

University of Lapland  
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Art and Visual Culture in the North

## Essay on the art and visual culture in the North

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Art and its correlating forms of visual expression run deep in the history of the Nordic culture. The artistic tradition in the North derives from the Sami people, and although the forms of art have evolved with the introduction of new techniques, materials and technology, many of the values and issues in which the art centres is the same. The art and visual culture of the North is organic, and focuses on the natural aspects of life; space, time, silence, fire, water, air, earth, people and culture.

The nature has a very strong presence in all aspects of the Northern lifestyle. Nature exists in some way in architecture, design, art and even the cultural habits and traditions of the people. In particular, modern art in the North communicates this connection to nature. Silja Nikula's exhibition entitled *Appelsiinituristin Päiväuni* at Galleria Kajo includes several artworks created using woodblock techniques. The subjects of her artworks vary, however most represent the Finnish landscape, its people and its wildlife. One particular untitled artwork showcases the traditional Nordic activity of ice fishing. A colourless figure sits patiently with his fishing rod in hand, auger by his side, and several colourfully playful fish far below the ice. This artwork emanates a sense of time and space, and admiration in the simple patience of the Lappish fisher. Hilikka Ukkola's exhibition at Korundi Art Museum explores more closely the wonder and admiration of the seasons, flora and fauna of Lapland. A particularly interesting piece in the exhibition is *Joiku*. This etching depicts a lone wolf howling to the swirling night sky. The title *Joiku* (which is a traditional Sami form of chant or song) gives the piece an added dimension; a connection between the ancient culture and nature today. Ukkola etched the Lappish animal with rugged detail, its eyes closed, ears relaxed and 'singing' mouth unstrained. This depiction is more than just a representation of the animal, but also a piece to show her admiration for the creature by depicting it as a peaceful ancient musician, rather than a fierce wolf. Both Nikula and Ukkola's artworks not only simply illustrate the Lappish nature, but more significantly communicates their sense of pride, admiration and wonder for the environment around them, and the traditions of their people.

Today's visual media of the North tends to represent the Finnish people as they are seen stereotypically to outsiders, with their very unique features, behaviours and attitudes exaggerated. Max Juntunen's lecture on visual media showcased several films which adhered to this trend, but in a more artistically interesting manner. One

piece; Maarit Lalli's *Kovat Miehet (Tough Men)* tells a comically dramatic story about the relationship between a son and his father. One would think that the serious nature of the events that take place in the short film; namely, a tractor falling on the father; the son being strung up high above farming machinery with no means of getting down; the father falling into a freezing lake and so on, would result in the characters coming together in a warm typical family-like manner, but instead the events are met with black humour remarks. The 'toughness' presented in this film comes across as a typical feature of the Finnish people, as well as the cold attitudes. Another piece shown in Juntunen's lecture, Markku Pölönen's *Onnen maa (The Land of Happiness)*, also showcases a 'tough' lifestyle and father/son relationship. A prodigal son arrives at his father's farm, where his brother has taken over running the property while the father is physically and mentally unstable. A fractured relationship between the sons, their father, and the farmer son and his own son creates an interesting platform for the film in presenting the typical perception of reservation amongst Finnish men. It is not until the brothers' father passes away that this reserved nature is broken, and the men express themselves. These two examples of visual media in the North play on how outsiders perceive the Finnish people and their traits, yet our ideas are compromised when confronted with how the two directors execute the films. *Kovat Miehet (Tough Men)* uses dark humour to contrast with the serious drama, and *Onnen maa (The Land of Happiness)*'s plot delves deeper than the surface of the typical Finnish character. We get a real insight into the true Finnish man.

