

Everyday uncertainty

Express-interview with Estonian artist Marko Mäetamm

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Marko Mäetamm is one of Estonia's most prominent contemporary artists. Represented by the gallery Temnikova & Kasela in Tallinn, Mäetamm's work can be seen at various art fairs and group exhibitions at home and abroad. He is regularly exhibited at the Nettie Horn gallery in London, which also represents him.

At first glance, the works of Marko Mäetamm may come off as a collection of witty anecdotes, although the artist himself has said that he does not want to be considered "funny". One must admit that his works – paintings, drawings, objects, sculptures etc. – are a highly satirical and comical representation of the human condition.

Last year, Mäetamm's solo-show "I'm Only Streaming" took place at the Kim? Contemporary Art Centre in Riga. Stylistically resembling pop-art, in a series of large graphic works, Mäetamm depicted mundane situations taking place in regular family life. Accompanied by hyper-realistic sculptures and comics, Mäetamm showcased the range of subject matter he is willing to address in his work – from everyday life to political commentary aimed at, for example, the administration of President Donald Trump.

His latest project, "Sit Back, Relax and Enjoy The Rest of Your Life", was recently on view at the ArtVilnius international contemporary art fair. The artist was kind enough to answer a few questions regarding his work.



Bad Man's Bookshelf

Work from series *Sit Back, Relax and Enjoy The Rest of Your Life*, 2018.

Photo: maetamm.net

What is the source material for your newest project?

Generally speaking, most of my projects are about something that really

touches me. Something that gets under my skin. When I am asked how or why I choose certain themes or topics in my art, I usually have to admit that I am not really choosing them, they are choosing me. Emotion, liveliness, a personal point of view – these are criteria that I really value not only in art but in literature, music, and life in general. And as I want people to find them also in my art, I feel I need to be completely open to what is going on around me. This is the richest source that is available to all of us for free – our everyday lives.

For years I worked with domestic and family stories, using my own family as a model. My children were small, I had a full time job to manage with my bank loan, and so on. My whole life was spinning around the fear of how to manage it: what if something happens, what if I am not as good as the others, etc. It was such a strong “building material” for my projects. And working with my fears and concerns was definitely very therapeutic as well.

After a huge show about my works based on family and domestic issues at the Estonian Art Museum KUMU in 2015, I suddenly felt that I needed a change. I understood that using that kind of topic had become kind of “my topic” – one that people were expecting from me. But I was not sure if I needed it for myself anymore. And so much started to happen around the world – suicide bombers everywhere, refugee crises, big waves of asylum seekers, etc., etc. And I had a chance to see it all with a fresh and different view when I spent five months in the United States in the autumn of 2016, which is when the country was electing a new president. The world around me was suddenly like a boiling and bubbling kettle. And I didn’t even notice how all of these themes were suddenly a part of my work.

The project I am showing in Vilnius has the title “Sit Back, Relax and Enjoy The Rest of Your Life”; it is about many things that influence me in my daily life, but most of all, it is triggered by the feeling of uncertainty.

I see uncertainty as a condition that has become a solid part of our everyday life. It is amazing how we have got used to this feeling. The feeling of not having the slightest idea about what will happen next, what

we will hear or see or read next. And not even having any idea if it is good or bad. Or right or wrong. Or truth or a complete lie.

We feel uncertain when we switch on the TV news in the morning. Or when we log in to our e-mail or social media accounts. Or when we are travelling. Sitting in the airport. Or in the airplane listening to the flight attendant telling us with the mildest tone ever that everything is absolutely under control – so just sit back and relax and enjoy the rest of your flight! The uncertainty when we go to the Christmas market or some other crowded public place. The uncertainty when we see a huge truck approaching. Or a strange guy with a huge back pack. Or a suitcase forgotten on the corner of a street.

Dear Son

So nice to hear that you are doing good and have found yourself a job. Hope the first working day went well. Driving a big truck in a crowded place must be difficult, we are very proud that you can do that. We wish we could come and see it. Then you could also show us your city, you must know it very well because of your job. And please write us. We haven't heard from you for ages.

your loving Mom and Dad



Work from series *Sit Back, Relax and Enjoy The Rest of Your Life*, 2018.

Photo: maetamm.net

What is the role of written text in your work?

It is true that text has an essential role in my projects. And it has a pretty

big role in the project I am showing in Vilnius.

When I started my career as an artist, my friends laughed about the super-long titles of my works. They were usually long sentences or even more than one sentence. And I have always combined texts and images on the field of the picture.

What is its role... I never think that the artist is the right and final person to ask why he/she is doing this or that because so many things happen intuitively, and the explanations given afterwards are just constructions built on rational thinking. All I can say is that for me, doing art has a lot to do with communication. I want to have a dialogue with the viewer, or the world, to put it more generally. And text is a good medium for that. It is a system of signs that we all can read. And combining this easy-to-read sign system with a visual image, which is way more abstract, it is like $1 + 1 = 3$, or even 4 or 5, for me.

How crucial is wit and humour in your work and art in general?

I never think of humour when I work. And to be honest, I don't see humour in most of my works either. But my works have been considered humorous and funny from the very beginning. When I started out as a young artist, I didn't like it at all; I wanted to be taken seriously as an artist. But whatever I did, people still thought it was funny, and sometimes they even thought that I was making jokes. Later, I realised that this is actually good because it gives me the freedom to work with even very serious issues; so now I am rather thankful for this strange phenomenon. Or perhaps I just have such a bad sense of humour myself that I don't even see how funny my own works are? :)

I have also learned that this moment of funny that people find in my work often helps them to approach heavy topic and build a dialogue. Which, as I said earlier, is very important for me.

Wit - I even don't know how to comment. For me, this word associates more with brainwork and rational planning, but I am very far from these things when I work. In the creative process, I trust intuition and subconsciousness much more than thinking. Although it is much harder to work like this. And more time- and energy-consuming.

Is this an ongoing project?

These are all new works and it is still too early to say how it will develop. But I believe – yes. What I am doing in Vilnius is kind of an extract of this topic, like a shortened version of something that can be launched on a much larger scale. Let's see.



Work from series *Chain Saw*, 2018. Photo: maetamm.net

Can you explain what draws you to a certain theme or idea in your work?

I think I already explained this in my first, super-long answer!