



HYPERALLERGIC

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Two Artists Show How Beauty Can Be Beastly



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Kris Lemsalu, "Star" (2016), porcelain, textile, cd-s, plastic mirror, foam, silicone, parachute, rubber eyeballs (courtesy Temnikova Kasela)

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TALLINN, Estonia — Be prepared to embark on a confusing journey upon entering the strange and colorful universe of beauty that artists [Kris Lemsalu](#) and [Tiit Pääsuke](#) constructed at the Tallinn Art Hall. Two of Estonia's best-known artists — one a figurative painter who began his career in the early 1970s, and the other a young conceptual practitioner — set up their exhibition as a labyrinth or a trap: You can walk through the entire exhibition several times and you will never find yourself at the center of something. The show is conceived as an eviscerated body, whose limbs have been scattered throughout the different rooms.

[*Beauty and the Beast*](#) is the somewhat deceiving title of a show in which two artists, separated by a generation, confront each other and engage in an open-ended conversation. Both artists attempt to eradicate an older notion of beauty and navigate its many constraints and prejudices, bringing them into contact with real-world experiences, such as horror or desire. “Beauty” and “beast” are not here a binary system of opposites but a correlation: the two words are interchangeable not only in terms of their meaning but relation to the world at a given moment — the beautiful is sometimes terrible, and the terrible is sometimes beautiful.



Installation view of 'Kris Lemsalu and Tiit Pääsuke: Beauty and the Beast' at Tallinn Art Hall (image courtesy Temnikova & Kasela Gallery)

Born in Põltsamaa in 1941, Pääsuke studied in Tartu and while one of the leading Estonian painters since the 1970s, he remains a largely unfamiliar name internationally (unlike Lemsalu). Pääsuke is a maverick of sorts: Distant from the history of Soviet official art and the nonconformist response to it, as much as from the rigid influence of German abstract impressionism, Pääsuke is at home with the Surrealism and Fauvism of the Paris School, and blends photographic realism inflected by Magrittesque elements with a kind of Pop art sensibility which is so distinctively Baltic. His position only confirms the ambiguous place that Estonia occupies at the margins of art history, the product of an identity crisis and different waves of colonial occupation.

With over 40 of his works in the exhibition, it is possible to get a sense for all of the significant chapters in Pääsuke's work, ranging from the 1970s to 2010. We move from his strictly surrealist beginnings in works such as "Spacious Landscape II" (1973), to his long series of animal paintings spanning through the decades, to his recent work in which increasingly vivacious, flat surfaces incorporate contemporary gestures, such as the simultaneous perspective in "A Piece of Heaven" (2016) or games of authorship in "Heart of a Fisher" (2015), for which he acquired a work from an anonymous artist and painted over it.



Kris Lemsalu, "Cool Girls Without Hands" (2016), porcelain, cement, metal, painted sheepskin, textile, skateboards, ramp (image courtesy Temnikova & Kasela Gallery)

Lemsalu, on the other hand, born in Tallinn in 1985, invites us to look inside a world more carnal and consumable. The material is always reduced and almost vulgar; she works with paper, found elements, and debris — nothing of the elevated notion of art we are used to in painting. In an effort to keep no distance between herself and her objects, Lemsalu performs a lot of her work — some of what you see is just the leftovers of performance. Unlike the painterly titles of Pääsuke’s work, Lemsalu moves with the flow of contemporary language, conjuring up slogans that could belong in songs, advertisements, love letters, or chat rooms.



Kris Lemsalu, “Evian Desert Porcelain” (2012), sand (image courtesy Temnikova & Kasela Gallery)

From her now iconic lambskin and wild boar skin sculpture “Father is in Town” (2012), to gowns collapsed in the sand as a metaphor for wealth in “Evian desert” (2012), to her most recent installation made out of dolls, “Cool Girls Without Hands” (2016), which addresses the eroticization of female helplessness, Lemsalu is fascinated with the possibility of producing objects that aren’t aestheticized — their concrete presence is narrative and not representational. Repeatedly, she asks: How to transform something, a moment, into an object without cancelling out experience? The artist’s heightened use of irony makes it difficult to see the seriousness of her question.



Tiit Pääsuke, “Kris & Kris” (2016) (one of a pair), acrylic, oil, canvas, 90x77 cm (image courtesy Tallinn Art Hall) (click to enlarge)

In two works especially commissioned for the exhibition, the artists produced work for each other, with compelling results: Lemsalu imitates Pääsuke’s gesture in appropriating the artwork of an anonymous artist and painting over it in her “Blanket 2” (2016); Pääsuke, on the other hand, executed two masterful portraits of Lemsalu, metamorphosed into different forms: The classical portrait figure merges into both animals and daily objects, creating a strange seamlessness

between Lemsalu and her artistic practice. The conversation

between the two artists is most poignant in these new works, but it remains fragmentary; their positions are not complementary, but exist in juxtaposition.

The exhibition lacks a center or answer to the preoccupation important to both artists over the nature of beauty and what can be done, or undone with it, in art today. In spite of the artists' dialogue, and because of it, they remain loyal to their respective aesthetic codes: Pääsuke, as a modernist painter, is flooded with a wonder characteristic of someone closely in touch with nature and the external world, whereas Lemsalu is estranged in her own consciousness; she is still in the search of a door to enter the world at last, to experience the real. In their conversation, Lemsalu and Pääsuke are demanding from art very different answers to a problem, but when they exchange ideas, a shared space emerges between them in which they begin to hear each other: Beauty is not only beautiful; it is also a tectonic force, it can upset but also rearrange the way we see the world.



Tiit Pääsuke, "Spacious Landscape II" (1973), enamel painting, oil, plywood, 100 x 149 cm (image courtesy Tartmus)

[Kris Lemsalu and Tiit Pääsuke: Beauty and the Beast continues at Tallinn Art Hall \(Vabaduse väljak 8, 10146 Tallinn, Estonia\) through May 1.](#)

Correction: *A previous version of this article included an image of Kris Lemsalu's work that was not featured in the Tallinn Art Hall exhibit. This image has been replaced.*

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