

Sirpa Särkijärvi

TRANSCRIPTIONS



# Sirpa Särkijärvi—TRANSCRIPTIONS

BY BARBARA O'BRIEN

In the *Transcriptions* series of paintings (2018-19) on view at Joseph Nease Gallery in Duluth, Sirpa Särkijärvi presents the human figure without the context of a recognizable place or setting—a landscape, forest, or domestic space, for example. By removing the familiar details of time and place, which she has done in paintings post-2015, Sirpa creates a world that is deeply sensual and emotionally charged. The human figures presented in *Transcriptions* are either naked or barely clothed in sheer garments that seem as much paint as fabric. The central subjects seem generally unaware of our gaze, adding a provocative voyeuristic note to the experience of viewing them. These paintings brook no easy reading. And of this term “transcription,” we see Sirpa in the role of translator, of interpreter, or guide from one world to another.

Sirpa was born in 1974 in the northern Finnish town of Muonio. She now lives and works in Turku. I first met Sirpa in 2014 as I traveled in Finland meeting more than a dozen artists and an equal number of gallerists, museum professionals, and arts administrators. Sirpa lived outside the hubbub of Helsinki in the small city of Turku, a two-hour

train ride away. At that time, she was working in a small, shared studio. Sirpa has since moved to a home that includes a larger studio, which she uses to full advantage to create significantly scaled paintings.

Sirpa is both reserved and outgoing, intelligent and approachable, with a charming smile and manner. Her careful demeanor in no way prepares one for the expressive gestural energies of her painting practice. And yet, perhaps this persona of being in the world, but not being weighed down by the quotidian is exactly the place one should stand when experiencing her paintings. Sirpa becomes our guide between the carnal and the spiritual, earth and atmosphere; space and place become conflated.

I selected three of her paintings to include in *Dark Days, Bright Nights: Contemporary Paintings from Finland*, which was presented at Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri. In *Lapiomies (Shovelman)* (2011) a human figure composed of horizontal bands of ochred yellows and early spring greens stands with relative solidity against a reedy shoreline of swirling greyed blues and blood-tinged pinks. He seems an apparition coming to rest against the shifting tide line, a nearby boat

seeming a mere suggestion of form rather than an object. Still, Sirpa grounds the experience of viewing the painting in a space of reality, engendering a belief that “this happened.” *Son* (2011) showcases a young boy sitting on a floor covered with traditional Finnish handmade carpets, one hand placed upon the skull of an animal. The gesture is one of quiet repose, while the use of paint—a pale powder blue outlined with vibrating neon yellows and orange—creates a visual vibration. The place where he is located is not as important as his state of mind, and his gaze moves our attention to the far edge of the canvas, toward what we know not. Is he observing a reality we cannot see or is he engaged in an interior rapture, a world of imagination? Sirpa states of her practice: “I have tried to distance the reality with an expressive paint, towards the imagination which the son has created.”<sup>1</sup>

I posited in the *Dark Days, Bright Nights* catalogue essay that Sirpa had crafted a hybrid form from two painting traditions—the landscape and the portrait. The paintings in *Transcriptions* continue this extraordinary meeting place of expressive gesture and command of a highly charged emotional palette.

But in this series, Sirpa has removed the relative comfort of a reality—time and place—and runs headlong into a highly aesthetic world, painting with no place for viewers to rest our feet.

