

Aino Lintunen

# Dimensions of purple

# **Dimensions of Purple**

Aino Lintunen

Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki

Master of Fine Arts thesis

5.4.2022

**UNIARTS  
HELSINKI**

**✕ ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS**

# Contents

<b>Summary</b>	7
<b>Introduction</b>	9
<b>Cherry-Coloured Funk</b>	15
<b>Green Shim, Red flash, Blue sky</b>	25
<b>Unnamed papers</b>	33
<b>Conclusions</b>	35
<b>Images</b>	39
Shimmy 2020	39
Kuvan Kevät 2020	59
<b>References</b>	67

# Summary

The artistic component of my Master's thesis project consisted of two public presentations: a presentation as part of the Kuvan Kevät exhibition at Exhibition Laboratory B in October 2020 and my solo exhibition Shimmy at the artist-run gallery SIC, Helsinki in September 2020.

My presentation at Kuvan Kevät included two medium-sized paintings, both from the year 2020, made with oil on canvas, and three works on paper (2020 and 2019), made with oil sticks. These works were installed on a wall near to a window in the Exhibition Laboratory B. The works on paper were attached to the wall un-framed with thin, unnoticeable tape to create a feeling of the papers sinking to the wall.

The exhibition Shimmy consisted of six oil-paintings on canvas, from a size of 160 x 200 cm to 24 x 27 cm, and three works on paper, all sized 14,8 x 21 cm and made with oil sticks. The works were installed loosely and evenly on the walls of the space. Also in this exhibition, the papers were taped to the wall and they were installed slightly above the center of the paintings.

This written component of my Master's thesis introduces the process and thinking behind the two presentations and includes a documentation of the exhibitions in images. The text is divided into three main chapters of which the first two essays are each named after a painting of mine: one chosen from the presentation at Kuvan Kevät and one from the exhibition Shimmy. I will map different aspects of my artistic work, interests and thinking through these two paintings, both of them representing one thematic body. The third essay will focus on my works on paper and further discusses the topics of intimacy and vulnerability. However, in this text, my main objective is to explore and outline my relationship to abstraction, and to get there I have chosen the following paths: colour, the queer, the body, sound, gesture and the intimate.

# Introduction

Purple is a combination of two primary colours, blue and red, in their different varieties. Purple is not commonly used to describe joy, although violet is visible in rays of light. More often it suggests longing, desire, passion, luxury or spirituality.

*'Purple the sails, and so perfumed that  
The winds were love-sick with them',*

<sup>1</sup>Purple of the grapes in Caravaggio's Bacchus, violet of sunsets and holy capes of priests. Prince's Purple Rain in a purple suit. An ambivalent colour of the royals and of something somebody is wearing on a nineties music video. I have a pair of shiny, light purple socks that I would only put on to go out in the evening. Like a priest putting on their purple cape for a very holy occasion.

Here, purple serves as a point of contact - as a place of departure and return, where the inner events connect with the surroundings and where the material and the perceptible meet the conceptual

Moreover, and more importantly, purple is queer; consisting of the blue of men and the red of women (as Jarman puts it) and escaping the confined dualism of gender. In the rainbow-flag, designed by Gilbert Baker in 1978, the purple stripe represents spirit - resistance and fight in sweet purple colour. Long before that, the tiaras of Sappho's lovers were violet, and even before, in the day of Sappho's mother, purple ribbons looped in the hair were said to be of high style.

Purple represents the space beyond (or between; around) the dualistic mode of understanding. Queer as a term positions in that space and resists the normative, the routinised, the fixed, the categorised, the dualistic and the monolithical. In the article titled 'Queer Abstraction (Or How to Be a Pervert with No Body). Some Notes Toward a Probability' published in Mousse

<sup>1</sup>Jarman 2019 (1994), 105.

magazine 2019, Travis Jeppesen outlines a definition of queer, looking at it in the context of contemporary art:

*‘What is commonly referred to as “queer” relates, of course, to issues of nonheterosexual and nonnormative sexual identity and practices. Of course, “queerness” has come to encapsulate non-gender-conforming modes of being, as well. I would widen the perimeters a bit more. When we speak of things queer, be they human or art objects or whatever, let’s speak of all those things whose inherent being is contingent upon a esistance to codification— whether that code be legal, signifying, or otherwise.’<sup>2</sup>*

Furthermore, Jeppesen argues that the Cartesian distinction of mind and body, as observed in the categories of abstraction and figuration where mind connects to abstraction and body to figuration, collapses in queer abstraction. This shattering does not result as mind and body simply uniting, but as multiplying minds and bodies, body-minds.

*‘Mind and body can never truly be separated; the one feeds the ther; nor is there any real unity between mind and body; many minds, many bodies: many body-mind vehicles.’<sup>3</sup>*

Queer abstraction, as Jeppesen describes, also offers other perspectives to figuration, that in a traditional sense, is thought as reflection of the body:

*‘Queer abstraction posits that traditional figuration, as representation of the body, is less vital than a possible/probable writing of the body: a shooting-off-into-space of the body-mind vehicle’s inner substance.’<sup>4</sup>*

Jeppesen’s thoughts around queer abstraction and the body ground the following questions regarding my own artistic work: how is body written in my paintings? And moreover, what place does queerness have in my work? How does it manifest? These questions indicate the direction of my approach to abstraction, which is the main target of my exploration in this thesis.

<sup>2</sup>Jeppesen 2019.

<sup>3</sup>Jeppesen 2019.

<sup>4</sup>Jeppesen 2019.

This text is divided into three main chapters of which the first two are named after different paintings of mine, exhibited in my solo exhibition Shimmy (SIC, September 2020) and in Kuvan Kevät (Exhibition Laboratory B, October 2020). The first chapter is titled Cherry-Coloured Funk - after the painting that got me into purples. The paintings I chose to include in this text differ from each other in character and show different sides of my thinking, although neither of them is limited to represent only one side. The first chapter focuses on the aspect of feeling and the sensual, and further describes my relationship to the painting material through colour, touch and sound.

