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Master's degree Thesis, Department of Painting, University of the Arts Helsinki

First part: **Solo exhibition *As Above, So Below, In Between* in Project Room, 12-28th of June, 2015**

Second part: **Essay called *Ethical considerations and spiritual notions for future artists*, 2016**

Written component

I see the core of my artistic practice as a long-term dialogue between philosophical questions concerning the way we inhabit the world and the purpose of the artist as a vessel or storyteller in this quest for meaning.

My second concern is to bridge gaps between the different worlds of fine art, illustration, classical and contemporary art, and most importantly reasserting the relevance of a more traditional approach within the context of contemporary art.

Thesis part I: *As Above, So Below, In Between*

Solo exhibition in Project Room, 12-28th of June, 2015

The first part of my Thesis is a solo exhibition titled *As Above, So Below, In Between* that took place in Project Room, from the 12th to the 28th of June, 2015. The main visual theme was human corporeality, represented by various anatomical depictions and mutations of the human body. The exhibition included pencil drawings, oil paintings, photographs as well as *in situ* modifications of the space. Concretely, it was an exhibition of the more illustrative side of my work.

I have built the exhibition space with a certain narration in mind, starting with the visually “lightest” works and placing the “fleshier” and physically heaviest paintings in the back room. To contrast with the brightness of the large entrance hall (left empty, except for the exhibition title applied to the wall and one almost white painting), the dark room was emptied of its usual furniture and plunged in near-total darkness. The only visible elements in that room were the ribcage painting *Xyphoid Process*, presented like a religious icon, and my self-portrait *Infans* partly hidden on the opposite wall, intended to be missed by inattentive visitors. Both paintings were lit in such way that no light was shining outside of the edges of the canvases, thus creating a subtle glowing effect as if the light was coming out from the canvases.

Anatomy has been the central aspect of my visual work for nearly a decade. What started as an aesthetic fascination for three artists I liked to call the *three B's* (Francis Bacon, Clive Barker, Hans Bellmer) became for me an almost obsessive visual investigation. As a field of research, anatomy is transdisciplinary: it is medical at first but is absolutely non-dissociable from many other discussions: that of ethics of course, but also representation (how to describe our findings), as well as philosophy, for the real question anatomy asks is: *what* are we? In his *Carnets*, Paul Valéry wrote: "Man is only man at the surface. Remove his skin,

dissect, and immediately you come to machinery. Then you lose yourself in an inexplicable substance, something alien to everything you know, which is nonetheless the essential."¹ Valéry is not the first writer to examine his bodily existence, far from it, and it is worth mentioning that these personal observations resurface in different people's journals, throughout centuries: in Pascal's *Pensées*, in Montaigne's *Essais*, earlier in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, and so forth; they all describe in their own words this tingling moment where the body itself becomes object of inquiry. Corporeality is both intimate and universal.

In this context I see my exhibition as taking the form of a puzzle that each viewer could solve through her or his relationship to their own body. I like to think of my images as riddles or enigmas whose answers are there but, much like Zen *koans*, are to be found on another level of understanding than that of simple reasoning or viewing. As the images dealt with the body and its numerous parts, many visitors indeed reacted through their own corporeal experience, and not their artistic knowledge or appreciation of art. One day, as I was invigilating the exhibition, a visitor came to me after seeing my painting *In Between* to tell me about her sister's abortion. I also particularly enjoyed the multiple visits of an elderly man in seemingly bad health, who was very loquacious about the various surgeries he had been subjected to through his life, and how close these experiences were to what was depicted on the canvases. In another example, a teacher organizing her seminar was unable to discuss within the more "fleshy" room as it gave her an almost physical reaction. It reminded me of Julia Kristeva's definition of abjection in her famous essay *The Powers of Abjection*, defining it as a state of uncanny blur between the subject and the object.

My intent has always been neutral or benevolent when making these works. I do not seek to shock or disturb the viewer. The anecdotes I recalled above have shown me that this is received positively.

As I mentioned in my interview with Jussi Mankkinen for Yle², there is often a light coming from within my subjects, or sometimes even a part of the canvas left blank. To me this hints at Valéry's "inexplicable substance", as well as the terrifying whiteness that I describe in my essay in Chapter III, "Absolute Elsewhere" (p.51). I always knew anatomy was an incomplete tool for investigating our own human nature, but I just had to see how far I could stretch its visual power, by also playing with scale and scientific (in)accuracy.

Regardless of the content and intent of my work, it is inevitable that I also reflect on its formal aspect, however unpleasant this conversation (monologue?) might be for me. I am fully aware of my own limitations, and the decision not to present each work individually in the visual documentation of the exhibition is a conscious one. While my anatomical drawings might feel meticulous or obsessively constructed, they sometimes are as stiff as the subjects they depict. Equally, my paintings suffer from a very dull palette, and they only seem to function in a series or association within a larger context. I see two reasons for the impediment of my technical abilities:

The first reason is practical. I have been looking for teachers who are able to challenge the technical aspect of my paintings for years, but being on and off art schools and having moved abroad multiple times led me to develop a very fragmented technique. Having now moved once more, I am back again to self-training. As I often tell people: "Just give me five more years!"

