

ESSI KUOKKANEN

Shapeshifter Dreaming

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galerie anhava

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Essi Kuokkanen's works in the exhibition *Shapeshifter Dreaming* give form to unspoken yet vivid thoughts and feelings that hover on the borderline of sleep. Everything is connected, boundaries between species become fluid, the inanimate becomes alive and living creatures break apart. What matters are the interrelationships (what we provide others, who eats whom) and the freedom to become something else.

Kuokkanen is interested in the physicality of emotion – how events in the mind create a physical reaction in the body. The figures in her paintings and drawings are like reservoirs filled with feeling, occasionally spilling, oozing or overflowing uncontrollably. Hands sweat, eyes water and shame has a slimy feel to it. Transparency is the simultaneous fear *and* desire to be seen as you are. And if you're not quite sure about your feelings, you can always wear a mood ring.

The new paintings are dark and luscious. Landscapes stretching out in the background are frozen, open, desolate and possibly dystopian. The images pulsate with nervous energy and a mysterious nocturnal glow. There is a strong sense of the body and materiality. A figure gobbles up soil in order to sprout, while another is weighed down by gloves of stone. Stomachs churn with milk and worms. The glass animals are endowed with a poignant sense of fragility. Whereas human and animal figures soar into the heavens in the dream-like paintings of **Marc Chagall** (1887–1985), the figures in Kuokkanen's works turn into earth, slime and bone. One particularly concrete expression of this is *Shithead*, in which beetles are shown rolling the very stuff itself – humanity, life, the universe.

Determined, mischievous and sensitive, Kuokkanen's shrewd brush investigates and illustrates the contradictions, hypocrisies and distortions of our world, and also humankind who, being unable to face up to its actions, curls up even deeper into itself. Perhaps we will wake one morning as monstrous vermin, just as in **Franz Kafka's** novella *The Metamorphosis*. But instead of cynicism or condemnation, there is compassion and gentleness in Kuokkanen's gaze. The actions of the figures in her works often stem from good intentions, ultimately (and perhaps accidentally) causing chaos: someone throws their own arm for dogs to fetch; a gesture with a tennis racket, meant as a caress, becomes a slap; and even a vegetal vehicle leaves a trail of destruction.

Essi Kuokkanen (b. 1991, Pieksämäki) lives and works in Helsinki. This is her second solo exhibition at Galerie Anhava. Kuokkanen has shown her work in several solo and group exhibitions, most recently at the international ARS22 show of contemporary art in the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma. Kuokkanen has work in numerous major collections, including those of the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation, the Finnish State Art Commission, the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma and the Saastamoinen Foundation, as well as in many private collections in Finland and the Nordic countries. In 2019 Kuokkanen received the Finnish Art Society's Ducat Prize.

– Oona Latto