I look at colour as something that’s fuzzy and unstable, and by trying to define the limits of it, one ends up peeling layers just to reveal more underneath. This is the fascination of colour: it can be discussed endlessly, framed from multiple directions and yet still remain as a question. As colour is something widely discussed in the arts I have narrowed down my references to David Batchelor’s Chromophobia (Reaktion Books, 2000) and Colour (edit. David Batchelor, Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2008) which is a collection of writings and remarks on colour by artists and writers from the mid 1800 til recent years. However, in this thesis, colour doesn’t serve as the target of my exploration but rather as a tool for making connections, and it also is something that my paintings inevitably deal with. Umberto Eco describes his relationship with colour to be a private affair and states that he is not supposed to entertain readers with his *‘personal reactivity towards the polychromous theatre of the world’*.<sup>5</sup> I, on the other hand, have a different mission and in fact wish to entertain the reader with my personal take on colour, because I believe that the personal, the intimate and the private have importance and can contribute to achieving a deeper understanding of the world and its phenomena.

The second chapter, Green Shim, Red Flash, Blue Sky, outlines connections between my painting and paintings around me. I will analyse my relationship to the vocabulary of abstract expressionism through the work of Agnes Martin, whose quiet and tranquil way of expression has left a mark on me. Here, I

<sup>5</sup> Eco 1985.

will especially look into Martin's paintings of grids, based on art historian and writer Suzanne Hudson's study *Agnes Martin: Night Sea* (2017).

The last chapter is titled *Unnamed papers*. In 2017 I spent the four months of my exchange in London at the Slade School of Fine Art. My working space was upstairs in what was called the round room, a space that could fit five or six painting students. There was a big ceiling window which freed the walls for hanging paintings, although hanging big canvases to arching walls was tricky. I was feeling a little shy in a new place. I found myself a table and sat there every morning either reading, writing or drawing, until lunch. It became a routine. I used oil sticks on this heavy, white, matte and smooth paper, that has since become my favourite, and would first make images of horizons: just blocks of colour and a line with subtle mixing happening where the colours meet. Horizon was a motif as any to do something. Earlier that same year I had made a small exhibition called *Horizon Melting into Desert, Through a Keyhole* (Asematila, May 2017). Probably I had the word horizon stuck in my memory. Not feeling confident enough to make big paintings, working on paper in small scale offered me the privacy and concentration that I felt I needed.

After returning from London I have continued working with oil sticks on paper along with my practice of painting on canvas. The papers are mostly unnamed because to me they don't have the same independence that my paintings have. They are more intimate and less of presentations; fleeting thoughts, sometimes lazy and sometimes small bursts of energy without direction. Nevertheless, they are as important as they are intimate, imperfect, hesitant and awkward - something I enjoy seeing in other people's work too. To me, those attributes send a message of vulnerability: the possibility of failure or embarrassment is in the air. I believe we need vulnerability to feel connected to things and to others, and as such vulnerability is essential to art. This last chapter of my thesis is a praise to the vulnerability of art making and of being.

Finally, I want to warmly thank the people who shared their thoughts with me, accompanied and advised me over the process

of making this thesis and the two exhibitions during this trying time.

I am grateful to my supervisors Peter Davies and Päivi Sirén for their invaluable guidance and enthusiasm, as well as to my examiners Liisa Pesonen and Elina Suoyrjö.

I wish to thank Luis Sagasti for his generosity in our exchange of thoughts and for writing such an extraordinary text for *Shimmy*; Fergus Feehily and Päivi Takala for their kindness, honesty and support; and professor of painting Sigrid Sandström who thoughtfully responded to my latest drafts. Thanks to James Prett for proofreading this text.

Many thanks to Bárbara Rebolledo for the beautiful work with the layout and for patiently reading and commenting my texts over the past year; as well as to Rosaliina Paavilainen and Venla Helenius for being such great colleagues.

# Cherry-Coloured Funk

Cherry-Coloured Funk is a song by Cocteau Twins. It came out in 1990 and is the opening track of the album *Heaven or Las Vegas*. Described as alternative rock, dream pop, post-punk and ethereal wave, Cocteau Twins has been a difficult one to place in a single category. In the occasion of the release of *Heaven or Las Vegas*, Clodagh O'Connell writes in *Select* (oct 1990):

*'Exploding the myth of the Cocteau Twins is dangerously easy. Look for meaning in their kaleidoscopic soundscapes and Liz's sensual Esperanto offers the imagination an infinite range of profundities. With their music hovering just outside the realm of comprehension, the Cocteau Twins are anything we want them to be therefore they can't help but be sublime.'*<sup>6</sup>

Twenty-nine years after its release, *Cherry-Coloured Funk* reached me. It hit me hard. I immediately listened to it again, repetitively. Completely immersed I walked, painted, danced, sat on a tram and laid down on my couch. What I heard I did not quite comprehend but it did feel like something sublime, as O'Connell describes. I travelled back to my early childhood when I didn't really listen to music yet - music just existed and was something I sensed in a similar way one senses colours or temperatures.

I am tempted to analyse *Cherry-Coloured Funk* further as a song or as a work of art, but the truth is, it mainly is about feeling to me. It has a feeling (or it is a feeling?) that for me is purple, shiny, queer, nostalgic, melancholic, eerie and determined. Artificial purple, the shine in the singer's eyes on a music video, the melancholy of

---

<sup>6</sup> O'Connell 1990.



everything. Spectral sounds that disappear towards the sky and the will to keep on singing. And nostalgia? Something about the nineties.

