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Does Gender Matter? Leena Luostarinen and the Art Debate Taking Place in Finnish Daily Newspapers in the 1980s and 1990s

Karita Kivikoski, MA student, University of Helsinki

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Leena Luostarinen, *Rain*, 1981,
oil on canvas,
100cm x 180cm
Finnish National Gallery /
Museum of Contemporary Art
Kiasma

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
Antti Kuivalainen



During my internship at the Finnish National Gallery I studied the Finnish painter Leena Luostarinen¹ (1949–2013) and her exhibition reviews in the Finnish daily newspapers. Using these sources, I was able to gain some insight into the Finnish art debate taking place in the 1980s and 1990s. Luostarinen is associated with the new painting² and expressionism of the

- 1 Luostarinen studied at the School of the Fine Arts Academy of Finland in 1968–72. She received the Ducat prize awarded by the Finnish Art Society in 1974 and the Pro Finlandia Medal in 1995. She was selected as the Artist of the Year in 1988. For more about Leena Luostarinen, see <http://www.leenaluostarinen.com> (accessed 22 October 2020).
- 2 In the beginning of the 1980s the resurgence of painting was a counter-reaction against conceptual art and its lack of images as well as over-intellectualism. Hannu Castrén. 'Maalaan, olen siis olemassa!', in Helena Sederholm *et al.* (eds.), *Pinx, Maalaustaide Suomessa. Siveltimen vetoja*. Porvoo: Weilin + Göös Oy, 2003, (210–11) 210.



Leena Luostarinen,
After Delacroix I, 1981,
 watercolour on paper,
 59.5cm x 80.5cm
 Finnish National Gallery /
 Museum of Contemporary
 Art Kiasma

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Petri Virtanen

1980s, as well as the powerful emergence of women painters at that time. In addition, a romantic attitude can be found in her art.³ The new painting in Finland did not emerge as a counter-reaction to minimalism or the 'linguistic'⁴ nature of conceptual art or its over-intellectualisation, as had been the case internationally. In Finland, it was rather a reaction to the ideological and realistic content in art. The starting point of the new painting in Finland at this time was therefore different than it was internationally.⁵

A Fullbright scholarship gave Luostarinen an opportunity to go to New York and study at the Pratt Institute in 1985–86.⁶ There she became interested in Chinese landscape painting.⁷ In a postmodern spirit, Luostarinen referred to various sources, and intertextuality became part of her work. She picked up subjects from older artists, such as Eugène Delacroix

and Diego Velázquez. Sphinxes, cats, swans, lizards, and snakes became familiar subject matter in her works. The themes of her paintings arose from national and religious myths, and contemporary legends.⁸ These themes were influenced by Luostarinen's travels.

Examining the art reviews of the 1980s and 1990s in the press cuttings in the Archive Collections of the Finnish National Gallery, I wanted to investigate the gender perspective and to see how the art discussion about Luostarinen and her art was played out in the Finnish press. Did the artist's gender influence the reviews? I focused on the four largest independent Finnish daily newspapers – *Helsingin Sanomat*⁹, *Aamulehti*¹⁰, *Turun Sanomat*¹¹ and *Kaleva*¹² –

