

There and Back Again

Artists from the Baltic region navigate volatile pasts and precarious presents at Kiasma, Helsinki

When we show our faces, we show our history. Every contour and crack; every crevice deepens as we squint at the sun. These marks – made by us, inflicted by others – can be confronted, concealed, but seldom erased. So why does the lifted hood of Kris Lemsalu's sculpture *Star* (2016) cover an absence? What has failed to form or, rather, been destroyed? In a yellow hoody and a party hat, the porcelain figure hangs from a parachute, its limbs kinked into a star. Two grotesques hunch below, eager to guard or gut, unaware that they too are intermediates; their wait, eternal.

Star is one of many included in 'There and Back Again', an exhibition of 26 artists from the Baltic Sea region, that hangs between states, wrapped in the present while wrangling with the past. Like Finland, the Baltic nations (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) declared independence following the 1917 Russian Revolution. Hands were shaken and treaties signed, but promises take pleasure in breaking, and in 1939 the Baltic littoral was divided into German and Soviet 'spheres of influence'. As World War II ceased and the Cold War lay claim to disorder, the Baltic nations fell under Soviet control, where they would remain until 1991.



How, when history is marked by such volatility, do we deal with the present? For Jaan Toomik, as for Lemsalu, one revels in flux. In his video *Dancing Home* (1995), Toomik dances alone on a ferry, the engine's thrum his guide, the world – or his place in it – untethered. Flo Kasearu's video *Uprising* (2015) speaks to an appropriation of past narratives, those which boast permanence but remain as brittle as the rest of us. While the camera hovers over Tallinn, two figures slice and fold sections of a rusted tin roof into a quartet of aeroplanes. One such craft, *Uprising (The Aircraft)* (2015), rests in Kiasma, thrust, thrown, flown into a new story.

Kris Lemsalu, *Star*, 2016, installation view, 2018, Kiasma, Helsinki. Courtesy: the artist and Kiasma, Helsinki; photograph: Pirje Mykkänen

Others needle at the conservative identities enforced during the occupation. In *Two in Periphery* (1994), a run of photographs taken by Gintautas Trimakas, Nomeda Urbonienė and Elena Valiukaitė re-stage illustrations from a 20th-century homemaking manual, revealing the standards of domesticity as ill-fitting poses. Katrīna Neiburga's video *Solitude* (2005), filmed in the artist's apartment, captures an absence of life, suggesting that constructed environments do not engender belonging. No work skewers the region's history with more discomfort than Marko Raat and Jaanus Samma's *A Chairman's Tale* (2015), a semi-fictional account of a former Soviet soldier who faced charges of homosexuality. The four films dramatize the soldier's 'crimes' to an excruciating degree, rendering natural sexual acts unnatural, just as they were to a Soviet Union that punished homosexuality with prison, hard-labour and, in its fledgling days, death.



Flo Kasearu, *Uprising (The Aircraft)*, 2015, folded in airplane shape tin roof surface, installation view, 2018, Kiasma, Helsinki. Courtesy: the artist and Kiasma, Helsinki; photograph: Petri Virtanen

Dealing with what defines you is a task always unenviable, occasionally untenable. For *Bubble* (2017), Artor Jesus Inkerö invested in protein and a gym membership in order to question male privilege and gender binaries. The resulting film sees Inkerö enacting quintessentially ‘male’ scenes, thereby clumsily reaffirming the self-same stereotypes that they aim to disrupt. Maria Toboła’s *Amber Kebab* (2016), a rotating spit grafted out of amber, is a celebration of cultural cross-pollination that plays out as crude reduction, while a befuddling woodcarving by Miķelis Fišer depicts aliens vandalizing a swastika-tipped pyramid – on the Moon.





‘There and Back Again’ cuts a lonesome figure, its cast held apart by history, held from their own history, and left to navigate a precarious present. But in networking these vagrant stories, it shows that community can be

Maria Tobola,
Amber Kebab,
2016, installation
view, 2018,
Kiasma, Helsinki.

found within dislocation, and within that, something better still. As Masha Gessen writes of her life as a Soviet émigré: 'I have felt a sense of precariousness wherever I have been, along with a sense of opportunity. They are a pair.'

Courtesy: the artist
and Kiasma,
Helsinki;
photograph: Pirje
Mykkänen

['There and Back Again. Contemporary Art from the Baltic region'](#) is on view at Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, until 24 March 2019.

Main image: Artor Jesus Inkerö, Bubble (detail), 2017, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Kiasma, Helsinki