That day I started painting under the usual circumstances: at the studio, on canvas with oil colours, without a clear direction but with a lot of will to make something out of paint. I let the senses and feelings inform me. In the catalogue text for Kuvan Kevät 2020 exhibition I write about how this painting, named *Cherry-Coloured Funk*, came to be:

*‘When I painted Cherry-Coloured Funk I had returned from a trip abroad. It’s never effortless to get back after having your mind elsewhere. I started with that painting several times - it was three different paintings before eventually becoming Cherry-Coloured Funk.*

*The brownish, pale red came first (it was an emergency-colour deriving from impatience, there’s a mess under it) and after that one the brown figure, which actually is more like a constellation of soft lines. Then, because everything was so soft, it was necessary to have something harsh as well, so I added the dark brown to put that softness in order. There I had the deep, soft and moist life I was going after but I craved for a bright colour.*

*Blue!*

*Not the right choice at all. I had listened to this Cocteau Twins album a lot. Purple.*

*Ugly and seductive, artificial purple. The painting is named after their song.’<sup>7</sup>*

The catalogue text focuses on colour, touch and materiality of the painting *Cherry-Coloured Funk*. It aims to give the reader a feeling and understanding of how this painting is (more than what it is) and touches on the process of my decision making. I find poetry in simple and straightforward ways of expression and therefore decided to write a text that would look like a quick

---

<sup>7</sup> Lintunen 2020.

answer to a question, as if I would casually explain this thing to a friend. The painting itself remains a question.

Framing my work in a relevant way, however, didn’t feel like a simple task. From which direction, of all directions, to approach the work? Which connections are relevant?

How to leave some space for the spectator but also be generous enough and give something to start with? I could choose to be silent and let the paintings speak for themselves. But that would feel like abandoning them - I don’t wish to give the viewer all the space and power with the words. As much as creating places to enter the work, words tend to guide the process of looking and what we make of what is being seen. In her novel called *Second place*, Rachel Cusk speaks as a woman who follows exhibition posters into a gallery, and the experience of being in the same room with the paintings leads to her contemplating the relationship between words and feelings:

*‘What was it? It was a feeling, Jeffers, but it was also a phrase. It will seem contradictory, after what I’ve just said about words, that words should accompany the sensation so definitively. But I didn’t find those words. The painting found them. Somewhere inside me. I don’t know who they belonged to, or even who spoke them - just that they were spoken.’<sup>8</sup>*

The storyteller gives painting agency, as it is the painting finding the words and not the spectator. You look at paintings but they look right back at you; the odd beings that came out of a bucket of mixed impulses, energies and efforts, now standing on their own, disconnected from their origins, as themselves. After a week I look at a finished work like it was a stranger. A reasonable way to approach a stranger is to ask who they are and let them define themselves to you. Why not be polite to paintings as well. In the catalogue text, I maintain a polite distance to the finished work but try to describe my train of thought closely. The text gives the impression that my work situates somewhere in the area of

---

<sup>8</sup> Cusk 2021, 14.

expressionist abstract painting, and this interpretation would be a correct one.

The up and the right-hand sides of the painting are defined by the intense purple, spread unevenly. Despite being dominant in its gemstone-like shine, the purple barely covers the blue underneath. In fact, it gives away its energy to the thin line of blue, hiding somewhere around the edge of the dark brown. It's such an important blue line, an entry to another space and a borderline that is detaching the space marked by the brown from the space of the purple. The dark brown is hugging the pale red colour, enclosing both red and the other, lighter brown that is almost taking the shape of a figure. More than a figure, what the light brown lines of colour suggest, is movement. Something is shaking, or perhaps just about to collapse and we catch a sight of it right before it's gone.

Moving towards the down left corner the pale red first becomes more pale, almost bright and then darkens again to turn into a lumpy form. We reach the edge and colours disappear into the white of the wall, white of the screen. Brushstrokes are visible and everything seems to be moving, shaking like from a punch, from left to right. My eyes move from up right towards the down left, then from down left to up right again. Eyes avoid the middle, there is nothing there. Only colour - without form or object.

*'For me, the unpredictability of colour, its queerness, its silence, its decoration, its shameless excess, its resistance to language, its elusiveness, its plasticity, the impossibility of its containment, and its inherent abstraction - are the exciting potentialities and promises of colour.'*<sup>9</sup>

I have many stories that involve colour. In one of them, I had bought a new long sleeve shirt, and the shirt had a desirable mix of dark blue and bright green stripes. I wore the shirt once and the colour combination made me feel so sick I never wore it again and then hid it at the back of my wardrobe. I learned that colour is ambivalent - it can be attractive and repellent simultaneously and behave in unexpected ways.

---

<sup>9</sup> Besemer 2007.

Recently, a person walked by wearing a red hat, blue jacket, red pants and blue shoes. The sight of vibrating colours in motion hid other features of the person and fully captivated my attention. Colour conceals and dazzles too.

In the attempt of saying something substantial about colour, I fall silent. The most truthful things I can say are my own remarks and observations - how I see and use colour, what colour means to me. This is not to imply nothing can be said, but the opposite: endlessly can be said about colour because it stretches across so many areas. There are science, history, philosophy and politics of colour - all aspects widely discussed in art, literature, poetry, psychology, anthropology, film and design, to mention a few.

Increasingly, as intersectionality has permeated the discussion, the neutrality of colour, or the lack of it, has been called into question. In his book *Chromophobia (2000)*, David Batchelor argues that colour has been the object of prejudice, and furthermore systematically marginalised in Western culture. The fear of colour is the fear of the *foreign body - the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar; the queer or the pathological.*<sup>10</sup>

Colour is alien and as such it is dangerous. To keep colour, and what it associates with, in the margins, it has been useful to label colour as trivial - inessential, superficial and cosmetic. Colour has not only been despised in the dominant cultures of the West but also intentionally erased from the bigger picture. The myth of whiteness in classical sculptures is a revealing example of the erasure of colour from the Western aesthetics. The white marble together with the proportionate forms of the classical Greek sculptures have long reflected the Western aesthetic ideals and set the standard for good taste, and in this initial setting colour looks like a stain. Time often washed away colours from the faces of these sculptures but in some cases the traits of paint were purposefully removed to align art with the ideal.<sup>11</sup>

In 2021, colour as a subject is not in fashion. Has it been since the sixties? Josef Albers' *Interaction of Colour* was originally

<sup>10</sup> Batchelor 2000, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Talbot 2018.

published in 1963 and by that time the space dominated by Abstract Expressionism in the west had opened up for pop art, land art, video, performance and women. The first acrylic paints were developed and brought to the market a decade earlier. Cities had become rather colourful places with neon lights, advertisements, design and fashion, both of the latter benefitting from the cheap production of synthetic colours.

