

Kiss of the Bunny: Twenty five years later

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Merike Estna's works are made interesting by the little squints, unexpected, weird and dangerous cracks in the smooth surface. The more minimalist and exact in nature they are, the more effect they have. The outcome is similar to a loud burp or belching exactly at the moment of complete silence in a very refined company in expectance of the festive speech. The suspense is in the air, the control mechanisms are turned up, the facade is impeccable – and it has to happen exactly then – a small carnal alarm, in this kind of situation, the remainder from your guts underneath the fastened corsets has usually more profound effect than any other naturalistic scene in its full nakedness.

The parallel to physiological sounds is created probably because in many Estna's works, the voice is what creates the feeling of squinting. In the exhibition "Rabbit. "Oh, pretty boys everywhere!" (Hobusepea Gallery, February 2005), we could hear the low, slow, beyond the grave like male voice every now and then saying "I am a happy bunny!". Also, on the painting called "Red Riding Hood: "I am the prettiest girl in the world"" (Estonian Academy of Arts, graduation work, 2005) the otherwise slender girl is growling strangely with the flutter of butterfly wings sounding like the screw blades as background. On Estna's works, we can usually see naked or half naked women, more seldom, androgynous men or feminine men but the voice, at least on the pictures that have been mentioned, is grotesquely masculine. There is a temptation to say that the picture is superficial and Symbolic and the voice – evil, foulmouthed and Real. Still, the voice doesn't completely destroy the facade of the picture but supports and refines, adds nuances and flavor. Because of this, it is probably not right to talk about criticism of media and consuming while discussing the works of Estna or other young artists that are classified as cultivating neo or post pop art or other similar art styles. Even irony is not the right word to be used here. It is rather that we are dealing with the so called creative interpretation of the state of affairs. The composition of Estna's works is usually very clear and self-assured, in harmony and symmetrical. A spacious, bright blue sky, the background of the whole painting or collage, the horizon is usually not seen or the lower part of the painting is of a bit more darker blue, the sea probably. A solitary figure in the middle of the picture, sometimes two figures, sometimes a whole bunch of them. A bright, a little too round rainbow surmounting it all. Sometimes the rainbow forms a whole circle, as a target board, sometimes "the ground" is rainbow colored, etc. This may not be the most adequate comparison but for some reason, these rainbow colored pictures sometimes remind me of big symmetrical renaissance figurine compositions in architectural framework or then, of in a way upside down Madonnas on the throne. Still, the two or more figures on the picture do not create an emotional entirety inside the picture. They have been positioned side by side and are demonstratively communicating only with the viewer. Often, communication is marked with the help of speech bubbles seen in comic books but these rather intensify the sense of detachedness. The position couldn't actually be different in view of their nature. They are either cut out from magazines or painted according to the type of body that sells well – in bikinis, lingerie or then, naked girls, a little sensuous or provocative but not too provoking, a little innocent, a little spoiled and always ready.

In addition to these posterlike pictures, Estna has a number of different, less known works with a more complicated composition that form a group on their own. If we were to use the historical parallel once more, then these pictures are mannerist in style, or okay, here we can even point to hyperrealism. Unlike the superficial rainbow colored pictures, space is extremely important in these works of different style (“Kitty, kitty, kitty, where are you, dirty bastard!”, 2004; “Little boys”, 2004; “Kaerajaan”, 2004; etc.). Here we can see corridors drawn into depth, rooms opening one after another and the door jambs and hinges, switches and wires, wall tiles, etc. have been painted in great detail. The colors of the paintings are more restrained, the action is more dramatic in nature. The effect of squinting is created by the cumulative effect of the anonymous and cold environment and the strange mysterious event that is taking place there. A naked woman with a white mask waiting for “kitty”, naked men with guns lurking one and other, a naked couple dancing in an empty room, the only prop being the cap from a national costume on the woman’s head.

Returning to the magazine girls, we cannot leave unnoticed the fact that they also wear something on their heads. Namely, caps with bunny ears. At first, we are thinking of the most famous bunny of Estonian art – the bunny from Leonhard Lapin’s painting “The kiss of the bunny” (1969) and the little, helpless doll-girl in its big suffocating embrace. The associations that arise from these bunny ears can be used to summarize the emotions and motives of Estna’s pictures. Rabbit as the symbol of hyper sexuality and breeding, bunny as the cute and innocent animal, “rabbit” as the personification of female stupidity, the prey, the victim . . . These works have the nostalgic longing for pop art childhood, a little innocence, even infantilism, a little frivolous, gentleness, intended awkwardness, a little carnality and somewhere on the background, the undefined yet sensible violence, danger. Spacious blue sky, sensuous girls and airplanes above them, motifs seen on many pictures let out also a literary parallel – in some way, Estna’s works remind of the undecided look on Arnold Schwarzenegger’s face after a passionate flight with Simply Maria on a fighter Harrier A-4.

“His left eye was half closed and expressed a completely clear, yet immensely complicated scale of emotions which, consisted, in equal portions, of joy of life, strength, a healthy love for children, moral support for American car industry in its rather difficult fight with Japan, the acknowledgement of the rights of sexual minority, slight irony towards feminism and a calm and conscious understanding that democracy and Jewish Christian values will eventually win all evil in this world. But his right eye was totally different. It was actually quite impossible to call an eye. Covered in dried out streaks of blood, from the broken eye socket, like a huge cataract, the round glass lens was looking at Maria. Close to the clamp that fastened the lens one could see small wires set under the skin. From the center of this lens, a blinding red streak of light burst out – Maria noticed it when it ended up in her eye.” Viktor Pelevin, “Tšapajev and Pustota”, 1996. Varrak, 2001