

SAMULI HEIMONEN

ARMI THANKS YOU

We used to have two dogs: Hilppa, still a puppy, and Armi, an old friend who saw all kinds of adventures with us. Armi joined our family when my wife and I were studying in Helsinki. We brought her to her new home in Espoo by train from Riihimäki, tucked inside a coat.

At the age of ten, Armi developed a rapidly progressing illness. We were devastated to hear there was no cure. Two vets gave a clear verdict after just looking at Armi: there was nothing to be done. If we wanted to save her from excessive suffering, we had to act fast. It was a matter of days, or a single day.

We decided to put Armi to sleep. On Monday morning, the whole family – myself, my wife and our 18-month-old son – went to the vet to do our final, sad duty. Even in the final moments we were panic-stricken, fearing our decision was not the right thing to do after all. We could wait for another day, or a week at best. But there was no turning back.

When you make a decision to end a life and justify it to yourself by its being the only correct solution, you are left with a nagging feeling of doubt. Did I do the right thing; had I paid attention soon enough; was this a necessary thing to do just now? And of course we missed Armi sorely. In a few weeks, our son said something peculiar. Apart from some individual words, he had not spoken yet. But now we heard him say this twice: Armi thanks, Armi thanks. Somehow this incident helped us stop wallowing and gave us peace.

Later, I made a small painting based on the sentence.

Kangasniemi, 27 April 2010

FACING THE IMPOSSIBLE

Many of my paintings feature the theme of being faced by something bigger than yourself. To me, the key experience in art is to face the impossible. How can I deal with something that defies comprehension and how do you create images of something you cannot understand or articulate? When you cannot fully grasp something you see or experience, you feel fear and danger. But simultaneously, the fear may be mixed with interest and attraction. This experience threatens everything you have regarded as true and certain.

To me, the key point in this is the border; the experience of the existence of a border. It is a border that cannot be crossed but can be approached and explored. In my images, I try to grasp the border through metaphors.

To me, the border means many things. First of all, it is the border of comprehension. When that border is being faced, the human being in my images is reduced to a tiny figure. The tiny people are part of a whole, the dimensions of which they may experience as unfamiliar, but which the viewer can comprehend as buildings or animal figures. Many systems – such as political or financial systems – are impossible to control and sometimes difficult to understand fully. Even though they are made by us humans, we are sometimes subordinate to them.

Another issue we are dealing with here is our limitedness. Every human being knows they will die, aware of the limited nature of their personal time. This demarcation process motivates us to a range of different actions and reflections. How should we live our lives; how should we approach the necessity of death? In the end, life receives its meaning from the presence of death. Death is a border that is impossible to understand. Yet we have to face it in some way or another in order to be able to go on with our lives.

The experience of sacredness is an important undercurrent in my paintings. Encountering a border is quintessential in this experience. Instead of approaching sacredness as a phenomenon associated only with religion, I understand it as something that can be experienced anywhere in our daily lives. To me, it means a sudden extension and ascension of the horizon. Not that you should leave the everyday level behind, but instead identify meaning and relevance in the everyday.

It is important to acknowledge that, in spite of all our knowledge, there are shadow regions in the world that cannot be fully explained. We find these regions in other human beings as well as in nature. Although they are beyond explanation, they can be experienced. To me, it is an important insight to accept that no matter how much you do research, some issues remain mysteries.

What I am looking for is an angle of the human being which recognises us all as equal and similar. Although life is often marked by inequality between people, there are some things in the face of which we are genuinely equal. Death is one of them. Our relationship to death and the hereafter unites us, because it is clear that the finality of death touches us all with a similar gravity. It reveals our smallness and powerlessness in the acutest manner. I want to explore how this border electrifies all life.

FATE

My images contain many things that I did not originally mean to import to them. To me, this means that you cannot fully plan or calculate your own paintings. Of course, you have to have a preliminary idea of the image, but not a finalised plan of the outcome. In the end, this is indeed a motivation for painting: the final image always takes its author by surprise. It becomes more than you could ever have designed in advance. In the process, the image captures something that you cannot fully control.

Many of my paintings are based on sketches that I create wherever I go. Some of them I plan a long time before I feel ready to actually paint them. On the other hand, there are images that emerge without planning, as if on the spur of the moment. These images are derived from my other paintings, commenting on and complementing them. I myself only understand the meaning and content of the spur-of-the-moment pictures after finishing the entire series of paintings. The whole meaning and direction of the process of painting is best revealed in paintings that I have not designed beforehand.

As their author, I feel as if I have not painted these myself at all: they have just emerged via me. I create paintings that I would like to see and experience myself. I am the first viewer of my own paintings, and it is important that they move me. If they have an effect on me, they might have an

effect on other people as well. Painting is to explore the actual doing and the subject, but also yourself. At its best, this aspect of painting makes it very rewarding. For the artist, it can harmonise and organise unfinished issues.

I also want to show others what I have found during my expeditions. My painting is strongly motivated by a wish to share my insights with others. This is essential in all art. Art only fully takes place when the meanings thus discovered are shared with others. The emphasis is as much on doing as it is on sharing. The wish to share your own truth with others is somehow universal. Only with another person can I actually be of some opinion and encounter agreement or disagreement.

