

To love, Barthes writes in *A Lover's Discourse*, is to wait—a vigil that he names, provocatively, as feminized. At first glance, longing appears steeped in passivity, a quiet surrender to absence. Yet Barthes insists otherwise. Love, he argues, is not inert but charged: it asks the ever-present self to be shaped by the one who is perpetually not here.¹

Waiting, then, is not emptiness but labor—an emotional workmanship of desire, where yearning becomes an active, neurotic force, and absence presses constantly against the heart, giving love both its ache and its form.

I wonder how this grammar of waiting might relate to the business of painting, a praxis rooted in time and desire, both gendered and feminized. Painting (*pittura*), after all, is a feminine noun in Italian, yet its artistic profession was historically bound to lineage and gender: to class, to men, to family. It passed most often from father to son, or along the male branch of kinship, and so the women who entered art did so almost always as daughters—admitted by birth rather than choice. Confined to the domestic sphere, their access to artistic education was narrow and fragile, shaped by prohibition as much as by possibility.

In studios and academies, students spent long hours drawing, painting, and sculpting the male nude—spaces that in Italy were bluntly named *accademia del nudo*. Respectable women were not permitted to look upon naked bodies, let alone study them. Nor could they travel freely, to encounter works of art that, in the era before museums, might have altered their vision and allowed a style of their own to emerge.

Those few women who did paint, with a handful of exceptions, were steered toward the lowest rungs of the academic hierarchy: still lifes, modest genre scenes, landscapes, portraits of the socially unremarkable. Their works were often small—miniatures contained within the limits imposed upon them. For most women with

¹ See Becca Rothfeld, *All Things Are Too Small*, London: Virago / Apple Books, 2024, p. 53

artistic longings, creation could take place only in quieter forms: in weaving, in lace, in embroidery, where ambition was softened into ornament and desire was stitched into cloth.

“It is a sin to do nothing,” my grandmother used to tell me when I was a child, and so, in the rare moments when she was free from the relentless demands of running the household, she would sit down to make something with her hands, usually traditional Estonian craft.

This is how Merike Estna described to me a childhood memory of visiting her grandparents in rural Estonia during the summer—a time shaped by labor, restraint, and quiet acts of making. I cannot help but to think of Penelope at her loom, patiently braiding silence, longing, and time into a single, unending garment. Staying busy with desire is what women are taught to do so well.

Throughout her practice, Estna has persistently blurred the historical boundaries between what has traditionally been defined as “high art”—oil on canvas, easel painting, artistic autonomy—and what has been relegated to “craft,” such as textiles, ceramics, embroidery, and domestic or functional objects. By painting on furniture, carpets, clothing, ceramics, and other materials embedded in domestic space, she challenges the elitism that has long shaped painting, particularly its alignment with notions of individual genius, permanence, and mastery.

At the same time, her work reveals a profound engagement with time itself. Estna continually pushes toward open-endedness, imagining painting as something that might bleed beyond its formal boundaries, remain unfinished, or require ongoing care. Her works fold back upon themselves the duration of time invested in sustaining them, making maintenance, repetition, and endurance part of the painting’s meaning. She gently unravels the codes by which we orient ourselves: vertical no longer promises a body, nor horizontal a landscape. In her work, direction loses its authority. Scale is tampered with, usefulness quietly desecrated—a painted canvas drifts toward the softness of a picnic blanket, while a textile spread across the floor opens into painting as a lived dimension rather than a surface.

What once stood upright learns to lie down. What was meant to be used asks instead to be looked at, lingered on, or stepped into. Painting slips its frame and posture, settling into space like a presence—intimate, wayward, and difficult to place.

For her presentation in Venice, Estna reclaims painting as this slippery mirage—a practice that resists closure and unfolds through time. She begins with a bare canvas laid directly on the floor, inviting the public to gather around to watch its slow awakening. The painting is not unveiled as a finished object but grows slowly, in plain sight. This gesture of gradual growth out of nothing while occupying the space carries a subtle defiance. It calls to mind the figure of the *pittore senza opera*—the painter without works—a shadowed type who haunted earlier centuries, most often embodied by women whose oeuvres were absorbed into patriarchal workshops or erased from official chronicles. Marietta Robusti Tintoretta was one of them: a Venetian painter-poet who dressed as a boy to work beside her father, Jacopo Tintoretto, in the heat of the family atelier. Her paintings circulated without her name, her skill credited upward; she died in childbirth before she had the chance to fully step into the light of her own authorship. Yet, as Jutta Sperling notes, scenes of reproduction appear almost compulsively throughout Jacopo Tintoretto's work—births, lactation, wet-nursing, and circumcision generously populate his biblical and mythological paintings.²

Standing beneath the frescoed ceiling of the Estonian pavilion—once a church, now a community centre—I found myself thinking of Tintoretto's *Origin of the Milky Way*, which recounts the old myth in which Jupiter seeks to secure immortality for his infant son Hercules, born of the mortal Alcmene. To achieve this, he places the child at the breast of his sleeping wife Juno, hoping divine milk might grant godhood. When Juno wakes and pushes the infant away, the milk that sprays upward forms the Milky Way; the drops that fall to earth become lilies.