Art had lost its privilege to surprise the viewer by the luminosity of colour. In the countryside, night skies were assumably still black. The desert in Taos, New Mexico must have been lit only by stars in the thick darkness of the night. That is where Agnes Martin had returned in 1967 after her years in New York. She did not paint for six years - at least there are no paintings to prove otherwise. Later, she found clarity in colour in the desert.

Eleven years earlier and more than nine thousand kilometers away from Taos in Ohara Hall in Tokyo, lights turned on unexpectedly. Atsuko Tanaka, a young member of the Gutai-group, is dressed in her *Denkifuku*, electric dress, consisting of hundreds of coloured light bulbs. The pulsating light illuminates the room shadowing her face.

Painters never forgot about colour but perhaps got interested in other things about their medium - or other mediums, in order to shake its boundaries and investigate other ways of making a painting. 'What painting is' became a more burning question than 'what colour is'. This kind of essentialism, however, was forgotten towards the last decades of the 20th century in the shift from modernism to postmodernism. A contemporary artist looks at art like they look at colour - as a subjective, unstable and relational matter.

As for me, I am fond of the instability of colour. Colour is often difficult and frustrating to work with, as it rarely ends up being exactly what was expected or imagined. What do I imagine when I imagine a colour? The memory or vision doesn't settle and the colour I am imagining tries to find a form, it vibrates and changes from one shade to another, like in a monochromatic disco. Add another colour to this experiment and imagining the end

results become close to impossible. I can speculate with colours endlessly, but at the end of the day I work with material. Such a relief actually, that colours are attached to materials. Something as abstract as colour is also touchable and perceptible, it has a body. In painting, colour and material are joined together. They have transparencies and intensities, they are heavy and light (both the illusion of colour and pigments) and operate in spatial dimension. I have learned their differences by working with paints and by looking at paintings. Many hours spent watching colours play together. When I imagine colour, I am forced to imagine material as well.

I often begin painting by choosing a colour. More than wanting to see a colour, I urge not to see the white. It's the first obstacle I feel I must cross. The white of the canvas is significant in the work of painters such as Michael Krebber and Richard Aldridge who both take a conceptual approach to painting. Looking at their works I think about the hesitation that is often present in the work of painters: what is enough to be an idea? For me, using a colour as a starting point is a way of postponing the decision making. I wish the colour will lead me somewhere, and many times it does, but in the end I will have to decide.

*Cherry-Coloured Funk* didn't begin with colour as much as it ended with it. The purple becomes the idea of the painting, and all the other parts are defined by it.



# Green shim, red flash, blue sky

I came across the word “shim” while looking for words that are formally similar to the word “shimmy”. I chose *Shimmy* as the title for my solo exhibition at SIC (September 2020) because it well described what the works presented had in common: layers of movements, vibration that transmits into feeling. To get back to shim, it might mean a thin piece of material, used for support or alignment - a wedge. Like when an object is not stable and you have to take a piece of paper, fold it and place it between the floor and the object. That piece of paper is shim. One uses shim to stop the movement, to stabilise the unstable.

This painting needed stabilising. It felt to me like an itchy pullover, an ugly and stuffy one found from an attic. With different shades of gray and red lines criss-crossing each other, sometimes becoming blurry and sometimes sharpening - like zooming in and out with a lens. Behind all this uncomfortable action there is bright blue that, against the stuffiness, is like cold water or open sky, some fresh air coming through the window.

The vertical and horizontal lines form a grid. I have told myself to stay away from grids because it is a subject with some baggage - I cannot go far without dragging the tail of modernism behind me. But then I painted one, and now I have to encounter the grid.

Something introverted about grids.

Throughout the later years of her career Agnes Martin was committed to the question of subjectivity, critical of the primacy of self, and her paintings reflect these thoughts. Art historian and writer Suzanne Hudson argues that Martin’s painting *Night Sea* from 1963 remains as the last one of her process-based works and after that ‘*Martin took the ego struggle, the personality struggle*

– and in some sense the human struggle – out of her paintings as much as she could, to offer a vision of non-attachment. What remained was the expression of innocence and freedom, lightness and purity, emptiness of mind and, maybe above all, happiness.’<sup>12</sup>

Martin had adopted the grid in the late 1950s. She used rulers and strings to draw vertical and horizontal lines, but, at the same time, ‘resisted the grid’s dictates by tracing more horizontal lines than vertical ones, thus breaking the way the rectangular cells of the grids would logically follow from the square of the canvas.’<sup>13</sup> This is to say, Martin was not interested in grid as a rule. Around 1964 she switched from oil paint to acrylic. Grey Stone II (1961) and Night Sea (1963) are made with oil and gold leaf on canvas, and The Beach (1964) with acrylic and graphite on canvas. Her refusal followed in 1967 and when she continued painting again in the 1970s, she turned to compositions with stripes and didn’t return to oils. The shift from oil to acrylic is significant, as with the material not only the works changed, but also the struggle, as Hudson points out, was removed from the paintings.

Grid was a modernist thought, a way of pointing out that art is about art. In her essay Grids (1979) Rosalind Krauss writes:

“(---) the grid announces, among other things, modern art’s will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse. As such, the grid has done its job with striking efficiency. The barrier it has lowered between the arts of vision and those of language has been almost totally successful in walling the visual arts into a realm of exclusive visuality and defending them against the intrusion of speech.”<sup>14</sup>

Is grid a dead end? A laconic sentence followed by silence?

I saw the Agnes Martin exhibition at Guggenheim New York in 2016. There was such consistency and stubbornness in her refusal

<sup>12</sup> Hudson 2016, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Mansoor 2011, 156.

