

Jussi Niva and Anita Seppä. Conversation at Niva's studio in Berlin on 23 November 2015

Anita Seppä: Your *Mime* series is a kind of invitation to a dance that wants to draw the viewer into motion to search for the right viewing angle or approach. It is a frequent experience when viewing your works. What is the position of the *Mime* series relative to your earlier work?

Jussi Niva: These new pieces actually have a direct connection with my earlier work. I need a sense of continuum; it helps me retain precision of language in my new works. In the *Foldaway* (2013–2014) series, for example, I tried to lay a heavy emphasis on the surface of the paintings, yet the brushwork created a powerful three-dimensional sense of stacked surfaces or contrarily turning directions.

Mime, however, represents a departure from my earlier work in that from the outset I began constructing small 3D models of some of the works, and they seemed interesting to me right from the get go. I wanted to detach the experience of three-dimensionality from the 'modelled form' and link it instead to the surface of the painting. The three-dimensional works are interventions of sorts, they thrust into the space but conversely they also project space. The experience of being in motion is crucial in these works. The title of the series, *Mime*, is a specific reference to this level of experience.

Over a longer time span, my desire to activate the viewer with a three-dimensional spatial experience can be traced back to my painting installations of the 1990s. Even back then I was interested in a platform of presentation that would be broader than traditional painting; a frontal work hung on a wall no longer seemed enough. I created a few installations, such as *Borrowed Landscape* (1993) and *I Spy* (1994), in which the painting was an organic part of the setting and the temporal situation. The viewer had to become enmeshed with the work, and the division between viewer-subject and work-object began to dissolve. In this process, viewers were positioned in a new way, within an alternating movement between distance and proximity that allowed them to reflect upon their own physical and mental existence.

These observations also opened up new perspectives on painting for me. I understood that the typical figurativeness of painting is both surface and an experience of spatiality at the same time, and the distinction between figurative and abstract is not decisive: everything is actually part of a movable process of experience. A painting for me is simply a way to activate the viewing situation and the painterly narrative is the act of recording that event.

I was thinking about my earlier installations quite a bit when I was working on the *Mime* series, because three-dimensionality has reappeared as a device in my work. I recognise similar cycles from my earlier work from time to time. In these works, three-dimensionality functions differently from that in my earlier work.

AS: You generally work with series – what does seriality mean to you?

JN: I do have a habit of classifying works completed within a certain period as series. However, seriality as such, or repetition as the process of deconstructing the meaning of a motif, are not important to me. But serialisation may have to do with ordering, perhaps even with archiving. I want to maintain a continuum, a linguistic connection between my works, whatever the term 'linguistic' may signify in the individual series. The linguistic cannot really be pinpointed inside any individual works, as it were. Instead, it becomes manifest in the relationships between the works, in the differences between individual works and in the shapes of the series.

AS: The works in the *Mime* series remind me at times of cubism, particularly the early monochromatic work of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, in which the two and three-dimensional planes merge to construct a new spatial experience. Were such art historical references important to you when you were making the *Mime* series?

JN: My way of breaking down the structure of space into planes and employing several different perspectives in the same space can of course be associated with cubism. Like the cubists, I disrupt the pictorial space built on a linear one-point perspective to make something previously unseen visible; I offer viewer-subjects an opportunity to situate themselves more individually within the space-time around the work. The pale brown colour in the *Mime* series can also be associated with the material world of wood and paperboard in synthetic cubism. Such references are not conscious or predecided, however. Just like pictorial devices sometimes re-emerge cyclically from my own work, so references may intuitively be assimilated from art history that then define the process.

I am currently painting two-dimensional surfaces and three-dimensional objects in parallel. Paradoxically, I have noticed that I work with them in opposite directions spatially. I construct two-dimensional works by painting a volume or by piercing the surface. When I paint three-dimensional pieces, I do it optically against a wall. I also personally associate this method with reliefs and the experience of depth in them.

AS: I wanted to ask about the special pale brown colour in *Mime*. It gives rise to intense sensory experiences and seems at times to invite the viewer to enter the crevices or 'bosoms' opened up by the painting. And the next moment the surface of some other painting of yours may be freezing cold and repulse the viewer. How did you come up with such a palette?

JN: My primary aim with colours is to create spatial contrasts. The black I use is a mixture of dark violet and dark brown which, in a three-dimensional work in particular, begins to acquire spatial meanings. As a contrast to this experience, I use bright, compact surfaces. The pale brown colour is also a distinct world of spatial narrative. I deliberately try to link its many tones to three-dimensionality.

The pale brown colour is in fact one of the key determinants of the *Mime* series. The tints of brown that I use are super-sensitive. They are remembered through the sense of touch. I have talked about this colour with many of my colleagues and many of them have asked me what material I use for the brown surfaces. The sensory impact of my brown is so powerful that the colour is often not regarded as paint at all. It is perceived as skin, wood, a cosmetic surface, and so on.

AS: The way you address two and three-dimensionality often seems to draw the viewer in towards the works, yet at the same time the unexpected deflections of the gaze, the fractures, sharp angles and breaks also seem to prevent ingress or close the work off. Aesthetic experiences engendered by your works are disturbances of sorts, they are paradoxes, cacophonous time-spaces or irregularities of rhythm.

JN: Your view of the works simultaneous pulling and repulsing the viewer-subject is quite correct. The surfaces in my work do indeed break up and search for direction. For me, the sharp angles are above all points where the surface of the painting makes a turn, disrupting its frontality, which immediately makes the work more interesting. Viewers find themselves in a danger zone or embroiled in something that exists independently of them.

The eventfulness in my works is generally not logical; I am interested in seemingly impossible spatiality. I construct spatial paradoxes into my works, surfaces of collision or friction that seem to lead to a destination. The situation is a bit similar to groping one's way blindly in a new environment.

