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TIINA ELINA NURMINEN

On my desk is an old brownish-green envelope. According to the postmarks, it was used to transport a letter that was sent from Nauvo in the Turku Archipelago on the fourth day of December 1895, arriving at Tammisaari in southern Finland four days later. According to the stamp, the postage charge was 20 pennies in the currency of the day. Later on, either the recipient of the letter or someone else has used the envelope to practise their handwriting. The squiggly written words and lines are, however, intertwined in a way that makes them effectively illegible. I notice that I am looking at the envelope as a drawing rather than trying to make out what is written on it.

There is a little story associated with the envelope. I was in Tiina Elina Nurminen's studio in Helsinki looking at her paintings. I found myself saying to her that, for some obscure reason, they reminded me of the letters and postcards that, long before the days of the Internet and social media, travellers sent to friends and relatives waiting for them back at home. I was particularly thinking of cards on which, due to lack of space, the written message had been carried over to the picture side, or where explanations had been added on top of the picture.

Nurminen was not surprised by my words, on the contrary. She brought out some old letters and postcards that she had collected, one of them being the one sent from Nauvo. She has also studied in Germany, and lived in Zambia and France, and the idea of a painting as a message sent from another country or another continent is, as it were, built into her art. On the other hand, many of her paintings contain slender, curling brushstrokes, which readily bring to mind some sort of abstract calligraphy.

The human eye is constructed in such a way that it finds things that belong to the visible world in places where they do not actually exist. As perception psychology has shown us, all it takes is a tiny hint and the mind comes up with an interpretation for something that, only a moment ago, was a vague smudge or shadow.

Nurminen knows what the eye and mind are capable of, but does not let them off easily. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to find references to figuration in her paintings. She parries them with multiply interlaced, layered and mutually annulling brushstrokes. Added to that, she favours bright, synthetic colour scales that are alien to nature, and eye-provoking compositional solutions that go against traditional spatial structures based on disparities between figure and ground.

Many of those who have written about Nurminen's paintings have discussed how hard it is to put her works into words or how they "remain [...] beyond the domain of language".¹ This is undeniably the case, since, for the reasons mentioned above, any attempt founders on its own impossibility. On the other hand, we could ask whether verbalization or looking for definitive interpretations is even necessary with paintings like these. Why should we not accept them as they are, as unique marvels and as looking only like themselves?

Not only are Nurminen's works not amenable to verbalization, it is also hard to reproduce them, for example, in photographs. Their ground does not lie in the picture, but in the surface of the canvas: in the way that the paint has been spread thinly or liberally, in the way that the brush has been dipped into the wet paint, traced out a sharp outline, or skimmed the surface with a featherlight touch, and in the way that the substance of the paint is opaque, translucent, or sparkling. They have to be seen live, with your own eyes.

Every one of Nurminen's paintings is a kind of composite involving various ways of handling paint, a distinctive type of drawing or "writing". At the same time as they are more complicated than they look, there is nothing hidden in them, they are totally open to the gaze. The eye, meanwhile, is a sensitive instrument and easily reads the messages on the paint surface.

Even though Nurminen's art has points in common with Informalism and with the way that it emphasizes the encounter between the artist and the physical substance of the paint, her

¹ "Nurminen's paintings often remain deliberately beyond the domain of language in an area of visual inspection by presenting a mixed array of unlocalized and sometimes even slightly imprecise initial visual themes on the surface of the canvas." Kati Kivinen: "Moods of Colour and Line". *Tiina Elina Nurminen: Encounter*. Galerie Anhava, Helsinki 2001.

working process is far from being a rapid act or event. An individual brushstroke can, indeed, be swift and spontaneous, but as a painter she is slow. She spends a lot of time on her paintings and ponders every detail at length. She listens to her paintings and occasionally lets them lead the way. At the same time, however, she tries to hold on to her original ideas and makes the final decisions herself. We might perhaps say that a painting is finished when it and its maker agree that nothing more can be done.

Nurminen finds the starting points for her paintings in her everyday surroundings, in colours and clothes, when moving around the city, and when she is amid nature. It is evident that she has also absorbed lasting experiences during her years in two places that are almost opposite in character: tropical Zambia, and France close to the mountainous Swiss border.

When our conversation turned to art, Nurminen mentioned her friend Marianna Uutinen's paintings from the start of the 1990s as an important, liberating experience. These powerfully feminist works opened up routes for her into other ways of making non-figurative paintings that diverge from tradition. For example, there appeared in her works collage elements that disrupt both the (modernist) two-dimensionality of the canvas and the excessive ornamentality and beauty of the painting.

And yet, it comes as no surprise when Nurminen brings up Claude Monet's late lily ponds, works that are anchored to a named place, while also balancing on the borders between the figurative and non-figurative, on the one hand, and between the picture and calligraphy, on the other. It is also clear that glimmering somewhere in the far distance are echoes of Cy Twombly's poetic metaphors and influences absorbed from Per Kirkeby, who was one of Nurminen's teachers.

Nurminen's paintings can be seen as autobiographical notes, messages or signposts, which she uses to give her memories and experiences, and the related feelings, permanent physical form, thus making them accessible to all of us. Crucial elements in her works are light, colour and line, which combine to constitute something that is hard to put a name to, while at the same time being clearly recognizable. I have never visited Central Africa, but I feel like I have been there when I look, for example, at *Lämmin odotus* (Warm Anticipation, 2008).

The slow, multi-stage process of creating of the paintings, in which the suggestions that they themselves make get to be heard, releases them from the bonds of excessive subjectivity. At the same time, the world of the paintings is opened up to us, while leaving room for our own memories and experiences. A few of the paintings, such as *Utu* (Mist, 2012), evoke powerful associations with landscapes, but to which one, the Bay of Naples towered over by a smoke-wreathed Vesuvius or a sunset in the Turku archipelago?

And even if we do not recognize our own world in Nurminen's paintings, we can always experience what she herself does when faced with the finished work: the joy and satisfaction that everything is exactly where it should be – in other words, that special, unique state, free of self, that requires neither interpretation nor explanation.