

## When flesh becomes word

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Merike Estna. Hate yourself with pleasure.  
Tallinn Art Hall Gallery February 3rd – 26th, 2006

By the time the old American playboy Burt (a character from Estna's collage made while she was studying) reached Estonia from Great Britain, the most recent exhibition of the young Estonian artist, Merike Estna had already been closed and it had been received well in the local print media. Some of the paintings have also been sold. Burt had intended to make Merike an offer she couldn't refuse and was looking for the Estonian word for "flashy" from an English-Estonian dictionary for that purpose. Because of the ideological preferences of the editor of the dictionary, he could only find the word "fleshy". At the end of the 21st century, the scientist supporting the theory of chaos, found clear evidence from this casual event to illustrate the so called butterfly effect where future is over sensitively dependent on the tiny variations in the original situation, in other words, in every moment in time. To talk specifically about the reviews of the exhibition, we should ask what we already know about Merike Estna. Firstly, maybe that Estna's works made so far, set easily all kinds of narratives free in the viewer: her works are almost always based on – if we borrow a term from psychology – extraversion. The author always counts on the presumable reaction created in the viewer when they meet clearly recognizable signs. These could be the photo realistic frontal human figures (nice boys or girls), airplanes, butterflies, animal masks or advertisement babes familiar from our every day life. All of these are repeated elements, like favorite collages that have constituted Estna's set of motifs this far and that have made her known as a young artist who loves blue sky backgrounds and rainbow motifs. And then of course, the titles of the pictures that often are even a little too ironic comments on Life, Ideals, etc. On her earlier works, we could often see an awkward speech bubble flowing onto the picture from one of the character's mouth corners like an inappropriate stain of saliva with some banal verbal content. Only flesh on the canvas. And an overdose of dreams approved by the society.

Sensing the real life and showing it's dislocation through defense filter of slight infantilism also characterize her more recent works of painting. Estna has said that she has a story of her own at the background of each work. It can be an incident, an event that she's not willing to convey that straightforwardly on the picture. She is not painting scenes from an imaginary movie. This excludes interpretations seen from the point of view of media reality. And she does not draw out pictures from her dreams which in the worst case, for the reviewers, would mean annoying utter surrealism. But Estna's works definitely include series. For example, in the Tallinn Art Hall Gallery exhibition, a two rather unified thematic groups are formed: in the front room, there are three works that depict human figures with a background of a slightly ominous forest and in the back room, human figures in white clothing (and animals symbolically benevolent towards humans) have been depicted with background of a blue sky. Just as heaven and hell, life & afterlife, etc. But this would already be the interpretation of the design of the exhibition. But, a kind of narrative centered around an incident, a brief performance has been coded into Estna's works. And they include

an alarm of some kind. Annoyance in a usual environment that arouses the individual's senses.

After the exhibition had been closed, Burt stepped down from the airplane instinctively fixing his wig and licked his moustache wishing to make a smoother image on the young woman artist. In the English-Estonian dictionary, he had underlined 15 words that were to be sufficient. What happened next, is already history. Behind every pretty girl is somebody (a title of one of the paintings from the exhibition "Hate yourself with pleasure") who takes care of this.