Press book

Ola KOLEHMAINEN
Coming up on the inside

After the Chinese and the Poles, are the Nordics the next trend?

BASEL. Scandinavian art is on a roll. In the last 10 years, artists from Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and little Iceland (population under 300,000) have started moving centre stage, and at Art Basel no less than seven galleries are presenting works by Nordic artists. The buzz is that there is big potential in the new generation of young artists, whose prices remain modest.

One enthusiast is Hans Ulrich Obrist, resident curator at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. In 1998 he curated a show at the museum, “Nuits blanches” for which he made some 20 trips to Scandinavia. He returned enthusiastic about the artists he saw. “I felt a great energy in the countries we visited; finding so many talented artists was extraordinary. There were a combination of elements that made this possible: a strong economy, good galleries, art schools and experimental projects such as artist-run spaces,” he says. The interest surrounding the work of the young artists also had a “trans-generational” effect, says Obrist. “The work of older artists was also rediscovered; the art world has a great capacity to fight against oblivion.”

Among the Nordic galleries exhibiting at the fair is the newcomer Anhava. While this is not the first Finnish gallery to exhibit at Art Basel, it is the first to show Nordic artists. The stand is dominated by two huge C-prints by Ola Kolehmainen, a graduate of the Helsinki School of Photography. Kolehmainen photographs the reflections on the outside of buildings, and also the interior. His work is priced up to €14,000. On the same stand are paintings by Mari Sunna which start at under €1,000, and are flying off the walls.

While Iceland is not yet represented by a gallery at Art Basel, over the last five years international interest has been growing. There are plans for an Iceland/Finland stand at Art Basel/Miami Beach this December and the two countries are even talking of having their own joint pavilion at the next Venice Biennale. “We get on well with Iceland because no-one else understands our impossible languages!” says Ilona Anhava. She is also showing work by the Icelanders Kristján Gudmundsson, who works with paper and graphite and makes elegant, minimalist wall installations.

Other places to see Scandinavian artists at Art Basel are Wallner from Copenhagen, showing Marriage by Elmgreen and Dragset, a pair of white ceramic sinks connected by a twisting chrome drainpipe (€40,000, sold). Works by the couple are also on view at the editions specialist Borch Jensen with an elegant and slightly spooky series of empty museum interiors (edition of 24, €8,000 for seven prints). At Art Statements, Wilson of Brändström & Stene from Stockholm is showing the Danish painter John Kørner. Beautiful drawings by Ole Jørgen Ness are on show at Riis, the only Norwegian gallery at the fair, which is also showing a painting by Sverre Wyller Maridalen four (€15,000).

Not every gallery likes to describe its artists as “Nordic”. Jan Steen of Brändström & Stene from Stockholm says, “The nationality of the artist is not important, it’s the quality of the work that counts”. However, he does note that the new generation of artists in Sweden is far more aware of the market and the importance of having a good dealer and exhibiting at art fairs. His stand includes photographs by Per Wizén, such as a large C-print of a mysterious forest, The hunt, (€40,000, edition of three: last in the edition).

Georgina Adam
Ola Kolehmainen, Space is unknown

De grandes photographies de bâtiments dont les façades de verre reflètent les architectures qui leur font face. Autant d'images-miroirs de la modernité qui font signe vers l'histoire; de pièges à lumière qui fragmentent et animent les volumes.

Galerie Dominique Fiat
65 nov. 2005 - 20 déc. 2005

Le dispositif présenté à la galerie Fiat a été conçu par l'artiste finlandais Ola Kolehmainen spécialement pour ce lieu. L'exposition se compose de cinq photographies de grand format qui représentent des façades d'immenses contemporains dans lesquelles se reflètent le ciel et les bâtiments qui leur font face. Par le jeu multiple des cadres, Ola Kolehmainen tente de « faire ressortir au spectateur [ses] propre expérience cathartique de l'espace ».

Le cadre qui circule à un espace, une scène, une action, est aussi celui des photographies dont chacune renferme une multitude d'espaces ombiliés par des fenêtres. Sorte de perches lumineuses dans ces lieux quasiment aveugles, les fenêtres n'ouvrent pas sur des espaces perspectivest de loin de point de fuite ou d'une ligne d'horizon.

