

Sirpa Särkijärvi

(to) reason | (to) sense



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Transcription 82 (The Hug); 31" x 31"

(to) reason | (to) sense: New Paintings by Sirpa Särkijärvi

BY BARBARA O'BRIEN

Watching and waiting for someone you know – not someone you see casually at work or a once-in-a-while friend as in “let’s have coffee next time you are in town” can be a vexing experience. Perhaps, you are picking up someone at the bus depot or at the “Y” after their afternoon game of racquetball. Peering through the front window of your car or watching as you stand on a sidewalk, you strain to recognize someone intimately known; known as in studying their face every day at the dinner table or sleeping with them most nights or having seen them through the ups and downs of life that inextricably bond. Even so, it is often difficult to identify them as they move toward you on a crowded walkway or through a tunnel moving from the shadows of concrete subway tunnel into the bright, late afternoon sun.

In watching closely, you go into a half-state of awareness, neither keenly nor indifferently aware as time passes. You start awake as they seem to appear, only to be mistaken. You’ve spied a person of comparable build; tall or chunky or athletic or zaftig; or similar rhythmic stride with arms swinging loosely or held close to the body; or an energy not unlike their own, expansively connecting to every person they pass or in a cyclonic shroud of anonymity. And, when they finally appear – come into close view – you might wonder how you ever mistook so many others for this person that had seemed so intimately familiar.



The experience of what seems simultaneously intimate and anonymous, guarded and public, intuited and understood is at the heart of a new suite of painting by Sirpa Särkijärvi on view in the exhibition “(to) reason | (to) sense” at the Joseph Nease Gallery. The artist chose the title “Transcription” for the series to reflect her role of “being present as a recording observer.”

After the pandemic era the artist says she is “longing to be more direct in what it (the painting) expresses. As a result of these difficult times, which continues with a war in Europe, I felt the need to live life more fully and appreciate it by drawing on a truly human experience.”

The intense physicality of these paintings (all 2022) is impossible to deny as Sirpa continues to lay claim to the contested territory of the painted human figure as form, vessel, memory, and cultural imperative. The confidence in these extraordinary works of art has been well-earned over a 20-year career as a painter based in Turku, Finland.

The “human experience” is a complex physical and psychological state of being that Sirpa approaches by (re)presenting not one moment, but many. Her approach to time is “no longer linear”, but a layered experience allowing the viewer to experience several moments simultaneously. Each painting on view becomes a filmic experience; images that are layered and interlaced by the artist can be unraveled, interpreted, puzzled together and



Transcription 79 (The Separated); 39" x 31"

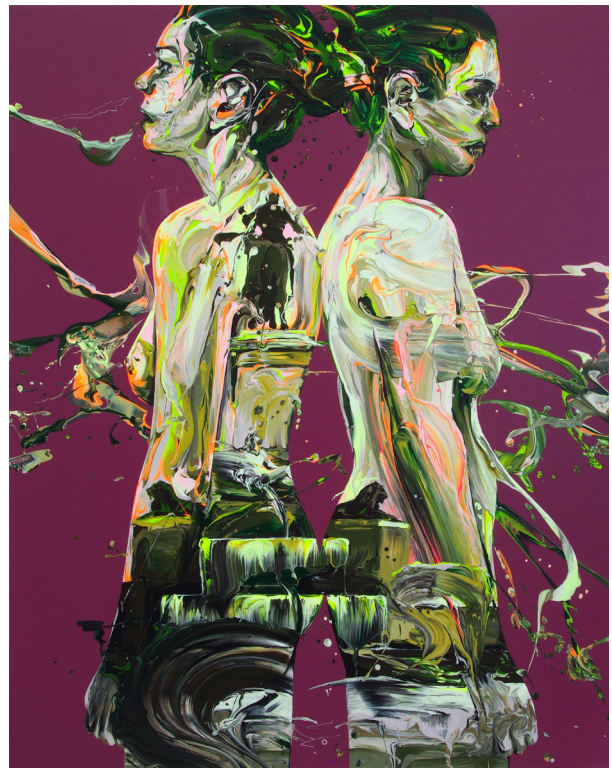
reimagined by the viewer. This approach is vividly embodied in *Transcription 79 (The Separated)* where, the artist shares, "I have painted many nested pictures in it."

The intense physicality of the paintings is in dynamic interplay with a state of being that seems as deceptively quiet as the eye of a storm. Sirpa delves into the psychology of the gaze – of looking and being looked at. Each composition is an aggressive fusion of an unsettling palette with paint that moves with and against gravity. Sirpa is methodical in planning for a painting; mixing and organizing the entire set of colors before beginning a canvas. In her studio Sirpa works first on the floor applying acrylic paints quickly from every side of the perimeter of the canvas to allow for the intermingling of colors and an energy that connects her to the Action Painters of the 20th century.

