

A World Between the Worlds

Vietnam-based Finnish artist **Maritta Nurmi** recently exhibited her unique paintings in an exhibition titled "World between the Worlds" at Numthong Gallery, Bangkok. **Varsha Nair** reports.

Traditional forms of painting are rarely popular amongst contemporary art practitioners. Many think of these paintings as old-fashioned or even irrelevant, and they no longer paint or rarely paint. This is especially apparent in the west where other media have been vigorously embraced by many artists of the day. In the East, however, painting as a medium is as strong as ever; long-established art forms continue to be engaged, and painting in particular is the chosen medium of many artists. One only needs to remind oneself of works by well-known Thai painters, such as Chatchai Puipia or Richard Tsao, who's relatively unknown at home but a prolific New York-based artist whose works I have been fortunate to experience.



Discussing the place of painting in contemporary art and the burgeoning new art forms, the world-renowned 72-year-old British artist Bridget Riley, one of the leading abstract painters of her generation, states: *"Painting on the other hand is an ancient-an archaic-form of art. It takes and needs time and this is to its great advantage. An artist needs enough time to reflect, to revise, to explore various directions, to make changes, to lay foundations. The most astonishing thing about painting is its unbelievable simplicity. In principle anyone can take a few colours and a flat surface and have a go. This ease of access is of course very deceptive and double-edged. It makes painting very vulnerable - more so than any other art form - to all kinds of abuse, distortion and mishandling. Nevertheless this lack of a threshold barrier also has a great advantage; it opens painting to a unique range of invention and development."*⁽¹⁾

¹ From the essay "Painting Now". Publication "The Eye's Mind: Bridget Riley", collected writings 1965 - 1999. De Montfort University, Serpentine Gallery. ISBN 0-500-21865-3

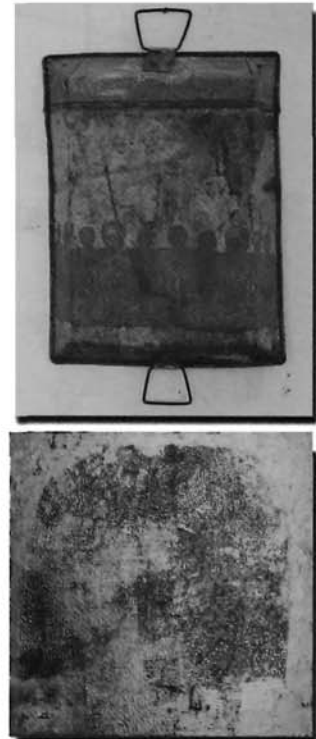
This “time to reflect, to explore various directions, to make changes, to lay foundations” and the “unique range of invention and development” in painting is especially reflected in artist Maritta Nurmi’s works. In my opinion, her art definitely evokes all that is significant about good paintings. Over and above all, they also speak of an honesty that one rarely finds in most art one comes across these days. I first met Maritta three years ago when she showed me photographs of her works, and after encountering her exuberant personality and her rather loud but infectious laughter, I was suddenly plunged into silence and lost in a world that was unfolding in the photos before me. At her recent exhibition “World between Worlds” at Numthong Gallery in Bangkok (from November 1 - 29, 2003), I came face to face with some of her works on canvas. Being drawn further into the realm of what could be described as the artist’s mindscape, alchemy starts to take place where many of the paintings that bear layers of metal foil/ leaves, paint and lacquer have literally been left to age by themselves, distilling time, space and emotions into what now appears in front of our eyes.

In this instance, one can refer to the artist as an alchemist in a literal sense. Having achieved a degree in biochemistry from Finland where she was born, Maritta says she was not happy and found herself “searching for a right place”. Drawn to painting from a young age, she applied for a place at art school whilst teaching and researching as a biochemist. She was accepted and subsequently completed 4 years of study in painting. Family connections brought her to Vietnam in time, where she has been living for the past 10 years and this is when her true journey seems to have begun.

Fascinated with traditional Vietnamese lacquer painting technique, she started delving further and claims this as the point of origin - the foundation that has been a major influence in her own process of art-making. Initially using silver leaves, eggshells and lacquer to build layers, Maritta later found the process too rigid and started to experiment and adapt it to her own way by keeping two major aspects of the technique: the use of metal which initially included only silver but later aluminum and copper leaves, and the layering.