It's a striking contradiction: men who could not paint themselves as the allegory of Painting (hear hear *femme-pintura!*) felt entirely entitled to depict women's bodies reproducing, as though it were neutral ground rather than lived experience. In this

² Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Roman Charity: Queer Lactations in Early Modern Visual Culture*, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2016, p.73.

light, Marietta Tintoretta's disappearance from art history feels less like forgetting and more like a patterned removal—as if the world could accept women giving life to images, but not signing them. The sky leaks light and milk, but never her name.

During our travels together across Estonia, Merike and I encountered a folk song connected to myths of birth and world-making, which offered us another cosmogenic story, yet this time with more reparative undertones. In the song, a group of maidens decide to rake the sea—an impossible, poetic gesture of labor directed at the primordial waters. A “blue-spotted wonder-bird with grey teeth” is born from the detritus the maidens toss back into the sea, who flies to land and reaches a bush in a simple yard. From its eggs come juniper on the hill, a stone in the field, a star in the sky, the Moon, then the Sun. The song links domestic rituals (raking, sweeping) with cosmogenesis: what begins as women's labor yields the celestial bodies and the natural landscape. These myths tell of a mother's labor on a cosmic scale. Think of it as everyday feminism. Creation is not thunder or command, but the slow choreography of care: tidying, gathering, feeding, letting go. In both, creation emerges from quotidian labor, an ongoing rhythm of maintenance, echoing how mothers and caregivers sustain life through continuous, repetitive labor that rarely seeks recognition.

Estna gently braids together meditations on motherhood and the lineages of women artists who carved paths toward artistic self-determination. As a working mother herself, she often folds complex iconographies of care, lineage, and inheritance into her practice, moving between gestures of nurture and acts that verge on matriphagy.

Consider, for instance, her spider in *Black Lace Weaver* the mother dissolves from within, offering her liquefied body to her young, who consume her as their first, nutrient-rich meal. In this sacrificial exchange, survival becomes an inheritance, and the next generation steps forward, sustained by the body that made them. In Estna's spider-mother, one might detect an echo of Louise Bourgeois's great arachnids: maternal figures whose strength lies not only in protection but in the quiet work of making. For Bourgeois, the spider honoured her tapestry-restorer mother—a patient weaver, mender, and keeper of fragile structures. In Estna, the spider extends this lineage into the biological realm: the mother liquefies herself to feed her young,

turning the act of care into a bodily offering. In both, the web, or net—a figurative symbol that populates many of her paintings—can also be read as a metaphor for artistic practice: an architecture spun from the body, endlessly repaired, and inherited by those who come after.

The delicate thread linking her practice to those who came before her, those who laid the groundwork for a transhistorical continuity, is central to the artist's thinking. Another such figure is Lavinia Fontana, who, unlike Tintoretta, became the first woman in Europe to sustain a long professional career as a painter and to support her family through her art. Working within, and against, the patriarchal and domestic structures of her time, Fontana signed her own works, negotiated her independence, and painted through eleven pregnancies.

Through the slow aggregation of work, Estna pushes back against the long erasure of women from art history. By inviting the audience into the unfolding of the work itself, she unsettles entrenched divisions about where art—and by extension, where women—are permitted to exist. The boundary between public and private, studio and home, what was once coded as male territory and female territory, begins to loosen. In her hands, the domestic is no longer a secluded corner but part of the same field as politics, labor, and art-making.

The spaces women were once told belonged to them in secret begin to open into the world, while the spaces once reserved for men soften, become porous, and are quietly renegotiated. The old discourse of love as waiting, and as a feminized form of endurance, returns here as a form of care bestowed upon a painting that grows to the limits of the pavilion. Neither battle scene nor landscape in service of the nation-state, the work arrives slowly: first through spills and leaks, then through the weight of brushstrokes, the press of tape, the sweep of the arm. The canvas is worked lying down and standing up, touched in both horizontal and vertical orientations, tended to as something that, like desire, must be kept alive.