Il s'agit de photographies de bâtiments dont les façades de verre reflètent d'autres architectures et qui se présentent tronquées dans leur monumentalité. La mise en abîme créée par cette multiplicité de fenêtres permet de passer progressivement de l'une à l'autre, jusqu'à des univers à la fois clos et très ouverts: des cieux dont la diversité de bleus crotonne et compose l'espace.

Search for Mastery III, qui semble renvoyer à la Vue de Delft de Vermeer, témoigne d'une recherche analogue de saisie de la lumière et d'expression des sensations coûteuses. Telles d'immenso miroirs déformants, les façades vitrées offrent de nouvelles possibilités de perpective de la réalité et ancrent l'œuvre dans la continuité de l'histoire de l'art.

De fondu en fenêtre, de carré en carré, les volumes des architectures sont suggérés et fragmentés à la fois, fixés dans un temps et animés de reflets changeants. Par ces différents jeux de lumières, de cadres et de miroirs, Ola Kolehmainen transforme les espaces tridimensionnels en plans et la réalité en jeux de couleurs et de lignes abstraites qui ne sont pas sans évoquer Mondrian.

Les miroitements sont aussi renforcés par la présentation des images: montées sous une surface de plexiglas très brillante elles se reflètent aussi entre elles, inscrivant ainsi le spectateur au cœur du dispositif.

Par l'entrecroisement des façades, de l'espace réel et des images, l'artiste démultiplie notre appréhension de la ville. En agrandissant des fragments jusqu'à la démesure il crée une poésie, une sorte de voyage entre l'intérieur et l'extérieur des bâtiments.

Reflet de la modernité et un signe vers l'histoire de l'art, l'installation est ouverte à la dimension onirique et sensible de l'homme.

Artiste(s)
Ola Kolehmainen
Né en 1954 à Helsinki (Finlande).
L’école photographique d’Helsinki, nouvelle venue

Apparus il y a trois ans sur le marché, des artistes finlandais connaissent un succès grandissant. Et leur cote profite à leurs prédécesseurs.

L'école d'Helsinki ne se réfère ni à une tradition académique ni à une nationalité. Il s'agit plutôt d'une approche pédagogique forçée sur le debate et la critique. Elle fédère d'ailleurs des sensibilités très diverses. Les préoccupations écologiques se reflètent dans les photos d'Ikrani Håls. Celle-ci présentant des fosses entourées de banches ou des tribus de paysages enfermés dans des serres. En 2004, la galerie Taik avait créé un diphtyque pour 5 000 euros au Salon de Paris Photo.

Passé de « frémière »
Caractérisée par des disproportion d'échelle et par une couleur nature blanche, les photos de Vara Hänninen bouléversent notre perception de l'espace. « Pour définir l'image, on doit d'abord laisser ses yeux s'adapter à l'image miniaturisée, observe Timothy Pers. En 2004, la Maison européenne de la photographie a acheté une de ses photos pour 5 000 euros lors de Paris Photo. L'œuvre de Pernilla Zetterman aborde l'univers des obsessions et des phobies. Un diphtyque représentant des images de peaux en signe de maladie s'est vendu 4 000 euros sur Paris Photo en novembre 2005. Le maître s'exprime aussi dans les clichés de Jyrki Tiainen, qui photographie des coupes de magazine après les avoir piquées d'épingles ou tissées de fils. A la Foire Scope à Miami, la galerie tchèque Hričkanka, a proposé 10 000 dollars pour un grand diphtyque représentant un couple rélié par des fils. La majorité croissante de ces artistes a profité à ceux de la génération précédente, comme Jorma Puranen. Les questions d'histoire, de mémoire et d'identité imprègnent ces paysages. Dans la série « Shadews », Puranen photographie des tableaux historiques sous des angles inhabituels. Il met en valeur le reflet parasite du flash que les photographies cherchent souvent à gommer. Sa cote a varié de 4 500 à 10 000 euros, contre 2 500 euros quelques années. » Les prix augmentent constamment, sans freinée. Je crois au long terme, » insiste Thomas Pers. Des propos bien égaux dans un domaine habituellement spéculatif.
Ola Kolehmainen is one of the most prominent figures within the Helsinki School of Photography, a group of acclaimed Finnish artists who have all been associated with the University of Art and Design Helsinki in recent decades. His celebrated work focuses on the geometric forms found in modern and contemporary architecture, abstracting such urban “skins” with the intention of eliminating “visual noise” and creating uniquely ornamental, minimal, visual structures. Selections of his work are currently on show at Purdy Hicks (London, UK) until the 21st April, and his new monograph, Fraction Abstraction Recreation, is due to be released by Hatje Cantz Verlag in Spring 2007.

