



TALLINN, ESTONIA

Merike Estna
KUMU ART MUSEUM

Merike Estna's exhibition "Blue Lagoon" forces the visitor out of the comfortable position of being merely a viewer: One can step on painting, eat it, wear it. Painting spills over to the floor; it takes the form of cakes, cocktails, books, and videos, while the vivacity of light pastel colors and vibrant patterns immerses the visitor in an overall sensory-cultural experience. On entering the expanded space of painting, one finds the hierarchies separating it from the decorative arts and everyday life dissolving. The installation is filled with all sorts of objects. But whatever they are—hats, pieces of clothing, strips of canvas, ventilators, TV screens—all aspire to one single thing: to be paintings.

The young London-based Estonian artist challenges the tradition of abstract painting, from color and composition, form and materials, through display and perception. Estna conducts her rebellion against convention with lightness and humor. Heroic macho abstraction is replaced by tongue-in-cheek patternmaking. By choosing pastel blues, yellows, and pinks, Estna pushes painting to a discomfort zone—can such combinations be treated as serious abstract art? And who makes the decision? This disquiet is enhanced by the use of unconventional materials that are not generally considered "painterly," among them apparel, food, and liquids. The pieces of clothing, hats, TV screens, and other objects are not integrated into paintings on canvas; rather, painting itself is integrated into the array of things dispersed around the exhibition space on the floor, on a rack, or hanging from the ceiling.

Finally, with the immersive display, Estna destroys the privileged single point of view for exploring a painting and for the installation as a whole. She challenges another old norm of painting—the Greenbergian value of flatness—by removing a painting from the wall and putting it into various, often slightly bizarre situations. The video *Traveling with a Painting*, 2013, shows Estna taking a canvas off its stretcher and placing it outside in a wintry landscape, creating various sculptural shapes with it as she manipulates it. The canvas becomes a character in a sort of adventure story. One finds oneself purposely disoriented visually, spatially, and, finally, art-historically. By dismantling the established structures of perception, Estna makes us question our assumptions about how to look at or engage with art objects and things in general. The conventional rules of those encounters are reversed: While paintings

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Merike Estna, *Camouflage Painting Show*, 2014, oil on canvas, house paint. Installation view.

gain the quality of "readiness-to-hand," to use Heidegger's famous term, articles of clothing become things to look at. Estna treats painting as a constant negotiation between artistic authority and the viewer's perception: Being everywhere and nowhere at the same time, painting becomes a state of mind.

At Kumu, Estna's solo project is paired with an international exhibition, "I'm a Painting," involving fifteen artists. Instead of being presented as separate exhibitions for comparison, the two shows are spatially blended: Estna's works seep into the space of the group show—which she co-organized in collaboration with the curator of her own exhibition, Kati Ilves—and vice versa. Such layering and merging replicates the current conditions of life, in which unrelated things are integrated into one another without our being able to trace the point zero of this mash-up. Through this simple but smart spatial decision, the impossibility of autonomy—whether of art, of authorship, or of influence—is revealed.

—Neriga Černiauskaitė

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