

Artist and curator in conversation: Heidi Lampenius & Mika Hannula

GROUND COLOR

November 22 – December 21, 2024

Mika Hannula: A new exhibition and clearly, obviously, a new opening, a new path. Where did this process start for you?

Heidi Lampenius: After my last exhibition *Earthbound*, I felt that I wanted to explore nature in a more concrete way and deepen the experience of grounding in the works. I wanted to simplify the way I paint but also go back to the basics of painting, such as color theory, and what color is - not in the sense of wavelengths, which I have dealt with before, but as tangible material.

At my summer cottage, on an island, I do all kinds of experiments and find inspiration in them. One of these experiments was digging up clay and molding it. This started the path that has led us to this exhibition. A lot of interesting things have happened along the way. For example, I have taken a course in paint making for restorers of log houses, familiarized myself with fresco painting technique, and learned to meditate by molding Japanese *dorodango* clay balls.

MH: In relation to the arcs of your previous exhibitions, what has changed, what has stayed the same in the continuum of your artistic work?

HL: In these works, there is a clear continuum in exploring our relationship with nature as well as the reflection on memory. In painting I have developed my own symbolic language based on natural history and the experience of nature.

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The change is in the material, the color scheme and the shapes. They form a slightly different language and perspective on the things that interest me. Although the shapes seen in these works are angular, there is a kind of softness to them.

While going back to basics, I also went back to a very distant time in history. Clay paint is a very layered material historically and thus a multilayered subject. Stone that is turned into paint is the oldest painting material known to mankind. So, in a way, the colors of the paintings lead me on a walk through a landscape of peatland, fields and bedrock. This, metaphorically, opens endless paths to travel on.

MH: The materials in the exhibition, as you have already mentioned, are centered on clay and the colors of the earth. What have been the surprises, the particularities of these material choices? What are the characteristics of these materials?

HL: It has taken me a while to practice painting with this material that is new to me. I have tried different recipes and different types of clay, different bases and brushes, talked to art conservators. At times the clay has caked, and it has required quite a lot of trust and belief that I am working with something meaningful. The fact that I chose to use these colors probably also reflects a growing awareness of ecological issues in the art community.

Clay as a material is steeped in history: clays, ochres and earth and mineral pigments are localized in vast cycles of elements. Earth colors have strong, deeply rooted cultural and symbolic meanings, often magical, secret, but also practical. In thinking about all this, I move between very different scales, places and scales of knowledge. I have been surprised that different colors, or clays from different places, behave so differently when painted. Finnish grey is coarse, and yellow clay absorbs much more water and is thicker, while German red is very fine and spreads smoothly.

Clay has a mysterious property, because when wet it is a very different color, darker, and when dry it is almost pastel. During the process of preparing this exhibition, I have watched

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very closely how the paint dries. I also made the decision to use only earth pigments if I wanted darker colors. This way the color scale and philosophy behind the works remain consistent.

Now I walk on the earth a little differently thinking that the surface hides a secret pastel world underneath.

MH: A series of works called *Stairs* - what are we looking at when we look at these large, square works?

HL: My first thought about *Stairs* was that it's about direction. The idea of descending underground probably was in the back of my mind when I found this very clear format where using two colors and leaving bare canvas exposed creates a powerful image. The direction of the stairs also changes if you stare at them long enough, creating an optical illusion.

Somehow it was clear all along that there were four of these coming together, and that they would form a kind of circle as a result. I'm sure you can interpret anything you like from it from a psychological point of view. For me, this circular pattern represents security, continuity and harmony. After the series of works was completed, I saw a video describing the tradition in Scandinavian folklore of drawing a circle in the air with one's finger as a gesture of protecting a room from evil. I found this a fascinating embodied gesture that somehow in my mind connects to these paintings.

MH: So, it's about a means, an approach, that is close to you, about how you relate to your environment - a practice-oriented way of perceiving, of understanding being in the world. Let's ask, in a kind of deliberately silly way, what new things have you learned in the process, not so much about materials, but more broadly about the earth, its essence, mysteries, and even ecology, being with and in communion with nature?

HL: It's really a funny question, because in this process it has been the material, the earth, that has taught me. From the very beginning, my intention has been that concept, the content, and

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the materials are not separable, but support each other, rely on each other.

