

EXHIBITION GUIDE

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

TIIT PÄÄSUKE
& KRIS LEMISALU
19.03–1.05.2016

KAUNITAR JA KOLETIS

TALINNA
KUNSTIHOONE
TALINN
ART HALL



Tiit Pääsuke and Kris Lemsalu. Ceremonial Portrait. 2016.
Photo: Karel Koplimets

TERRIBLY BEAUTIFUL TIIT PÄÄSUKU

The glass-ceilinged hall of the Tallinn Art Hall, which was wonderfully designed by Neeme Külm, has become a post-bombing cathedral open to the sky, with its altar removed. On the walls are Tiit Pääsuke's paintings from the 1970s to the present day. Arranged randomly to provide the viewer with the opportunity to discover the changes and constants in the aesthetics, with a foundation that is strong and a roof that is playful; but which has never been radical. Instead, it is unceasingly respectful of tradition, and subtly reconciled it to its times. His paintings are open to experiments, but firmly remain paintings, and the same applies to the composition and subject matter: the artist modifies, dislocates and blurs, but the pictorial whole firmly holds together even when the sensitive hierarchies of its components change places. Pääsuke's pictures are pleasing to the eye, picturesque and beautiful. From time to time, he uses elements and techniques of surrealism, pop art or photorealism, but always remains an admirer of the art of fine painting. Its roots are in the Paris School, influenced by Fauvism and lyrical abstraction – not by German, Russian or Nordic influences; and this is where the history of respectful mainstream painting in Estonia, which emerged in Tartu, begins.

Throughout, Pääsuke portrays his favourite subjects – women, birds, fish and animals – which are slightly reminiscent of stuffed figures, and sometimes hybrid in nature. The most emotional part of the women in his paintings – the face – is frozen and closed to interpretation; the bodies are alive, graceful and sensual. Although the artist says that the women in his pictures are just a pretext for his paintings like stagings, it seems

that Kris Lemsalu is right when she says, *"His women are very personal; I don't know what to say about them, but I like them. I don't do people's faces, and Tiit's are also like masks. But our bodies are mostly human ones."*¹ The features common to both Tiit's gallery of women and nature is clearly noticeable: *"I am too dangerously close to nature; I appreciate its smells, colours, sounds, i.e. everything that I cannot paint, and therefore, a painted picture seems very pale compared to living nature and I will not attempt such works."* (2010).² Compared to everything else, to all the aesthetic magic, there is something in Pääsuke's women that is greater than the artist and which he cannot master without subordinating it to pictorial structure.

"The same here!" the animals and birds with shiny coats, rich plumage and a gentle, but glassy, gaze might say. And if there is something personal in their enchanting presence, it serves the abundance of possibilities in art, and not the contemporaneity and the people therein: *"My attitude toward the subject can be indirectly compared to a director's attitude toward an actor – the final objective is not to reveal the versatility of the actor's abilities, but a good production, for me it's an exciting picture"* (2000).

An orange parachutist is caught in the latticework on the exploded ceiling. Like an alien from another

star, he dangles with his deflated head on his shoulders and his body seeking a point of support with his knee, entangled in an alien reality. A party animal in a top hat – Daniel in the lion's den – whose David Bowie-like different coloured eyes have fallen into the puddle of the local galaxy. Here, bloodthirsty savages are quenching their thirst, but none of those present seem to be planning to create a storm.

Kris Lemsalu, who has dispatched this star-boy parachutist, is not refuting or proving anything; with her abundant capes she is simply offending roadside values, starting with traditional aesthetic hierarchies: *"I found a position that I can stand behind: when it comes to material it is balance, combining, so hierarchies do not develop; as far as the idea, this is like a stone that falls into the water and creates circles. Balance must develop; all the details are seemingly floating and they quietly converge. In order for balance to develop I need various materials – porcelain, textile, glue, hands, feet or hair. I also want to be part of this balance myself, because I have grown into it, I have become a material. I think this is the way that I combine performance with my work. Before starting to act physically, they must be completed in my head, their authorship must disappear."*


Kris's sculptural installations stand out; they are astonishing and shocking; they do not enchant with a masterful combination of sublime contrasts and harmony; they do not exalt, but assert. Here, beauty is not something to emphasise – although in the final analysis, one cannot reproach Kris Lemsalu for the lack of beauty (although it's exaggerated and amplified).

