

Challenging the Perception of Painting



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Photos from exhibitions: Annika Toots

From June 27th until November 2nd 2014, the Kumu Gallery of Contemporary Art will be presenting “Merike Estna and I’m a Painting”, which consists of two closely connected exhibitions. One of them is Merike Estna’s solo exhibition, “Blue Lagoon”, curated by Kati Ilves, and the second one is the international painting exhibition, “I’m a Painting”, curated by Kati Ilves and Merike Estna, with works by Frank Ammerlaan, Ei Arakawa, Kerstin Brätsch, James Ferris, Annie Hémond Hotte, Juste Kostikovaite, Kristi Kongi, Kris Lemsalu, Nicolas Party, Katinka Pilscheur, Jon Rafman, Dan Rees, Samara Scott, Simon Daniel Tegnander and Taavi Tulev. The two exhibitions intertwine and melt together, creating a magical space in which everything is possible – everything can be a painting. As a painter and as a curator, Merike Estna has been on a quest to deconstruct the common beliefs about painting and to cross all conservative borders to see what is left in the end – to see what a painting really is. Her provocative and playful works challenge the viewer’s perception of a painting and provide an alluring visual and spatial experience. The exhibition will be accompanied by a publication which will be launched on the 4th of September, 2014.

On the 5th floor of the Kumu Art Museum there are two exhibitions: your solo exhibition “Blue Lagoon”, and the international painting exhibition, “I’m a Painting”, curated by you and Kati Ilves. What is the main idea behind these two shows?

The main question is – what is a painting and what could it be, and this exhibition proposes many different approaches by several contemporary artists. One of the most important things in the structure of these shows is the aspect of overlapping - things are placed on top of each other. Firstly, one show is actually on top of the other one, or inside of it. Secondly, the works of art are positioned on top of each other. For example, there is a mural and on top of it are other paintings. Or, there is a painting on the floor and someone else’s objects are placed on top of it. The main idea behind this show is the layering of things in order to produce new combinations and dialogues. The purpose is, perhaps, to dissolve the traditional exhibition format, in which each work of art possesses an autonomous space and seclusion, thereby showing the expanded space of the painting.



This exhibition shows the specific nature of contemporary painting. What do you think are its most important characteristics?

The most important characteristic is, perhaps, the disappearance of boundaries. The expansion of the medium of painting appeared a few decades ago – the painting has ceased to be on the canvas, the space of a painting is vast and the mediums are overlapping. So, the answer to the question “what is a painting?” embodies various approaches. For example, is it a painting when you use paint? Or could an object be a painting? Or blending painting with ceramics, like in the works by Kris Lemsalu? Or is it a painting when it looks like a painting, even though no paint has been used – such as the plasticine painting by Dan Rees? Or the painting by Frank Ammerlaan, which is the result of a chemical reaction? The exhibition doesn’t give one certain answer, but instead, provides a variety of options.

