

Images of Disappearance

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Images of disappearance

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Summary

The artistic component of my master's thesis was part of the Kuvan Kevät exhibition at Kuva/Tila in May 2024. Inspired by an experience of metaphorical death during a Sufi dance session, my thesis explores the intersection between Sufi practices and my artistic work, focusing on themes of disappearance, transformation, and unity. The written component of the thesis documents the creative process behind the exhibited works and includes images from the exhibition.

The first chapter consists of recollections of a transcendental experience during a Sufi dance session that inspired the exhibited paintings and further discusses and introduces Sufi tradition. In the first chapter I also reflect on the historical and cultural implications of Orientalism, emphasizing the importance of respecting cultural identities.

In the second chapter, I discuss the artist's relationship with materials, highlighting my shift from viewing materials as passive tools to active collaborators. I will also discuss how I choose the painting materials that I worked with. My process of creating the artistic component of the thesis was influenced by artists like Wassily Kandinsky, Lina Iris Viktor, and Agnes Pelton, whose work also navigates the interplay between material and immaterial worlds. I will introduce these artists briefly and explain how their practices connect to mine. I will introduce the materials and the process of working with them when creating the artistic component of the thesis such as Lokta paper and clay that played a significant role in my work, resonating with themes of cyclical existence. This chapter aims to explore and outline my approach to my artistic practice.

The third chapter introduces the paintings and discusses their installation in the Master of Fine arts graduation show, Kuvan Kevät.

The artistic component of the thesis, titled "Images of Disappearance," included four medium-sized paintings created in 2024. Techniques and materials varied from tempera on board to ink on paper, incorporating mixtures of bole clay, quartz sand, acrylic mediums, gold leaf, ink, and watercolor. These works were installed on a wall within an enclosed space in the Kuva/Tila gallery, arranged in pairs at the average viewer's eye level. The placement of the paintings was crucial to establish a bodily connection between the viewer and the artwork, with eyes featured in three of the pieces. The paper works were attached unframed with small, discreet magnets, creating the illusion that the papers were floating.

Acknowledges and Thanks

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The support and dedication of these artists enabled me to learn, develop my skills, and deepen my thinking, thereby laying a solid foundation for my continued artistic journey after graduation, which was exactly what I hoped this thesis project could foster. I hope every student can receive the same solid and compassionate support that these artists and teachers provided me throughout this thesis project.

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SUFISM

Approaching a spiritual practice

While I have practiced Sufi dance and immersed myself in the Sufi practice, I want to acknowledge that I am not a Sufi practitioner. My aim is to explore how Sufism has influenced my practice, and I make no attempt to extract or postulate the centuries old core of Islamic faith and practice.

In this chapter, the term “oriental” refers to the academic study of the history, languages, and cultures of Islam, a field that became known as Orientalism by the late 18th century. However, in contemporary discourse, the term “oriental” is recognized as carrying negative connotations due to its association with the reinforcement and perpetuation of colonial biases.¹ It is important to note that the term “oriental” should not be used to describe any person, community, culture, tradition, or religion, as it is a label imposed by others. It is vital for communities to have the autonomy to define and assert their own identities in terms that they find most accurate and respectful.²

Orientalism, especially in the arts, is often defined by romanticized and eroticized portrayals of non-European cultures, particularly prevalent in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This fascination with the “otherness” led to representations that painted societies outside of Europe in a fairy-tale light, often stripping away the complexities and realities of these cultures. Such depictions reduced rich, diverse traditions to simplistic tropes that catered to European fantasies, fostering a binary of “us” versus “them.”

In recent decades, there has been a critical shift in the discourse surrounding Orientalism. Since the late 20th century, scholars and artists have increasingly scrutinized the appropriation of cultural elements, arguing that these reductionist portrayals perpetuate harmful stereotypes and reinforce colonial narratives. This critique highlights the need to recognize the power dynamics at play in these artistic expressions and the ethical implications of representing cultures as mere objects of fascination or “otherness.”

1. Merriam-Webster, s.v. “Orientalism,” Accessed July 15, 2024
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Orientalism>.

2. Li Zhou, “Asian American vs. Oriental,” *Rethinking Schools* 10, no. 1 (Fall 1995).

3. Edward W. Said, “Orientalism” (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 45.

Furthermore, it is essential to challenge the tendency to categorize human reality into separate cultures, histories, or societies. Instead, we could view our world as interconnected, where communities coexist despite cultural differences. Emphasizing divisions can lead to dangerous generalizations, reinforcing the notion of an ‘us’ versus ‘them.’ Such perspectives can be exploited to advance colonial and racist agendas, painting the “West” as strong and the “Orient” as weak.³ Recognizing our shared humanity is crucial in dismantling these harmful binaries and fostering a more nuanced understanding of cultural representation.

Such division hinders the essential engagement needed for coexistence among diverse people, cultures, traditions, and religions. Edward Said, a Palestinian American academic, political activist, philosopher and literary critic, eloquently describes in his book *Orientalism* how harmful oriental thinking can be:

“The result of division is usually to polarize the distinction: the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western, and limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies. Orientalist reality is both antihuman and persistent. Its scope, as much as its institutions and all-pervasive influence, lasts up to the present.”⁴

I have been considering whether exploring Sufism and incorporating insights from Sufi practice into my artistic work could be seen as disrespectful or harmful to Sufi practitioners and those who practice Islam, given that I am a white European person and I am neither a Sufi practitioner nor a Muslim. After careful reflection and also the time spent on studying Edward Said’s work, I came to the conclusion that I want to give my best effort to articulate how Sufism has shaped my artistic practice, despite my lack of personal affiliation with Islam. I believe there is potential to connect Sufism to my practice, even though painting is not traditionally associated with Sufism. I aim to share through this thesis my genuine interest towards Sufi practice. It is my belief that engaging with and sharing my experiences of Sufism can contribute to a greater understanding and appreciation of its richness and depth.

Through this thesis, I aspire to create a dialogue about the nuances of Sufi traditions, illustrating its relevance and accessibility to contemporary audiences. By offering insights into my personal journey, I hope to inspire a deeper appreciation for Sufism as a source of artistic and spiritual growth.

4. Said, 1979, 45

Questions of Appropriation

Appropriation is a recurring practice in modern and contemporary art, where artists draw inspiration from existing images, objects, or cultural elements or incorporate those into their work.⁵ When it comes to drawing inspiration and appropriating a culture to create art there must be heavy acknowledgement that cultural appropriation in art is complex and multifaceted topic touching on issues of power, representation, and respect for cultural heritage. While artists often draw inspiration from various sources, including cultures other than their own, the line between appreciation and appropriation is not always clear. Appropriation can lead to the misrepresentation or trivialization of deeply significant cultural symbols and experiences, particularly when the artist comes from a dominant culture and the subject matter belongs to a marginalized group.⁶

My aim is to foster a more nuanced understanding of how Sufism can inform and enrich my practice. To this end, I will explore the history of Sufism and Sufi dance in this written component, as I believe it is essential to understand the core of the practice, its history, and to acknowledge the people who have shaped it to engage with the tradition respectfully. Through this exploration, I intend to share this knowledge with the reader. I am committed to acknowledging and avoiding colonial and orientalist thinking and the exoticization of Islamic culture, which have been and still are a significant problem in western history and modern western thinking.

To erase one's own identity in the face of God

Sufism, often described as Islamic mysticism, is a way of practicing faith that focuses on the inward search for God while shunning materialism and abandoning their own ego. Sufis seek to achieve a deeper spiritual understanding through direct personal experience of God, with the aim of achieving spiritual unity with the divine. In his book *Sufism: The Formative Period*, Professor Ahmed T. Karamustafa notes that while Sufis are often viewed as inward-focused mystics detached from worldly matters, their practice is deeply rooted in this world. He suggests that Sufis can be seen as heartfelt activists engaged in an inner mission of realizing a holistic vision of Islam.⁷

5. Rosie Lesso, *Just What is Appropriation in Art? An Historical Overview*, 2022, Accessed August 12, 2024
<https://www.invaluable.com/blog/what-is-appropriation-in-art/>

6. Jessica Sudol, *Appropriation in Contemporary Art: Who Can Paint What?* Accessed August 12, 2024
<https://rhetorikos.blog.fordham.edu/?p=1201>

7. Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism The Formative Period*, Edinburgh university press, Edinburgh 2007, 177

Historical context and early movements

The roots of Sufi practices lead to the early ascetic movements in Islam during the 7th to 9th century, which emphasized piety and a simple, devout lifestyle. The name Sufism was initially associated only with groups in modern day Iraq, where mystical circles formed primarily within communities of people who have abandon the pursuit of material comforts, in the interests of achieving enlightenment. Originally quite radical in both thought and practice, these circles coalesced into distinct mystical movements.⁸

Asceticism emerged as a reaction to the perceived moral and spiritual decline following the rapid expansion of the Islamic empire. Early Muslims sought a return to the simplicity and piety exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. These early ascetics practiced rigorous self-discipline, renounced worldly pleasures, and engaged in intense devotion and prayer. Their lifestyle emphasized the transient nature of worldly life and the importance of preparing for the afterlife. In his paper *Mevlevi Music and Whirling*, Dr. Alan Wenham-Prosser explores the history of Sufi practices, highlighting how the cultural diversity of the Islamic empire—including various pre-Islamic traditions and philosophies—shaped Sufi thought. He notes that Sufism has a remarkable capacity to adapt to the socio-cultural contexts in which it emerges. Early Sufi practices incorporated elements of Christian monasticism, Gnostic beliefs, and Neoplatonism. Sufis from regions now known as Iran and Afghanistan engaged with Greek philosophical traditions, as well as the rich tapestry of cultures in modern-day India, creating a lifestyle that harmoniously blended knowledge and devotion.⁹ The integration of these diverse elements helped Sufism evolve into a rich and complex spiritual tradition, emphasizing direct personal experience of the divine. By the time of the Middle Ages Sufism had established an important part of the Muslim devotional, social and intellectual life and had become integral part of Islam.