BEAUTIFULLY TERRIBLE KRIS LEMSALU

There are two of Kris's earlier works from 2011 in the long hall facing Freedom Square – *When the Big Trees Were Kings* and *Wisdom and Eggs*. In the video room, is full-time friend Erik, who has become engaged in 2016: “A monkey’s skull hung on my lamp, I pulled my fingers across it and spontaneously said, “Erik!”. Then I dressed him. I started playing with him; I sent him to a strip bar with small inflatable dolls. Then I realised that Erik is my mirror; all my bad qualities are in him. At first I wanted to put an end to Erik, but I realised that if I did, in time I would also be putting an end to myself. So I made Maria, to make Erik understand that he is no longer the only boss. Maria is a bigger boss. Actually I designed Maria’s dress for myself. As a wedding dress.”

Although it is difficult to differentiate between the material and form in Kris’s work, they are both definitely set. As are the artist’s aesthetic and ethical attitudes. She cares about both, but does not announce this caring visibly or in words. The artist has done her work with the greatest possible concentration and expressive power, and she does not have to chew through it in the interests of the viewer or interpreter: “I would like people to look at my things like a stone that creates circles when it falls in the water. You can remain at the centre or move on and continue dealing with your parents, friends, community, continent or galaxy. If I formulate too much, the circle will remain closed. I have spent a lot of time building, collecting a meaningful aggregate. There is no sense in started to unravel it. I provide a title, and thereby the viewer has two leads in hand – the work and the title.”

The little that Kris says has much in common with Tiit’s notes: “*Luckily the explanation is hard to remember and is soon forgotten. And then the painting must helplessly observe the birth and death of explanations. Today, who knows what is actually going on in Manet’s painting The Luncheon on the Grass? What*

does the frog in the lower left corner mean? Or the bird amid the foliage? Or what is the woman in the background doing in the water? Is she peeing?” (2009). “*Luckily the content is so closely related to the form of painting that in places it becomes the form...if we start to highlight one, another recedes...the balance is lost, and one might think that something is amiss elsewhere. It could also be said that in a good painting, if it is truly good, there is no composition. No colouring. Actually there is, but it is imperceptible. This means that all the parts of the work are integrated into the whole.*” (2010). Tiit indisputably has a way with words, and is capable of creating a poetic textual parallel reality for a picture, but he knows all too well that this is inconsequential for visual art: “*There is no sense in searching for any other symbolis*” (2011). 

It is impossible to understand Kris’s chain of thought based on the logic of spoken language – the unexpected transitional leaps, the precise, but free-falling sentences anchored in a hard-to-comprehend context. Kris’s words become eloquent when despite, or rather thanks to, their roughness, a strong visual visionary image is formed. Unlike Tiit, who comes from a school that recognises the significance of teachers and those who went before, Kris comes from the place where she has landed at the moment: from the street, from bars, the cinema, from behind a computer or the solitude of the studio. Tiit’s wisdom allows him to abstract, generalise and distance himself; Kris’s intelligence is just a great thirst for experience: she grabs on the fly, bites off huge pieces, and even if she is not talking with a full mouth, it’s not because of learned civility. It is just impossible to speak with your mouth full.

Both artists are strongly material-based, but Tiit profanes noble subject matter – nature – for the benefit of painting as art, while Kris ennobles her primary materials – fabric, a piece of wire,

a bottle scrubber or life vest – by elevating them to art. The nature of the material that Tiit works with is abstract – colour and surface – which the painting makes illusory. Kris’s art is thoroughly concrete, derived from the surroundings and far from incidental: *I have a totally visual gaze and before it is clear – I can feel when it is clear – I don’t even start working.*” However, brilliantly professional Tiit observes and makes much more use of the charm of the incidental; Kris rebuffs the incidental. For her, dreams, the everyday, things she reads, sees and hear, the media and “great” art all have equal weight, and she is amazingly precise in recognising the possible alternative that suits her.

