

Autumn is turning to winter, the days are cold, and light is no more than a word. Occasionally, tiny flakes float down from the leaden sky. They form a coating of white on the ground, as light and translucent as dust. At the same time, they turn the view from my window graphic and grainy, like the black-and-white photographs that were in vogue a few decades ago.

As I watch the arrival of winter, Riitta Nelimarkka is travelling in Africa and filling the travel trunks of her mind with unusual objects. She opens them to let in the shadowless light of the equator and piles them full to the brim with colours as they appear only in that dazzling, endless brightness.

This journey is not Nelimarkka's first; I have seen the photographs on her walls, reminders of its many predecessors. It seems to me that, for her, Africa is the same kind of absolutely fundamental experience—and hence important for denizens of the cold, dark North, too—as the one that once prompted Henri Matisse to follow in Paul Gauguin's footsteps to Tahiti. On arriving there, he sighed that every morning was like “the first morning of the Creation.”

“Yes, I could live there,” Nelimarkka replies, when I later ask her how it went. Her reply is a short one, and tells me that I am stepping into personal territory. I inquire no further.

I have no need to. Nelimarkka's works are not about Africa, or any other remote corner of the globe. Her subjects are much closer to home, found in familial relationships, in friends' conversations, and in the kaleidoscopic events of everyday life. At the same time, however, we can reasonably assume that powerful visual experiences and images that have stayed in her mind from her travels do affect the choices she has made in the studio, remaining dimly visible in the background to her art.

In practice, this is evident, for example, in the way that in her tapestries she uses only yarn that she has dyed herself, according to the palette that she has carefully created. The dusty, yet brilliant and even spicy reds, yellows and browns, and their cool, mint and turquoisey complementary colours lure my thoughts to a place that is only partly here, to a place that is ‘elsewhere’, in my mind's Africa.

Before the work leaves the loom, before its jigsaw-puzzle-type shapes are condensed to make them final and seamless, and before it is capable of enticing us into its world, it has to go through a lot. It has to travel quite a journey, from the first inklings, bit by bit, to increasingly precise sketches, and on to detailed working drawings, which Nelimarkka executes together with expert professionals.

The foundation for all this lies in the drawing, in the marks that Nelimarkka makes rapidly and directly, with black charcoal, pen and coloured chalk, onto white paper—onto the “original sheet”, as she herself calls that white emptiness. I have seen piles of these on her desk.

Most of the drawings in those piles are impressions captured rapidly on slips of paper, quick, eloquent markings made with a few precise strokes, dozens of which can be sparked off by any situation that she is faced with, or by any thought that flashes into her mind in conversation. Nelimarkka always has a notebook to hand for fleeting moments.

These drawings can be viewed both as figurative doodles and as a calligraphic symbolic language, as a kind of writing in which particles of an image are still as though seeking out their ultimate place. As I leaf through them, I notice my gaze shifting back and forth

between individual lines, germs of images, and the pictures formed out of them and recognisable from them. I also find myself thinking of Wassily Kandinsky's early *Improvisations*, intimated combinations of calligraphic drawings and paintings, which rank among the opening shots of abstract art, but whose starting points are in the figurative image.

When talking about her drawings, Nelimarkka says she is an undisciplined artist, who starts drawing at different places at different times, from the edge or from the centre, from a detail or a minor figure. But having grasped the connecting thread, she reworks that one image again and again, repeating it until she is satisfied with the result. In all her indiscipline, she has a clear eye for what she is after.

At the same time as the repetition hones the image to make it more precise, it can also throw up something quite new and unexpected. The closely related drawings that have accumulated on the desk quickly begin to sprout new tales, adaptations that are the beginnings of quite other adventures. Variation, the reverse side of repetition, is one of the underlying concepts in Nelimarkka's art.

Thus, specifically this quest for precise expression can be seen as fuelling the organic growth of her art, a growth that is kept within bounds by the repetition that is a fundamental part of the working process. Nelimarkka's art is not only about seeking and finding, but also about continuity, about a kind of breathing in and out.

When we view her art for a little longer, we soon notice how works and groups of works that had their beginnings at different times and in different ways mirror each other. At the same time as they form various meta-entities, families and clans moving back and forth in time, they call into question all those linear, chronological models via which artists' production has traditionally been viewed. In Nelimarkka's case, it might be best to talk of a kind of network or mycelium.

Her art can thus be described as a sum of paradoxes, as a combination of mutually exclusive opposites. It is finely tuned, and yet it slips freely in its chosen directions. It is rooted in fleeting moments and improvisation, while at the same time being conscious of its goals. It constantly seeks out new viewpoints and tests out new ways of using form. And yet it is immediately recognisable.

The whole made up of these widely ramified forms, colours and material effects, and the techniques used, in fact, seem to be holding together a number of the human figures that appear in Nelimarkka's art. Judging by their names, some of them could be fugitives from those barren eastern Baltic-Sea islands that Henry Miller aptly described as "crumbs of bread thrown into the sea".