<sup>14</sup> Krauss 1979.

of gesture in the later paintings, yet the presence of something, or her bodily presence, was clear to me. This presence was written in the smallest changes in thickness, speed or rhythm and it was deeply touching. For a long time, I stood looking at a small drawing placed on a table under a glass. It was of a houseplant in its pot, single quavering line of ink on regular-looking paper. I followed the movement of the line with my eyes tracing where her hand had been, and decided that maybe it consisted of two lines after all. The lines are floating in emptiness and nothing suggests that this would be a specific potted plant. I can’t be sure if this plant had a living counterpart somewhere but it did seem like Martin had drawn a plant she saw; and what she saw was an idea of this plant. An idea delivered with a breathing body and shaking hands.

*‘Night Sea manifests one of many dualities in Martin’s work: the tension between the ideal – what she understood to be a near Platonic conception of perfect geometry and materialised form – and the human.’<sup>15</sup>*

I see this tension between the ideal and the human in almost everything people do and it always draws my attention. There is humour and beauty in this shared impossibility of reaching perfection. I have decided to embrace it in my work by not hiding all the struggles of painting.

Even though some of the titles of Martin’s works could refer to nature, I thought her colours didn’t have much to do with the outside world. More than that, the paintings seem to be about feeling. Martin herself explains that they are ‘light, lightness, about merging, about formlessness, breaking down form’.<sup>16</sup>

Where does that light come from? Is painting the illumination of the ideal, where colour acts as a bridge between the perceptible and what is not seen but understood or felt? Following this thought I come to the conclusion that colour itself must be something very abstract, formless. Not only a matter of feeling-sensing but also an idea.

<sup>15</sup> Hudson 2016, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Martin quoted in Hudson 2016, 57.



During her time, Martin's work was placed in the category of minimalism by some art critics and Martin herself didn't agree. Surely, her paintings are not very abundant but there still is a lot going on. Martin was an abstract expressionist. Her expression though, differs from what had been seen earlier in the work of Abstract Expressionists. Suzanne Hudson writes:

*'Martin's 'expressionism' is much more 'conceptual', more meta about its means and consequences, than was the work made by the first-generation Abstract Expressionists consumed by their processes.'*

And furthermore,

*'No longer hyper-masculine, expressiveness had come to connote sensitivity. Martin became their feminised other through her subtle use of colour, the visibility – expressivity – of her touch, and the variability of surface it begot.'*<sup>17</sup>

It has taken a long time for me to accept my gestures and marks, and allow my paintings to be expressive. For some reason (and for many reasons), I thought expression is something to hide because it's embarrassing - more so if you are a woman who paints. God forbid somebody should make a connection between expression, emotion, and being female - they would never take me seriously. This was to avoid becoming the feminised other. Later I realised it is not my expressiveness that is wrong, it was the context I had tried to place myself in.

Some anger was involved in the making of my grid. I thought about the cleanness and the preciseness of grids, the harmony of lines and then how to break that harmony and how, eventually, destroy the grid. My lines felt tired and soggy. The lines in the front create small windows to smeary lines behind and they create even smaller windows to blue colour, an opening to nowhere. I didn't destroy the grid of course. Destruction is a bigger force than painting. But there is a will to disrupt or to create at least a little crack in the stability (of lines or grids or ideas).

I had painted a non-seductive, unstable grid and then I couldn't

---

<sup>17</sup> Hudson 2016, 39-40.

take it - I needed something to stabilise the image and decided to paint a field of green-blue grey on the right side, approximately the size of one fourth of the canvas. This painting is named *Green shim, red flash, blue sky* simply by the three main parts of it: green shim - *stillness and flatness*; red flash - *line and movement*; blue sky - *space*. These elements of painting, flatness, line, movement and space, have been the target of many (abstract) painters' explorations since modernism, and perhaps this particular painting, for me, is a way of recognising my relationship to this heritage. I also see this painting as a note on abstraction, commenting the conventions of it - such as the colour field and grid.

I am angry at gestural abstract painting sometimes. That's because it can be so very male, very straight, serious in an annoying way or careless in even more annoying, intentional, dude-kind-of-way. Masculinity written all over it. As if there was not enough space for me even though there has been space for painters like Louise Fishman, Amy Sillman, Vivian Suter, Charline von Heyl and Jacqueline Humphries. In her text *'AbEx and Disco Balls, In Defence of Abstract Expressionism II'* (2011) Amy Sillman argues that Abstract Expressionism, after being labeled as macho and being undone in the work of many generations of artists, has become so passé that it became interesting, and is now being not undone but redone by women and queer artists.

*'—I don't find it odd that AbEx practices have now been vitally reinvigorated by a queered connection of the vulgar and the camp. Many artists - not least of them women and queers - are currently recomplicating the terrain of gestural, messy, physical, chromatic, embodied, handmade practices. I would argue that this is because AbEx already had something to do with the politics of the body, and that it was all the more tempting once it seemed to have been shut down by its own rhetoric, rendered mythically straight and male in quotation marks.'*<sup>18</sup>

What AbEx, indeed, had to do with the politics of the body would be an interesting topic for investigation, but something

---

<sup>18</sup> Sillman 2011.

I might have to find another place and time for. What kind of body or whose body is the AbEx-body? Or bodies, could be a multiplicity. I have had these questions around the body and gender in abstract painting forming in my head for since I began my studies at the academy. The reason are the words that were spoken to me at the entrance exam. "Aha, these are your paintings. I thought they were made by a man!" - as if my gender didn't match my paintings. And sadly, at the time, it felt like a compliment. I'm so good I'm almost like a man. To put things into proportions, this of course was just a careless remark by a person I met for the first time, but there is something quite disturbing in telling the gender of the painter by looking at the paintings or, in fact, in gendering the paintings or practices. However, Sillman's note is very positive: it is exactly because of this vulgarity that there is now space for women and queer artists to explore.





