

Precious Particles.

'Bluetooth (Sister N)' by Inga Meldere at Temnikova&Kasela, Tallinn

Divinity can hide in dental tartar; at least if the teeth belong to a servant of God. Sister N was one, a pious nun who lived around 997 to 1162 and was buried at a convent in Dalheim in Germany. Her tartar held a tiny precious secret, a mere rocky particle, the discovery of which transformed the history of scribes and painters for ever. But here we need to pause, because the rest of this unique story cannot be told without Inga Meldere.

Through her new series of paintings (and an object) 'Bluetooth (Sister N)', presented at the Temnikova&Kasela Gallery in Tallinn, we delve into an imaginary dialogue between the artist and her colleague from a thousand years ago. And we learn the following: the divine particle found in the tartar of Sister N is a piece of ultramarine. A pigment which was once worth its weight in gold, until the 19th century it could only be extracted from the semi-precious rock lapis lazuli. In Medieval and Renaissance painting, ultramarine was reserved exclusively for the Virgin Mary: the deep, glowing blue symbolised holiness and humility. The pigment was so precious that the fragment found in the skull of Sister N means that she was pretty good at her work as a manuscript painter if

she was given this material to paint with. Given that only monk scribes signed manuscripts (what a surprise!), the majority of unsigned manuscripts could be the laborious work of women scribes, sisters A, B and C.

For Meldere, who originally trained as a restorer, such material discoveries not only rewrite the (unjust) history of painting, they also relate more personal and intimate connections with the past, the painter(s), and the paint. In Inga's practice, the narrative and the materiality of painting seem to be on equal terms. Her profound interest in the substance of painting became the basis for the workshop/exhibition 'Ashes of Seedlings. Pigment Extraction from Natural Materials' at the LOW gallery in Riga in 2021, in which colours were extracted from natural materials: trees, leaves, mushrooms, lichen, fruit, vegetables, roots and flowers. In her exhibition in Tallinn, however, natural pigment can only be found in a couple of canvases and crushed on a table-object that holds printed sheets with the exhibition text eloquently written by Zane Onckule. In the other works, the particle of ultramarine from Sister N's tartar serves as a Bluetooth device to communicate across time and space.

Sparsely hung around the room of the gallery, the small-format canvases resemble lost pages of manuscripts, at times presented on their own, at times in pairs. But at the entrance to the gallery, almost half the view of the room is obstructed by large canvases resting on two concrete blocks and turned away from the viewer. This hides the

image while denuding its support structure. Conceived during the seemingly endless months of Coronavirus confinement, the paintings breathe a solitary intimacy. It is similar to what Sister N might have experienced while poring over the parchment pages of a manuscript, quietly licking the tip of a quill, doodling to train her skilled hand, or closing her eyes to the celestial sound of organs (*Domain of Birds*, 2022). Inga captures moments in such imaginary routines in her canvases, like a patient archaeologist or a restorer bringing the margins, the doodling, the fragments, the anonymous female painters, into the spotlight.

Meldere's painting stands out by its subtlety. The see-through layers of paint, silhouettes of objects, bodies or letters made with the lightest touch, and plenty of empty or abstract backgrounds, create an abundance of space for the thoughts to wander, even in the smallest of her paintings. In 'Bluetooth (Sister N)', the subtlety reaches the point of Grace: so light are the brushstrokes, so elevating, that they seem to oscillate between presence and absence. Even Sister N herself, appearing in one of the canvases (*Sister N*, 2022), emerges like a distant dream in a luminous vaulted room; only a few brushstrokes hold her transparent body together.

The largest canvas, *Margins* (2017–2022), binds together digital, organic and synthetic layers through UV print, acrylic, oil and pigment techniques. A flood of intense blue and growing patches of white fight together on the

surface. Small fragments of painted architecture spring up from a sea of blue. For Inga, painting is as much about covering the surface as subtracting, restoring and preserving. It is a manifold procedure, required by a manifold reality.