Did these comic, occasionally boisterous beings want to leave their peaceful, myth-laden Arcadia and its always equally beautiful recurring summer's days in order to have a bit of fun, to enjoy life in all its hues? Have they spotted an intriguing casket in the idyllic harbour of some island floating in its blue sea, filled with strange lights and, to them, rare colours, refracted, broken and inter-mingled?

In any case, having left their island, they have at the same time, become enmeshed in the often tangled threads of human relationships and everyday life. In unpicking the knots, they have woven together a noisy comedy that looks like it comes from the world of the circus, a comedy whose resounding laughter they hoped would cover over life's deeper, darker, more onerous furrows—or at least turn them to a better light, so as at the least to ease the human load.

Among Apollo and his resplendent friends we also get a glimpse of the red-lipped

Flygelise, the small, winged figure who has taken her shape from the grand piano, and who may in fact be Nelimarkka's alter ego. For one thing, this figure appeared in her art during her doctoral research, completed over five years ago (*Self Portrait—Elisen vaitöskirja*, 2000). Secondly, I know that playing the piano and classical music are among her best-loved hobbies.

The shape of Flygelise, or Elise, is also highly malleable. The Grand-PianoHeads (Flyygelipäät) are swiftly transformed by Nelimarkka's pen into musicians, into Madonnas, and on into a choir of sweet little angels, each with a large heart-shaped head and a small heart-shaped mouth. Could a symbol of the love between mother and child be any more succinct?

In her recent works Nelimarkka is otherwise revealed to be a skilled deployer of visual symbols. The hearts, stars, chess pieces, musical instruments and other details that recur in her works are a visual shorthand, readable and accessible at the speed of light. The origin of these symbols presumably lies in visual art and, conversely, in comic strips and in the artist's experience with animated film.

In one red-hued rya rug the familiar Flyygelipäät have unexpectedly been transformed into water-lily pads, that is, unless they are heart-shaped Turkish-delights. At any rate, the work seems to be saying, "Happy Valentine's Day".

My own favourites in Nelimarkka's symbolic language are linked with the ingenious way she resolves formal questions related to the lighting of the picture space. Often, the issue is handled with an uncomplicatedly pear or Chinese-straw-hat-shaped splotch of colour, which the eye instantly reads as a light. The amount of light is not reduced, even though the rays emanating from the bulb in the top corner of the work are dark blue or brown.

The actual picture space in Nelimarkka's works frequently looks like a room with the wall on the viewer's side removed. The larger-scale works can have several rooms. This solution is reminiscent of the enigmatic, allusive tales in Indian miniatures, but also of the novel that Georges Perec has planned, which is to be set specifically in one such façadeless building. Perec's idea is that the reader will thus be able to follow the progress of simultaneous events in the different rooms. We can do this in Nelimarkka's works.

Art never emerges out of a vacuum. Behind each image there are always other images, and it is precisely this that makes communication possible. That is why the image is capable of speaking to us, even though it does not speak of other images. This is a matter of recognition, of something like a language: I recognise the image and what the image implies specifically because I have seen other images. (Some semioticians would indeed want to put the question the other way round. They say that images recognise us.)

When our discussion turns to the pictures, Nelimarkka does not talk about Africa, but tells me about her early trips to the museums of continental Europe. She likes to remember the early masters of modernism: Henri Matisse's impressive paper cut-outs, Joan Miró's playful figures... The list could easily go on. Nelimarkka does not conceal her influences, since she has already long ago absorbed what she has found to make it a part of her own expression. From the spectator's viewpoint, recognising a reference or quotation is purely a delight and enriches the viewing experience.

Nevertheless, at the top of the list Nelimarkka puts Henry Moore, perhaps even surprisingly—after all, Moore executed the larger part of his production by casting it in heavy bronze. But, on the other hand, no, there would not be room for even a single dead spot in the archaic, organic art of this artist that Herbert Read described as a vitalist. Nor is there room for that sort of thing in Nelimarkka's works, since every square centimetre, right down to the narrowest wedges in the margins, is subordinate to the expression.

Recently, she also appears to have become interested in Robert and Sonya Delaunay's prismatic form language based on pure rainbow colours. The variations of the colour circle in the rya rugs and tapestries—which Nelimarkka also likes to place on the floor—has, after a long hiatus, tempted her closer to abstract expression. The artist herself laughs at my interpretations and talks about “Excel cakes”. It takes me a moment before I realise that she means the pie charts familiar from the business press and statistics.

Despite the changeability and profusion of the influences, one, and a personal one, seems to endure: “My father would never succumb to wearing black shoes,” Nelimarkka says. “He was constantly reminding me about the diversity of the world. So why should I follow in existing footsteps?”

Nelimarkka's art is cheerful and sunny, often much sunnier than we know life actually is. A closer look does reveal darker tones and fractured furrows, which are constantly present and shine through from beneath the lucent colour surfaces. “I am an idealist, and I don't want to give in,” Nelimarkka says. “Pain exists, but you don't have to work on everything through pain.”

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