# Unnamed papers

As part of both exhibitions, Shimmy and Kuvan Kevät 2020, I presented works on paper alongside paintings on canvas. I had decided not to use frames or nails as I felt they would have been additional and intruded on the work. I attached the papers to the wall with thin, acid free tape and glued them closely. The paper did not cast a shadow.

The year of 2020 changed my plans and scattered my thoughts. The two presentations were gathered from pieces of something that was still in formation and unclear. Working felt like searching for a bench to sit on in heavy fog. I was restless, impatient and unconcentrated. To my disappointment, I realised I could not separate myself from the work I was making and so the work became restless too. I was moving without direction and the work was too. Why not concentrate on the movement then. Shimmy followed from that thought. Painting is movement - with or without direction, in different scales. Movement was what mattered and direction, not so much.

The world became still. We were all trembling in ourselves, our places, our rooms. Hold the body still, alternate only the shoulders back and forth. Small movement is enough. My body is a circle and my room is a circle. When the left shoulder goes back, the right shoulder moves to the front. How long is this dance? Unlike days, songs do have beginnings and ends. Although consisting of days, life is more like a song. *Shim-Me-Sha-Wabble*.

When in search of something, I like to sit down by a table and work on paper. It makes me feel contained and more coherent. I start with choosing a colour, rub the oil stick on the paper and then alter the colour with other colours until it becomes something. When you carefully rub the oil stick on matte, heavy paper it results as a smooth, suede-kind of layered surface. Despite being dense, the layers have transparency which creates a sense of breathing that is, essentially, movement. Behind the closed door of my studio, I adapt my breathing to the breathing

of the layers.

A view of my studio: nothing is ready and everything is promising. I have got folders for my papers to put them away and keep them clean. Oil sticks are in a box with a small knife for peeling the crust. Most pencils are in a plastic bag and some of them are more than fifteen years old (my aunt worked at a primary school and gave me a new box of pencils every time we visited and I never could finish the previous ones so they kept piling up). There is a piece of old wallpaper in stretchers (from the house of the same aunt) that I keep visible. It is there to collect dirt - a painting that is painting itself over a long period of time. A good spirit protecting my space, something like a garden elf. There are some sad and small plants that would take too much space at home, a french press for coffee, cups and glasses, empty glass bottles, clay in a bucket, tools for this-and-that, notebooks, books, notes, tapes, dirty plastic gloves, shoes, a shirt with green and white stripes, a wonky ruler, hidden paintings, unfinished paintings, ugly paintings, loved paintings, new paintings parading on the walls. One chair facing the painting, another one facing the window.

I meet myself at the studio and introduce myself as an artist. What kind of artist? What is my line? What do I believe in? What do I do, as an artist? Hoping answering these questions would show a direction to what to do next. Need of confirmation in a place of insecurity. Whose eyes do I imagine, looking at me? I wish they didn't follow me here, here I am alone. Or would like to be. However, I am connected to my surroundings and time in many ways.

One of those connections is between my work and the viewer. Among other things, I regard the artwork as a catalyst or a vessel for making connections; connecting past, present and future moments, narratives, experiences, inner and outer, yours to mine. We move through our lives looking for connections to other people, places and things, surroundings and other beings. Forming meaningful connections requires vulnerability, which - I believe - is difficult under our current cultural climate that is quite obsessed with productivity and performance. Art,

# Conclusions

however, can sustain vulnerability and be a site for all things uncertain, non-productive and awkward. I hope that if we can see vulnerability in art, we are more prepared to recognise it elsewhere as an important part of our being.

How to conclude something that essentially is about beginning?

What I have written here has been a meandering description of paintings and the two exhibitions I made during the year 2020, and other things related. While writing this text I discovered new words to describe my interests as a painter and developed a more comprehensive understanding of my own practice - or what my practice maybe will consist of. So, for me, this has been more about opening than closing. As important as I find it to make images that can stand on their own without the support of words, I realise that I really need words to help me understand what my work is about. The relationship between a work of visual art and words is like an odd mirror: the reflection you perceive is unexpected and changing, or suddenly reveals more than you expected to see. Writing about art or any other non-measurable subject is frustrating when words don't come close to the experience, but the fun part is to try. I am satisfied with how close I got this time.

The Argentinian writer Luis Sagasti has a beautiful way with words. He kindly offered to write a short text for the exhibition Shimmy. This text made me see my paintings both as alien and familiar, and I enjoyed looking at them outside of my own perspective. I learnt a lot.

*'When an air molecule penetrates a snowflake it enters a vast labyrinth of microscopic tunnels; the sound waves become trapped there, and finding no way out they turn into heat. The snow deadens human noises, dissipating the echo that beats within each body. With their wintery,*

*austere, muffled palette, the works of Aino Lintunen appear to distil this reverberation that struggles to emerge into the light, to escape the labyrinth. That is why we can appreciate the swift movement of urgent, electric brushstrokes, confined to rectangles that, like snow crystals, again remind us that no spontaneity, no élan, can escape the almost mathematical order that has produced it. These brushstrokes often suggest the full extension of the artist's arm, as if she wished to go beyond certain limits, in the knowledge that what matters is the very attempt to do so. It could be said that, in a sense, the process is the result. These are very physical, visceral paintings. And the idea that the intention reaches as far as the artist's gesture – as can clearly be noted in the energetic fields of colour – tells us that Lintunen's works are closed and compact worlds, and not, as is the case with most non-figurative painting, just a fragment of a visual expression that could be extended indefinitely. This idea of thickness, of a robust solidity, serves to underline the silent character of the intention.*

*The night silently rent by a sudden flash; the sound that takes a while to reach the ears. This is the lapse of time in which Lintunen's paintings appear. The threshold of what is unleashed, the hidden yet restless palpitation of something that appears barren and lifeless.*

*The sound concealed in the snow.<sup>19</sup>*

Sagasti brings up words that I find relevant and fitting. He mentions the body, echo that beats within each body, the heartbeat. The exhibition Shimmy had everything to do with the body as body has to do with movement and gesture. I look at my paintings like they had bodies, and relate to painting (both in the act of painting and looking at paintings) through the body. Sagasti does mention the gesture as well; my paintings are gestural. Gesture connects to the body as you can read the body being present by looking at gestures, but they also are intentional and composed.