The collaged, painted and finally lacquered surface of her canvases are built up gradually, creating a fine play between textures and colours. The colours are mainly achieved as part of the natural oxidizing process rather than entirely imposed. Acrylic paint is used and this is to build textures and interplay with the metal foils. It is a lengthy process; each

*From the “Tray” series,
painted found objects, 2003.
50 x 40 cm.*



*“Tangles of Buddha” 2, 2003.
Acrylic, silver leaf on canvas,
100 x 100 cm.*

*"Towers of Tears" 1, 2003.
Acrylic, silver leaf on canvas*



*"River beneath the River",
2003. Acrylic,
aluminum leaf on
canvas, 45 x 100 cm.*

painting can take 6 to 8 months to complete after which it is sealed to stop oxidization and to give protection. The resulting depth further provides a play between delicate hues and repetitive forms or motifs that are mostly organic. As Maritta explains, "the circles that I use widely stand for an opening, the possibility for something else, for hope and change. The teardrops for me have always had a mission to cleanse, allowing one to change one's state of mind from one to another. The knots speak of an old symbol - the dot, the beginning point drawing you back to your roots. This is the starting point that is common to us all, no matter who we are."

Repeated circle and dot forms are used in almost a pointillist fashion in the paintings "Tangles of Buddha" 1 and 2, and refer to both Lord Buddha's top knot (or "Usnisa" of enlightenment) and "knots" or "tangles" of mind and body that were encountered, dealt with and overcome to achieve this state. "River beneath the river" also hints at a deeper state of mind and seems to particularly speak of the artist's idea of making art - that of mainly wanting to lead people into the deeper self rather than simply skimming the surface. Says Maritta, "This is important to me, to get into this idea that is global, common to all of us. Not in the modern sense where globalization is the buzzword but to me, it is the idea of introspection that connects us all and I consider this to be the original form of globalization. I believe in this ancient form where we all can read through intuition. It has always connected people and provided comfort and is also evident in all languages of art, literature, poetry, etc.."

As a non-Asian artist living and working in Asia, it has not been easy in terms of getting exposure but in terms of interaction with local art forms and finding the right isolation to set herself on the road for a deeper search, it has provided Maritta the right environment to flourish. Furthermore, Vietnam is for this self-supporting artist an affordable place to live. As most artists know, not having major financial worries is one of the factors sustaining their practice.

In recent times, however, Maritta has been exhibiting widely in the US, Finland and Vietnam and will take part in a group exhibition involving 70 artists from 10 Southeast Asian countries. The exhibition is titled "Globalization versus Identity", and will open in Chiang Mai in February 2004 and then travel to the National Gallery in Bangkok.

In 2001, she was invited to the Womanifesto Workshop that took place on a farm in Si Saket, and this in a way provided yet another turning point. Maritta explains: "It was important after a long period of isolation to be together with other artists." The outdoor nature of the workshop provided a challenge to this primarily studio-based artist. She took a bold step away from the confines of a canvas, and found a way to successfully juxtapose her images in direct response to the environment and landscape. Placing small sheets of silver leaf on the trunks of trees on a winding path, she painted almost invisible images on the bark that were subtly left to be encountered unexpectedly by people passing by (*see SPAFA Journal*, volume 12 Number 1, Jan - April 2002). Maritta's charged and meaningful shift at this workshop has become one of the major factors in expanding the horizon of her art practice. She now finds herself drawn to found objects such as rusted metal trays and traditional tofu boxes made from aluminum, which she collects and transforms. One of her work-in-progress consists of small format paintings that she aims to install in a suitable room and in conversation with the surrounding space where, the walls are no longer just a surface to hang paintings, but the wall itself and the space it contains will all be brought into play. A recent grant from Finland has also made it possible for Maritta to think in such wider terms for the first time as this support enables her to experiment more; she is not forced to sell all the works she creates in order to survive.

Breathing, living, reacting to nature, and appearing different in different light, Maritta says her paintings "begin with a mark and soon the painting paints itself..." This recognition of one's instinct is fundamental. But along with it, invested also are knowledge, experience, technique and a great amount of effort and commitment. It is the process that must be gone through over and over again to make things "visible". And in order to "see", one creates art and through this activity in turn finds what can be seen and gained.

Maritta Nurmi's works can be viewed at the following websites:

www.womanifesto.com

www.vietnamesefineart.com

www.salonnatasha.com

www.asianartoptions.com