Sufism is often seen as deviating from the core Islamic traditions outlined in Sharia law and the Quran. While conventional Islamic scholars adhere strictly to the Quran and Sharia as the primary sources of knowledge about Islam, Sufi practice emphasizes a more metaphysical approach, focusing on the inward search for God and the deepening of one's personal relationship with the divine. As such, Sufism can be viewed as a form of resistance against the dogmatic authority within the Islamic faith.¹⁰

8. Karamustafa, *Sufism The Formative Period*, 172

9. Alan Wenham-Prosser, *Mevlevi Music and Whirling*, London, 2024, 17

10. Isha Sharma, *Sufism in the 21st Century Islam*, Medium, 2021, Accessed August 3, 2024
<https://ishasharmax.medium.com/sufism-in-the-21st-century-islam-b191d9cee617>

Sufism has often been criticized for incorporating elements perceived as irrational or superstitious, seen as diverging from the core doctrines of Islam. This divergence from established religious norms has led to concerns that Sufi practices require regulation. Viewed as distinct from the central Islamic texts and teachings, Sufism has faced scrutiny, suspicion, and restrictions, particularly in some Muslim-majority countries like Iran and Turkey, where it is seen as straying from orthodox beliefs and practices, raising concerns among religious authorities about its place within Islam.¹¹

Globalization of Sufi Practices

Since its inception in the 7th century, Sufism has spread across the globe and is now recognized as a contemporary global activity. In today's modern world, Sufism offers individuals support by instilling essential values such as piety, peace, and unity.¹² Sufism has become increasingly recognized in Europe and U.S during the 21st century through public Sufi dance ceremonies, Sufi music, publications like poetry, and practitioners who have begun teaching Sufism globally.

However, there is justified criticism regarding how Sufi practices are portrayed and transmitted in non-Muslim countries, which can be detrimental to the Sufi tradition itself. Carl W. Ernst, in his text *Sufism, Islam, and Globalization in the Contemporary World*, criticizes how Sufi practice has entered the commercialized spirituality market. He points out that some governments, such as Turkey, increasingly view Sufi practices as sources of tourist revenue. Ernst also highlights the risk posed by Euro-American scholars promoting their version of Sufism as a "tame" form of Islam or using it for monetary gain. This approach risks delegitimizing Sufism both in its traditional contexts and in its new global communities.¹³

Sufi dance

Sufi dance is one of the most recognizable expressions of Sufi devotion. The practice originates from the Mevlevi Order founded by the followers of Jalaluddin Rumi also known as Mowlānā Jalāloddin Balkhi in the 13th century in Konya, Turkey from where it gradually spread throughout the Ottoman Empire. Rumi was a Persian poet, scholar, teacher and mystic who believed in the power of music, poetry, and dance to reach God. Rumi's disciples, inspired by his teachings and ecstatic states of spiritual enlightenment, began the practice of whirling as a form of worship in a Sufi order that they had formed, called the Mevlevi order. The Mevlevi order's practice is thought to be based firmly on Islamic principles, but history shows that it is also close to the principles of Vedanta, which recognizes all religions, yet it is not a religion, but a way of life.¹⁴ Vedanta is Hindu philosophy which explores timeless truth and underlines the view that no religion has a monopoly on truth or revelation.¹⁵

Sufi dance or also known as whirling dance represents a journey from the ego's confinement to a state of union with the divine. Whirling dance is a part of the Sema, a ceremony for worship that originally took place in a private setting among the melevi orders. Sema is conducted by musicians who provide divine melody and singer who sings the words of Rumi with the played divine melody. The person who is engaging in the ceremony whirls at the pace of the music and the chanting around their own axis in a repetitive manner. The whirling can continue from several minutes up to hours. The practitioner aims to achieve a state of transcendence through the sema, where they overcome sense of separateness from God and abandon the mortal frame of their body and the confinement of their ego to join the divine essence. The rotating movement can also be seen as symbolizing the movements of the planets and the sun, an eternal whirling movement which we all take part in. Sufi dance can be seen as a type of physically active meditation.

11. Carl W. Ernst, *Sufism, Islam, and Globalization in the Contemporary World: Methodological Reflections on a Changing Field of Study*, Indiana University, 2006, 22- 26

12. Isha Sharma (*Sufism in the 21st Century Islam*, 2021)

13. Carl W. Ernst (*Sufism Islam, and Globalization in the Contemporary World*) 2006 ,23- 32

14. Alan Wenham-Prosser (*Mevlevi Music and Whirling*, 2024) 1

15. Swami Tathagatananda, *Fundamental Principles of Vedanta*, Accessed August 2, 2024 <https://www.vedantany.org/articles/blog-post-title-two-6txr3>

The Sufi dance tradition of Mevlevi orders has been recognized and protected by the UNESCO World Heritage Program. Before the recognition of UNESCO Mevlevi orders were impacted from the cultural revolution of Turkey, during the 1920's. Mevlevi and many other Sufi orders were banned from continuation and their land and buildings were confiscated by the state. The Whirling ceremony which has been seen around the world since the 1950s began after the Turkish government relaxed the legal ban on the Mevlevi orders and their ceremonies. The original relaxation only applied once a year to the special day of the Mevlevi on 17th December. This is the anniversary of the passing of Rumi from this world. As time passed Turkish government took an interest in the ceremony and eventually the press and other public media were involved and Mevlevi order were allowed to continue as a public ceremony and tourist attraction which has not been the original way for conducting a sema.¹⁶ Since the 1990s, all restrictions on Sufi practices have been lifted in Turkey. Some private Sufi groups and practitioners are working to restore the original spiritual and intimate character of the Sema ceremony.¹⁷

16. Alan Wenham-Prosser (Mevlevi Music and Whirling, 2024) 1-16

17. UNESCO intangible cultural heritage, Mevlevi Sema ceremony, Accessed August 6, 2024 <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/mevlevi-sema-ceremony-00100>

The Influence of Spiritual and Philosophical Aspects of Sufism to My Artistic Practice

The spiritual and philosophical principles of Sufism have deeply influenced my approach to painting, particularly in how I engage with materials and the creative process. A central concept in Sufism is the remembrance and love of God, with love seen as the highest form of intelligence—without which nothing truly significant can be achieved. Engaging with Sufi practices has taught me that love is at the core of my painting practice. I paint because I love it, and through painting, I connect with others—artists, viewers, and even the materials themselves that I also love.

This notion of love extends to the materials I use. In Sufism, the love for God transcends into love for creation, and I reflect this in how I treat my materials with care and respect. The act of painting becomes a form of devotion, where my connection to the world around me, its creatures, and its materials mirrors the Sufi emphasis on unity with the divine. I am not merely using materials; I am collaborating with them, acknowledging their inherent value and presence.

Sufism also emphasizes that spiritual revelation is an ongoing, ever-evolving process. This idea resonates with my belief that my artistic practice is never fixed or finished. There is no endpoint in my development as an artist—just as in Sufism, there is no ultimate arrival to God, only continuous growth and deepening understanding. My artistic journey, like the Sufi spiritual path, is one of constant discovery, where I am always expanding, transforming, and refining my connection to the materials and the world around me. This open-ended nature of both Sufism and my artistic practice means that I must remain receptive to change, allowing space for new insights and giving space for my practice to evolve naturally over time.

In this way, my work becomes a reflection of this spiritual journey that Sufis embark on, where love, connection, and growth are at the heart of the practices.