Tiit’s most abstract paintings – *A Great White Bird and Kissing Fish*, *West Coast Birds* (1989), *Fish-bird* (1991), *Watermarks* (2012) – contain realistic details; the artist does not reject topical analogies, although he is capable of practically anything that a level surface and colour enables. When the inspiration dries up, he keeps the pictorial surface alive with yellow, blue and red periods, with monochromatic patches of colours that have been painted over several times, and by varying his favourite themes. The professional in the artist does not let him down; such extended success can only be disputed, if a change occurs in the way culture is interpreted, if that.

Instead, Kris’s ability to generalise is in the serving up of the potential necessary for generalisations to those who are willing “to go beyond the ‘centre’”. The central point itself was and will remain thoroughly concrete and tangible.

1 All of Kris Lemsalu’s thoughts come from conversations with the artist in 2015 and 2016.

2 Tiit Pääsuke’s quotes date back to his catalogue that appeared in 2000, to the forewords written for galleries, newspaper articles and the artist’s own handwritten notes. Since the latter more than the rest reflect everything in a genuine and unedited form, as the artist planned them, I have mostly used them, without referring to the ones that have appeared in the media or in press releases. In the interests of temporal consistency I have added the years.

The titles of Tiit’s pictures are not very significant compared to the paintings themselves, and are modestly ordinary. But Kris, whose notebook and phone is filled with sentence fragments and expressions, song titles and lyrics, has titles, which “converge” the work into an integrated whole, and are on an equal footing with all the other parts comprising the work. With these titles, most of which are in English and unconventional to exhibition halls, Kris helps the viewers considerably; if not by revealing the meaning of the work, then by providing them an opportunity to participate in the creative process. That which, in Tiit’s case, belongs to the code of contemplative aesthetics, in Kris’s case is a flight of free associations, which does not want to be read in any context, but first off delivers an opportunity for liberating laughter. Those who are able to go further may arrive in another galaxy.



Tiit Pääsuke.
Herdsman’s Robe.
2005, acrylic, oil, canvas,
110 × 120 cm.
Courtesy of Rene Kuulmann

Kris’s generation has forgotten the portrait genre a long time ago; it appears seldom in Tiit’s work as well and the artist prefers to call his few portraits stagings. But, if Tiit comes off second best compared to Kris at all, it’s in the role of as the creator of the staging: Kris’s extreme, grotesque and quintessential scenarios confuse even Tiit: “*She is colourful. I would even say picturesque, if that word still means anything today. She is free, flatters and irritates. She has three or more dimensions,*” Tiit says about Kris and acknowledges her by painting: *Actually it is hard to remember how she looks.*” (2016). Yet, *Kris&Kris* along with *Vaike* are Tiit Pääsuke’s most objectively manifested, most realistic portraits.



Tiit Pääsuke.
Vaike.
1978, oil, canvas,
145 × 130 cm.
Courtesy of the
Art Museum of Estonia

Tiit Pääsuke's apprenticeship as an artist was long – eleven years. This was a time for learning to trust and understand his teachers, the experience of bringing tradition and the here and now together. Pääsuke's path as an artist has been very much longer. A large and significant part of which is comprised of teaching, mediating knowledge and responsibility. It could be said that he has paid the price of moderation in order to maintain a fragile balance between art and life, in order to keep art alive. Perhaps at the cost of change and audacity, for which now that he has turned 75, he lacks the energy. For Kris, who has turned thirty, these are hopelessly tangled. She is holding her breath, diving head first into passion, from which she resurfaces gasping for air.

"Everything is all mixed up in me. What I do is my life, my priority, my mission. It's all mixed together," says Kris, who constantly lingering in the "extreme present" is sometimes difficult but always interesting to observe.

"I am constantly trying to see if I can survive as the kind of artist I am. These days, as a rule, artists are calculating; they know everything about galleries, how the market works. They base everything on choices, but Tiit and I have no choices. There are no people like that anymore."



