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'The House of the Tragic Poet' by Merike Estna at Bosse & Baum



[Merike Estna, The House of the Tragic Poet, 2021, Installation View at Bosse&Baum. Courtesy of the artist and Bosse&Baum. Photography by Damian Griffiths](#)

The House of the Tragic Poet is one of the most famous Roman dwellings of Pompeii. Despite its modest size it still preserves some of the finest mosaics of the archeological site, among which one of a black domestic dog leashed and chained to an arbitrary point of the vestibule's floor. The name of this ancient house gives the title to Merike Estna's second solo show at Bosse & Baum, *The House of the Tragic Poet*, where the artist continues her investigation into painting, craft, technoromanticism, history and mythology within the domestic, the feminine and the everyday, while also exercising empathetic acts of embodiment and interpretation.

A large hand-woven rug depicting a similar subject to the Pompeiian mosaic, covers the gallery floor occupying most of the entrance and the exhibition space. Rhomboid black

tesserae-like shapes populate a sky-blue background where the grey silhouette of a dog, free from any domestic chains, wildly inhabits the infinite space of sky and sea. Unlike its original, the shape of the dog looks like a grey cloud, a track left by something erased digitally or dissolved virtually, emblematically capturing some of Estna's long-standing trademarks in her work, such as her interest into incorporating digital visual idioms within more traditional mediums – painting or textile for example – as well as toying with the boundaries between figuration and abstraction or presence and absence as a way to address the transient nature of the now continuously evolving within its cycles and drastic changes, well represented within the mythological and folk subjects and symbols dear to the artist and existing in her practice. Together with the dog, there are other figures that populate the rug and spill out in the gallery space appearing in the rest of the exhibiting works. Among these, a crouched human silhouette whose position and tattooed skin create a tribal glitch: frozen between past and present, the figure has no precise identity and belongs to all temporalities, future included. Despite their contemporary character, the tattoos populating the humanoid shape generate a rich landscape of symbols referring to all-times cosmological concerns such as divine providence or the cyclical nature of civilization's rise and fall, day and night, life and death and so on, acquiring a certain relevance in the context of the show.

Estna proposes interpretative versions of the Pompeii house's decorative patterns as well as its unknown inhabitants, extinguished after the catastrophic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D. By re-imagining their most intimate environment, the artist looks at lost legacies and explores the interpretative potential that lies within the ruins of the past, while also questioning her own tracks, residues of present and past actions, left behind as future ruins. As Federico Campagna recently proposed during a discussion as part of the 2nd Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art titled "World-ing, or: How to Embrace the End of an Era", the legacies of fallen cultures often form part of the new narrations that come afterwards. The potential of ruins is to be found thus in their lack of detailed information, which makes it possible for posterior cultures to interpret and inspire different ways to understand reality. Using complex layering techniques as well as blurring effects which transform once detailed patterns into fading backgrounds and grids, Estna voyeuristically looks into the private dimension of lost archaic stories and at the same time becomes an archeologist of her own past, displaying old works together with a selection of newer paintings whose colorful patterns, symbols and forms move beyond the limits of the canvas, erupting into life at the moment when the end feels worryingly close. The result is the suggestion of a complex and yet un-understood web of temporalities where the past becomes

uncannily present, and future. A young girl with her pale skin reddened by the sun observes the viewer while suspended into a bright sky with spare clouds, in the company of some doves. Her wise gaze guards eternal secrets... perhaps it is not a coincidence that a pair of doves also appears on the rug on the floor, as well as possible fragments of clouds and a similar unreal bright sky-blue, framed by the mosaic motif and beyond it at the same time; inhabiting multiple narrations of the world – or dimensions – one might say. A mysterious figure appears in a cream, a-temporal zone of the textile as well as in the background of a painting. Although being the only figure with some facial traits, its sinuous curves make it a ghostly presence. It holds a jar, which references some of the ceramic objects used by a nude male performer in an older work which the artist presented both as part of the 13th Baltic Triennial and in her first solo exhibition at the gallery. If the well-known performative character of Estna's work is seemingly absent in this show, its track constitutes a new mark in which the fluidity of the boundaries of the medium of painting emerges once again. A mask inhabits the same "outside of time" region of the rug; its tragically curved mouth and hollow eyes are then on a painting too, superimposed on a psychedelic gridded backdrop of virtual nature. The serpentine lines of the grid seem to link to the many snakes present in the works of the show, recalling once again cycles, alternating times and epistemological short-circuits in all their fascinating latency.

