

Review: We are all observers anyway

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The protagonist of Merike Estna's exhibition of paintings titled *Voyeur* can be an anonymous onlooker, a passer-by or simply a voyeur. The viewer decides.
Riin Kübarsepp 20 April 2011

Merike Estna used to be a quiet blond girl who studied at Academia Non Grata, known for its anarchist flavour, at the Estonian Academy of Arts and at the London Goldsmiths College. Every place and experience has left its mark on the young artist, and now she has turned a new page in her work.

We are probably dealing here with feminine emotions, expressed already in the title of the display, *Voyeur*. Whether this is an anonymous onlooker, passer-by or simply a voyeur, is for everyone to decide for themselves. Figures entwined into expressive masses of colour convey a lot of what Estna presented in her small comics-type collages at her exhibition at Vaal Gallery *Adventures Jüri and Mari* in Tallinn in 2004. In the course of that period of time, the artist has definitely become keener on the idea of less specific text and more action. Sketchy brushstrokes, characteristic of a painter, often contain more information than works that veer towards hyperrealism and concentrate on minutiae, with which Estna experimented a while ago. Her previous concrete kinetic objects are now moving around on canvas, in symbiosis with oil paints and the unstable language of images.

21st century rough impressionism

Estna has certainly benefitted from her long stay in London and her grant period in the guest studio in Loviisa in Finland. The effect is quite obvious, because "city air makes you free", as the saying goes.

Sigmund Freud's grandson Lucien Freud attracted attention in England in the 1980s with his mercilessly objective paintings of nudes and with muddy colours and grim mood. There is something similar in the works of Estna and Freud, namely the direct rough robustness, with a pinch of eroticism added.

The art term "impressionism" is getting devalued, because the rough impressionism of the 21st century has now surfaced, and is conveying emotions much more objectively and directly, everything is visually told to the face. In her series of paintings dating a few years ago, Estna posed a question: „Mirror, mirror on the wall. Is this art or is it porn?" Quite good philosophical argumentation.

In his article *Revolt and Madness* published in one of the main Estonian dailies, the Estonian psychiatrist and culture analyst Juhan Luiga wrote on 3 October 1909 that a man who lets himself be affected by fear and is easily startled, is weak by nature, and that affects can tempt madness only where the illness would have emerged anyway, without any upsets.

It is no news any more that times, values and evaluations have changed both in art and in journalism. Estna's work tackles topical issues, as art in our society has inevitably become "part of prostitution and pornography".

Estna's language of painting is excellent, and this is indeed her best linguistic approach to viewers through the prism of pictures. Her earlier works depicting nude men and women clad in national costumes and coifs prancing around totally differ

from grand master Lembit Sarapuu's naivist, Eurosceptic compositions on the topic of the national epic *Kalevipoeg* (Son of Kalev). Estna is femininely smoother and softer, but she nevertheless pushes the concept even further.

Voyeurism, after all, belongs in the field of clinical psychology, where people achieve sexual pleasure by peeping into the intimate world of others, although in reality they lack any specific interest in objects. Estna's priority is to record all that in painting, moment by moment as disillusionment, but without a camera, as if in passing.