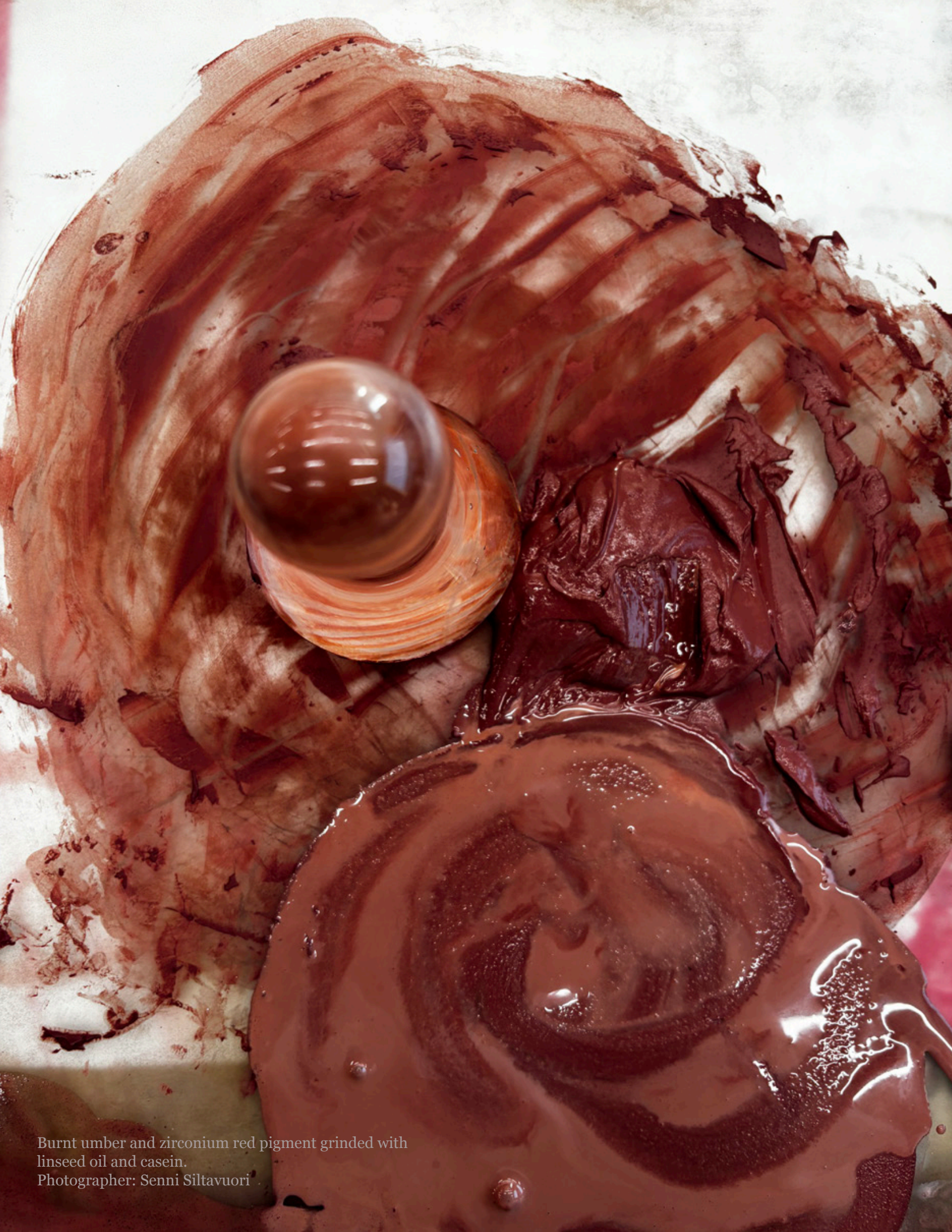
Remembrance of an experience of disappearing during sufi dance session

Logbook entry from April 2023

I spin and spin around my axis.
My feet grow tired, but my body refuses to stop. It urges me to move, to spin endlessly until there's no spin left.
The movement becomes automatic, blending into a single, continuous circle. I am inside the circle; I am the circle. I feel light and warm as my senses slowly numb. My vision blurs, filled with indistinct images, light, and shadows. The floor and the ceiling merge, wobbling and colliding.

If I step outside the circle that the movement has created, there might not be a floor anymore. It has vanished, leaving no floor, no roof, no walls — just an endless expanse of space. I am there, with nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. No corners, no above, no below — just space. Suddenly, I realized the space is empty. There is no me, just nothingness. I wander where I have gone, then understanding, I am in the space. I am that emptiness. I have melted into the void. It feels terrifying to let go and accept that I am nowhere to be found. If I let go, will I disappear forever? Will I die? If I do not exist, I cannot die. So, why hold on? I float in the space for a fleeting moment.

Suddenly, I feel an ache in my toe, and I return to this hot, sweaty body. My legs scream, and my stomach churns. I open my eyes, though they were never closed. Everything spins — the ceiling, the floor. I feel like I'm running. I feel my breath, my heartbeat, the blood pulsing in my fingers. My hands feel heavy. I am tired, yet I continue to spin, but I no longer melt outward. I am melting back into my body, my consciousness filling every corner — my toes, my eyes, my stomach. My face feels warm, blood rushing to my cheeks. My back feels strong but weary. I am back in this body, and I feel nauseous. Exhausted, I decided to slow down. Gradually, my movements slow down. My legs no longer turn as fast. My hands draw closer to my body. The world around me won't stop spinning, but I fight to slow down, swimming upstream against the relentless pace. I slowly, slowly, make my way to the floor. The floor and the ceiling are distinct once more. The floor is solid and safe. I lay down, the cold surface of the floor is comforting.



Material Choices and Approach to The Painting Process

Materials as objects of agency and collaborators

My experience of losing myself in the movement during a Sufi dance session revealed profound parallels with my painting process. The act of spinning, where my sense of self momentarily dissolved, is reminiscent of how I engage with my materials in the studio. Just as the repetitive motion of the dance allowed me to transcend my individual identity, the physical process of mixing pigments with substances such as linseed oil, turpentine, casein, and beeswax enables me to immerse deeply in the act of creation. The tactile pleasure of mixing pigment with these materials on a palette often becomes so intriguing that it surpasses the act of painting itself. This immersion leads to a similar sense of losing oneself, where the boundaries between the artist, the material, and the artwork begin to blur. In both practices, there is a surrender to the process, allowing the medium—whether movement or material—to guide the outcome.

When I engage with materials such as paint residues or pigments, I immerse myself into them, allowing the material to guide my decisions on the painting surface. The material leads, and I follow, responding to its inherent qualities. In these moments, I lose my sense of self and focus entirely on serving the material—whether it involves making it shine, rendering it matte, or layering it to appear heavy. At its most profound, I disappear; I experience a metaphorical death when I am painting.

This experience of merging with the material is reminiscent of the sense of disappearance that I encountered during the Sufi dance. It was a revelation to realize that these moments of self-loss can manifest in different contexts and mutually reinforce one another when explored together. The experiences of disappearing during the Sufi dance session started to shift my focus in my artistic practice to the painting materials and how I often feel unity with them.

Burnt umber and zirconium red pigment grinded with
linseed oil and casein.
Photographer: Senni Siltavuori

This shift marked a turning point in how I view my relationship with painting materials. My earlier works were more concerned with precision and control, utilizing oil colors on white-primed canvases to create figurative images. In that context, the material functioned merely as a means to fulfill the motif of creating an image. However, the unity I experienced during the Sufi dance—where I no longer felt like a separate entity but as part of the surrounding world—prompted a reevaluation of my approach to painting.

The Qualities of material

The blend of material's physical qualities and their symbolic meanings is integral to my practice, where neither element can exist in isolation. This perspective aligns with Sabet Bucman's assertion, as noted in a book edited by Sigrid Sandström, "Material and symbolic qualities cannot be separated from one another; in other words, one is not pre-emptive to the other, but mutually dependent."¹⁸ This idea frames well my approach to painting. I seek out materials that resonate with me through their texture, color, and symbolic significance. While brushwork and mark-making play a role in my practice, my primary focus is on the integration of material and symbolic elements. In my work, the motif and the material merge. When using materials like handmade paper or unprimed canvas, I allow the material to reveal its inherent characteristics, forcing me to relinquish control and authority. I regard materials as collaborators rather than mere tools to be managed or controlled, allowing the painting process to become an exploration.

This collaboration is exemplified in the materials I chose for the Kuvan Kevät exhibition, where handmade paper, clay, and gold leaf played a central role. In my practice, material choices are intertwined with the motifs of my paintings. For instance, when I sought to embody my experiences of disappearance during the Sufi dance session, I knew I needed materials that carried symbolic weight, capable of conveying themes of disappearance.

