

Between revealing and concealing

A landscape, or any view, exists only at the time and place from which it is observed. Even a single step to the side changes it into another view, just as each new moment makes it into a new prospect.

Even if the photographic method sprang from a the desire to freeze and capture these vistas, ultimately it is the endless number of possible views that makes photographs interesting to look at.

The practised viewer sees not only the photographed view, but also the choices that the photographer has made. Set out before us is not simply what was in front of the camera at the instant the picture was taken, rather, each moment also offers the observer a meta-view into the work and its author.

In Nanna Hänninen's works the photograph occupies a key position. On the one hand, its role seems to be to maintain a kind of referential relationship with external reality, while, at the same time, the work's principal technique in itself constitutes its own physical reality. And yet this referential relationship with external reality remains in the background. Taking up the foreground is the picture's subjective, fictive reality, which accentuates the method that Hänninen has adopted in recent years of painting over the photographs.

Overpainting makes the situation more complex: It is, at once, both concealing and revealing. It is a paralleling of different realities, while also being a depiction of one reality. Overpainting involves contrasting a photograph with a painting, but also combining them. A photograph can represent the external or the internal, just as a painting can. Surface and depth are on view simultaneously.

And, above all: the situation is not necessarily in any way dualistic. Do the photograph and the painting have any need at all to be in mutual balance? There is surely reason to lift our gaze from methods and to ponder the revealed visuality.

In recent years, Hänninen has used old photographs as her starting points. Some of them are linked to events in Hänninen's own family, some have been made by well-known Finnish photographers of their day, while others are from abroad, from anonymous albums. In some places the shape of the painted marks follows the shapes discernible in the photograph, and yet those painted marks remain independent and capricious. The painted trace occasionally seems to comment on the content of the photograph, as when it conceals people and their faces. Sometimes, these "comments" seems to exaggerate things to an extreme, as, for example, in the flower works, in which the familiar, slightly conventional beauty of flowers is joined by an abandon and exorbitance that derive from the ambivalent and somewhat disturbing presence of the splashes of paint in the picture space.

The mutual motion between photograph and paint is both attractive and repellent. This is something that bears similarities to Hänninen's earlier photographs based on double exposures. The double exposures are focussed on the same point, going around it, or in other words approaching it, yet avoiding it. The picture gets a focal point at the same time as its existence is denied.

This is like a story told by meticulously describing what is not there.

The overpainting of the photographs seems to reverse this set-up so that the paint calls into question the view shown by the photograph. The irony lies in the fact that the act of painting is in itself very much open to question, at least as regards the relationship of the end result with reality.

When faced with these works, we can sense that a reference point, a story exists, but what precisely that story is remains unrevealed.

In 2001, Hänninen made a picture showing 12 boxes. The title is as spare as the picture itself: 12 boxes. The fact that the boxes are white, and that they have been shot against a white background – the fact that the picture is extremely simplified and purged of all subjectivity – leads to a paradox: the picture is such an extreme attempt to conceal everything personal that the personal secret becomes its main subject matter.

The number 12 may in itself be a clue, or a lure that leads us astray: it could, for example, refer to years, months, hours, but perhaps also to world religions or popular culture. The problem becomes that what applies to absolutely everything actually applies to nothing: all that is specific melts into air.

When we compare this with the works from 2014, in which Hänninen has used old photographs of Kuopio (taken by other people a long time ago) and covered bits of them over with paint, the disparity could not be greater. The titles of the works refer to subjective experiences of guilt and shame, to families' unspoken secrets.

Now, everything suddenly seems very specific: this very person, this very house, these very events, even if, in fact, we know nothing about any of them.

Nevertheless, these works have been made by the same artist. Are they about the same thing? We can go through Hänninen's productions by posing questions as stepping stones:

Why did Hänninen's works initially contain mostly white? Why did the number of black areas increase only gradually and tentatively? Why was the next big theme in Hänninen's works multiple exposures? Is the visuality resulting from the camera's movement blur a conscious or unconscious message? How are we supposed to relate to the colours that suddenly intrude into Hänninen's works? Is laconicness intentionally replaced by a deceptive verbosity with colours? Are the self-portraits that have appeared in the works a sign that all of this has a profound personal significance for the artist? Why has the centre point of the spiral in the multiple exposure shots of buildings been left empty or, on the contrary, is everything specifically spiralling around the central point? Why does a layer of painted marks that allude to subjectivity manifest so as to conceal a photograph that gets its reference surface from reality?

It does not do to rush into answering these questions, since they are not necessarily the right questions.

And if we further take another look at the white boxes from 2001 and the works from 2014 side by side, then in the end we can ask whether they – and the works that came between them – are about “the same thing”?

I propose a brief reply: Yes and no, since it is important to notice not just the sameness, but also the differences. What is the same is the movement between revealing and concealing, and the personal, subjective level, which remains partly hidden. The disparities between the works are a consequence of the inexhaustible movement of their visuality, which draws its power from themes related to morality, such as shame and guilt.

Exhibiting it over and over again gradually strips shame of the power that it once had, and severs its internal connections with the psyche, since, as shame turns into fuel, it metamorphoses from predator into prey.

The artist does what she does, in exactly the way that she wants to do it. Ruthlessly and precisely.

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Jonni Roos is interested in Art, Architecture and the psychology of subjective well-being. He has more than 20 years experience in art journalism. He is currently involved in TV, Radio and New media productions as a journalist and director. His academic interests include the study of creativity and the way that the built environment can support the flow of creativity at work.