

Question Love Answer

On Niina Lehtonen Braun's art

A room full of answers and boxes full of spells. A word on each box to help you remember and fill the boxes. Words to unlock your memories. Words that let us share knots entangling a memory, an emotion and a thing: things, scent, landscapes, alcohol, songs, creatures, Jesus, situations, vegetables, scarves, places. In the boxes you can sometimes leave answers to charming questions, and it is then very likely you already gave an answer. Being charming is a practice for exploring subjectivities. Asking questions is a way to find truth. The weird thing, which you will quickly notice, is that there is no trick nor trap. You won't ever be blamed once exposed. There is no morality to hit you once naked. You can feel free and you can be free to feel how it feels to feel.

This exhibition is an opera engaging multiple means and instruments. It's an operating place where acknowledging emotional conditions shall bring relief, maybe even courage and comfort. Niina said because everything is so absurd; Because loved ones can be so down that they destroy everything, so they can't owe a thing to anybody. And it doesn't need to be this way. Niina refuses this, works against it, revolt: with art and with confidence. Anger becomes resistance. Happiness a rebellion: "Happiness is not something of the intellectual mind, but of the corporeal mind, of the emotion that opens the body to a caress. Neither faith nor hope, but charity, to say it in a style that is not mine. It is not the desperate consciousness that makes us unhappy, but the depressing effect that it has on our empathetic body. Social suffering turns itself into depression when it dulls the capacity of being caressed. And the openness of receiving a caress is not only the condition for individual happiness, but also that of rebellion, of collective autonomy and of emancipation from the salaried work." (Bifo, 'How do we explain depression to ourselves?'). In times where debts have become the evil per se, where everyone is an austere accountant of his life, acknowledging to whom and what you owe the meaning of your life is a risky operation, a moment of nakedness and shameful truth. This show is a place where you can do that. The artist is giving relief to herself and everyone that comes and sees. At openings the artist will be next to you, and make you a co-author of the show. The show will open your body to a caress.

The show will portray you, will portray Niina, Leonard, Marnie, Tuomas, Kirsi, you, me... Portraits of people are anyway hanging all over, and you may recognize your own inner states. Lived situations. Lived emotions. There is never an emotion alone. They are not surgically pinned down for a curiosity cabinet. There is always a story, a context, a reality. Emotions are not lived in a conceptual space. Take a look at the spaces in which they are summoned: what started on thin ruled filofax paper, inherent to self administration, derived to great open spaces beyond any euclidian reason. I mean it: take a close and attentive look at the bigger watercolor paintings. Figure these spaces. The spaces in which the figures, the objects, the words are dwelling. They remind me of the spiritual spaces in which Gauguin's figures are dwelling, where the real and the now is contaminated and blurred by the unspoken, unexplicit reality of memories and traumas that spontaneously affect daily life and disrupt our sense of autonomy. We're emotional bums and this is a space where one can become emotionally intelligent, where the complex interplay of emotions and reality becomes intelligible.

And the painter explores recklessly these unfathomable spaces. The paintings are snapshots from these journeys, relieving postcards sent us from ~~uneasy~~, ~~cheesy~~, ~~naive~~, ~~sad~~, ~~fragile~~, ~~shameful~~, ~~evil~~, ~~foolish~~ situations we all went through over the course of life. It's an art of redemption that dwells in the artist's practice. All along the way the work confronts many christian values (love, redemption, guilt, forgiveness, compassion, humility, shame, passion, mercy, gratefulness), and in many works one can read how entangled these values are in daily situations. It appears that there can't be a clear line that drawn between values and actions, which makes it simply impossible to turn away from

that cultural heritage. The artist's attitude isn't one of critical bravery, engaging in a distant analysis. It is one of exploring the ongoing composition of these values with one's life in society. Rather than looking for an ablation, it is about observing how that meaning-making organ operates; rather than displaying atheism, she looked at how she believes. Believing is a practice. And found out that she believes by believing in meaning.

Thus, every depicted situation becomes a kind of icon, and there is a parallel between Lehtonen's shows and the richly decorated orthodox, and also formerly, catholic churches. But while all want to celebrate life and the wish of living together, the churches draw their beliefs from a single book from unquestionable and transcendent origin, whereas the material on which the painter's iconography is based are the stories you told her, thus an immanent source of truth. Because in response to her questions, any answer is true. Every answer is a testimonial of a personal experience gifted, shared to her. Every answer is a bump in the course of our lives. Every answer becomes a source of belief. "There is in Christianity a germ of quiet atheism which will feed painting: the painter can easily get indifferent to the religious subject he's in charge to represent. [...] Modern painting starts when man lives itself no more as an essence, but rather as an accident. There is always a fall, the risk of a fall; the form begins to tell the accident, no more the essence" (Gilles Deleuze, 'Francis Bacon, The Logic of Sensation'). The artist's original question fades away, blurs towards a more general sense for the space in which that question lives, an abstract realm of meaning and sensation.

To obtain her endless nuances and shades, the painter corrupts the watercolor planes with inks, acryl, gouaches. Combined with the sharpness of photography collages, text and figures dwell like stones and glass splitters on the grounds of a limitless marsh, eroding or sharpening, getting covered and reemerging sometimes later. The painter handles her material not like an archive she'd want to control. She talks about compost. And listening to this, one cannot get around the deep and sweet irony that exudes from many single pieces, ripping any fake feeling into pieces, exposing any indulgence with a hearty laughter. This irony keeps every single truth real, anchoring the feelings in our bodies, while every answer becomes more open, merges with another, until the wall becomes that universe of accidents we are, we share and we question.

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