Sirpa's paintings have often addressed the conflict arising from humans' relationship with nature, but in the *Transcriptions* paintings we see this extended to the more general theme of power and control, of the right of the individual to self-determination, gender equality, and respect for men, women and children. The subjects are not presentations of individuals, but symbols of a broader, human understanding described by Carl Jung as the archetypal:

*They [archetypal elements] are inherited and not acquired, and they belong to each human being by virtue of being born human. They are what make us uniquely and characteristically human. Not only the body but also the soul—the psyche—is specifically human and creates the preconditions for all later experience.<sup>2</sup>*

Sirpa crafts a deeply psychological space from color, gesture, and a performative intention that begins in the studio. She poses and photographs her subjects—men, women and children—in what she calls “indicative sketches,” not varying the painting from the photographic source. She tends to use a three-quarter view of the human figure;

*Son* (2011), 41 3/8" x 55 1/8"



*Lapiomies (Shovelman)* (2011), 41 3/8" x 55 1/8"

always including the torso and head, and sometimes using the full figure that seems to swirl in space. The sketch for Transcription 45 (Equilibrium) contains elements of collage and bits of language, torn perhaps from a magazine. The emotionally cold palette of the black and white photographic sketches offers little clue as to the jolt we will feel upon viewing the final painting.

When Sirpa traveled, for the first time, to the United States in the spring of 2018, she faced questions and inspirations that impacted the *Transcriptions* series. She describes her working process:

*I work with models and design colors, shades and tones, which is a surprisingly time-consuming part, as well as the mixing and preparation of the paints when that step is reached. So, I'm trying to find suitable material so I can express my thoughts which are in my head now, create images that are familiar with feelings what I have experienced and so on. I give all the thoughts to flow freely and influence the impressions that are made of them.*<sup>3</sup>

And she explains the photo sketch process in more detail:

*I'm working mainly here in the studio at home with the models. But I can sometimes take pictures in other environments too. I can also try to reenact my own version of the situation which has inspired*

*me in some media. Image, angle or movie scene, I do not limit myself in that context. So I take influences from other channels in addition to my own models. I instruct models a lot. Before the shoot, I ponder different options to challenge my own work, what I could do differently and what I would achieve. I plan postures, facial expressions, atmosphere, and mental images.*<sup>4</sup>

Her painting process builds on the legacy of the Abstract Expressionists who like Pollock famously threw; like Frankenthaler poured; and like Klein counted on the trace of the movement of the human body, in his case by dragging paint-covered women across the expanse of a canvas. There was a formal outcome, but also a provocative intention in the work of these mid-twentieth-century artists. They brought up short the expectations of the viewer; they insisted on challenging themselves to create expressions of their time. Sirpa's technique includes laborious color studies and pre-mixing all of her acrylic paints before starting the painting; "approximately thirty different colors are used in one painting."<sup>5</sup> She stacks the colors high in her studio in plastic bins, well organized and methodically numbered. When she starts to paint, she works quickly, wet-on-wet, with the canvas placed on the floor of the studio, her body moving confidently above the

canvas, creating with dynamic movement the expressive gestures that are a signature part of her artistic vocabulary. If a painting doesn't come together before the acrylic paint begins to dry, Sirpa washes the surface completely and starts the process again. The canvas is attached to the stretcher bars "only when it is almost ready to be finished."<sup>6</sup>

While a master of formal explorations, Sirpa is deeply committed to the political and moral questions of the twenty-first century. The ambiguous, painted space in which her figures reside offers no comfort. Who are these people, I asked? She replied:

*I try to express my thoughts through the characters. I don't paint portraits, but versions of the aspects of reality with a lot of my inner world also involved. I usually want to present the atmosphere that surrounds me socially, globally, and also on some personal level at that moment. The eventual result is like a weave, all levels are interlaced in the painting, which will become a little more enigmatic. I like paintings with different paths to the source of the subject so that the viewer can make their interpretations. I try to avoid a too direct, depictive way to describe the subjects. I try to choose both men and women as models, as well as children and teens. The most natural thing for me is to describe my themes*



*Transcription 45 (sketch)*



*Transcription 45 (Equilibrium) (2018), 70 7/8" x 55 1/8"*



*Transcription 42 (Of the Stimuli)* (2018), 70 7/8" x 55 1/8"



