

MARIA SANN

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In the middle of the room stands a house. So not in the usual way of the room being inside the house, but vice versa: Maria Sann's exhibit centres around a book that is simultaneously a miniature of a building. The digitally created illustrations lace play with sorrow. The graphic look cries about the impossibility of encounter. The whole is complex with multiple layers, as are Maria's roots.

I was born in 1982 in what was then the Soviet Union, and I spent my first ten years of life in a suburb of Moscow. As a child I felt I was just like anyone else my age.

Until everything changed. After the failure of Perestroika came the fall of the Soviet Union, dropping value of money, increasing crime and the wars in Chechnya. Maria's parents began to think about other options for their family. The move to Maria's fathers place of birth, Helsinki, is now 30 years in the past. In Finland Maria had to face the prejudices directed at immigrants. Being called a Russky was everyday racism that could also be dressed up as a compliment: "You're pretty nice, for a Russian." Maria happily internalised the family's Fenno-Swedish roots, even though stereotypes also existed about this minority. Her white skin masked her foreign descent, but the experience of being an outsider remained.

I remember how Maria Sann participated in a group exhibit at Galleria Kuvitus in the late winter of 2022. Maria's piece was a hazily pink view of a park. "I identify as a city person and I love beautiful, well-groomed parks", she described her premise for the piece. She had just received an art grant that allowed her to reacquaint herself with her city of birth.

Then the war began.

References:

Kajaste, Helmi: Rakenna, kärsi ja unhoita [Build, Suffer and Forget]. Kosmos 2020.

Römpötti, Harri: Paluu Moskovaan [Return to Moscow]. Helsingin Sanomat 18.2.2022.

Perec, Georges: Tiloja / Avaruuksia [Species of Spaces]. Loki-Kirjat 1992.

Sann, Maria: Toiseuden kokemuksia Suomessa ja Venäjällä [Feelings of Otherness in Finland and Russia Onnimanni 4/2022. Lastenkirjainstituutti.

Known for her insightful graphic illustrations, Maria Sann graduated as Master of Arts (Art and Design) from Aalto University in 2018 and has illustrated six books. She is the recipient of the 2021 Rudolf Koivu Prize and the 2022 Most Beautiful Books of the Year Award.

mariasann.com

Attitudes towards Russia and Russians changed in an instant, and hostile comments on online forums were a repeat of Maria's childhood experiences. Russian artists were no longer allowed to enter Finland. Their wings had been clipped. However, as a Finland Swedish illustrator, Maria Sann could freely travel to Russia.

The expedition to her childhood scenery and inner child both tore her down and built her up. Maria described her feelings after the journey as follows: "It was a wild step to take, to go to a country boycotted by the whole world. But now, as an adult, I know what I am responsible for – and what I am not. I condemn the war, but I was born in Russia, and it is not something to be ashamed of." (HS 18.12.2022) In Moscow, Maria also visited the Berrywater festival for children's book illustrators and listened to Innokentij Kelejnikov's lecture that approached the concept of book from an architectural perspective.

In the black and white illustration on the wall, Maria leans in to peek inside her old home. She is like Alice who has grown too big in the Wonderland. As the architect and musician Helmi Kajaste writes: "It is impossible, however, to the return to the rooms of our childhood. They were located in our childhood." Similarly, the subject of this exhibit is not the building per se, but what and who are on the outside or inside of it. Sann's world of pictures forces the viewer to ponder the interior and the exterior: what is outside of us, who do we want to invite in, and who do we want to leave outside.

"Borders are lines. Millions of people have died for these lines", writes Georges Perec. With her own lines, Maria Sann builds connections and dialogue. A train swooshes past power lines. Sensitivity and strength travel side by side.

– Veera Pekkinen, Curator