In such a chaotic landscape of romantic gestures, existing among the private and the metaphysical, both forgotten legacies and future ruins reveal the potential for new sinuous narrations, twisted between past and present and exploring vocabularies that exist in the detailed layers and blurred backgrounds of Estna's work.

Text by Caterina Avataneo

Biography

Merike Estna (b. 1980) lives and works in Tallinn. A participant in the performance art scene associated with Academia Non Grata alternative art school in the early 2000s, Estna later acquired formal art education at the Estonian Academy of Art where she attended Painting BA and Interdisciplinary Arts MA classes. Estna relocated to London in 2007, where she completed an MFA Art Practice degree at Goldsmiths College in 2009. Estna's practice is primarily focused on the processes of painting, approaching the artwork as an integral part of life rather than it being about life. Borrowing patterns and colour combinations from applied arts and crafts, vocabularies which traditionally have

not been accepted in the visual language of painting, her work challenges the masculine territory of painting and questions the strict separation between the two discourses. Initially applying patterns and treatments to canvases, Estna gradually progressed to cover clothes, objects and entire spaces as her research into colour and acts of painting expanded.

Merike Estna's recent exhibitions include: "Tienda de Memorias / Memory Shop", Casa Wabi, Oaxaca, Mexico curated by Nicolas Bourriaud (2021), "Borderlessness", with Jaime Lobato, Hasanlu Armastajad, Temnikova & Kasela, Tallinn (2021), "Nightfall / Videvik", Publics, Helsinki (2021), "Ghost of the Future, Filled With Memories of Past", Moderna Museet, Malmö (2019); "Mother of Pearls", Karen Huber, Mexico City (2019); "Dawn of the Swarm", Bosse & Baum, London (2018); "Disposable Gloves Guide", kim? Contemporary Art Centre, Riga (2018); "Soft Scrub, Hard Body, Liquid Presence", with Maria Metsalu, curated by Maria Arusoo, Art in General, New York (2017–2018); "Fragments from the shattered toe", curated by Thomas Cuckle, Kunstraum, London (2017); "Red Herring", Chart Social, Copenhagen (2017); "Doublethink: Double vision", curated by Alistair Hicks, Pera Museum, Istanbul (2017); "The Seed Can Be Initialized Randomly II", with Ana Cardoso, Temnikova & Kasela, Tallinn (2017); "Memorial", Estonian Embassy, London (2016); "The Seed Can Be Initialized Randomly", with Ana Cardoso, Múrias Centeno, Porto (2016); "Domesticmindcraft", Karen Huber gallery, Mexico City (2016); "Genialmythcraft", Palermo Galerie, Stuttgart (2015); "Corporate Jungle", Temnikova & Kasela, Tallinn (2015); "Blue Lagoon", KUMU Art Museum, Tallinn (2014).

Artist	Merike Estna
Exhibition	<i>The House of the Tragic Poet</i>
Place / venue	Bosse & Baum
Dates	27 November 2021 to 29 January 2022
Photos	Damian Griffiths
Website	www.bosseandbaum.com/

Merike Estna, The House of the Tragic Poet, 2021, Installation View at Bosse&Baum.
Courtesy of the artist and Bosse&Baum. Photography by Damian Griffiths

Courtesy of the artist and BOSSE&BAUM. Photography by DAMIAN GIMMUS