But do not be deceived by the overall sacred context of these paintings. Like the title of the show suggests, we can no longer perceive the world without the technological 'filter': Bluetooth, Window, Touch and Domain now stand equally for physical and virtual realms. To get into the mind of a Medieval person, a woman, a nun or a painter, is (virtually) impossible. One can merely dive into their lives through a secondary reality: books, manuscripts, endless sources on the Web. And yet, with all this impossibility, Meldere builds a temporary portal through which we can listen to her dialogue with Sister N. A dialogue made through manual gestures that can be traced for centuries. An ultramarine particle in dental tartar was the key to unlock that portal.



Inga Meldere, Snippets in Stone, acrylic and oil on canvas, 60×45 cm, 2022



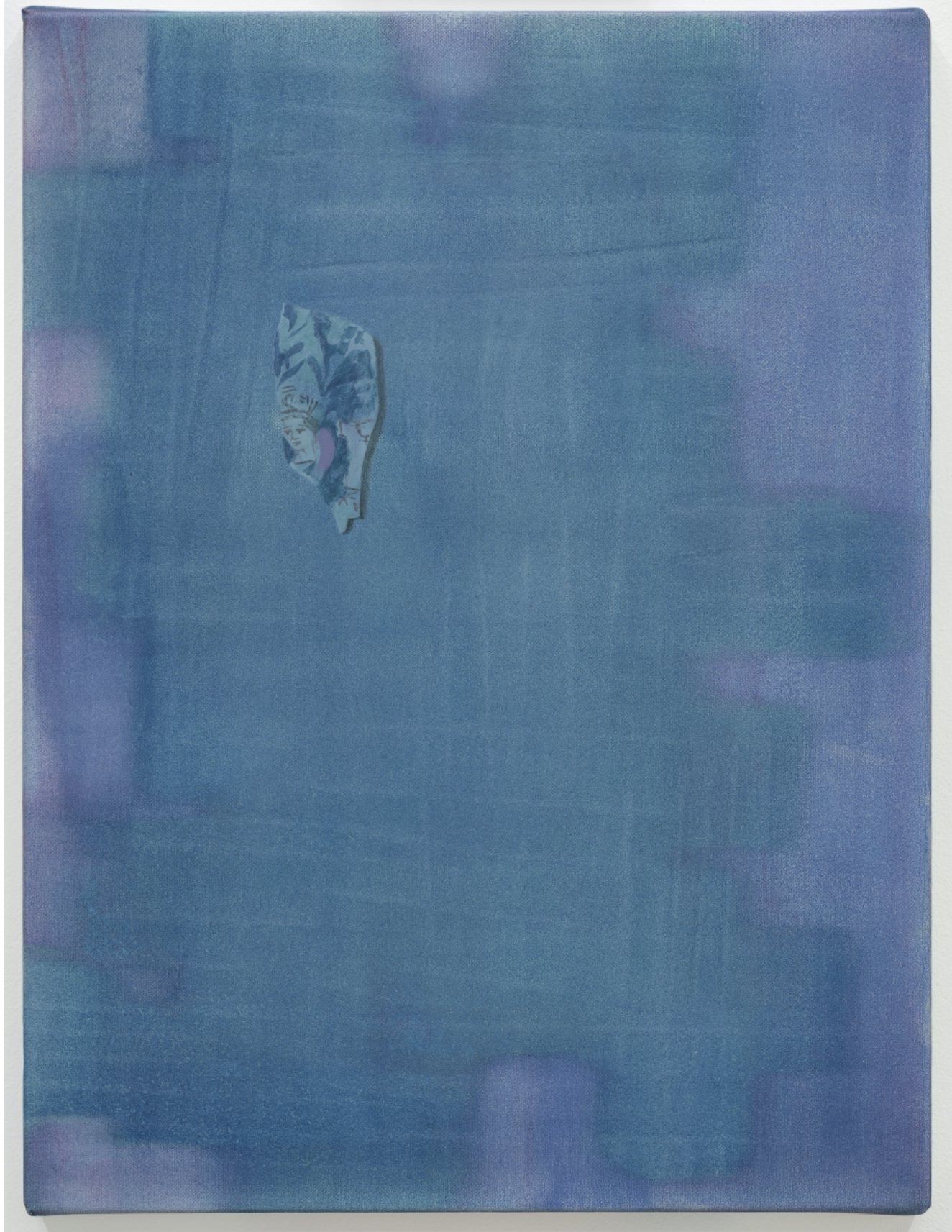
Inga Meldere, *Bluetooth (Sister N.)*, exhibition view, 2022. Photo: Stanislav Stepashko



