

SIJAINTEJA – LOCATIONS

Locations presents two artists, the cosmopolitan Finn, Mari Rantanen, and a true Walloon based in Brussels, Yves Zurstrassen. The artists make us consider the exhibition title in two senses. First concrete locating in time and space is highlighted. In this sense, we can offer an excellent collection of similarities and antitheses. The artists, who represent the same generation but different sexes, have taken completely different paths. Or maybe just one of them has taken a path, for which Mari Rantanen seems to be made for, whilst her exhibition partner, Yves Zurstrassen has rather built a nest. This nest is not, however, just a modest bird's home, as can be seen by anyone who has the chance to visit his impressive studio. The backgrounds of the artists are dominated by geographical divergence. Furthermore, their paths seem to proceed contrary to previously evident tendencies.

The international nomadism represented by Mari Rantanen is in no way intrinsic to Finnish culture. The reason for this is geographical isolation – Finland's location on the world map is certainly not the most central, unless you think purely mathematically whereby every point on the globe could be defined as a central point. The Earth is not, however, a mathematical formation, but contains geological, biological and political aspects. As far as we are concerned, not only our northern location shapes our living conditions but also the isolation caused by the Baltic Sea, which has

ensured the homogeneity of both the population and its culture. Surprisingly this seems to hold true even today. With the best will in the world, Finland cannot be called a multicultural nation, neither can Finnish cities be termed melting pots. Finland's European antithesis can be found in the city connected with this exhibition, at an intersecting point trod by many different peoples, a patchwork quilt of social classes, cultures and languages living at the whim of chance but not necessarily willingly as one nation – Belgium, and in particular that most 'Tower-of-Babel'-like of Europe's capital cities, Brussels. Contrast also exists in relation to nature and culture, as Brussels, as a city and cultural area, is both historical and urban, whereas Finnish culture basically represents newness and proximity to nature.

Against this background, it is interesting that, of our duo, it is Mari Rantanen who has settled permanently outside her home country, first spending ten years in New York, and then more than ten years in Stockholm. This means that she is a foreigner not only geographically but also linguistically, which inevitably influences her thinking and thereby her art. This is not exactly unusual in the world of painters, but is a rare choice for a Finn, as our culture almost intrinsically favours what is Finnish. This in itself is not a bad thing: New York's art world is very sympathetic towards residents of the Big Apple, and even Parisians do not consider a love of home to be a vice. But there is another side to the coin. When your own country is a strawberry, blueberry eaters are rare. In this respect, Mari Rantanen is no exception: she is a rarity.

All communities of course produce exceptions, even the most closed. From an artistic perspective, what is most essential is the question of whether there is room for difference. In the case of Mari Rantanen we can breathe a sigh of relief: Finland has always been her place, in spite of the fact that it has been Finnish homogeneity that has caused her to move outside the local mainstream. Luckily, our community is a broad-minded one.

Belgium, on the other hand, is a country full of comings and goings. It is pointless to talk about a nation – it is more a question of an area. It is an area at the historical heart of Europe. People have always come there and people have always left. It is a kind of crossroads, not just of thoroughfares that over the years have been maintained by merchants, but also of languages and cultures.

In an art history sense, regional traditions reach further than the national tradition – both in time and place. Hieronymus Bosch spent much time working for foreign states, and the Flemish Renaissance artists often lived in the keeping of Italian princes. For centuries, mobility has been the hallmark of the area nowadays covered by Belgium. Intrinsic expansiveness and the practical lowness of language barriers in the heart of the Indo-European area have helped with all kinds of interaction – both in war and in peace. So because moving about is easy, we might assume that Yves Zurstrassen would make use of just this characteristic. But perhaps that would just be too easy. It has also been easy to return. And the best place to return to is home. Zurstrassen's interest in creating a permanent base locally is therefore

easily understandable. We all need a home. At this point we can observe that he has, rather like the Finns, also found himself a summer sanctuary – in Spain.

The *Locations* exhibition does not, however, aim to be a geographical presentation of the areas where the two different artists live and of their histories. As far as the essential theme of the exhibition is concerned, this is of almost no importance. It is primarily an exhibition of paintings. Indeed it is a very pure example of such. The artists in our exhibition have thoroughly researched the idea of abstract painting. Here 'abstract' means that the virtues of traditional modernism, form and colour stand as a cornerstone of the paintings, with colour in control, taking form to the extreme. Even so the end result no longer represents traditional modernism but the art of painting at its purest. And this is what the title of this exhibition indicates, not in the form of pure painting, but in the form of representation. In the field of art, every work produced in its name is placed somewhere. Works of art do not live their own separate lives in outer space, but are created, they are a sum of intelligent and emotional interaction, and through this they can be positioned in the field of art. They are positioned in this cultural space, and their location can be sought and defined, whether people want it or not.