Relationship between me and the material

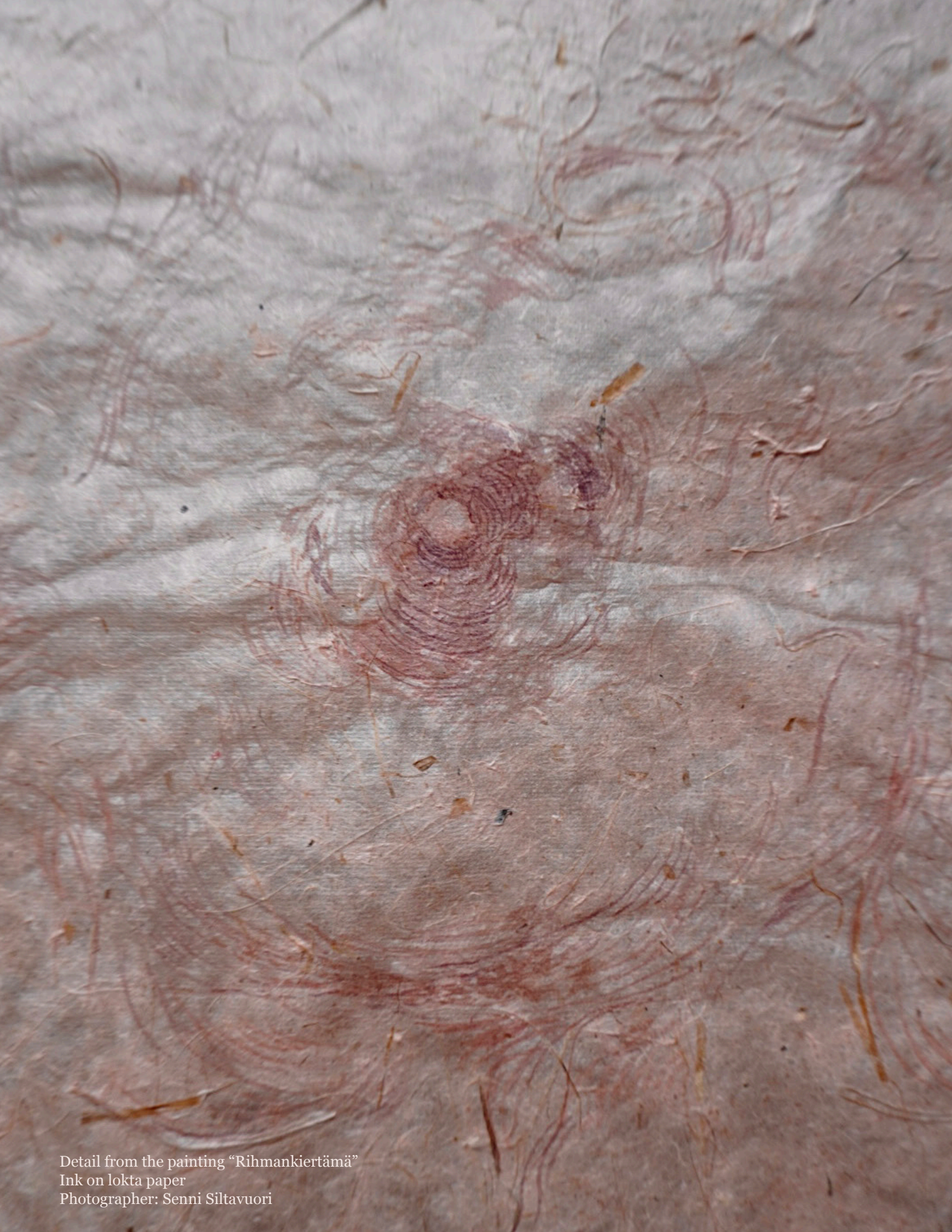
Through the process of reevaluating my artistic practice after my experiences with Sufi dance practice, I came to understand that I am not a master over the materials that I work with. Previously, I viewed myself as an authority, directing the materials to achieve my motifs on the canvas. This perspective, however, limited my connection with the materials, reducing them to mere tools. I recognized the need to approach painting materials as equal entities rather than subjects to be controlled. This shift in thinking deepened my relationship with the materials, allowing me to explore their inherent qualities and how they actively influence my artistic practice.

Initially, this change in perspective was met with frustration, as it required me to relinquish control and embrace the unpredictability of the materials. Yet, this very frustration served as an invitation to re-examine and redefine the core of painting itself. By relinquishing control, I began to see the materials not as passive mediums but as active participants in the creative process, capable of shaping the outcome as much as my own intentions do. This collaborative relationship with the materials offered a space to explore, the dialogue between the artist and the medium and how it can develop into a dynamic and evolving process.

As my practice evolved, so did my understanding of painting. Previously, I regarded painting as a skill of control, where individual expression was projected onto the canvas. However, this perspective evolved as I delved deeper into the relationship between the artist and the material. My experience with Sufi dance illuminated the concept of painting as an evolving process—an act of creation that is not solely about individual expression but is also meant to be observed, engaged with, and experienced by others.¹⁹ The act of painting can be an inner journey and personal experience that ultimately extends beyond the artist's personal expression, emphasizing its role as a dynamic interaction between the work, the viewer, and the surrounding world.

18. Sabet Bucman, Sigrid Sandström, *Material Matters, Painting and Its Materialities*, Art and Theory Publishing, Stockholm, 2020, 23

19. Sigrid Sandström (*Material Matters, Painting and Its Materialities*) 2020, 6



Detail from the painting "Rihmankiertämä"
Ink on lokta paper
Photographer: Senni Siltavuori

Lokta Paper

In the autumn of 2023, I started working with handmade Lokta paper, which I had ordered from Nepal, alongside inks that I crafted during a material study course. Lokta paper, a traditional handmade paper indigenous to Nepal, has been used for centuries for official documents, religious texts, and sacred scripts due to its great durability and resistance to tearing, insects, and mildew. It is made from the inner bark of the *Daphne bholua* bush, which grows at high altitudes in the Himalayas. The bark is harvested without damaging the plant's roots, allowing it to regrow. The production process imbues the paper with an intriguing texture, a rustic feel that almost resembles human skin. It is thick and rough, yet it can also be silky soft and translucent when painted with water and pigment.

The soft, absorbent nature of Lokta paper compelled me to ease the control and precision that I had previously relied upon when painting with oil on linen. The watercolors blended naturally on the paper's surface, absorbing into its delicate fibers and creating the impression that the painting was embedded within the paper itself. I was captivated by this effect; the paper seemed to breathe, and the colors radiated with the vibrancy of an April sunset. When I placed my earlier oil paintings beside these new works on Lokta paper, the oil paintings appeared static and dull in comparison. My attempts to control the oil paint were visible in every brushstroke, a stark contrast to the organic, unrestrained marks made on the Lokta paper.

The unrestrained watercolor and ink marks on the soft paper embodied a different physical presence. The untamed, independent nature of the Lokta paper fascinated me, especially when compared to the stillness of primed canvas. It felt as though I had integrated with the paper and the paint, collaborating with the materials rather than dictating from above. This process echoed the practice of whirling, where I melted into the fibers of the paper much like I had melted into the spinning movement, experiencing a sensation of gravity disappearing. The light, floaty nature of the paper became a meaningful choice to depict my experience of disappearance while whirling.



Leaf Gold
Photographer: Senni Siltavuori



Gilding process
Photographer: Senni Siltavuori



Icon from my grandmother's dining room dating 19th century.
Photographer: Janne Siltavuori

Gold and pigment

The ikon on my grandmother's wall, has stared me with his sad eyes through out my child hood as I have dined in her table. The ikon depicts Jesus surrounded by a dark metal halo. The halo, darkened over time, creates a protective aura around Jesus, bringing the depicted figure closer to our reality, as he would actually hide behind the metal. The metal in this ikon serves as both an illusory surface and a physical object, representing the ingrained feature of the material while simultaneously being used to present an image. This duality of the metal's nature in this ikon inspired me to explore the process of gilding, even though the halo in this ikon is made of silver, not gold.

I had the opportunity to learn gilding spring 2024, following a lecture by our now-retired material studies teacher, Malla Tallgren. Gold, with its rich associations and dark history, drew me in. Its reflective surface and deep yellow hue enchanted me, much like a magpie when seeing shiny objects. Gold seems to absorb light and reflect it back with multiplied intensity, a brilliance that cannot be achieved with pigments and varnishes.

Gilding, however, demands precision and control—qualities that are in stark contrast to the more spontaneous, collaborative process of working with ink on paper. Gold requires the artist's authority to flourish, and the process is labor-intensive and requires dedication.

It took me seven weeks to achieve the desired shine and adhesion of the gold. The process involves several meticulous steps, starting with the preparation of a suitable base for the gilded area. This base is primed with a mixture of bolus clay and animal glue, which is then sanded smooth. Early in the process, I discovered that my handprint and my working pace were not the only factors I needed to control. Humidity played a significant role, as the clay mixture dried too quickly and unevenly in the school building's harsh ventilation, leading to cracks. The surface must be perfectly smooth before gilding, as gold replicates every flaw—I learned this the hard way.

The first time I applied the clay, I let it dry overnight. The next morning, I noticed a thin crack but assumed it would be concealed by the gold leaf layers. Instead, the gold accentuated the crack, reflecting light into it and making it appear as a deep groove. I had to sand off the gold and start over. This happened twice more. The process of applying gold to clay requires the clay to be slightly moistened with a mixture of water and alcohol, which allows the clay to absorb the gold leaf. Unfortunately, I was too heavy-handed with the water, causing

the clay to become too wet, leading to more cracking. Despite feeling the urge to give up, my determination to master the gilding process prevailed. I sanded off the gold and the cracked clay once more, determined to succeed.

I eventually decided to change my approach. After studying various techniques, I learned that gold leaf can be attached to clay by exhaling warm breath onto the clay surface, creating a moment of moisture. I prepared the clay surface again, set the gold leaves beside me, and began breathing heavily on the surface of the painting. After several attempts, I finally managed to attach the gold leaf perfectly to the smooth surface of the clay.

The physicality of gilding was unlike anything I had experienced before, even compared to painting large canvases with oil color. The process made me acutely aware of every breath and the slightest tremor in my hands. Through gilding, I understood that the physicality of painting is not always about visible marks or traces left by the artist. Sometimes, it is about the artist's battle with their own body to create something that seems to emerge independently. The contradiction between the substantial craftsmanship required and end result—where the artist's individual mark is undiscernible—fascinates me. It reminds me of Sufi dancing, where repetition can lead to an experience of merging with the surroundings. In gilding, skill is developed and refined until the artist seems to disappear, merging with the material. Where individual expression is unsought.