<sup>19</sup>Sagasti 2020.

Sagasti describes my paintings as closed and compact worlds -as opposed to fragments. Instead of expanding, my interest throughout my time at the academy has been to get closer to painting, to explore it in the depth direction. I'm quite happy working with the limitations painting offers, such as the canvas. It is so traditional that it can have this neutrality, it can just pass without questioning, and that allows one to focus on what is happening inside these limitations. Sagasti also mentions sound, something that already came up in the Cherry Coloured Funk -chapter.

And then he writes about time being slow. The question of painting and time is very intriguing, as painting is not a time-based medium but still must have some kind of relationship with time, like everything must. I don't think my paintings really reveal how much time was spent in the making -could be anything from four hours to four months. But they do have the sense of slowness in common. Perhaps it's not so much about the slowness of process as it is about the slowness of thought, and it is the thought or idea that slowly appears.

# **Images – Shimmy**

SIC, Helsinki 5.-27.9.2020





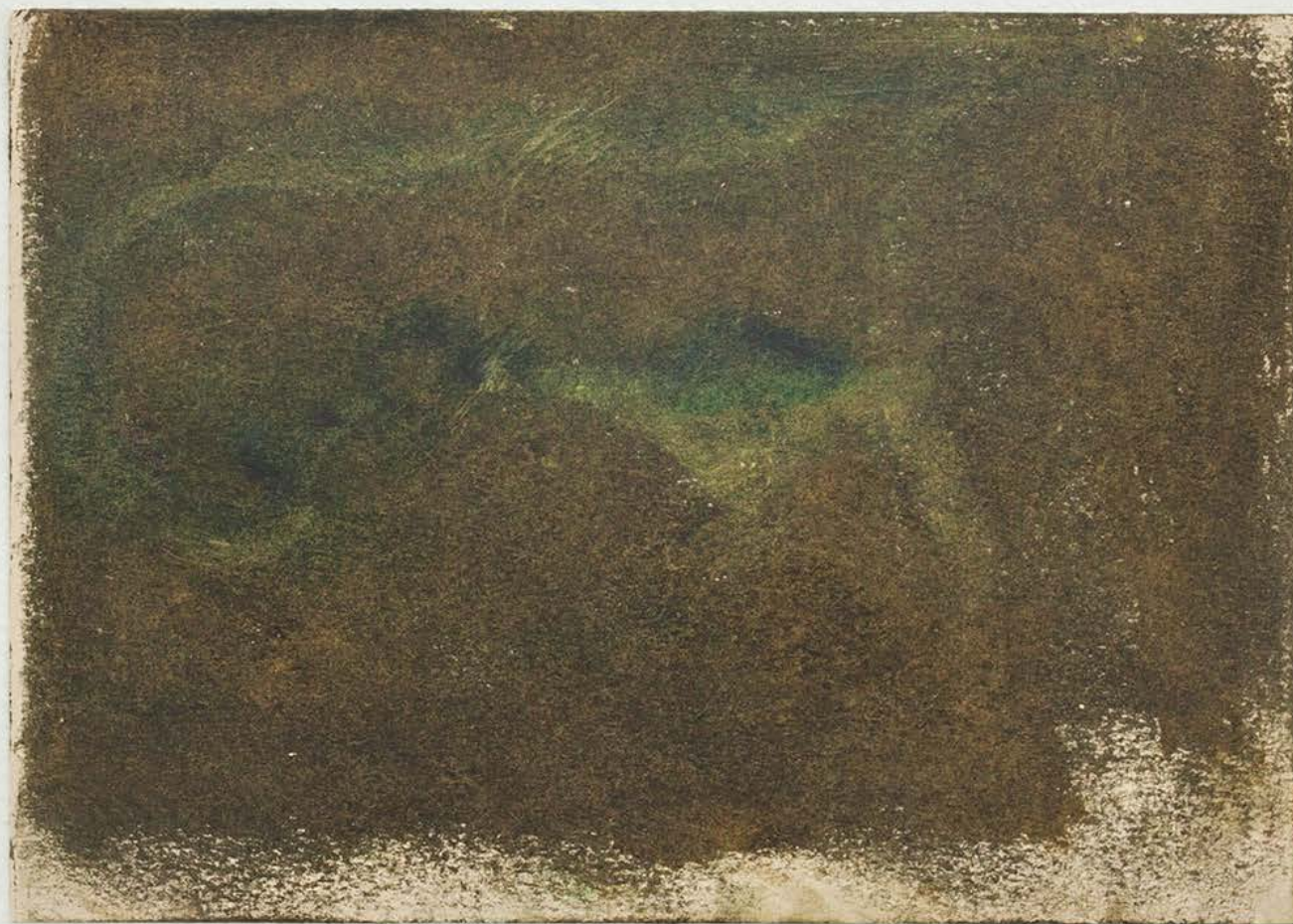




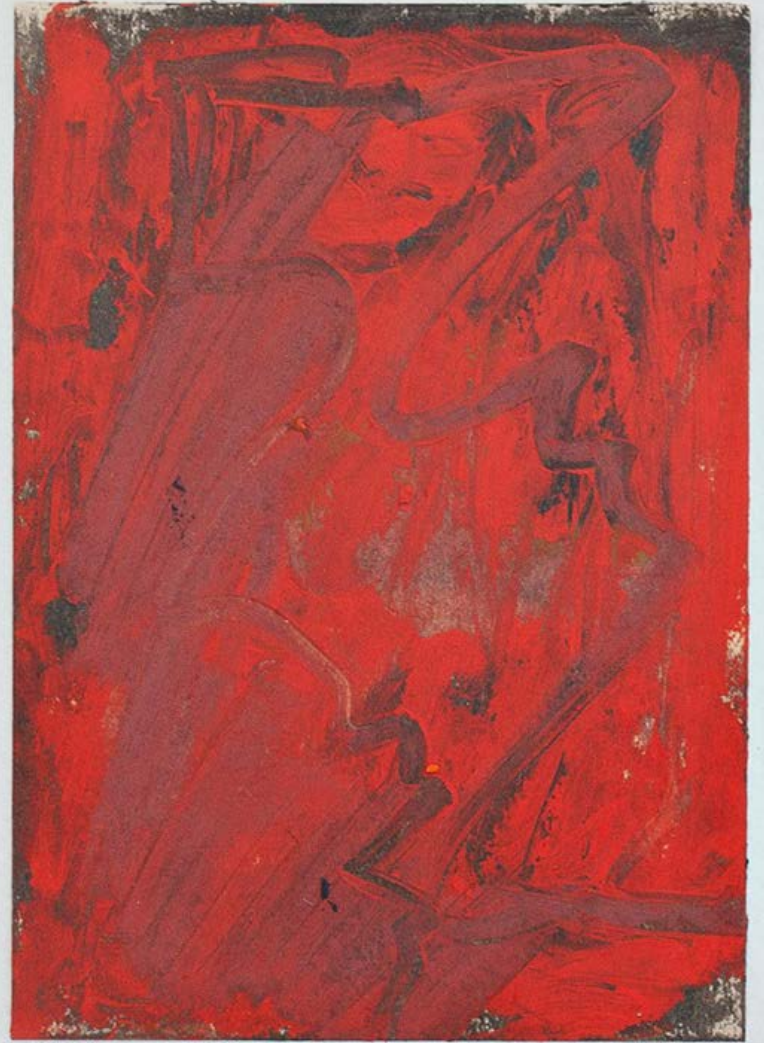
















**p. 40-41:** Exhibition view. Left: Shimmy, 2020. Oil on canvas, 160 x 200 cm. Right: Initial, 2020. Oil on canvas, 24 x 27 cm.

**p. 42:** Initial, 2020. Oil on canvas, 24 x 27 cm.

**p. 43:** Hiding in plain sight, 2020. Oil on canvas, 54 x 62 cm.

**p. 44-45:** Exhibition view.

**p. 46:** Nineties shimmy, 2019. Oil on canvas, 54 x 60 cm.

**p. 48-49:** Exhibition view.

**p. 50-51:** Untitled, 2020. Oil stick on paper, 14,8 x 21 cm.

**p. 52:** Untitled, 2020. Oil stick on paper, 14,8 x 21 cm.

**p. 53:** Untitled, 2020. Oil stick on paper, 14,8 x 21 cm.

**p. 54-55:** Exhibition view.

**p. 56:** Night time, 2020. Oil on canvas, 60 x 73 cm.

Photographs by Tuomas Linna

# **Images– Kuvan Kevät**

Exhibitio Laboratory B, Helsinki  
10.10.-8.11.2020











**p. 60-61:** Exhibition view. Paintings from left to right:  
Aloof, 2020. Oil on canvas, 73 x 61 cm.  
Untitled, 2020. Oil stick on paper, 29,7 x 21 cm.  
Untitled, 2020. Oil stick on paper, 29,7 x 21 cm.  
Sizzle, 2019. Oil stick on paper, 21 x 14,8 cm.  