The post-modern has, however, re-assessed positioning in the field of art. Although the idea of equality between the periphery and the centre has been proven to be a utopia in practice – the centres are still centres and can wield greater power than the peripheral areas – the concept of the centre

has lost its meaning in cultural space. If modernism once was interpreted through the position and significance of different tendencies, these days the project of the creation of hierarchies of style is a non-starter. Artistic pluralism is the reality of today. Thus works of art are no longer positioned in the centre or on the periphery, but live their own lives connected rather to their own genres and the values attached to them. This makes the process of evaluating relative.

It is impossible to try to claim offhand that this or that is a damn good work of art. Such absolutism is history. Instead, it is possible to consider paintings as impressive, powerful, interesting, etc. This possibility is not dead, neither is there any reason to leave it to posterity. We can always, here and now, put something on a pedestal or leave other things in the shade, always bearing in mind the transiency of our claim.

This time, the spotlight is on Yves Zurstrassen and Mari Rantanen. The reason for this is a desire to position these artists, and there is a slight coincidence connected with this: in 2005, I opened the door to Yves Zurstrassen's studio in Brussels. I was very impressed, not merely by the works, for my impression was made more powerful by a recollection of the work of Mari Rantanen. Powerful and rich in colour. Both artists work in a very unique way based on the tradition created by abstract painting. You could find in them connections to constructivism and Neo-Geo, and why not? Mari Rantanen is easily found behind Sam Vanni's stripy structures and Zurstrassen's geometrically bordered and outlined surfaces seem to point only to themselves. The

background to this can also be found elsewhere. For example, the strongly coloured paper cuts by Matisse are related to the work of both artists, and the colours that Mari Rantanen uses can be traced all the way back to the Renaissance. One of the characteristic features of the art of painting is also a commitment to tradition, and this tradition is starting to be significant.

However, I myself see them above all as continuing the triumph of American painting, the tradition of abstract expressionism. The bewilderment caused by the encounter was accentuated in particular by the fact that two artists working from such different starting points are positioned so close to each other. A joint exhibition allows us to examine this but it also highlights personal accents.

The work of both artists is dominated by a robust, almost outlinable structure, which holds beneath layers of colour in constant movement. The colours exist precisely for themselves and their own liberation, just as they did with the American painters of the 1950s. Both painters can be tied to this tradition. Behind Zurstrassen's art lie such figures as De Kooning and Franz Kline. As far as Mari Rantanen is concerned, you can very well talk of artists like Barnett Newmann, although perhaps a more obvious American reference might be the slightly later artist, Frank Stella. What is essential here, however, is that the layer of culture coming from across the Atlantic is the 1950s, when painting still had a European background and ideology. Pop art and its offshoots are the first art forms I consider purely American, and there lies a fundamental difference in respect to European-ness.

Pop art is clearly the art of mass culture and of the society of mass production. This again requires a straightforwardness, in which there is hardly any room for complexity and expressivism accentuating individuality.

European-ness, both as a cultural and political phenomenon, embodies multiformity. This is excellently illustrated by the efforts to force through a common EU constitution. Time after time, the agreement has been brought down by national referenda. The reason is not the assumed gulf between the decision-making Euro elite and the common folk that live with their decisions. The basic difficulty lies in excessive oversimplification, which is contrary to the European idea. Europe consists of individuals. In the field of art, this is evident as a belief in the individual. The artist expresses himself and, at the same time, the collective belief in an individual artist's right to present his own view. As an idea this is very far from mass production and mass culture; the expressionist handprint on the canvas tells its own story of uniqueness.

The matter is not, however, quite as simple as that: The American painting of the 1950s emphasised the mythical heroism of the persona of the painter, which is actually in sharp contrast to individuality. Behind the individual and his brushstrokes is a person, flesh and blood, with all the usual mistakes and faults. The heroes, for their part, are real heroes, supermen hovering above the mundanity of everyday life. In this sense, the abstract expressionists have already been bound to American-ness, pioneers in a process of development in which the artist and his public image became

more important than his works. There is no need to list separate examples of this.

In this sense, our artists are pure Europeans, and not only geographically. When looking at the works in this exhibition, you scarcely need first to think about the colour of the artists' hair or what they were wearing on the gala night. *Locations* offers us first and foremost paintings brought together, rich in color. The artists themselves can be found behind the works. In this exhibition we can consider the art of painting for a change. And its location.

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