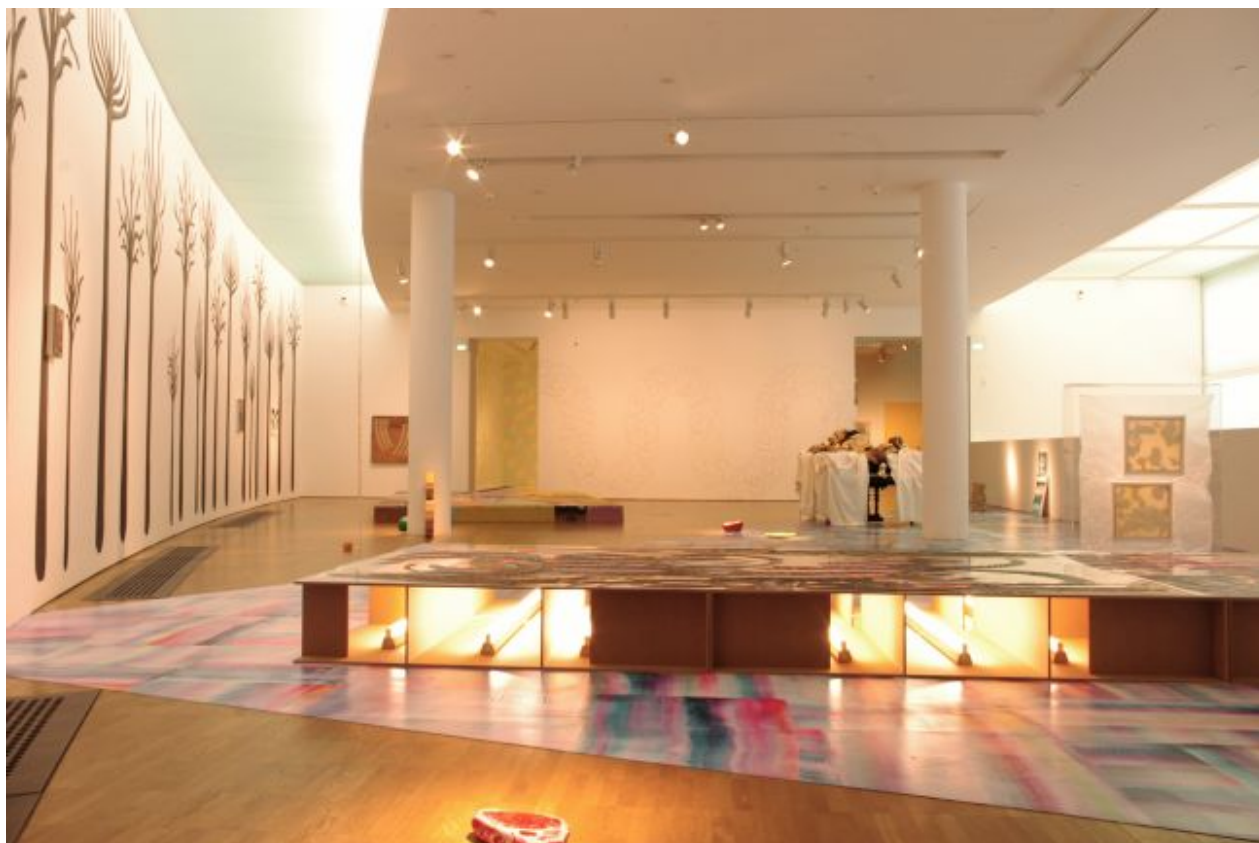
Was the process of overlapping two exhibitions uncomplicated? Was it planned this way right from the beginning?

At first, Eha Komissarov invited me to organize my solo exhibition at Kumu, and at some point we developed the idea of also simultaneously displaying a group show. I felt that if I'm working on both of them, then the classical separation is pointless and they should, rather, be blended. This is how it developed and I think it functions rather well, but the whole process was much more complicated than I expected – I was surprised. However, I consider the experience of curating particularly useful because it made me appreciate all the curators I have ever worked with. Now I can see the other side of our practice a lot more clearly and I understand it a lot better. At some point, I felt like writing an apology letter to all of the curators I have previously worked with.

The name of your solo exhibition is “Blue Lagoon”. What is a “blue lagoon” in terms of painting?

It's a title that at first might seem simply poetic; however, for me it signifies a place that could be, but doesn't exist in reality. “Blue Lagoon” is an installation at the exhibition that consists of many small particles that are all paintings – on hats or other pieces of clothing, on threads and air blowers, TV screens, and other objects. They create a space in which all of the objects aspire to be paintings – painting as a question of what could be called a painting. What are the possibilities?





What defines a painting in your opinion? In your own work you have gradually eliminated narrative and figurative qualities – you have abandoned the canvas; is it the paint that makes a painting? Or is it rather the process?

I work mostly through paint. I have been using paint on canvas in order to solve the question of the painting, and I have also moved past it. So, personally, yes, I work with paint, but this exhibition shows many other approaches. I don't think that paint makes the painting and I don't think that the paint has to be there. It depends on the approach and there isn't only one answer. I think the specialty of contemporary painting is that it's not in a secluded position anymore, and that the mediums are mixing. The painting has expanded and it could be anything. I think that what actually makes a painting or a painter is the artist's own interest in positioning it this way.

Are there any borders at all?

For this exhibition, I have worked through many possible solutions – at the opening we had painting as food and drinks; in the exhibition we have paintings that you can wear, or which you can enter and touch. We have painting on the floor – painting that you can walk on; we have paintings as books that you can browse. There are so many possibilities. Of course, I have thought a lot about this exhibition. I think there are no limits; the limits are long gone and this is why it seemed so important for me to curate this exhibition in Estonia. I think that there haven't been that many shows in Estonia that have exhibited this kind of painting that crosses the borders of traditional painting and goes into an expanded painting space.