A similar merging occurred during the tempera painting process, where I received guidance from artists Liisa Karintaus, Hannele Kumpulainen and Emma Luukkala. Their expertise and shared knowledge made my work much more meaningful; I did not feel alone in my practice. We began by selecting a mixture of casein and linseed oil as the binder for the pigment. I wanted the paint surface to be as matte and dull as possible, absorbing light rather than reflecting it. This choice created a deliberate contrast with the gilded areas, emphasizing the material's differences. I wanted to give the stage for the pigment, so I strived to create a painting surface that was free from visible brush strokes and individual handprints. After experimenting with various pigments, I settled on a mixture of raw umber and zirconium red, which created a shade that danced between brown and purple, shifting depending on the light. The color was meant to evoke multiple interpretations, from the earthiness of brown—suggesting decay and death—to the spirituality and status conferred by purple, often seen in Christian liturgical robes and iconography.



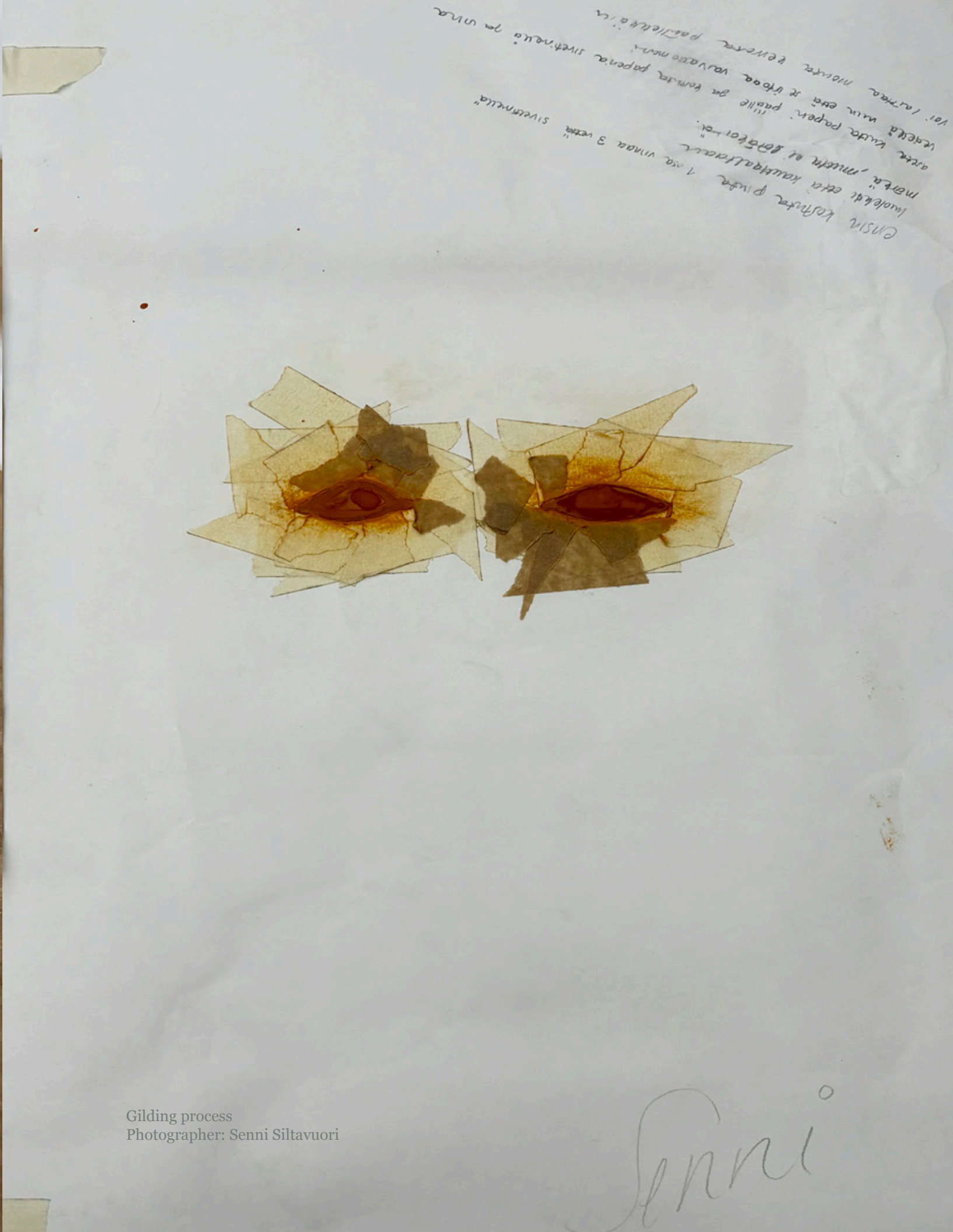
Gilding process, polished bole clay
Photographer: Senni Siltavuori



Gilding process
Photographer: Senni Siltavuori



Gilding process
Photographer: Senni Siltavuori



Gilding process
Photographer: Senni Siltavuori

Senni



Gilding process
Photographer: Senni Siltavuori



Burnt umber and zirconium red pigment
grinded with linseed oil and casein.
Photographer: Senni Siltavuori

About Disappearing

The themes of disappearance, death, and loss are central to my thesis and are closely connected to the broader exploration of existence that informs my artistic practice. Through the exhibited paintings, I examine how these concepts materialize in the physical world, with a particular focus on the transformation of materials and their enduring qualities that persist over time.

To explore the concept of disappearance, it might be helpful to first consider the notion of appearance. Disappearance may not signify the complete cessation of existence but rather a transformation of form. It seems that everything in the universe is interconnected, suggesting that nothing truly vanishes; instead, it changes shape, continuing to exist in another guise. This cycle of appearance and disappearance appears to be a fundamental aspect of physical existence, as reflected in the natural world. The materials I use in my paintings—gold, clay, and sand—are all part of this ongoing cycle. For example Gold, formed in the aftermath of supernovae and neutron star collisions, journeyed through space before being transported to Earth by asteroids. While it has disintegrated and fused with surrounding substances on Earth over time, its essential characteristics remain, contributing to the larger material existence.²⁰

The pigments I incorporate into my paintings, such as raw umber, serve as a testament to this continuity. Raw umber consists of iron oxide and manganese oxide, both of which have existed on our planet for billions of years. Iron, the most prevalent element on Earth, forms a significant part of its core and is the fourth most common element in the crust. Iron oxide has a historical presence that stretches back to the Banded Iron Formation era, around 2.5 to 1.8 billion years ago.²¹ These materials, which are independent of human existence and have existed for billions of years before humans, position me as a collaborator in the painting process, emphasizing the agency of the materials themselves. They shape and influence human actions, just as humans shape and influence them.

Human experience is inherently tied to our physical form, as our bodies enable us to interact with and perceive the world through sensory experiences. This process of perception allows us to become aware of objects, relationships, and events, helping us to navigate and interpret our surroundings.²²

20. StoneX Bullion, How is Gold Formed and Where Does it Come From? 2024 Accessed August 2.2024 <https://stonexbullion.com/en/blog/how-is-gold-formed-and-where-does-it-come-from/>

21. Alex D Sheftel, Anne B Mason, Prem Ponka, The long history of iron in the Universe and in health and disease, *Biochimica et Biophysica Acta General subjects*, Volume 1820, Issue 3, 2012,165-166

22. Kendra Cherry, "What Is Perception? Recognizing Environmental Stimuli Through the Five Senses," *Verywell Mind*, 2024, Accessed August 2.2024 <https://www.verywellmind.com/perception-and-the-perceptual-process-2795839>

Even when something or someone ceases to appear—disappears—and we can't sense them or that anymore the fundamental elements that composed them persist, transforming into new forms. Through perception, we not only gain information about the world but also engage with the continuous cycle of appearance, disappearance, and transformation.

By creating physical art objects, I engage in the cycle of disappearance and reappearance. For this thesis, I chose to work with paper and clay because these materials inherently embody the concept of disappearance. When exposed to the elements, paper integrates with its environment, illustrating transformation; even when dissolved in water, the fibers persist, merging into the aquatic surroundings. Similarly, when clay is exposed to the elements, it dissolves and blends with other substances, yet the inorganic components of the clay continue to exist.

In this sense, disappearance is more accurately described as evolution or transformation. Perhaps there is no true disappearance, only a perpetual cycle of change and rebirth. Disappearance, therefore, is not an end but a part of the continuous process of existence—a circular journey of evolving forms and enduring existence.

Spirituality in Art

In his book "On the Spiritual in Art", Wassily Kandinsky explores the profound power of art to convey the spiritual and emotional experiences. He argues that art transcends mere representation, communicating on a spiritual level through abstraction and symbolism. Kandinsky emphasizes the role of color and form in evoking emotional and spiritual responses, positioning art as a bridge between the material and immaterial worlds.