Kris Lemsalu. In My Bathtub I'm the Captain.
2012, ceramics, textile, metal.
Courtesy of the Temnikova & Kasela Gallery



Kris Lemsalu.
Father is in Town.
2012, ceramics,
lambskin and
wild boar skin, foam.
Courtesy of the
Temnikova & Kasela Gallery



Tiit Pääsuke. Spacious Landscape II.
1973, enamel painting, oil, plywood, 100 × 149 cm.
Courtesy of Tartmus

Spacious Landscape II (1973), the earliest work in the exhibition, is a daring mix of school-era materials – fabrics, a heavy dark jacket, bars and a woman in a pink sky coming through the grass with leaves that resemble surrealistic mouths. Here there is movement and disruption, truthfulness in the details and irrationality in the whole. *Eva* and *Woman in Red*, which were made a year or two later, are more self-aware and focused. What is irritating and dislocating is the woman's appearance – the jackal wearing red dress and *Eva* with a relatively real face, disappearing into a body overflowing with even realer life juices. No matter how expertly they are painted, very few of Pääsuke's paintings of women are persuasive because of their personification. The nudity, as well as the clothing that they wear or have worn exudes the power of a symbol.

Kris with a Burning Suitcase. This is a photo taken on a canal of the Wien River, where, disregarding the prohibitory signs Kris and Nikolaus Weitzer waded in to take a picture of Kris dragging a burning suitcase. A Willendorf Venus-like traveller, with an abundant bosom on her back, she is going to burn bridges – not memories. What seemed like going backstage in 2013, became real in 2014 – Kris left Vienna, where she had lived for quite a long time.



Kris Lemsalu.
Kris with
a Burning Suitcase.
2013, photo.
Photo: Nikolaus Weitzer



"When I was in Japan, I noticed how the sexiness of helplessness is exploited in an otherwise closed and refined culture. Making people into objects of desire seemed to be common to traditional *kinbaku* bondage culture and junior porn, where scantily dressed young girls wearing housemaid aprons, aroused men's passions. I was intrigued by the idea that the object of desire could simultaneously also be a cleaning tool, and I made my *manga*-girls into a compensation product, in which the skill of the feet compensates for the disability of being armless."

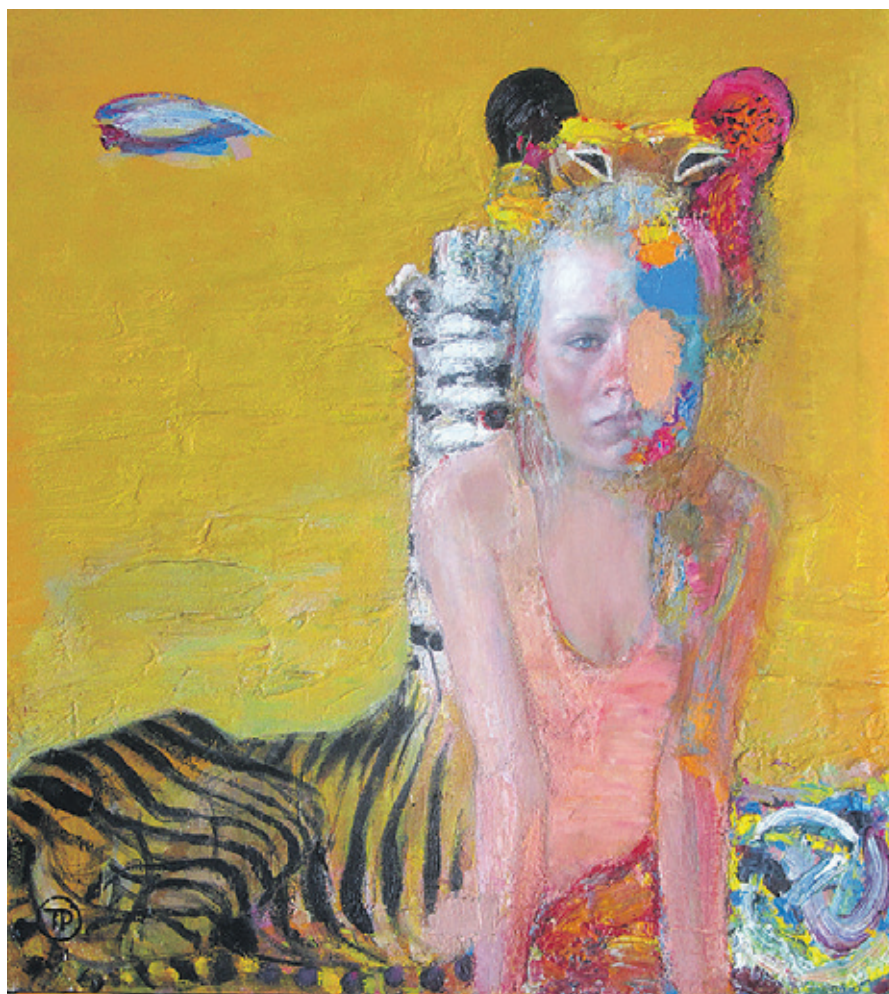
Kris Lemsalu.
Cool Girls Without Hands.
2016, porcelain, cement, metal,
dyed lambskin, textile, skateboards