The overlapping of works and putting the painting into an unusual position – blurring the boundaries – often confuses the audience. They are not used to stepping on a painting, or wearing and eating a painting. And sometimes it can also seem a bit cruel, for example, the way you have cut the canvas. I suppose this is all intentional?

I was immensely annoyed by the unpractical and secluded position of painting, and I wanted to break that. I wanted to put painting into a new light, to see what is left if you bring it down from the wall and touch it. How do you relate to it or evaluate it then? Or how do you interpret it if it's less secluded from daily life? These are the questions I have been working with... but I don't have the answers. These are all experiments and I'm always observing people to see how they react to it. With this exhibition, I wanted to create a space of obstacles that invite and force you to somehow interact with them – you can't just go through it. I think it is interesting to challenge the viewers and see how they relate with these works.

You have worked with installations, video, textile, performance, etc. – yet you have quite firmly and consciously positioned yourself as a painter. Why is it important to emphasize the aspect of painting in your work?

It is important for me because for the last few years, my main subject and interest has been in rethinking things through the medium of painting. Painting is a medium that is still perceived in a very conservative way – mainly as paint on canvas. Therefore, it is a good way to approach the more general question of rethinking some outdated ideas. In this sense, for me, painting is certainly an obsession and a challenge, because it is definitely not the easiest medium to work with.

You have said that the medium of painting often frustrates you.

Yes, sometimes it definitely does. It's an endless struggle of what is possible and whether it really is possible.

This frustration also unfolds in one of the video installations at the exhibition in which you can be seen kicking a painting with which you are traveling.

Yes, this piece, "Traveling with a painting", reflects on my relationship with painting on many different levels. Firstly, it turns around the idea of a landscape painting – instead of a landscape painting, there is a painting in the landscape. Secondly, it reflects on the life of contemporary artists. There is a lot of traveling involved, many residencies, etc. The life of an artist is not very stationary. In this video, the painting is my companion during my travels, and sometimes it is the only companion, which means that it is also the target of all of my emotions. When I did my residency in Northern Norway in February, it was very dark all the time and my frustration grew, as can be seen in the video.





Your latest paintings have been a concoction of pastels and rhythmic patterns that have an obsessive, yet playful feel to them – from where do these derive?

The reason behind these pastels colors is that I come from a very traditional painting tradition – this is my background. Even if these shades are used in traditional painting, they wouldn't be in this kind of combination. Above all, I wanted to see if this kind of sweet combination could function as a serious oil-on-canvas painting. I wanted to step out of the tradition and away from everything that I have been learning for such a long time. This seemed the only right option.

So it is basically a rebellion?

At first, it definitely was, a little bit. The purpose was to break the tradition and not to reproduce things. And it was quite hard to get there. These patterns that I use are also usually associated with applied arts and crafts. Although they have been certainly used in the painting medium for the last 50 years or so, they definitely aren't the most common attribute of painting. But this is only the first level – all the works in this exhibition, especially in the group exhibition, are challenges, and they can be seen on many different levels. Mostly it is the unexpected use of materials that surprises the viewer, but I definitely hope that they can see past the initial visual aspect, and see that there is so much more to them.

During your career as an artist, you have changed your direction quite a lot of times. Is it true that that is mainly because you easily become disinterested?

Clearly, I do get bored, but it might be because I'm a young artist and I've been searching for the thing that matters the most to me; and perhaps I have the habit of thoroughly working through the things that interest me. Maybe for some other artist this would look more natural – a few works of each experiment – but I have always seriously delved into the subject, and therefore, these series or certain periods have emerged. One of my principles is not to get stuck in the repetition of something, but it is quite possible that from now on, the changes will be seen within slightly smaller nuances. The reason could also be the fact that I started taking part in exhibitions very early on, and my whole journey of becoming an artist has always been in front of everyone to be seen.

Do you ever look back? For example, do you still paint nudes sometimes, or is this phase already long behind you?

At the moment, I don't. But I have wondered if, at some point in my life, that would be interesting for me again. I mostly work in series – I take one question and I work it through and then I move on. I solve the question and then I move on to the next one.



Merike Estna

Have you thought about moving on from where you are now? Have you solved this question and are you now ready for the next one?

I think that now there will be a break. The process of organizing this exhibition has been very long. About two years ago we had the initial idea, and we have been working on it intensively for at least a year now – the last three months without even a moment to rest. I think I need some time to reflect on it and to rest a little bit.

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