



VIRTUALLY REAL HELSINKI

Computer imagery has come a long way from the days when graphics were dominated by images of silvery spheres reflecting perspectival grids. As various media now converge in the ever-expanding electronic realm, agility has become the *modus operandi* in many artists' work. The exhibition *Virtually Real—Painters of the Internet Generation* tackles one aspect of this broad topic [Helsinki Art Museum Meilahti; June 9—August 29, 2010]. The exhibition does not, however, strictly limit its purview to the internet. Instead, it features works by a dozen younger Finnish painters who enlist a broad range of computing strategies and metaphors to craft compositions that span a broad range of concerns, from gender confusion and self-image to violence and parallel worlds. Ultimately, the representations on view share one thing: inherently contradictory, they leave us with the impression that our contemporary world is an increasingly malleable and complex place.

Juha Hälikkä's canvases convey an uneasy mix of glamor and violence. He sources his subjects from the internet, assorted media, and his own photographs, removing them from their original contexts to draw attention to anatomical features or other relationships. *Skyline*, 2005, presents a tipped sideways view of Mickey Rourke that leads the eyes to concentrate on the actor/boxer's facial topography. In *Marble Dreams*, 2010, the proximity of a cane to the female performer's face simultaneously intimates violence and eroticism. The large scale of these ambiguous images ultimately causes our eyes to become absorbed in the color and patterns of the subjects' dermis and we lose sight of the individuals depicted. Similarly, Sami Lukkarinen searches networking sites for faces of interest, crops and pixellates them, then transfers the images to canvas. The paintings frequently carry provocative titles such as *Foam Boy*, 2006, and *Steel Vagina*, 2007, but the images, now virtually abstract color grids, convey next to no pertinent visual information. This mix of titillating titles and hidden identity suggests illicit activity, thus creating a climate bristling with tension.

Tiina Mielonen's painted Plexiglas panels exude an altogether different kind of tension. The electric chromatic intensity of her landscapes derives both from her palette and the layer of yellow coating the back of each sheet. The works' eerie glow recalls the luminescence of computer screens and cylindrical animated novelty lamps depicting views of Niagara Falls. Mielonen's borrowings from travel brochures, though, remain unrecognizable. Firmly anti-arcadian, her unconventional images lure us into considering other issues, such as the unique visual qualities arising out of her choice of materials.

Landscape also features in Markku Laakso's and Petri Ala-Maunus' work. Laakso, who hails from Lapland, paints images that evidence a dual sense of self. His double self-portraits derive from photographs taken in Lapland showing him dressed in traditional costumes and self-made Elvis outfits. In paintings such as *Going Home*, 2009, understated humor pervades as improbable realities merge. Here, an Elvis adorned in a gold lamé suit and skis is twinned with Laakso the Laplander affecting an Elvis pose in the wintry hills of Finland's far north. Whereas Laakso's romantic depictions of nature cite the Golden Age of Finnish art, Ala-Maunus creates unseemly idealized scenarios that skewer parochial viewpoints. Based on an image found in the Jehovah's Witnesses' *Watchtower* magazine, his paintings *There is a place in heaven for me and my kind 1*, 2009, *There is a place in heaven for me and my kind 2*, 2009, and *There is a place in heaven for me and my kind 3*, 2010, picture heaven as a series of mountainous gardens in which metal heads, horrid Ala-Maunus clones, and movie monsters, respectively, can frolic.

Stiina Saaristo also relies on her own image to produce oversized portraits of females struggling with various neuroses. These grotesque, visually dense and psychologically powerful images utilize children's and sex toys to explore issues of friendship, betrayal, sexual relationships, and gender confusion. The saccharine hues, tightly framed subjects, and shallow spaces in

which they reside convey emotional intensity and induce a sense of claustrophobia. Psychological stress manifests itself in an altogether different manner in Kari Vehosalo's journalistic images. Combining his photos with old ones found on the internet, Vehosalo's photo-realist canvases of business meetings and formal dinner parties initially intimate verity. But when we suddenly notice the apparition of an infant, astonishment over a spilled glass of wine, or the corpse lying on the table, this impression is shattered. The works show that trauma arises out of all kinds of events and situations.

Virtually Real proves that computer-sourced imagery has subtly and overtly seeped into painters' oeuvres. It evidences a tendency for pastiche and a renewed interest in the surreal. In a sense, it also confirms what we already know: paintings tend to be virtual representations. Though few works take a critical approach, Ala-Maunus' sardonic representations mirror the internet's ability for uniting groups outside the social mainstream. Miina Jatkola's ambivalent and somewhat melodramatic painting *The First New Day*, 2006-2009, at least speaks of the internet's alienating effect. The individuals trapped in floating bubbles suffer loss and abandonment. From another perspective, however, they represent explorers on a path of discovery.

—John Gayer

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Sami Lukkarinen, *Ma-ri*, 2009, oil on canvas, 46 x 46 cm [courtesy of the artist and the Helsinki Art Museum; photo: Sami Lukkarinen]; Petri Ala-Maunus, *There is a place in heaven for me and my kind 2*, 2009, oil on canvas, 170 x 200 cm [courtesy of the artist and the Helsinki Art Museum; photo: Petri Ala-Maunus]