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Finnish Noir. A new take on melancholia

Quiet nostalgia, heavy-hearted melancholia, gloom – these are all common attributes used when describing Finnish literature, music, cinema or visual arts, as well as the associations they give rise to. For many lovers of Finnish contemporary art, melancholia is embodied within Esko Männikkö's depictions of hermits, the dark fantasy landscapes of Elina Merenmies, or the ethereal self-portraits of Elina Brotherus steeped in a mysterious silence. Fellow countrymen find no difficulty identifying with the worlds of these masters of contemporary art, while for outsiders Finnish melancholia has a certain exotic quality to it, epitomised by the kind of deadpan aesthetic familiar to Aki Kaurismäki's films. That quality is often seen to describe the entire nation, its mentality and its art. But, is melancholia truly an inexhaustible fountain of Finnish art or merely a stereotypical take on it? How is melancholia being addressed by the new generation of visual artists? What is their take on this admittedly pervasive mindset?

Let's start by looking at the etymology of melancholia. The concept derives from the Greek word for black, *melas*, which Homer used in the *Odyssey* as an epithet for death. By concentrating on this aspect of melancholia – the colour and its connotations – we can detach ourselves from the mentality and focus instead of the symbolic meanings of the colour, which are fluid and change from one context to the next.

Beyond Black

Black, in art, is a colour. Surely that's self-evident? Not necessarily. In physics colour is a property of light, and black is the absence of light. What if we were to consider black in art in the same way as it appears in physics, as an absence? Blackness covers and conceals the visible; it cloaks life. Yet we know there is something under or behind the black. Something that is hidden but that exists. Something fascinating. And this is a quality that many contemporary artists draw on: the vitality of black.

It may seem like an exercise in category-making to select examples of art that are based on a certain colour, but I think examining the functions of black opens a veritable Pandora's box of content. The notion of colour as a component in the generating of meaning in art, not just as a visible, unproblematic amalgamation of tones, has interested me for a long time. Some ten years ago, I wrote in an anthology on painting about the cultural ways of reading pink. To my chagrin, I realised that research on the dynamics of colour in contemporary art remains extremely thin, and that the meaning of colours are often ignored in analyses of art. Thanks to the powerful influence of Bauhaus teachers Johannes Itten and Josef Albers, the predominant colour theory is still the leading standard. In this theory, the properties of colours are based on the construction of hues using pigments and the interrelations of hues. This narrow view remains unfortunately prevalent, even today, whenever the concept of colour is discussed in art education and art theory. It feels as if the heart is ripped out of the subject whenever the reasons for specific colour use are systematically ignored.

Instead, we should try to find out what black, as material for art, truly is. What is it that black conceals? Associatively, black signifies darkness, tonal reduction, the absence of light,

silence, gloom, black humour. It is illustrated by presence and absence. Most importantly, it is both visible and aesthetic, but also content that arises from a visual aesthetic. Behind black there is a veritable explosion of meaning!

Emotionally Charged Black

When I think about black in contemporary art, I am immediately reminded of **Ville Andersson**'s ink drawings, dark photographs and paintings. Evoking a sense of infinite emptiness, they remind me of the physical definition of black as the absence of colour. Andersson's works are like ahistorical illustrations of eternity. They breathe silently in the here and now, yet they seem to be someplace else. In Andersson's newest body of work, the drawn line is even more powerful and captivating: the rhizome dissolves into a mass of fantastical tendrils and tentacles, with indistinct figures visible inside. The figures are like people in dreams, possessing distinct details yet remaining completely unreal, distant and unidentifiable. The mood of an imminent nightmare is negated by the inner harmony: I am looking at a picture where peace reigns and where I am tempted to stay so that I may wander in tranquillity. The static quality of drawing and painting as artistic media are ideal for depicting Andersson's dreamlike world, which is simultaneously brimming with emotion and presence yet in perfect harmony with silence.

What I find amazing is that given his extremely narrow, monochromatic palette, Andersson is able to imbue his works with such a multitude of tonalities in the viewer's mind. The works do not seem to require any interpretation. As a viewer, it is wonderful – even liberating – to experience nothing but a sharp emotion, even a slight sense of pathos, without feeling any need to verbalise the experience. In psychology black is associated with the unconscious. The term 'blackout' says it all. I am unable to say what is it that happens in Andersson's pictures or what they purport to depict – there is only the impact.

Black Humour

This year's Finnish representation at the Venice Biennale would seem to suggest a new connection between black humour and garage aesthetic in contemporary art. **Erkka Nissinen** is a full-blooded representative of his generation. He is an artist who bows down to no formal teachings or theories of art or to the history of the nation, for that matter. He appears indeed to have turned a new page in art, his work seeming to have become a true part of the popular everyday culture and existence. When you have no models to look up to, you have no need to comment on the aesthetics of previous generations. The result is uninhibited, fresh.