The second is psychological, and is probably my main obstacle. As one teacher once pointed out, I am trying to do *good*, instead of doing what is *right*. Misguided good can lead to many problems. I often start from a finished image in mind, only to find the process resisting my will. What would be right would be to let the thought embody itself organically through the image, and not the opposite. This is what I have been

¹ Paul Valéry, *Cahier B*, 1910.

² Jussi Mankkinen, "Lihassäikeitä ja läpikuultavaa suolistoa – Paul Takahashi sukeltaa ihmisen sisälle", published August 8, 2015, <http://yle.fi/uutiset/3-8219874> (in Finnish).

working on since the exhibition. To borrow an image from the Gnostics, if it is hard enough to become aware of the prison that is the world, we might die before even being aware of the one that is our mind.

Interestingly, I barely drew or even bothered with anatomy at all since the exhibition ended. I explored other topics of great relevance to me; that of spirituality and the nature of truth, language and symbols, culminating in my large wall piece for Kuvan Kevät *Iridescent Fields I: Between the Serpent and You*³. This work was of a very different nature and perhaps surprising to whoever had already labeled me “the guy who does anatomical stuff”.

I also reconnected with what I always enjoyed doing the most: illustration and storytelling. Lately I have been solidifying my skills in calligraphy, figure drawing, and aspects of composition. I am still on the lookout for efficient ways to connect my philosophical interrogations with my love for drawing. Should I draw a post-apocalyptic comic book about Plato and Diogenes? Time will tell. After all, in our cultural chaos, each one of us must find her or his solace using the scraps she or he has at arms’ reach.

Thesis Part II: *Ethical considerations and spiritual notions for future artists*

Essay, 2016

The second part of my Thesis is an essay called *Ethical considerations and spiritual notions for future artists*. This essay went through multiple structural changes, although its core has remained the same. What was clear to me was the necessity of discussing the topic of transcendence. I already wished to write about spirituality from an artist’s perspective before applying to the school. This Thesis project was a perfect opportunity to make it happen.

There is not much I need to explain about the essay here as my intent and my methods are fully addressed in the essay’s introduction. What I can add is that contrary to the solo exhibition, I am more confident with the final result.

The topics of ethics and artistic intent are large enough to fill a whole separate essay. Combined with the question of spirituality and art, the research becomes nearly impossible to exhaust. I chose to construct the text through a series of notes, akin to a personal journal. Each note provides a possible departure point for future discussions, lectures or (provided my family would bear with the time-consuming process ever again) new essays.

I trust that the essay also clarifies my position within contemporary art, therefore allowing me not to expand on that subject here. Because I have an artistic practice in the current world, I am *de facto* included in it, just like as anybody who is alive and creating works of art. But having to locate oneself in relationship to the contemporary art world already implies a form of hegemony thereof that I find problematic. It will become clear after having read my essay that my position is more ambiguous, perhaps a form of inquisitive (but benevolent) skepticism, just as with everything that usually falls under my scrutiny. As an Apostle, I might be more Thomas than Paul, as a theologian, more Abelard than St. Bernard.

Reaching thirty and becoming a father has brought new perspectives on the way I interact with others and the world. It is said that men reveal their limitations (or what enablers might call ‘true selves’)

³ My participation for *Kuvan Kevät 2016* is not documented here as it was not part of my Thesis work.

when embracing fatherhood. Without deviating too much from the topic of the Thesis, this is actually quite essential to understand the way I developed myself and my obsessive need for investigation. Because of how I developed my personality in reaction to a relatively strict father, I often interact in counter-reaction to what is presented to me. It is important to understand that this is not defiance, but curiosity: if something is asked from me, I will need to know *why*. Needless to say this does not go well with authoritarian figures who themselves have been raised by the mantra “because it is so”, and this is why apophatic methods of religious inquiry resonate much more, for me at least, than kataphatic methods.

Let us go back to the Thesis. As I reach completion of my documentation, it is now clear to me that I work on a transdisciplinary level, weighing multiple arguments through a methodology based on analogies. I will happily play the devil’s advocate, and exhaust intellectual arguments, but I know that I also distract myself very easily from my work because of that play.

Throughout my studies my thought process has often been more lauded than my visual works, to the point where many people wish to see dedicate myself entirely to writing. While it is reassuring to know that my brain is somewhat operational, it is also a reminder of the amount of practice my visual works still require, because if my brain loves words, my heart desires to make images. While I feel ready on an intellectual level, my artistic journey is only at its beginning. (Just give me five more years!)

Therefore, without expanding further, I will follow Master Frenhofer’s advice given to the young Nicolas Poussin, in Honoré de Balzac’s *The Unknown Masterpiece*:

“Work! Painters have no business to think, except brush in hand.”