thinking of her perseverance and the act of painting and re-painting her modest workspace – an area at most five square metres in size – indirectly recalls Morris Louis, who painted his large, atmospheric and highly chromatic canvases in a studio too small to accommodate any stretched-up works. How he did this no one knew. Like Louis, Hokkanen has a talent for overcoming limitations. Her images are so well-constructed, so intrinsically varied and, in some respects, so spacious, that one focuses on what's happening in the room, not the substructure. The manner in which she handles color, controls lighting and arranges her props, imbues the images with an authority that speaks of her artistic vision, resourcefulness and skill. The results are not just performative, the crisp details also confer a look and feel that is sculptural. Moreover, and most importantly, these concise paradigms substantiate her reaction to each and every hue.

At MUU Kaapeli *Vihreä* depicts a lifeless body and a calla lily has sprouted from the mound that covers the torso. *Oranssi* contrasts *Vihreä*'s muted fecundity by offering some fiery tones. Hanging kitty corner, the body in this work functions as a stem that supports a crown studded with ripening oranges. In *Harmaa*, on the opposite side of the gallery, her frame is rigid, steeling itself against an onslaught of potatoes. Highlights in the mist above, shooting off her hair and skin, and those stone-like potatoes provide contrast that increases the density and weight of the blueish grey to dark grey atmosphere. Prettied up for a party in the effervescent *Pinkki*, the figure eyes the viewer from within a rubbery and hairless head mask. Her countenance suggests ambivalence, of being temporarily engulfed in joyful discomfort.

To say that Hokkanen has successfully fused the anatomy with its setting doesn't describe her achievement. It's more as if the body has been haunted by its surroundings or, in other words, been taken over and subjected to its full and unmitigated control. Her images visualise moments of intense feeling, reactions that supersede all rational and logic consideration. There's nothing facile or calculated about these pictures. Their sweep is broad. Each work actually

embodies a range of emotions and the manner in which they have been installed in the gallery emphasises their inherent depth. The arrangement, as Hokkanen noted at the opening, also creates a story. This story is based on and draws strength from an intuitive set of relationships, and its plot is open to interpretation. Perhaps others will come away from the exhibition as I did, seeing the works as facets of a larger chromatic gem.

“—in short—color is consciousness itself, color is feeling, and shape is the distance color goes securely, as in our life we extend ourselves through neighborhoods and hunting grounds; while form in its turn is the relation of these inhabited spaces, in or out or up or down, and thrives on the difference between kitchen and pantry. This difference, with all its sameness, is yet another quality, alive in time like the stickiness of honey or the gently rough lap of the cat, for color is connection. The deeds and sufferings of light, as Goethe says, are ultimately song and celebration.”³

[1] Dorothea Brook in George Eliot's Middlemarch (introductory quote), in Theroux, A. The Primary Colors, New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1994.

[2] Personal communication with the artist, 3.9.2018.

[3] Gass, W. On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry, 5th ed. Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, 1979, p. 73.

MARI HOKKANEN: Room of colors, 14.9.-21.10.2018, MUU Kaapeli, Kaapelitehdas, Tallberginkatu 1 C, 00180 Helsinki

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MUU writes:

Finland is a nation of art lovers, with visual art events and venues attracting some 4.5 million visitors annually. Visual art is available for enjoyment the year round in all sorts of places, from established institutions to small galleries and pop-up exhibitions. New exciting venues are being set up all the time. Yet the number of discriminating texts about art is dwindling. This deplorable lack has also been noted at Artists' Association MUU, the second largest organisation representing professional artists in Finland.

MUU Writes is a group composed of artists who share an interest in writing. It has been meeting for a couple of years already to discuss the role and potential of writing in contemporary art. Now the group has set themselves the task of publishing an essay on every exhibition scheduled in MUU's program autumn 2018, to be released both online and in the gallery. The project seeks to offer a creative alternative to art criticism, with artists writing about the work of a colleague.

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