*Transcription 46 (Unnatural)* (2018), 55 1/8" x 43 3/8"

through women and children. Friends, colleagues, or family members have often acted as my model, but I do not express and present them in my works, I rather present the challenging emotions associated with on a more general level as femininity, manhood or childhood.<sup>7</sup>

Whether presented on the azalea red ground of *Transcription 57 (She)* (back cover) or the cotton candy clouded atmospheric space of *Transcription 44 (The World on Their Shoulders)* (front cover), Sirpa has isolated the figure. Seen in profile or caught in a swirl of color and paint, facial features are obscured, eyes are often either closed or veiled by a scrim of paint. In *Transcription 46 (Unnatural)* a female figure is kneeling, turned aside from the viewer and seen in profile. The woman kneeling is often seen a supplicant figure, but here the figure seems simply weighted by gravity, not by an external narrative. Her eyes are blackened, yes, but the adjacent white paint on her face has been pulled into the black, leaving the trace of a comb-

like tool. Her black hair, pulled tight in a top knot, is striated with a neon blue that suggests a halo, an aura. A shadow, formed of nearly black forest green, echoes the full length of her figure and creates a middle ground. The shadow is a remnant of the photographs that Sirpa stages as source material for the paintings.

The slim figure (is it a young woman or a child?) in *Transcription 42 (Of the Stimuli)* is caught in a tidal wave, both generated from and obliterated by the paint from which the figure is formed. Presented in profile, the slim figure is bent slightly at the waist as if using all available energy and attention to stand up against this onslaught. As in *Unnatural*, the figure is placed against a ground of deepest forest green that brings the memory of place and the natural world. But the pale blues, never quite pure whites, powdery flesh tones, and always-red lips demand an emotional response to an imagined and sensual world. The male figure in *Transcription 45 (Equilibrium)* stares directly at the viewer, his arms tight

around the waist of a female figure, her pale blue eyes turning slightly outward, the tension in her torso suggesting the physical effort needed to stay solidly aloft against his standing figure. In the *Transcriptions* series paint becomes not only clothing, but also protection and armor against the forces of the natural and imagined world: the wind, the sea, the emotions, energies, and experiences that define us as human. The questions Sirpa Särkijärvi brings are not easily addressed or answered. She is our guide, but not one who demands we follow her toward a predetermined goal; rather we move side-by-side with her in a challenging and respectful dialogue of expression, reflection, and beauty.

1. Sirpa Särkijärvi, email to the author, February 16, 2019.
2. Murray Stein, *Jung's Map of the Soul: An Introduction*, (Chicago: Carus/Open Court Publishing, 1998), 53–54.
3. Särkijärvi, email to the author, July 12, 2018.
4. Särkijärvi, email to the author, February 1, 2019.
5. Särkijärvi, email to the author, January 9, 2019.
6. Särkijärvi, email to the author, August 20, 2018.
7. Särkijärvi, email to the author, January 19, 2019.

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**Barbara O'Brien** is an independent curator and critic based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She was Executive Director of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri from 2012–2017, after serving as chief curator and director of exhibitions since 2009. O'Brien is an elected member of AICA-USA, International Association of Art Critics. Her more than two decades of curatorial practice and criticism have focused on the art and artists of our time. O'Brien had the opportunity to visit Finland as she curated *Dark Days, Bright Nights: Contemporary Paintings from Finland*. *Dark Days, Bright Nights* opened at the Kemper in 2015, and included works by a dozen painters, including Sirpa Särkijärvi.

Prior to her time at the Kemper Museum, O'Brien was an assistant professor in the Art & Music department at Simmons College in Boston, Massachusetts. She was editor-in-chief of *Art New England* magazine from 2003–06.

O'Brien earned an MFA from Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and in 2006 was awarded the RISD national alumni award for professional achievement.

**Front cover:** *Transcription 44 (The World on Their Shoulders)* (2018), 41 3/8" x 31 1/2"

**Back cover:** *Transcription 57 (She)* (2018), 41 3/8" x 31 1/2"



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