Kandinsky's focus on the spiritual and transformative aspects of art resonates with my own practice, especially during the process of selecting color palettes for the works exhibited in Kuvan Kevät. I believe that color has the power to influence emotions and set a particular mood within a piece. Kandinsky discusses the fleeting yet profound impact of color, suggesting that while the initial visual effect may be temporary, the deeper, lasting reaction often arises through associative processes. As Kandinsky writes:

*“As the soul generally is tightly bound to the body, it is possible that the psychic emotion may be aroused by means of association. For example, red may cause a spiritual vibration, analogous to that caused by a flame, because red is the colour of flame. Warm red may prove exciting, or painful, even disgusting, through possible association with blood; as this colour recalls a physical agent which undoubtedly has a displeasing effect on the soul. This being the case, it would be easy, by association, to find the other physical effects of colour not only on the sense of sight but also on the other senses. For example, one could assume that light yellow would make a sour impression, because of its association with a lemon.”*²³

This exploration of color’s emotional depth aligns closely with my approach to painting, where I focus on the interplay between the physical and symbolic qualities that materials can embody. By carefully selecting the materials and pigments I work with, I aim to bridge the gap between tangible and intangible experiences. For instance, when I chose the pigments for the painting exhibited in the Kuvan Kevät show titled “Deprived eye” I resonated towards deep tones between purple and brown, because I felt that they can evoke associations with death, faith, decay, and elicit feelings for example grief, fear, or curiosity. Additionally, in the painting titled “Dust to Dust” also exhibited in the Kuvan Kevät show, I aimed to evoke a sense of underlying movement or the intense heat of the sun by creating cracked surfaces in the clay, reminiscent of the dry, parched earth. Much like Kandinsky’s exploration of color as a medium for evoking spiritual experiences, I strive to evoke specific moods and emotions in my paintings through thoughtful material selection that conveys the themes I wish to express.

I would also like to acknowledge the influence of artist Lina Iris Viktor, whose work has been a source of inspiration for my practice. Viktor’s exploration of spiritual themes through her art resonates with my own approach, particularly in how she perceives gold as a material with connections to spiritual planes. This concept aligns with my view of materials as active participants in the creative process, capable of evoking associations that affect emotions and moods. Viktor’s use of gold as a symbol of the spiritual is particularly compelling to me, as it underscores the material’s transcendent qualities beyond its monetary value.

23. Wassily Kandinsky, Hilla Rebay “On the Spiritual in Art”, New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1946, 39-41

Moreover, like Viktor, who seamlessly integrates various mediums—including painting, sculpture, and photography—I approach my painting materials with a holistic mindset. I aim to combine different elements and techniques to fully express my artistic vision. I greatly admire how effortlessly Viktor blends different media, creating a cohesive narrative that bridges the physical and metaphysical realms.

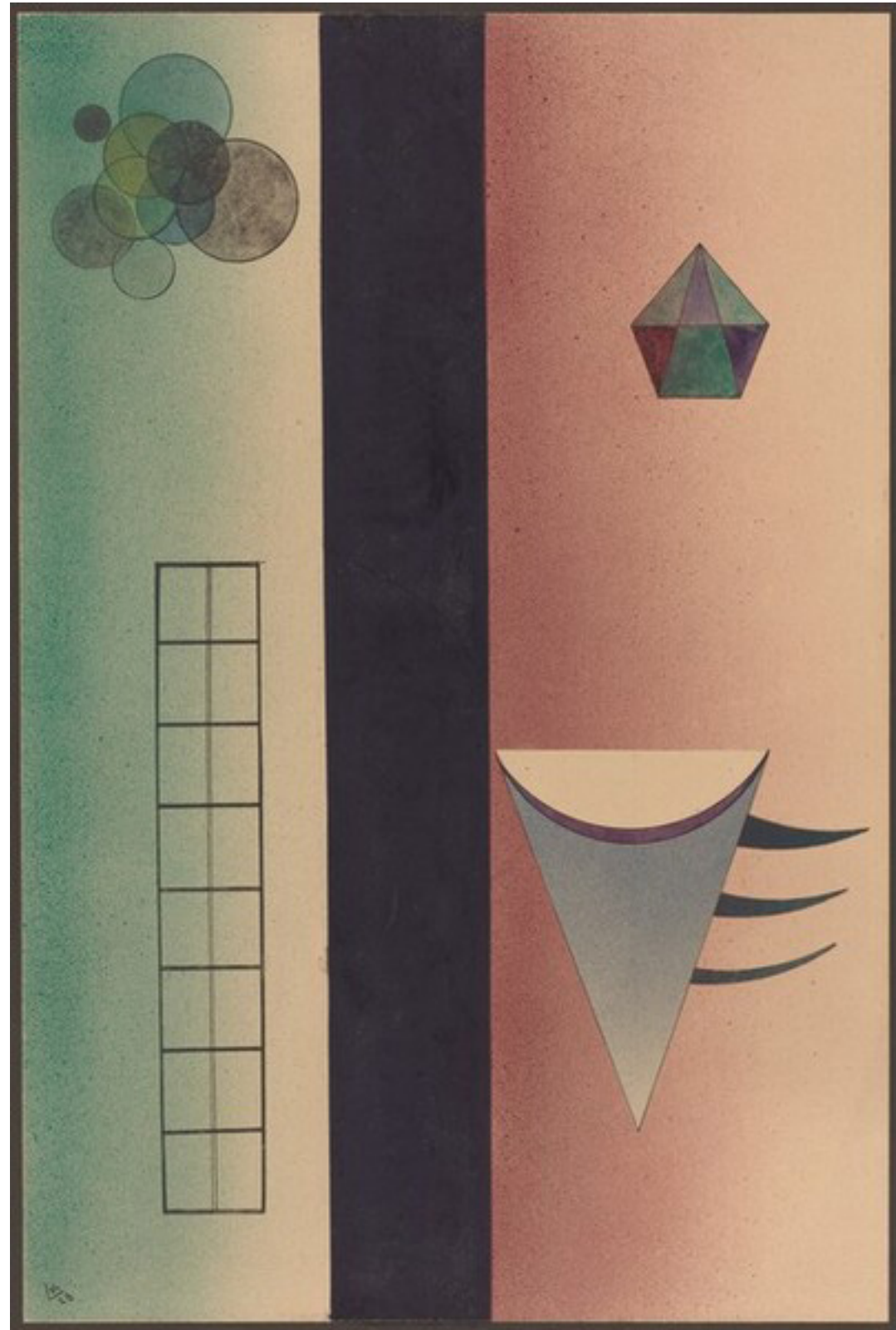
Viktor’s work often incorporates references to cultural history and mythology, an aspect of her practice that resonates with my own exploration of Sufi practices and the cyclical nature of existence. Both Viktor and I draw from rich cultural traditions to inform our work, using our art to engage with and reflect on complex spiritual and cultural narratives.

This shared emphasis on the spiritual and cultural dimensions of art highlights a connection between our practices. Viktor’s work not only inspires but also reinforces my approach to art, encouraging me to continue exploring the connections between materiality, spirituality, and cultural heritage.

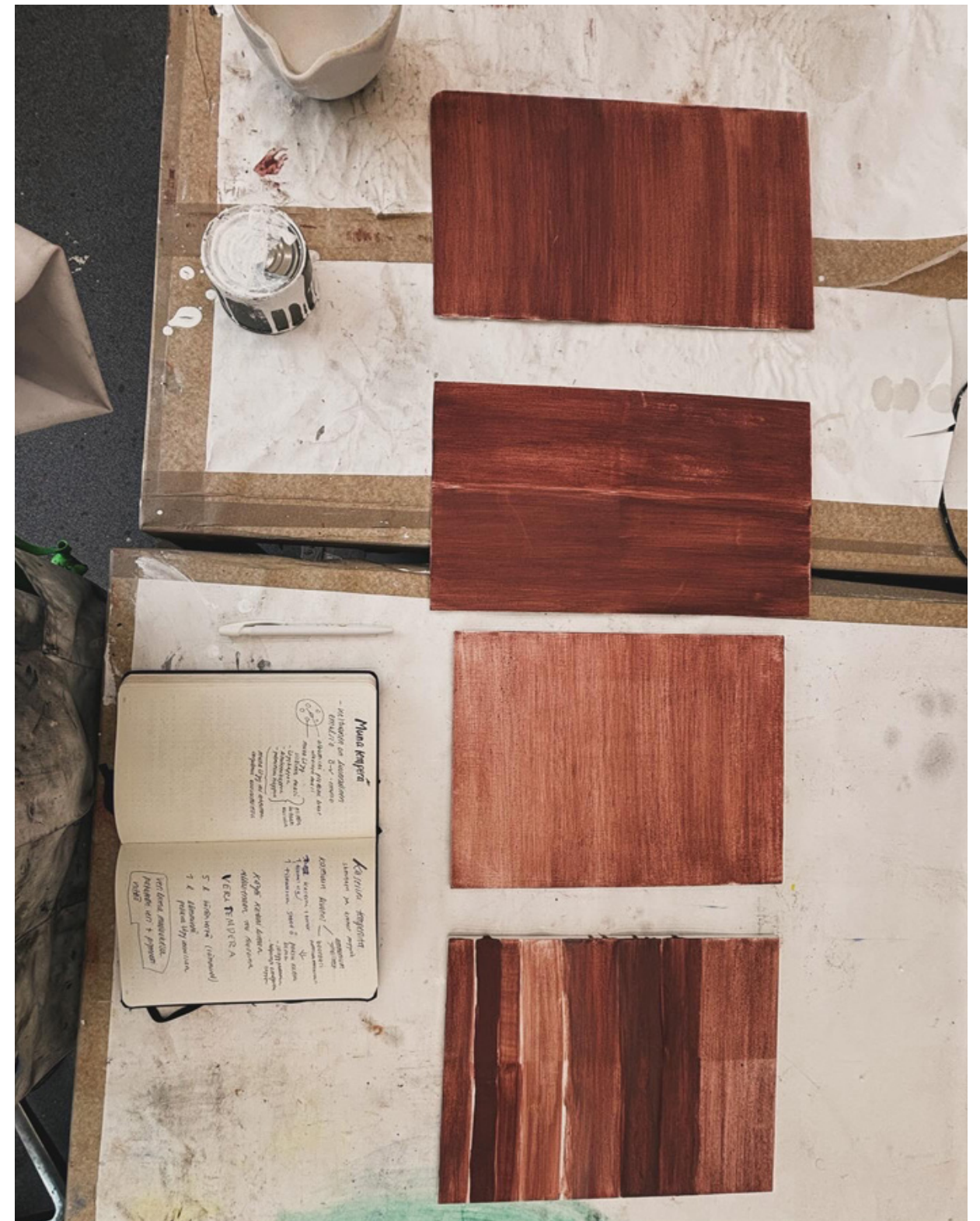
Another artist whose practice aligns with mine is Agnes Pelton. A visionary symbolist, Pelton sought to depict the spiritual realms she encountered during meditative states. Her work, characterized by abstract forms and luminous veils of light, aimed to express a higher consciousness and reveal a world beyond the physical—a realm of benevolent, disembodied energies that animate and protect life. Pelton’s decision to live in remote locations reflects her desire for a contemplative space to pursue her spiritual and artistic visions.²⁴