AS Aaron Schuman

OK Ola Kolehmainen

AS To start, could you please discuss your earliest experiences with photography. What drew you to the medium, and why did you choose to pursue it seriously?

OK The first photograph I ever published was in Transworld Skateboarding Magazine, in 1984. I was living in Santa Clara, California, and my best friend was an aspiring skateboarder. He asked me to take some promo pictures—on a ramp, on the street, and then at various competitions—and some of these images appeared in Transworld. He eventually became a pro skater, and he was the first person who suggested that I consider photography professionally.

It took a while for me to follow his advice. I think I started taking pictures seriously around ’86 or ’87, and my main focus became music gigs; primarily jazz. A very close friend of mine was a music critic, and we got a monthly column in a jazz magazine together. We began to travel around a lot, and along with music, we would talk about all sorts of things; visual art became a subject very important to us.

Then in 1992, while I was pursuing a journalism degree at the University of Helsinki, I got permission to study for a year at the University of Art and Design Helsinki. Everything started there. I still clearly remember the moment when I understood that I had discovered something which I could call my own. It was a misty day in early September, I was having a break between two classes, and I literally “woke up”. Of course, I still knew very little about art or photography, but my hunger for information was immense. My life completely changed at that moment. After the year finished, I transferred over to the art school as a full-time student.

AS What images first truly inspired you?

OK My first love was the work of Eugene Atget; the quietness within his photographs fascinated me. But as I continued my studies, colour photography gradually became something very important to me. Unfortunately I missed
having Martin Parr as a professor, as he taught at the school a few years before my time, but I did encounter the positive aftermath of his influence. Also, William Eggleston’s Graceland and Paul Graham’s Beyond Caring became milestones for me, not because of their subject matter, but in the way they used space, light and colour.

**AS** When did you begin to focus your attention on architecture, and why?

**OK** Gradually, I found that it became increasingly difficult for me to photograph people. We had this one assignment, in which each student had to make their own book – the images, the edit, the layout, the binding; everything. I decided to make portraits of my friends. I had known all the “models” for many years, so I assumed that it would be a really fun project, but it turned out to be anything else. I realised that I couldn’t really concentrate on making an image while someone else was present in the studio. My project didn’t completely fall apart, but I have been trying to avoid situations that might involve directing people ever since. So instead, I became interested in working with space; issues of scale, colour, light and the space outside the frame became important questions for me.

Also, in Finland – a land very far north, on the peripheries of the art world – it was a great time, especially for an art student. My biggest influence during this period was Jyrki Parantainen. I was assigned to be his student assistant while he was making his Fire series, and I worked with him for five years. Jyrki photographed deserted spaces – apartments, old factories, art galleries, military barracks – which he would furnish and then burn, not completely to ashes, but so that the fire became an element in the scene. Maybe one wall would be on fire, or the bed in a room would be engulfed in flames. Everything was staged, but the final images appeared to be very spontaneous.

This process taught me a completely different approach to photography, and slowly it opened my eyes to architecture. First of all, what Jyrki did was not photographing in the strictest, documentary sense. We were making unreal situations reality in the form of a photograph. The scenario only existed as an image – nothing physically seen in the final picture was tied to the real world at all. But the conceptual bind was taut. And the whole process was like walking on a tight rope; if you overdid it even once, the series would descend into nothing but boys playing with fire.