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Inga Meldere, Bluetooth (Sister N.), exhibition view, 2022. Photo: Stanislav Stepashko



Inga Meldere, Bookmark, oil on canvas, 44×33 cm, 2022



Inga Meldere, Bluetooth (Sister N.), exhibition view, 2022. Photo: Stanislav Stepashko



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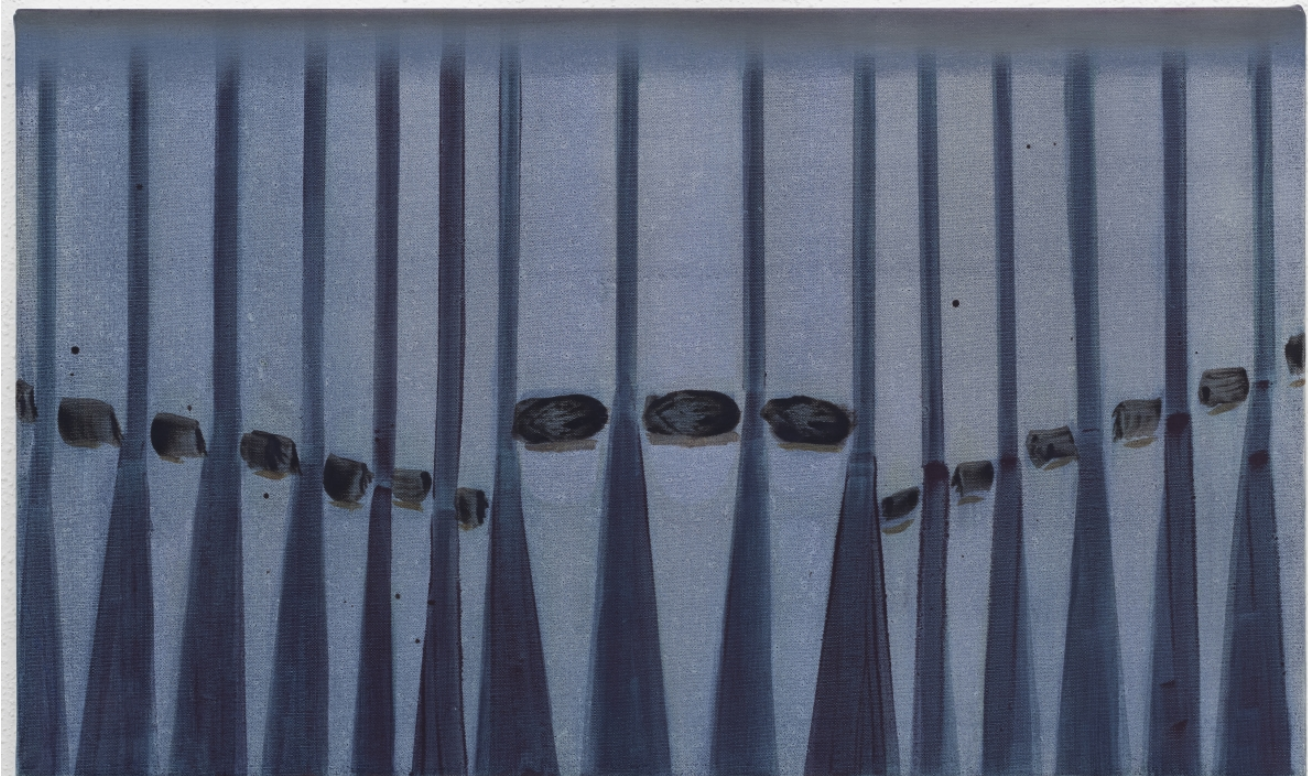
Inga Meldere, *Margins*, installation, metal table, plexiglass, silkscreen on paper, plaster object, self made pigments from plants, 72x117x43 cm, 2022



Inga Meldere, *Margins*, installation, metal table, plexiglass, silkscreen on paper, plaster object, self made pigments from plants, 72x117x43 cm, 2022



Inga Meldere, *www*, oil on canvas, 25×32 cm, 2022



Inga Meldere, Domain of Birds, oil and pigment on canvas, 33×55 cm, 2022