Similarly, I engage in meditative Sufi dance practices that emphasize the dissolution of the self and unity with the divine. Just as Pelton’s paintings invite viewers to look beyond physical appearances into a transcendent reality, the paintings I exhibited at the Kuvan Kevät exhibition encouraged viewers to consider the cyclical nature of existence. Pelton approached her painting materials as vehicles for expressing the intangible and spiritual, a perspective that aligns with my view of painting materials as objects of agency. By collaborating with certain materials, I aim to build a bridge between the material and immaterial worlds, much like Pelton and Kandinsky did in their painting practices.

24. Whitney Museum of American Art, “Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist”, Accessed August 21, 2024 <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/agnes-pelton>.



Wassily Kandinsky, 1928, Geteilt (Divided), watercolor and ink on wove paper
accessed 25.9.2024 National Gallery of Art
Retrieved from <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.108875.html>



Pigment samples for the painting titled "Deprived Eye"
Photographer: Senni Siltavuori



Lina Iris Victor, 2018, Eleventh, Mixed media, Pure 24 Karat Gold, Acrylic, Ink, Copolymer Resin, Print on Matte Canvas
 accessed 25.9.2024 Lina Iris Victor
 Retrieved from <https://www.linaviktor.com>



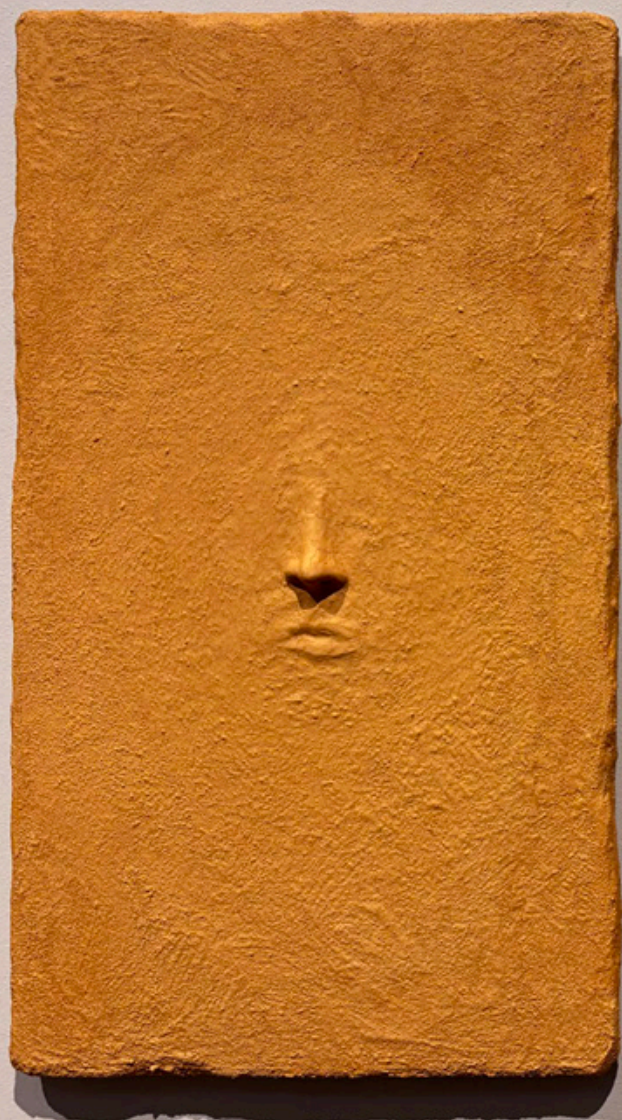
Agnes Pelton, 1932, Messengers, oil on canvas
 accessed 25.9.2024 Phoenix Art Museum
 Retrieved from <https://phxart.org/arts/messengers-primary-title/>

Images of the exhibited works – Kuvan Kevät exhibition view

Kuva/tila, Helsinki 3.5.2024-1.6-2024

Photographer: Senni Siltavuori





Exhibiting the Images of Disappearance

As the exhibition visitor navigates the Kuva/Tila exhibition space, they can find themselves enveloped by a vivid array of paintings and sculptures accompanied by ambient noises from a sound piece. The exhibition space is divided by walls into smaller, more intimate sections, with a central wall spiraling inward, inviting exploration and discovery.

Upon entering this spiral of walls, the atmosphere shifts dramatically. The walls here are not the stark white of the main gallery but are tinged with a blend of purple, pink, grey, and brown—an ambiguous and moody hue that is neither warm nor cool. This subtle coloration alters the perception of space, making it appear both larger and more introspective. The darker ambiance encourages a moment of pause and reflection, despite the background noises of other exhibition visitors.

The spiral layout not only invites exploration but also mirrors the themes of intimacy and the gradual revelation of identity within the works. As visitors move deeper into the spiral, they encounter layers of meaning, much like the layers of material in the paintings themselves.

“Deprived Eye”

Approaching my series of four paintings on the left corner wall, the first works the viewer encounters are two paintings. The painting on the right, titled ‘Deprived Eye’ is a dark, matte-surfaced tempera piece depicting two eyes—one crafted from clay and the other shimmering with gold. Positioned at the viewer’s eye level, these eyes seem to oscillate between being open and closed.

Upon prolonged observation, a subtle vibration on the painting’s surface becomes apparent, as if a face is gradually emerging around the eyes. The choice of materials is symbolic: the clay eye represents grounding, earth, and stillness, while the golden eye reflects ideas of desire, holiness and wealth. The title “Deprived Eye” alludes to a medical condition where eyesight is lost due to structural collapse.

“Dust to Dust”

The painting “Deprived Eye” is paired with another painting titled “Dust to Dust”, which evokes the appearance of dry, cracked soil from which a nose and upper lip protrude. Positioned at the viewer’s nose level, this work invites a direct, almost conversational engagement, as though one is in dialogue with a person or gazing at a portrait of someone frozen in time. The painting’s surface, covered with bole clay, reflects themes of decay and death, with the figure gradually turning to dust and losing its identity. The title “Dust to Dust” alludes to the cycle of life and death, with the cracked surface reminiscent of a hatching egg, symbolizing both the end and the beginning of existence.

These works are accompanied by two delicate pieces on paper. While the first two paintings engage with themes of decay and identity through their tactile, earthbound materials, the paper works shift this exploration to a more delicate and ephemeral register, inviting a closer, more introspective engagement. The paper works, including ‘Boneless’ and ‘Rihmankiertämä,’ invite close inspection and reveal intricate fibers interwoven with ink and watercolor, creating a subtle, almost ethereal texture. The works invite the viewer to trace the delicate lines and feel the fragile surface, even if only with their eyes. These pieces stand side by side, resembling siblings or a couple; each feature two dots that evoke the appearance of nipples or eyes. These dots gaze back at the viewer with a fierce, unwavering presence, despite their fragile appearance. The red ink in these works evokes a rush of blood, akin to the flush of cheeks during moments of nervousness or anger.

“Boneless”

“Boneless” specifically depicts breasts, or more precisely, nipples, emerging from skin-like, thick, matte-textured paper, chosen for its resemblance to human skin. The breasts symbolize life, nurture, and flesh, with the nipples defiantly gazing back at the viewer, challenging the expectation that female nipples should be hidden. This work explores the merging of body and material, highlighting the shared, non-unique nature of human flesh and animal flesh, and the inevitable cycle of consumption where we all will end up being eaten by others. The paper is installed using an invisible magnet system, creating the illusion that it is levitating, with a small shadow forming between the paper and the wall, enhancing the sense that the works are ready to drift away at any moment.