During that five-year period there was a constant flow of ideas between the two of us, with many conversations about his work, my work and art in general. In a sense, we were practicing performance art, in that we had a small amount of people viewing the act of making the photographs. Also, in making the pictures we were doing installations, building stage sets, and manipulating spaces. In short, we were working with the architecture, and although it may not have been the main focus of the work, space was present in our minds all the time. Furthermore, we were always talking about how to present the images – the scale, the selection, which pictures should be presented together, the medium and so on. We finally decided to present the images as light-boxes,
Jyrki produced one test box, and this piece became the guideline for future images, both conceptually and visually.

**AS** Considering that there is a strong lineage within photography of architectural imagery, conceptualism and minimalist tendencies, why have you generally chosen to photograph “high” architecture, rather than more vernacular architecture? For example, the work of Ed Ruscha, Lewis Baltz and even the Bechers finds inspiration within uncelebrated, rather common edifices, in a sense making something out of “nothing”, whereas your work seems to elaborate on what the renowned architects— Mies van der Rohe, Renzo Piano, Alvar Aalto, and Herzog & de Meuron among them—intended when they diligently designed these façades and interiors in the first place.

**OK** I find this question rather challenging. First of all, I do not see the strong lineage between the architectural photography and minimalist tendencies. There are minimalist tendencies in architecture, but architectural photography is documenting these creations whether they are minimal or not. Another question is: what kind of architectural imagery are we generally exposed to? The absence of people in photographs of architecture does not make these images minimal.

Secondly, a distinction needs to be made between commercial architectural photography, and photography of architecture as an art practice. The great artists you mention are engaged with the latter, but I find myself belonging to neither of these schools. I do not photograph architecture; I use it as raw material. This approach cuts all ties with reality. The final image is not dependent on the actual appearance of the architecture; it is an extract, which becomes abstract. I do not use digital manipulation in the process of making my work, but I do sometimes intervene in the original image within the darkroom. I might change the colour, or the light may be changed through different ways of exposing the photographic paper. Sometimes make a mirror image, or even turn the original up-side-down. Ruscha, Baltz and the Bechers are making something out of “nothing”, I am making something else out of something. If I dare to compare myself to these masters, what we share is the use of photography as a medium of conceptual art. But our approaches to the subject matter and our various agendas are completely different. For example, Lewis Baltz realised a “counter-aesthetics” through the depiction of desolate landscapes and forgotten places. This is not my aim at all.

Thirdly, the name of an architect is not an automatic guarantee of good material for me. In fact, quite a few of my pieces use architecture designed by lesser-known or entirely unknown architects. My main interests lie in modern and contemporary building structure. In the past, I have tried to work with architecture designed before the 20th century, but have not succeeded—a façade or interior of such a building cannot be made to “something else” by taking an extract; it does not become abstract.

Lastly, if my images elaborate the architects’ intentions, this is merely a coincidence. Conceptually, I think it is rather impossible; visually maybe it occurs. In any case, this is a secondary matter to me. But if someone sees a connection, I have nothing against it on the contrary, I welcome it.

**AS** The titles of your works infuse them with a level of contextual, theoretical and conceptual weight that might otherwise go unnoticed if the viewer were to simply contemplate the images themselves. How important is it that the audience understands these undercurrents in your work?

**OK** In an ideal world, the titles would be understood; fortunately, this is not the case. By this I mean that I prefer that a viewer contemplate the works themselves— at least at the first encounter— without the written “instructions” disturbing the experience. That said, the titles are important, and are there for a reason.

In general, the titles refer to modern art history and act as a reminder of the works’ roots within minimalism. But some of the titles are completely indecipherable if you do not know the story behind them. For instance,
Changing Plates with Kristjan (Yellow). This refers to the Icelandic conceptual artist, Kristjan Gudmundsson. I once attended a dinner party with around fifteen guests, and Kristjan and I were seated at the opposite ends of the table. In the middle of dinner, a half eaten plate of food was handed to me. His gallerist said, “Kristjan stop it,” and I didn’t understand what was going on, so I asked my neighbour. I discovered that this was Kristjan’s way of showing friendship – to share a meal, literally. Since I admire his work very much, and four strong, horizontal lines appear in this particular image, the title is a reference to his line paintings.