The piece in Venice was *The Aalto Natives*, a co-production with Nathaniel Mellors. A previous work, *Mikä on yhteisö? (What Is Community?)* from 2015, is an even more apt example of the vitality of black and of a comic approach to national stereotypes. When colours are pared down to black and white, when the central figure is a middle-aged Finnish man with a 'black-and-white' worldview, when the plot consists of supernatural events that befall him, and when the medium is comics-like drawn animation with a laconic narrative, the piece engenders chuckles, compassion, laughter and mundane insights, and perhaps a little bit of sadness too. Even using just a few elements, the artist builds a complex socio-political

work of art that is absurd yet contains something very ordinary and recognisable. Dare I say, something genuinely Finnish?

The viewer should beware of being taken in by the seemingly simple aesthetic of Nissinen's works. They are highly deliberate and polished down to the last detail. Their seeming amateurishness is a device that clears a path directly to the recipient's soul. The sense of crudeness, ordinariness, familiarity and directness makes the works highly approachable. Instead of playing with any artistic filters, Nissinen baits us with a narrative that divorces us from everyday existence and a sympathy that returns us back to it.

Black Identity

Iiu Susiraja has leapt into the hearts and minds of both domestic and international audiences, and with good reason. Although the figure in her photographs is the artist herself, I think the principal role is reserved for the spectator. Susiraja takes photographs of absurd but simple situations that force viewers to face their emotions before they have a chance to start processing the picture. Why did I laugh? Are these supposed to be funny? Why did I also feel sadness even though the figure in the photographs is evidently active, confident, bold, revealing? The images appear quite mundane, but are they realistic? Or are they naturalistic, since I felt an urge to avert my gaze?

The dismal formality of the situations in Susiraja's images, coupled with their entertaining implausibility, makes us observe them as if transfixed. Rarely are the viewer's own inner conflicts brought into awareness in such a concrete way. Hyper-ordinariness coupled with absurdity is an exquisite recipe. The burden of selfhood and of everyday life and the complexity of the emotions attached to them make their weight felt in the viewer's dark mind. Susiraja's stunning art reminds us that, whoever you are and whatever you're like, our identity is always fluid and dark. And yet, when you look at these pictures, you understand that humour is the perfect way to control your mind and see yourself from a distance. Identity may sometimes be black, but melancholia is not a permanent state of mind.

Black Horror

If *Finnish Noir* were a genre, **Juhana Moisander's** work would serve as its paragon. Moisander's moving-image works always make use of their venue. The topics of his works are based on ordinary cultural themes of the day, which Moisander combines with a pitch-black aesthetic inspired by the horror genre. Set up in a dim space, the works acquire their force from the immersiveness of the experience, the foreboding and even frightening mood generated by the movements and sounds of figures floating in the intangible, black immensity of Moisander's works. The sense of dread is subtly present. But, instead of being truly frightening, the works play with the universal human desire to be scared, that same titillation that makes us read detective stories or watch a horror movie on a dark, stormy night. Awareness of the presence of the contrived situation is vitally important and a key feature of the reception of Moisander's works.

In a new topical piece entitled *Hukka (Wolf)*, Moisander slyly mocks ultra-nationalism. Wearing a flight jacket, commando mask and a fur hat, the man seen in the video huffs and puffs without actually saying anything. Initially, the figure appears threatening, but because

the man is almost totally passive, his blustering behaviour soon loses its power and the viewer begins to chuckle at the figure. When I stare at the huffing character, I actually find myself starting to feel compassion towards him. As a viewer, I realise I am looking at someone who is utterly lost and frustrated. Moisander is shrewd enough to avoid pointing a finger at anything or anybody, yet he has created a revealing image of passive and dammed-up hate. The Finnish title of the piece, *Hukka*, is a word familiar from old folklore and fairy tales, and it even has a slight lyricism to it. Although it does refer to the wolf, one of its meanings is also 'to be lost'. The title says it all and makes me think that today more than ever it is imperative that we be able to understand and deal with the causes of extremist attitudes.

In Conclusion

The artists I have selected for this show are very different from each other, but they all represent a generation that creates their narratives from their own personal framework. They all seem to take a mercifully playful yet also sober attitude towards life and current social issues. The soberness is not oppressive but indicative of realistic awareness of the present moment. Awareness is not a burden. In the world of these artists, tomorrow will come; we have not been vanquished in the 'here and now'. So, where is that famous 'Finnish melancholia'?

In the ancient oral cultures of the North, the colour black was endowed with a life-giving force. The dark winter and the rains would eventually give rise to a new season and to new growth. In contemporary art, too, melancholia seems to be a springboard for the future. Melancholia and heaviness have been replaced by the absurdity of life. Black is now suddenly used in a colourful way, as an exit from melancholia. Perhaps *Finnish Noir* as a new take on melancholia has indeed been born.