The attitudes and values of Northern people have a correlating impact on art in the area. Just as nature is a large aspect of the Finnish people's lives, so too is it a large aspect of their art; not only being represented in the art, but by using materials from the nature to create art. Environmental art has recently become very popular and a common form of self expression among artists in the North, and a notable aspect of this environmental art is the influence of the elements of nature; fire, water, air, and earth. Timo Jokela's lecture on environmental art concentrated predominantly on Ice and Snow Sculpture. Winter in the North changes all aspects of life in the area. Both culture and nature change during this season. The culture embraces the new landscape, and the nature embraces the different states of water. It is with this changing states of water that many artists in the North gather inspiration to build works of art (generally as a team) of great scales in open spaces to bring people out of

the galleries and back into the nature. Annamari Manninen's lecture on environmental art, in particular Fire Sculpture, also draws on this notion of the artists sending a message to art viewers to get outside and back into the environment to fully embrace the experience the artwork aims to create. Both forms of environmental art are somewhat a protest against manufactured materials and the more artificial methods of creating art. They are an exploration of space, time and the elements of nature.

Central to people of the North, apart from nature, is community. The value of community possibly derives from the Sami people with their nomadic lifestyle, and this has continued through to present day, particularly seen through community art. Community art can encompass all different forms and methods of art. Fire, ice and snow sculpture, as well as other kinds of environmental art are a few examples of the different avenues in which a community of people come together to collaborate, create and celebrate art. Community art is almost a performance. Not only is the final product a piece of art built by a community of people, but the entire process from generating ideas, through to organising and creating the piece becomes part of the art itself. Dr. Mirja Hiltunen's lecture on community art and art education emphasises that community art centres on recognising the past; acting everyday life situations; designing the future; and visualising the rich culture of the community. From these aspects of community art, one can determine that *art* is the *place*, and *the artist* is *the community*.

As well as art having a large presence in the North, the North itself is the subject of many artworks over time. In Tuija Hautala-Hirvioja's lecture about the history of art in Lapland, it was discussed that many artworks touched on the historical issues of Finland. One such artwork, *Attack* by Eetu Isto, depicts a woman clutching at a book of laws which is being clawed at by a two headed eagle, representing Imperial Russia. This painting illustrates a very different kind of Finland in comparison to what is projected today. This depiction shows a beautiful woman - a beautiful Finland - yet she is vulnerable and struggling. Contrasting to this illustration of Finland is Bettina Schülke's exhibition in Galleria Valo at the Arktikum, entitled *Transaction 3: From Flatland to Spaceland - Picturing Time*. Schülke is an Austrian artist, but her exhibition takes an almost microscopic look at Finland and concepts of space and time. One of Schülke's pieces is a 6 minute video of many photographs which depict

pictures of Finnish nature, yet the subject is not really nature. It focuses on space and time, motion and stillness, light and dark, feeling and sensory perception, and the beauty in it. These very different instances are only two examples of the changing representation of the North in art through history.

In comparison, the art and visual culture of Australia is very different to that of Finland. Our westernised culture is very young, being colonised a mere 225 years ago, which means we are heavily influenced by our multiculturalism. The art scene in Australia today predominantly follows the global trends of artistic movements and self-expression. However, our culture and ancient traditions have many parallels to the North. The Aboriginal people used raw materials from the land to create paint and decorate their weapons, musical instruments and cooking tools, much like the Sami people, with their artworks. They also used art as a way of story telling. Today, Aboriginal art is still very prominent in our galleries, although their methods of creation have generally adapted to adopt modern techniques and tools, such as using paint instead of ochre (a coloured rock ground into powder). Though, the main correlation between Finland and Australia's art and visual culture is the strong connection with the land, environment and nature. Many original Aboriginal artworks were in fact maps of the land. With their nomadic lifestyle, the Aborigines used art to document the land and their culture.

After viewing several fine art exhibitions, and attending many lectures discussing the art and visual culture of the North, it is quite obvious to see that artists and the community want to project a common theme. People. Finland is infamous for its winter, the silence, the space, and the nature, but it comes back to the connection of these aspects of Finland to the people. From my experience after this course, the Finnish people have such pride and admiration for their nature and the basic elements, wildlife, culture, traditions, history, and their sense of community. All of these things are connected to the people of the North through their art and visual culture throughout history. Finland is a piece of art, and its artist is its people.