**AS** Your final works are very large. Could you discuss the importance of scale in your imagery?

**OK** It is essential. And not only is size vital, but the way in which I present the work is crucial as well – photographic paper laminated on Perspex with silicon. The very thin layer of silicon between the Plexiglas and the paper increases the density of the tones, and touches on the idea of the third dimension. Furthermore, large areas of a single color become almost palpable.

It is difficult to understand my works without seeing at least one of them in the flesh. When my images appear on the printed page, or on a computer screen, or in my portfolio, it is only a picture of the final work. The dilemma is similar to that of paintings, in the sense that a reproduction of a painting has lost many of its physical qualities and therefore much of its visual impact. Of course a photograph laminated behind Plexiglas is far from possessing the nuances and materiality of a painting, but it has its own detailed world.

Furthermore, an additional element in my work is the reflection seen on the surface of the Plexiglas. This is dependent upon the space and light whenever the work is exhibited. Usually, the architecture of the exhibition space is just visible on the surface. Looking at the work from different angles, the reflections change, appear more prominently, or even disappear. This aspect also encourages the viewer to come closer to the work in order to avoid the reflection. The large scale of the pieces makes all of these elements possible. The encounter between the audience and the image becomes more physical; this is a very important part of my work.

**AS** What exactly is it that you hope to accomplish, or to instill within the viewer, through your photographs?

**OK** Standing in front of a building and capturing its skin – or an extract of it – on film is a rather private matter. The final artworks exhibited are subjected to openness. The workflow does not contain a certain message.

But ultimately, I find that most of my works are rather contemplative, and one needs to allow oneself quite a bit of time to view them. Of course, this is nothing exceptional, but I do want to encourage such behaviour through my work. I believe that we should allow ourselves more time to view all visual art.


Below: Search for Mastery IV, 2006. 180 × 232 cm.

The Helsinki School of Photography is showing at Purdy Hicks until 21 April.

Fraction Abstraction
Reversion is published by Hatje Cantz Verlag.
Everything is Illuminated
For a true reflection of a place, you’ve got to see the light.

L’éclat des lieux
Chercher la lumière permet de mieux s’orienter.

BY / PAR TREvor Boddy  PHOTOS BY / D’OLA KOLEHMAIEN
viewing the baffling atmospheric effect that meteorologists call a glory. This is a back-scattering of light where a silhouette of your own moving head appears, halo-like, projected onto nearby banks of fog. My first visits to Vancouver Island and the Northern California coast introduced me to the subtle pleasures of mist – the flattening of space that happens when air is more humid, with outlines first melding, then melting away.

More than trees, terrain or turrets, qualities of light transform mere geography into particular experiences. Our sense of a place is as much about how it’s seen as by what we are seeing. As an architecture critic, I fly all over the world to see the globe’s greatest structures, but these recollections of illumination are more strongly imprinted on my personal psyche.

What I thought was two solid weeks of jet lag on my first Australian tour was more likely some form of light lag. Antipodean illumination is as different from Alberta’s as gum trees are from aspens: the warm hues of high north sunlight at noon, turning blood-red late in the day. In India, what sticks in my mind’s eye is the three-and-nowhere-else dry season light of the subcontinent, dust-specked and resplendent with a thousand gods of colour. And for connoisseurs of traveling light, there is no banquet like Nunavut: the Arctic melodrama of fog and snow swirls around Pond Inlet, Iqaluit awakening to dawns bounced off Frobisher Bay’s ice; snow chucks lift up to the scale of redwoods in the flat eternity outside Cambridge Bay.

A much earlier light tourist – Impressionist Claude Monet – looked up at the Thames from his room in the Savoy and first saw, then painted the density of light hanging in air. What we reduce to a painterly style is now widely believed to be the reaction of Monet and his colleagues to the haze of a newly coal-fired Europe. Written in more modest quarters across the river in Lambeth decades before Monet’s visit, William Blake’s poem “The Mental Traveller” proposes that “the eye altering, alters all.” Enlivening. Write to us: letters@enroutemag.net