Cherry-Coloured Funk, 2020. Oil on canvas, 73 x 60 cm.

**p. 62-63:** Exhibition view.

**p. 64:** Aloof, 2020. Oil on canvas, 73 x 61 cm.

Photographs by Petri Summanen

# References

Batchelor, David. 2000. *Chromophobia*. London: Reaktion Books.

Besemer, Linda. 2007. On Colour. *In Documents of Contemporary Art: Colour*. Edited by David Batchelor. London: Whitechapel Gallery & The MIT Press.

Cusk, Rachel. 2021. *Second place*. London: Faber & Faber.

Eco, Umberto. 1985. *How Culture Conditions the Colours We See*. *In On Signs*. Edited by Marshall Blonsky. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Hudson, Suzanne. 2016. *Agnes Martin: Night Sea*. London: Afterall Books. Kindle Edition.

Jarman, Derek. 2019 (1994). *Chroma*. London: Vintage Classics.

Jeppesen, Travis. 2019. *Queer Abstraction (Or How to Be a Pervert with No Body)*. *Some Notes Toward a Probability*. Mousse magazine, 16.1.2019.  
<https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/queer-abstraction-travis-jeppesen-2019/>. Ref. 12.3.2022.

Krauss, Rosalind. 1979. *Grids*. October, vol. 9, 1979. Cambridge/London: The MIT Press.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/778321?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.  
Ref. 13.3.2022.

Lintunen, Aino. 2020. *Kuvan Kevät 2020*. Exhibition catalogue. Helsinki: Uniarts Academy of Fine Arts.

Mansoor, Jaleh. 2011. Self-Effacement, Self-Inscription: Agnes Martin's Singular Quietude. *In Agnes Martin*. Edited by Lynne Cooke, Karen Kelly, Barbara Schröder. New York: Dia Art Foundation & Yale University Press.

O'Connell, Clodagh. 1990. *Heavenly Bodies*. Select, October 1990.

Sagasti, Luis. 2020. Exhibition text for *Aino Lintunen: Shimmy*.  
Translated by Fionn Petch.

Sillman, Amy. 2011. *AbEx and Disco Balls: In defence of abstract expressionism II*.

[https://www.amysillman.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/201107\\_AbExandDiscoBalls.pdf](https://www.amysillman.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/201107_AbExandDiscoBalls.pdf).

Ref. 12.3.2022.

Talbot, Margaret. 2018. *The myth of whiteness in classical sculpture*. The New Yorker, 22.10.2018.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/29/the-myth-of-whiteness-in-classical-sculpture>.

Ref. 13.3.2022.



