

KANSALLISGALLERIA •  
FINLANDS NATIONALGALLERI •  
FINNISH NATIONAL GALLERY •

## Elga Sesemann – A Woman Artist Rediscovered

**Anu Utrainen**, MA, Senior Researcher, Ateneum Art Museum / Finnish National Gallery

*Research project and exhibition at the Ateneum Art Museum (1st floor, 13 Aug – 14 Nov 2021)*



**Elga Sesemann, *Self-Portrait*, 1945, oil on canvas, 73cm x 54cm**  
Finnish National Gallery /  
Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /  
Janne Tuominen

Elga Sesemann (1922–2007) is one of the post-war women artists who made a remarkable debut in the mid-1940s, but then vanished from the Finnish art scene very soon after that. She has only recently been recognised once again and brought back to the attention of researchers and museum visitors.<sup>1</sup> The aim of the forthcoming exhibition and research project is to study the reasons for this development, as well as to show Sesemann's original and independent artworks in the context of Finnish post-war modernism.

The role and significance of women in the Finnish art scene has been a subject of study in art history for many decades. As a result, numerous creditable publications, academic dissertations and exhibitions have been made about Finnish women artists, teachers and critics from the turn of the 20th century. Due to the pioneering work of professors Riitta Konttinen and Riitta Nikula from the 1980s on, women's studies became an essential paradigm in art history. This development has made it possible for interdisciplinary researchers to re-evaluate and examine more critically the works of art and careers of women not only as individuals but also in terms of social class, gender and artistic style. In recent years, the research focus has moved on from the turn of the century to the inter- and post-war periods, as there is a growing interest in studying women artists of the first decades of the 20th century. In Finland this was the time of reshaping culture and art for the new independent nation within a modernistic ethos – with an arts scene that seems to have been astonishingly male-dominated.

One of the Ateneum Art Museum's current projects on this subject is the international touring exhibition 'Modern Woman', now on display in Kunstforeningen GL Strand in Copenhagen. Elga Sesemann is one of the four modernist woman painters included in the exhibition, together with Helene Schjerfbeck, Ellen Thesleff and Sigrid Schauman.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 Sesemann's works have been included in the exhibitions 'Urban Encounters' 2018–19 and 'Artists in Ruovesi' 2019–20 in the Ateneum Art Museum, 'State of Mind – Helsinki 1939–45', 2019–20 at Helsinki Art Museum HAM and in 'Täältä tullaan, naistaiteilijat modernin murroksessa' in Tampere Art Museum 2017. See also corresponding exhibition catalogues.
- 2 <http://en.glstrand.dk/exhibitions/current/modern-women.aspx> (accessed 25 September 2020).

There are also individual factors in Elga Sesemann's life that inevitably had an effect on her career, her visibility and her degree of recognition as an artist. While the decision to leave Helsinki and move to the backwoods of Ruovesi in 1948 was one made by many Finnish artists – her predecessor Akseli Gallen-Kallela designed and built his wilderness home and studio Kalela in the same remote area – for Sesemann this was not a temporary arrangement. Neither was it a romantic pursuit of primitivism – she lived permanently in Ruovesi with her artist husband Seppo Näätänen in their studio home for nearly 20 years. During that time she worked as an artist and followed arts events and trends closely, but exhibited infrequently. In this sense Sesemann can be compared to Helene Schjerfbeck, who also retreated from Helsinki and chose to live more quietly in Hyvinkää, concentrating on her work. Schjerfbeck too painted actively and was perfectly aware of developments in art despite the distance from the capital.<sup>3</sup>

The Ateneum Art Museum has 50 artworks by Elga Sesemann in its collection, and there are some works elsewhere in public and private collections. The Ateneum has included some of them in two thematic collection exhibitions recently. The first, 'Urban Encounters', focused on the influence of modernisation and urbanisation on everyday Finnish life in the early decades of the 20th century, and how this was portrayed in visual art. The second thematic exhibition, 'Artists in Ruovesi', focused on Finnish artists living and working in the Ruovesi region.<sup>4</sup> In both shows the reception of Sesemann's artworks was enthusiastic and audiences were surprised that she had been virtually forgotten in art history for many decades.

Until now the number of known artworks by Sesemann has been relatively low, even though she was highly productive. In order to create a wider overview of her work and trace the extent of Sesemann's oeuvre, the Ateneum Art Museum initiated a survey in the spring of 2020. The museum also works in close cooperation with Elga Sesemann's estate. As a result we have gathered information on more than 200 works from private owners. These works give us a whole new perspective on Sesemann's artistic career. It demonstrates that she made significant shifts during her career, from her colourful and materialistic expressionism, melancholic urbanscapes and interiors of the 1940s, to surrealistic, dream-like visions and almost abstract, colour-ascetic studies of nature and constructions in the 1950s and 60s. She employed different techniques skilfully, from oil to gouache, from pastel to chalk.

The aim of this project is to show these shifts in an attentively curated solo exhibition and to study the circumstances that resulted in her disappearance from the post-war art-historical canon.

3 Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff. 'Fine things Alongside Fierce Things: The Art of Helene Schjerfbeck', in *Helene Schjerfbeck*. London: RA Publications 2019, 10–27.

4 <https://ateneum.fi/kohtaamisia-kaupungissa-esittelee-kaupunkielamaa-1900-luvun-suomessa/?lang=en> and <https://ateneum.fi/nayttelyt/finnish-artists-in-ruovesi/?lang=en> (accessed 25 September 2020).