Tiit Pääsuke.
A Piece of Heaven.
2016, acrylic, pencil, canvas,
123 × 150 cm



Tiit Pääsuke takes a long time to paint his pictures; he overpaints and sometimes starts anew. Started in 2015, *Kris&Kris* has meanwhile undergone many transformations. Returning to portrait painting as a pictorial solution after a long time, Tiit was intrigued by Kris as a model, whose exterior state is constantly changing, and therefore, coincides with Tiit's understanding of painting as staging. The real Kris's sad face has been expertly captured in the animal/bird/sphinx/woman that looks back at us from the picture, which in places the artist hides and supplements with layers of colour and strange images.

Pääsuke has painted fauna before. In 2001, he produced his first ox, and several others in the two years leading up to this exhibition were added: "Beautiful animals. Large eyes, pink noses. Terrifying and dear, powerful and intelligent," he says and adds, "All my oxen are mythical beings." It's true, *The Abduction of Europa*, and the small *Death of Painting* that bears the *Mythos* missive, which Pääsuke interprets as "the death of painting is myth, i.e. a fabrication" and *A Piece of Heaven* about which he says, "But see, the sky is not longer blue – when our dreams become reality they turn out to be quite colourless."



Tiit Pääsuke. *Kris&Kris*.
First of a pair. 2016, acrylic, oil, canvas, 90 × 77 cm

Tiit Pääsuke. *Death of Painting*.
2015, acrylic, oil, canvas, 30 × 40 cm



Tiit Pääsuke. *Kris&Kris*.
Second of a pair. 2016, acrylic, oil, canvas, 90 × 77 cm

"I saw the image of an Islamic soldier in the media. He was sitting on a camel and waving a sword. The soldier did not interest me at all, but the camel did. I imagined that its reaction to having its humps slashed with a sword would be to run amok. Similarly to the extreme situations where people with their legs broken are able to run a few kilometres, fountains appear to replace the camel's humps that pump valuable water in and out. This is a continuing theme that haunts me, one I am trying to express: despite losses and shortcomings, strength exists that helps us keep living, a kind of perpetual motion machine or unbroken circle. The same thing appeared in my work *In My Bathtub I'm the Captain* – in connection with the fish, hook, and worm; and also in *Wisdom and Eggs*, where the Chinese men sitting in a leaking boat being sunk by stones are saved from drowning by their life jackets."



Kris Lemsalu.
Wisdom and Eggs.
2011, ceramics, textiles,
rubber boat, stones

Kris Lemsalu.
*When the Big Trees
Were Kings*.
2011, ceramics, wool, metal
and fountain pump





Tiit Pääsuke and an unknown artist.
Heart of a Fisher.
2015, acrylic, oil, canvas, 160 × 160 cm

The story of this picture, which got its start from a target found in the forest, is quite similar to the previous one. Here you see a rain-soaked and crumpled nylon net riddled with shotgun holes, which has been painted over by the artist and is now living new pictorial life as a pink-eared wild boar.



Tiit Pääsuke.
Target with a Red Ear.
2007, acrylic, oil,
vinyl, plywood,
diameter 109 cm.
Courtesy of Tõnis Arro

The *Heart of a Hunter* (1997) from the Art Museum of Estonia collection and the *Heart of the Fisher* painted almost 20 years later, were motivated by simple chance: the artist bought a naïve work by an unknown artist from a flea market and repainted it within his own similar sentimental framework – like a monument to an unknown colleague.



