

Painting In a Time of Global Warming

Merike Estna's paintings at Moderna Museet Malmö are inviting, strange, and genuinely convinced of their own vanity.

By Matthew Rana 06.11.19 Review Artikel på svenska



Merike Estna, *Ocean of Endangered Times* (installation view with performance), 2019.

Spanning two upper-floor galleries, Estonian artist Merike Estna's first institutional solo presentation in the Nordic region, *Ghosts From the Future, Filled With Memories of Past* presents painting in a number of guises. Viewers are met with paintings as functional benches and stages, ceramic vessels, even a tiled bathtub. There is also, as the wall-label for *Fragments From the Shattered Toe* (2017) helpfully informs, a "painting as a rug as a poncho" into which locks of the artist's hair are woven.

***Ghosts From the Future, Filled With
Memories of Past*****Merike Estna****Moderna Museet Malmö, Malmö
26 October 2019 — 26 January 2021**

Uniting these disparate forms is Estna's idiosyncratic style: a repertoire of marbled surfaces, grids, colour gradients, and drop-shadows; faux-naïve ensembles of colourful snakes, winged insects, and disembodied eyes and hands. As much as all this alludes to the liquid aesthetics and touchscreen interfaces of our 'post-internet' age, it also resonates with a symbolic realm of sacred rites and ceremonial practices. Not to mention the magical qualities of the artist's hand. Indeed, underpinning Estna's multifaceted painting practice is a deep witchy knowledge – at least, that is what the exhibition leads us to believe. Whether this is actually the case, her aesthetic makes the weird approachable, staging encounters between present and past that look to reconcile contemporary screen culture with painting's more spiritual functions.



Merike Estna, *Ghosts From the Future, Filled With Memories of Past*, 2019.

Staging is the operative word here. The exhibition's theatrical set-up, spot lighting, and polite invitations to stand, sit, and walk on the works not only encourage viewers to activate the paintings, but also dramatise positions within painting's 'expanded field'. On the one hand, it is as though painting must compensate for its alleged exhaustion as a medium for thought and reflection by indexing – or

inventing, as the case may be – social rituals which bolster its fetishistic qualities. On the other, painting is tasked with accommodating art-institutional rituals of audience ‘participation’, sharing, liking, and picture-taking (admittedly, the photos I took of her paintings with my phone *do* look terrific). Although Estna’s paintings tend to be overwrought, they also locate meaning outside of the frame. Conspicuously placed atop one of the artist’s bench-paintings, a copy of the Sternberg Press anthology *Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition* (2016) all but confirms it.

The entire set-up feels a tad overdone and surprisingly fraught for an artist who, as the curatorial essay attests, views painting as a fluid, living, and performative practice. However, it’s not only the paintings as ponchos and stages which convey unease. As their titles make clear, Estna’s more traditional wall-mounted works also register anxiety: *There Are More Eyes Than There Is Fire, but There Is No Need to See* (2018); *The Emptiness of the Empty Eyes* (2019); *In the Shadow of the Painting Grows Another Much More Vain Thing* (2018). The latter depicts a two-headed snake coiled like a caduceus around what appear to be two lit candles. Appropriating surface effects from graphic and interior design, its shallow pictorial space is defined by rose marbling and lavender drop-shadows which fall awkwardly against a background antiqued in shades of green. While there’s little doubt that there are, lurking in the shadows beyond the painting, more conceited things (gallerists, collectors, and museums for a start), it is difficult to imagine a nicer assertion of painting’s vanity.



Merike Estna, *The Emptiness of the Empty Eyes*, 2019.

The exhibition reaches a climax of sorts in *Ocean of Endangered Times* (2019), a newly commissioned work which comprises four panels occupying most of the gallery's large northern wall. It depicts colourful, amorphous, and tentacled sea creatures ("prehistoric jellyfish" in the curator's description) barnacled and bloodied with drips and paint splatter; entangled with undulating nets, driftwood, and leaking pipelines (which oddly resemble gummy worms), they seem to be either dying or already dead. The ocean in which the creatures float is spatially improbable, as though we are looking at an enormous fish tank, or perhaps a giant screen saver. In what at first appears like a remarkable strategic reversal, this monumental work actually seems to test painting's capacity to take on one of our era's most urgent issues, global warming. It is a weighty theme that Estna's aesthetic can't quite hold up; the whole thing feels rather forced.

Of course, such a reading takes the painting at face value. A more searching interpretation might point to the figures' strange inertia and argue that rather than depicting sea creatures, the painting

actually symbolises endangered time. Surely this resonates with the sense of temporal disjunction implied by the show's title. In which case, is it historical time that is put at risk here? Is it possible futures foreclosed? Taken a step further: are these today's paintings haunted by an imagined future in which they have achieved a renewed social function, or a (dystopian) rendering of future paintings haunted by the institutional, technological, and ecological conditions of the present? Perhaps this is a non-anthropocentric intervention into the chronopolitics of history painting, or a commentary on painting's failures as a representational system? Perhaps it is all and none of these things. After all, two great virtues of the symbolic are reversibility and ambivalence. Ultimately, all of this is hand-wringing over meaning is probably more my problem than the paintings', which are inviting, strange, and genuinely convinced of their own inadequacy. For a vain empty-eyed art critic, there is little to do but agree.



Merike Estna, installation view with performance, 2019.

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