While digging up clay I have learned to identify where it is to be found and along the way I've also, accidentally, taught our dog Wilson to be a "clay dog". He digs with me and points with his nose where the clay is. He smells it and I am also entranced by the enticing scent of wet earth. There is a name for it, *petrichor*, which describes the strong smell after the rain. The word is formed from the ancient Greek words πέτρα (pétra) 'stone' or πέτρος (pétros) 'from stone' and ἰχώρ (ikhōr), 'ethereal liquid', which is the blood of the gods.

I don't know if I've found any mysteries. Maybe things have become somehow clearer. Mystery is strongly inscribed in this cycle. I look at rocks with a bit more interest. I've always felt safest when leaning my back against exposed bedrock and, still, it's one of the safest feelings. A lot of my thoughts have been revolving around time, again, and the visible and the invisible.

The fact that the soil is of a different color in different places and countries is of course logical, but now it has entered my consciousness in such a way that I think about it often.

MH: What about when we go back to the concrete and focus on the works that go by the name of *Color Chart*. What are these about - and what is it about these color charts that attracts and interests you?

HL: Since these colors were a whole new color scale for me, I started to organise them in some kind of systematic way. I made a grid that I repeated from painting to painting. In the grids, I looked at the different shades of clay and their mixtures side by side. Most of the time, however, I slipped away from being systematic and made decisions intuitively. I wondered where this idea came from. Maybe from coordinate planes, grids, mapping, exploration - they are all ways and tools of understanding being in the world. I bought a comprehensive book on the history of color theory *The Book of Color Concepts 1686-1963* (Taschen) and looked at different systems for defining colors. It is a very fascinating book visually.

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The paintings in the *Color Chart* series are the first time I hear sound in my paintings. It is certain that I will continue with this series.

MH: The sound or voice of these paintings - what is it, what does it say, communicate?

HL: The voice is quiet but bright, a bit like little bells, or the sound of the kind of Christmas decoration where the warmth of the burning candle spins the metallic angel characters round, an angel chime. I don't think it's necessarily synaesthesia but somehow the sound is related to the movement of the painting.

MH: And on the subject of color - which has become your favourite and why is that?

HL: My favourite color is, of course, the color of my own island, but this one's not seen in this exhibition. Of the ten different clays I've used in the exhibition, the Finnish grey clay, which turns warm even though it has a very rough texture, is somehow sympathetic. Perhaps the most special thing about these paints is that they always seem to find their harmony in my eyes.

MH: Harmony - what do you mean? In relation to the movement, searching and discovery that is present, occurring and manifesting in the paintings, which is not static but something else, something that also tolerates uncertainty and contradictions?

HL: I simply mean that these colors always seem to fit together.

MH: We finally arrive at the end and consider the name of the exhibition: *Ground Color*. What does it mean to you, what does it have to do with in relation to the process of painting?

HL: It's an ambiguous word, as the names of my exhibitions usually are. *Ground Color* means the color of the earth, but it also relates to the grounding of the painting. In these works, the canvas is unprimed, and the ground plays the main role. However, the individual works' names are very unambiguous this time around.

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MH: But what, or, what is it for you, the specificity of the color of the earth? Is it one in one, or many in one - or even an infinite number of possibilities, some already known, some still unknown? Or to approach it in another way: the colors of the earth that come from the earth, even beneath what we normally see, what is the light that is always there and that is sometimes found?

HL: I found this great quote about geological time:

"Time is the substance from which I am made. Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that devours me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire." (Jorge Luis Borges)

It's nice to imagine that there is light underground, but maybe it's that very thing itself; bringing the earth's matter into the light, which is what makes the use of clay paint special.

I like the fact that when wet, clay paint shines bright like nature does after morning dew, but when dry, its colors seem to go into hiding, and the nature of the clay encloses the painting in its own harmonious palette. In a way, this is the secret, the secret of the clay, the secret of the earth, and it describes well all that is invisible in nature that we know but cannot see.

In my work, the relationship between me and the material is emphasized, and through the process of creation emotional and spiritual connections are formed. This material ties together in its essence many of the things I deal with in my art - time, space and memory - continuing my quest to describe the invisible forces that shape our reality.

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