“Rihmankiertämä”

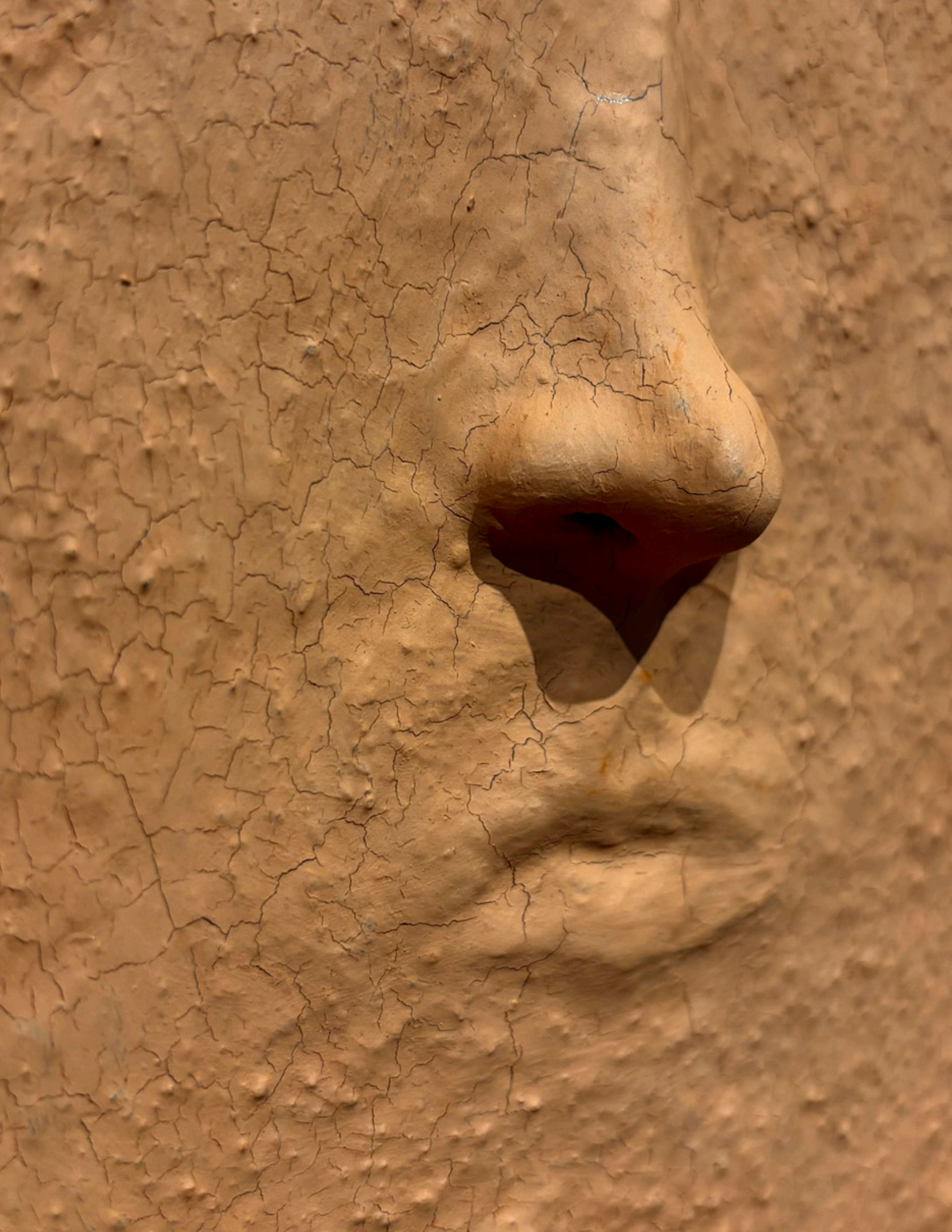
Similarly, “Rihmankiertämä” is created on Lokta paper, which contains banana plant fibers dyed light pink during the paper-making process. The long fibers create a skin-like appearance filled with hair, which merges with thin brushstrokes that also resemble hair. These elements gradually form the image of a breast, with the fibers and brushstrokes dancing in a circle to create two nipple-like spots. Like “Boneless,” “Rihmankiertämä” is installed same way without frames or glass, allowing the texture of the paper to be fully observed, ensuring that no material barrier separates the work from the viewer or its surroundings. Together, these works create an intimate connection with the viewer, their gaze lingering even as one turns away.

As the visitor moves through the enclosed, spiral-like space, a strange, almost uncanny presence can be sensed—as if the artworks are alive, observing, and even breathing into the visitor’s back. The feeling is both physical and psychological.

Upon leaving the spiral and entering other parts of the exhibition space, one must turn their back on the works. This act feels akin to encountering an old friend on the street or saying goodbye to a loved one. The interaction has a clear beginning, where the works invite you closer, creating a moment of intimacy, and an ending, where you must decide to move on by turning your back. The structure of the spiral space guides visitors in new directions, and once they have exited, they are unlikely to return to the hidden works within the enclosed walls.

List of Works Exhibited on Kuvan Kevät Exhibition

1. Dust to Dust
2024
mixed media
bole clay, quartz sand and acrylic medium.
64 cm x 38,5 cm
2. Deprived Eye
2024
Mixed media,
24k leaf gold, casein tempera, bole clay and plaster.
60 cm x 35,5 cm
3. Boneless
2024
Ink on handmade lokta paper
70,5 cm x 56 cm
4. Rihmankiertämä
2024
Aquarelle on handmade lokta paper
70,5 x 56 cm



"Dust to dust" 2024 mixed media 64 cm x 38,5 cm



"Deprived eye" 2024 Mixed media 60 cm x 35,5 cm



"Boneless" 2024 Ink on handmade lokta paper 70,5 cm x 56 cm



"Rihmankiertämä" 2024 Aquarelle on handmade lokta paper 70,5 x 56 cm

CONCLUSION

This master thesis project has significantly reshaped my understanding of my role as a painter, my relationship with the materials I work with, and, more broadly, my perception of what it even means to be alive. It feels like this thesis project is the beginning of a deeper exploration into the intersection of painting materials and themes of existence.

So how do I conclude something that I feel has just begun? I feel like a chick that has just hatched from its egg. The year and a half I spent working on this thesis was far from enough to fully grasp the new understandings about painting materials and my position in my own artistic practice. However, I believe this project has served as an excellent starting point for future exploration. Gazing at the world as a hatched chick surrounded by the fragments of my previous protective shell and home, I can conclude that I feel relieved and proud to have completed this thesis. Although my seven years at the academy are coming to an end, this thesis marks not an ending but a beginning. I am fortunate not to feel a sense of finality, but rather excitement as the world opens up before me after this project.

In this thesis, I explored the profound connections between Sufi practice and my artistic process, particularly through the concepts of disappearance and the dissolution of self in movement or material. My journey began with a personal and transformative experience during a Sufi dance session, which revealed significant parallels with my approach to painting. The act of spinning and losing myself in movement mirrored how I engage with materials in my studio, where the boundaries between the artist, the medium, and the artwork blur and dissolve. This thesis process has allowed me to establish a more holistic approach to my practice, one where I feel more integrated with my work, making the painting process more meaningful to me.

Translating and dressing these experiences into written language was a challenge. Building the foundation of this thesis on a personal experience was something I doubted for a long time, and at times, writing about it in an academic context felt difficult. The relationship between visual art and written language has often been a complex subject for me. I previously believed my paintings should stand independently of written explanations, fearing that language could confine the viewer's experience. The phrase "a picture is worth a thousand words" suggests a clear distinction between the two forms of communication. However, through the

process of writing this thesis, I have come to realize that images and language can reflect and enhance one another.

Writing about my material choices and approach to artistic practice revealed how much materials truly matter to me. While I initially took their presence for granted, the act of writing allowed me to further understand the profound influence that materials have on my artistic process. This experience has shown me that words can be crucial in deepening one's understanding of their own practice, often revealing more than expected.

By articulating my thoughts in writing, I realized that words do not limit the viewer's experience but can actually help communicate the broader themes I explore. This realization led me to include exhibition text in the Kuvan Kevät exhibition, providing viewers with the opportunity to understand the concepts behind my work in addition to their own personal interpretations. I believe it's important to offer this opportunity—an invitation to explore not only the emotional resonance of the paintings but also the ideas that underpin them.

Looking ahead, this project has laid the groundwork for my future explorations, where I aim to push boundaries in material exploration, spiritual themes, and artistic expression. The insights I've gained about the materiality of painting and my relationship with materials will continue to inform and shape my practice. This will drive me to investigate new materials, techniques, and conceptual frameworks. I have started to collect sand, clay and seashells during this writing process. I'm practicing how to make pigments from them for my future paintings. I am also particularly interested in exploring how my ongoing relationship with Lokta paper can evolve to engage with new audiences and potentially cross boundaries between traditional painting and installation art. My work will remain focused on the delicate balance between presence and absence, and the material and the immaterial. As I move forward, I am excited to explore how these themes can evolve and expand, pushing the boundaries of both my artistic practice and my understanding of the world.

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