To me, there is something fateful in the work of an artist: as if my path had been chosen for me in advance. Although I have the freedom to paint whatever I want, I only use it to a very narrow extent. No matter where I start from, I inevitably end up dealing with issues that are dear, difficult or somehow significant to me. I cannot escape my nature. Despite the detours I make, the process of painting always brings me back on track. The themes and subjects of painting can only truly change if I change as a person. Witnessing this change in a long cycle is what I find most interesting. It does not necessarily involve becoming “better” or “improving”, but giving something up. By this I mean the gradual disappearance of all external limitations. The cliché of “becoming yourself” is insightful, in spite of its baggage.

In this sense, the artist can never be trendy, unless by pure chance. Somehow the artists who year after year tread their own paths are the most interesting ones.

We can speak and communicate about everything that images deal with. To me, the image is more important than speaking or writing, because it crystallises several layers into a single moment, into a single image. Speech and text are always read in the context of narration constructed by the author. In an image, the narration is more subtle, and it is not read through at a certain pace. The image throws it all at you at once. I like the fact that we must face an image so that it fills our minds, uncontrolled. We never understand everything we see at once, and there is no need to. Depending on the image, the content unfolds in very different ways. The unfolding of the content to the viewer could be compared to reading an aphorism: all the meanings are packed into a compact, often metaphorical form. A plethora of meanings are bundled into a short sentence. Not all dimensions open up on first reading, but unfold at their own pace. But you have

to swallow the sentence or the image as a whole, as one piece. That is what makes it special. You only examine the contents and effect after consuming the image.

ANIMAL

When I used to make images of ships, trains and aeroplanes, I sometimes noticed how they were distantly reminiscent of animal figures. I avoided emphasising this in the images, because I was under the impression that “animal art” was boring. It seemed that there was such a wealth of emotions associated with animals that I found it hard to tackle the theme.

The mere subject rarely dictates the interpretation of the work of art. The manner of approach and context influence interpretation more. I started to paint animals, dogs at first, in the same way I painted trains. The funny thing was that they seemed to signify the same thing as trains, only from a different angle. I was still looking for a feeling of something greater than man, but now through animals. The animal figures imported to the images an ancient layer of the connection and the differences between humans and animals.

With regard to boats and ships, there was an archaeological undercurrent. They had been dug out of the ground, reminding us of something lost and decomposed. Yet their purpose in my painting was to remind people of something. Not an exact recollection, but a strangely familiar feeling: like the sudden return of a memory or a dream.

In my paintings, animals seem to play exactly the same role. They remind us of our origins. Animistic religions often involve the idea of the origin of a tribe or a village as deriving from a local animal. This animal is sacred to the community, because it reminds the people of their origins. There are seldom any religious meanings linked to nature and animals these days. The scientific world view has reduced nature to a system. The unscrupulous abuse of nature to satisfy our needs has reached a worrying scale. We have harnessed everything in nature for our own use. Perhaps this is why I, in my paintings, like to toy with the idea of nature still being the great unknown before which man is powerless.

Animals are in many ways interestingly comparable to human beings. Instead of providing a complete opposite, they provide a complement. They are something other than we, but

nevertheless inevitably similar in many issues. When we look at animals, is it our own archaic origins we see, or a lost connection to nature?

I am also intrigued by the way in which animals are anthropomorphised. In animals, we see something that does not belong there: our own problems, wishes or fears. Animals are like screens onto which we project various images. Of course, we do the same to other things as well; other people for instance. People only see their own selves in the mirror. In anthropomorphism, the actual object is replaced by another set image. Reality is a mixture of what really exists and what we want to see there, for one reason or another.

ASKING

One of the goals of an author of images is to create an original idiom. You do not want to merely refer to existing meanings and apply conventional methods, but to create your own set of symbols and techniques. It is not enough that everything has already been said once. In art, you can say things again, more sharply, with more originality and topicality. So you have to invent the wheel again every day. Ultimately, perfect originality requires its own vocabulary and language, to avoid the risk of being lost in translation. All meanings and symbols are in a constant state of change. Through their own art, artists hone, sharpen and test them.

Between man and the world, we need an interpretation: images and words. They focus, fuse, reduce and signify the world to human beings. To me, one of the meanings of painting lies in the fact that there is at least one section of my life where I can strip, control and deal with variables one at a time. There is a divine feeling of seizing and shaping involved in this process. In order to understand the world, you turn it into an image.

To me, it is important that my images are viewed and that they attract people. When the viewer succumbs to viewing the image, the content can emerge. I try to make the viewer feel comfortable with the image, in order to be able to say something. Instead of depicting how things are, I depict the way in which they are experienced as true.

In art, the most important issue is the depth movement. Sometimes you get the impression that contemporary art is difficult and that good art should indeed be difficult to understand. To me, the

axis of easy-difficult is not essential in the assessment of quality in art. The only thing that matters is the effect in depth: how art touches you and whether it manages to create a fruitful link between the thoughts of the viewer, the viewer's personal history and the work of art.

Asking is more important than answering. It is very difficult and time-consuming to formulate a good question. The duty of art is to challenge the viewer to active reflection. Sharing your own opinions as an artist is simply not enough, mere answers are not enough. But the right kinds of questions lead you to the unknown, providing kindling or a fresh angle. Sometimes the viewer is kindled, sometimes not. It is enough that one person responds.

Translation Laura Mänki

Copyright Samuli Heimonen

This text is a translation of a text that was published in a book *Armi Kiittää* by Samuli Heimonen.

Kustannus oy Taide

Helsinki 2010

ISBN 978-951-608-085-0