In *Transcription 82 (The Hug)*, (see cover) the central character, presented in an unusual black and white palette, (representing the past, a memory, or an experience washed away by the storm of trauma along the shores of life?) gazes to the left at something outside of the frame. Her mouth, a maw of smeared red with front teeth barely showing is besmirched by another face, perhaps of a man, whose visage melds with the cheek of her own. The use of color in these paintings is according to the artist "unhindered." The male figure is presented in a barrage of orange, red, yellow and a green held just moments away from black. Her face becomes his and his hers. Time layered, experience recalled, palettes and relationships seemingly at odds coexisting in an uneasy truce.

Who are these people, these faces, these intertwined bodies that we as viewers attempt to untangle and understand? The paintings are "not portraits, but interpretations based on reality, from the inner world of an imaginary character." But, let us not think that the artist is disconnected from the reality or the politics of gender, geography, identity, and world experiences. She questions with a keen intelligence and commitment to egalitarian ethics the very subject matter of her paintings – the naked figure – and the relationship of the viewer of that sometimes charged subject.

Fully nude figures - or are they figures fully clothed in paint? – are paired in *Transcription 84 (Fountain)*. Perhaps the women in *Fountain* are mirror images of one female; on the left with chin tilted ever so slightly upward and on the right with jaw set firmly square. With hair swept



Transcription 84 (Fountain); 39" x 31"

up off the nape of their necks they are entangled one to the other. As in most of the paintings on view, Sirpa has placed the human figure – comprised of a dizzying vocabulary of expressive gesture; tossed or thrown onto the canvas hypnotically circling and melding thin and broad brushwork into an image, seemingly never at rest – on a nearly-solid colored ground. In *Fountain*, a mauve-tinged ground offers a place for both the twinned forms and the viewer to settle, at least for a moment. The "fountain" of the title seems to appear atop their buttocks, water flowing down the stepped form with iconic guardian lions facing – like the central female forms – outward. Here a civic piece of architecture emulates nature and offers cooling water. Gravity and the laws of nature will have their way with water flowing to the sea, from which all life once emerged.

Transcription 80 (The Rambler) is a mysterious composition; a human figure is set amongst a world of marbled ovals formed from a swirl of chalky pinks and blues, whitewashed browns and mossy greens. The torso of

The Rambler is a crashing tidepool of ruby red, azalea pink, bloodied black. She or he (it is uncertain) covers one eye with the four fingers of their right hand, leaving only a half-gaze staring beyond. According to Sirpa, "it's okay if most of the characters can be seen in either gender: Androgyny has interested me since the beginning of my career." The left hand rests awkwardly atop what this writer interpreted as tide-smoothed stones on an ocean beach. According to the artist, they are "round stones left behind by the Ice Age at the top of a mountain in the wilderness." The mystery of the narratives in the paintings, and the artist's generous approach to interpretation, creates a complex and ultimately gratifying experience for the viewer.



Transcription 80 (The Rambler); 31" x 31"



Ophelia (1851-2); oil on canvas, 30" x 44", by Sir John Everett Millais, Presented by Sir Henry Tate 1894, Photo: Tate

The Rambler calls to mind the tragic figure of Ophelia, the iconic character from *Hamlet* who is pictured as a flower-strewn corpse floating atop a stream in *Ophelia* (1851-2) by Sir John Everett Millais (British 1829-1896). While Millais's painting clearly presents the young woman's hands and face, her body is obscured by the weight of a water-soaked dress. Where Ophelia is in the arms of the final resting place of death, Sirpa's *Rambler* is surely on the move with a life force that will not be hindered.

Throughout the "Transcription" series, the human experience is at the service of a brilliant painter who uses a complex expressive palette, often on the edge of darkness, to present universal themes and concerns regarding the social and cultural challenges of our time. In experiencing these paintings, we might recognize something of that person who seems never to appear; who exists in our memory, longing, and dreams. But, Sirpa offers something more consequential: the opportunity to sift through trauma, disappointment, cultural norms and the very history of art. As she faces the tumult of our times, she seems to imagine a renewed version of humanity.

O'Brien, an independent curator and critic based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, first met Sirpa in 2014 at the painter's studio in Turku, Finland. Sirpa's paintings were included in the 2015 exhibition "Dark Days, Bright Nights: Contemporary Paintings from Finland", presented at Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri, where O'Brien was the Executive Director and Chief Curator.



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All paintings in the exhibition are acrylic on canvas and dated 2022.

All quotes from the artist were sent by the artist in emails to either Joseph Nease or Barbara O'Brien between April and June 2022.



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