AS: Does this aesthetic disruption or search for unexpected experiential turning points also involve a social issue for you? Some sort of aesthetic anarchism?

JN: I like the idea of aesthetic anarchism, but I have no wish to promote some clear message or make myself heard. I do not believe in intact narratives. The anarchism in my works is more of a search for a counterbalance to everyday apathy or uninterestingness. I search for challenges and try to disrupt existing assumptions.

AS: Perhaps the anarchy in your work is primarily of form or language. Your paintings refuse to become objects, as it were. They are like endless processes of looking or leading the eye astray, they require one to surrender to the work, otherwise nothing will happen.

JN: That's right, an active process of perception is much more important than what these works look like. In the case of the three-dimensional works, I must of course consider the issue of plasticity. But I do not want the plasticity to be classical, it too must be disrupted in some way. Instead of constructing interesting forms, I decompose structures of space-time into images, offering the viewer surfaces for identification, the experience of which goes beyond the traditional perspectival illusion.

AS: The form language and palette you use to construct the *Mime* series are minimalistically compressed and the range of devices carefully defined. I am fascinated by the sense that this sparsity seems to build up into a systematic, almost geometric order – yet without being systematic or mathematic. The level of knowledge or experience that guides the viewer of your works is ultimately always intuition or inorganicity. That is a very special combination.

JN: At first sight it does in fact seem like there are almost no devices, yet if you surrender to the work you'll notice that devices do in fact exist. I do plan and reflect quite a lot on my works, and I hone their plasticity over a very long time. The alterations or variations of repetition are also carefully devised.

I need geometry for some reason. But my geometry is of a kind of cut-and-fold type. Dividing a plane into ever-smaller parts will always involve geometry or mathematics. But I have no interest in systematising the principles of spatial division. I am interested in intuitive progress instead. At the same time, I am very careful to keep the level of experience moving. Many people say that I am a sharp painter, that I have a stringent aesthetic. For me the important thing is that the logic of the works is sharp, the logic that makes things visible.

AS: The spatio-pictorial illusion, such as a realistic painting or a pictorial space built on a linear perspective, typically positions the viewer so that they find it relatively easy to maintain a fixed subject position from which to interpret the work, and make it into an object of the gaze. By contrast, an immersive experience or knowledge activates our entire physical sensory-perceptual being and blurs the boundary between the subject and the object. For me, the interpretation of your work revolves precisely around this difficult-to-verbalise level of knowledge or experience. The movement goes on and on.

JN: Precisely. There is no point of painterly knowledge or control! The spatial experience of my work cannot be fixed to any single cognitive or experiential point. Instead, the works in the *Mime* series are loaded with elements that lead to fracture, such as acute angles where the surface of the painting takes a surprising turn. I also deliberately use a forceful stroke technique to give the planes a spatial direction and an accelerating motion. Often, however, this conflicts with the three-dimensionality. I am intrigued by such disturbances, violation or intervention.

AS: What about other art forms? The powerful sense of movement in your work often reminds me of the moving image or modern experimental music. Even sometimes of cacophony or disharmony, or surprising variations of a fast tempo and rhythm.

JN: I have actually named some of my works after musical associations. My works are built upon a kind of repetition or rhythm. I use the idea of tempo and rhythm in many ways. It is not so much seriality as the manifestation of change and variation. The temporal aspect of rhythm is revealed by disturbances of repetition. A regular rhythm is associated with an endless time axis. If there are events in my work, they consist of acceleration and disruption.

The other media of visual art are not particularly topical for me right now; I used to be much more interested in them. I have worked a bit with the moving image and photography, and I have used moving image projection techniques in my work. But my primary identity is that of a painter. Even at times when I have constructed my works with the aid of photography, I have seen myself a painter. You could also say that my paintings carry the other media inside them. For example, when I am taking photographs, I might be thinking that it enables me to manipulate colour with light,

and so on.

AS: The title of your series, *Mime*, recalls the Greek word *mimesis*, which originally referred to the truthful or faithful imitation of nature in art. In the mid-20th century, the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno partially redefined the concept of mimesis in a way that I think is an apt description of some of the core aspirations in your *Mime* series. One of Adorno's key assertions was that art remains faithful to reality only when it refuses to turn nature into figurative images, to name reality on the principle of 'a word corresponds to its signifier'. According to Adorno, our mimetic ability operates instead under the structure of images or the language that objectifies reality, it is a kind of mute force that enables us to identify with various 'others' – animals, other people and nature. Such a perception must surely also incorporate the body, intuition and emotions. This conception of mimesis is no longer faithful imitation or copying of nature, but a process of continuously prioritising the 'other' in a way that undermines our own self and also makes us slightly different at every moment – because we are changed by the *constant priority of the object*. For Adorno, this mimetic refusal of direct representation signifies the consummation of modern art. He also describes his view of mimesis by asserting that the expression of an artwork is 'the nonsubjective in the subject, not so much that subject's expression as its copy'.

How do you look at your own works – and is such a notion of mimesis disrupting the boundaries between subject and object meaningful in connection with the *Mime* series?

JN: I feel that I am simultaneously both the maker and the viewer of my works. In that sense, too, the motion in my works is not one-way. I always work on several pieces in parallel, and I spend a lot of time just reflecting on the problem of their inherent space-time. I try to create interferences in my paintings by inserting conflicting impulses and disruptions, to prevent the establishment of a single vantage point – it slips from your grasp and escapes to a further place or to the next moment. Much of my practice is participatory in the sense that I am the viewer. I can easily see what you refer to happening in those moments when I realise that the work I am about to complete is no longer a readable picture to me, when the unpredictable impulses and prompts within me start to become part of my understanding of the work. The work begins to move me in pace with its turns.