Kris Lemsalu and
an Unknown Artist.
Blanket 2.
2016, porcelain, textile,
145 × 115 cm.
Courtesy of
Temnikova & Kasela Gallery

This “blanket-painting” uses kitschy fabrics. Kris Lemsalu usually bought them at the now defunct Baltic Station market and supplemented them by adding a bit of this and that. She used an idea that was derived from her work called *Aldonza Lorenzo*, which she completed in 2014. In that case, pairs of sheer pantyhose hung on forms taken from a jawbone that a friend had given her, and thus, Kris’s first “painting” was born. A jawbone-vagina in leopard-skin pants doing a split has planted itself on the head of bear innocently taking a break in the forest. That’s it. Here’s an opportunity to compare Tiit’s kitschy pictures with the hearts of a hunter and a fisher with Kris’s blanket kitsch on an equal plane – on a white wall.



Kris Lemsalu.
Evian Desert.
2012, porcelain, sand

The term “Evian desert” creates an association of bottled water in a desert. In addition, two bathrobes – one standing and the other collapsed empty on a pile of sand speak of clothed emptiness. Kris’s own interpretation is the following: “At a festival someone once asked me how I was doing. I didn’t want to give the usual empty answer, so I said, ‘I’m like a millionaire in the desert’. Wealth and thirst hand-in-hand, with the feeling that anything is possible inside.”



Tiit Pääsuke.
A Piece of Heaven. Ox Head.
2016, acrylic, oil,
canvas on cardboard,
50 × 120 cm

In 1980, Tiit suffered a trauma: while diving in the Black Sea, a wave threw him against a cliff and shattered his shoulder to bits. For the next six months, a cast and barbell, screws and other metals became part of his everyday routine. Also some very good paintings were created, like *Boy with a Violin* (1980), which is now part of the permanent exhibition at the Kumu Art Museum, and *Still Life with Violin and Injured Hand* (1981), which belongs to the same category. The latter, which he gifted to his friend Urmas Ploomipuu, has unfortunately been lost, but at our exhibition, this past event and the lost painting is recalled by two works: *My Freedom Square* (1980–2000) from Pääsuke's apron series and *Injured Hand* which was completed this year.

Tiit Pääsuke. Injured Hand.
2016, acrylic, oil, canvas, Three parts, each 30 × 30 cm.



Full time Friend Erik.
2015, monkey-skull, textile, porcelain, plastic

Actually, the name of this photo should be *Maria und Erik* but Maria is still “hot from the oven” and will not be standing behind Erik until just before the opening. However, the exhibition guide needs to be laid out and sent to the printers right away, so we will have settle for Erik alone. All the more because Erik has been Kris's full-time friend since 2015, but his delicate, self-confident monkey-skull, and porcelain, textile and plastic figure have started to annoy Kris. Let's be honest, by creating Maria, Kris thought seriously about handing Erik over. Maybe into better hands.

KRIS LEMSALU (b. 1985) is an artist that combines ceramics with the innovativeness of contemporary art, and has garnered a great deal of attention. Her parent's home is in Tallinn, but it is difficult to pin down her permanent residence. Travelling, communicating and relating have become her lifestyle, her need. Having graduated from the Estonian Academy of Arts as a ceramicist, she continued her education in Denmark and Austria. However, the school of life and experience have undoubtedly shaped her more than academic learning. Kris's works have been exhibited at many galleries in different parts of the world. She is represented by the Temnikova & Kasela Gallery in Tallinn.

TIIT PÄÄSUKU (b. 1941) is a renowned painter and teacher, who graduated from the Tartu Art School and State Art Institute of the Estonian S.S.R.; he continued his education in St. Petersburg and Vilnius. He has had over 30 solo exhibition and taught painting and drawing at the Estonian Academy of Arts, Rovaniemi Art School and University of Lapland for more than 40 years. Professor Emeritus. He has been honoured with many prizes and national acknowledgements.

Tiit Pääsuke & Kris Lemsalu
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Tallinn Art Hall. Tiit Pääsuke & Kris Lemsalu. Beauty and the Beast.
Exhibition design Neeme Külm. Photo: Karel Koplímets