- 3 Marja-Terttu Kivirinta. 'Sfinksejä ja kissoja. Leena Luostarisen pensseli ottaa etäisyyttä modernin taiteen genealoggiaan', in Marja-Terttu Kivirinta, Lasse Saarinen, Leena Luostarinen, Camilla Ahlström-Taavitsainen, Otso Kantokorpi, Päivi Karttunen, Jüri Kokkonen and Pirkko Tuukkanen (eds.), *Leena Luostarinen: Tiikerinpiirtäjä = Tigertecknaren = Tiger Drawer*. Helsinki: Suomen taideyhdistys, 2013, (15–22) 17; Kimmo Sarje. *Romantiikka ja postmoderni*. Helsinki: Valtion painatuskeskus, 1989.
- 4 The art object was no longer a unique and special 'means of expression made by hand'. New means of expression came up and the way of expressing conceptual art became 'linguistic', even when images were used. Marja Sakari. *Käsitetaiteen etiikka: suomalaisen käsitetaiteen postmodernia ja fenomenologista tulkintaa*. Dimensio 4. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery, 2000, 26.
- 5 Inkamajja Iitiä. *Käsitteellisestä ruumiilliseen, sitaatiosta paikkaan: maalaustaide ja nykyaiteen historia*. Helsinki: Helsingin yliopisto, 2008, 212; Castrén, 'Maalaan, olen siis olemassa!', 210.
- 6 Kimmo Sarje. 'Maalasin ensisijaisesti ihmisfiguureja, kunnes tiikerisarja alkoi syksyllä 1980', *Taide* no. 3 (1988), 31.
- 7 Kimmo Sarje. 'Haluan, että maalaukseni ovat runoutta', in Harald Arnkil, Achille Bonito Oliva and Kimmo Sarje (eds.), *Leena Luostarinen. Vuoden taiteilija / Årets konstnär / Artist of the Year*. Helsinki: Helsingin juhlaviikot, Helsingin taidehalli, Hermes Oy, 1988, (10–21) 18.
- 8 Marja-Terttu Kivirinta. 'Sfinksejä ja kissoja', 15.
- 9 *Helsingin Sanomat* was established in 1889 as *Päivälehti*, which, for the first decades, supported liberalism, but in 1932 it was declared politically neutral. *Helsingin Sanomat* is Finland's largest daily newspaper. 'Helsingin Sanomat', Wikipedia, https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helsingin_Sanomat (accessed 6 April 2020).
- 10 *Aamulehti* is the second largest daily newspaper in Finland, established in 1881 in Tampere. 'Aamulehti', Wikipedia, <https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aamulehti> (accessed 14 April 2020).
- 11 *Turun Sanomat* is an independent newspaper established in 1904. It is the third largest in Finland and comes out in Turku. 'Turun Sanomat', Wikipedia, https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turun_Sanomat (accessed 7 April 2020).
- 12 *Kaleva* is an independent newspaper established in 1899 and the fourth largest in Finland. It is published in Oulu. 'Kaleva', Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaleva_\(newspaper\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaleva_(newspaper)) (accessed 17 April 2020).



Leena Luostarinen, *Dragon's Cave*, 1990–93, oil, velvet, metal pigment on canvas, 301 cm x 362 cm
Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jukka Romu

as well as on the largest Swedish-language newspaper *Hufvudstadsbladet*¹³ and two politically committed newspapers, *Uusi Suomi*¹⁴ and *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti*¹⁵. I discovered that the critics of all these newspapers wrote a lot about art exhibitions and through this activity, they participated actively in the Finnish art debate. In general, not all Finnish newspapers wrote exhibition reviews.

The reviews arose from different starting points. Not all of them showed an awareness of the perspective of gender,

although they nevertheless emphasised the female gender of the artists. Two of the critics, Marja-Terttu Kivirinta in *Helsingin Sanomat* and Dan Sundell in *Hufvudstadsbladet*, underlined Luostarinen's educational background and professional achievements. Another critic, A. I. Routio, writing in *Uusi Suomi*, referred to what has historically been traditional regarding female artists and which still seems to have been valid for him in the 1980s. In his view, it was appropriate for women painters to make small-scale artworks and Luostarinen's large and colourful paintings were thus problematic for him.

Even those critics who wrote with an awareness of sexual equality, could still unknowingly or even consciously repeat traditional values, for example by using the word 'girl' for an adult woman. In a way, the

1980s and 1990s were a transition period during which discussion about gender in art was still evolving. It was quite ironic to read these newspaper articles from 30-40 years ago, as this kind of text would be unthinkable nowadays. However, the formulaic nature of the writings, as well as the number of them, made me realise how much influence and power art critics have.

I started my research internship at the Finnish National Gallery in the beginning of March 2020. It was an exceptional time because of the Covid-19 virus and the lockdown. I worked in the FNG library at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, with other staff



Leena Luostarinen, *Swan and Metropolis (To Maria)*, 1985, oil on canvas, 121 cm x 183 cm
Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

13 *Hufvudstadsbladet*, established in 1864, is a Finnish Swedish-language daily newspaper and has among them the largest circulation in the country. 'Hufvudstadsbladet', Wikipedia, <https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hufvudstadsbladet> (accessed 6 April 2020).

14 *Uusi Suomi* was published in 1919–1991. It was a newspaper of the Coalition Party until 1976, after which it declared itself politically neutral. 'Uusi Suomi', Wikipedia, https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uusi_Suomi (accessed 6 April 2020).

15 *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* was established under the name *Työmies* (The Labourer) in 1895. It is the paper of the Finnish Social Democratic Party and comes out nowadays with the name *Demokraatti*. 'Suomen sosialidemokraatti', Wikipedia, [https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demokraatti_\(lehti\)](https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demokraatti_(lehti)) (accessed 4 April 2020).

working remotely at home. I communicated with my in-house tutors Marja Sakari and Patrik Nyberg via video meetings and e-mails and received their comments and suggestions. My study on Luostarinen and newspaper reviews is ongoing as I continue to write my master's thesis on the subject.

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