



Space 04

Jaakko Mattila:
Lowest Common
Denominator

7 October –
17 December 2011

James Hockey & Foyer Galleries

UCA James Hockey
& Foyer
Galleries

Introduction

About five years ago I was given a catalogue by the Finnish artist Jaakko Mattila – then emerging nationally – by Bex Burchell, a UCA colleague. At first glance I found the work by this Fine Art Graduate from UCA at Farnham impressive, intriguing and moving. But I was not entirely sure how, why or whether justice could be done to Jaakko's work at the Galleries.

Then in 2008 I attended the international conference of the Association of Curators of Contemporary Art (IKT), held in Helsinki, Finland. I realised that this was an ideal opportunity for seeing Jaakko's work in situ. The conference focused on lectures, visits and tours of major Finnish museums and galleries. Like their equivalents in Europe, these institutions appear to follow an artistic agenda characterised by globalism, the type of internationalism which pervades today's contemporary art market. As a result I became aware of the distinguishing qualities of Jaakko's art and its unique differentiation.

Before 2008, I had become acquainted with Finland first and foremost through its Twentieth Century Modernist design: fashion, textiles, ceramics, glass and architecture. Its innate communion with nature encapsulates the adage 'less is more'. At the heart of this creative tradition is the worship of nature whose intuitive depth goes back to the visceral in such connections. Greater than the sum of constituent parts, its energy is palpable in an apparent simplicity. In Jaakko's work the Finnish light is distilled and stripped to its bare essentials. I became aware of Jaakko's unique contribution to a deeply abstract and mystical strand of art found in all corners of the globe.

Our next meeting in Tampere in 2009, courtesy of Pertti Ketonen owner of Jaakko's Printing Press and Galleria Himmelblau (www.himmelblau.fi/en/), set in motion the collaboration which has led to the current exhibition. In the mean time Jaakko's practice has received national and international acclaim. This first solo exhibition by a recent UCA graduate at the James Hockey & Foyer Galleries will be opened by the Ambassador of Finland, Mr. Pekka Huhtaniemi. The show has led to a high profile research and outreach programme with the South East Physics Network and an exciting community art project with the Sandy Hill Detached Youth Project funded by the Farnham South Street Trust. It is supported by FRAME and a loan from the Sara Hildén Art Museum, Tampere. Sustained by the complementary talents that shape the Galleries' Office, 'Lowest Common Denominator' is being showcased at its very best.

Christine Kapteijn MA (RCA) MBA

Curator & Galleries Manager

Cover: section of *Landscape (Summer)*, 2010, gloss on panel, 183 x 413 cm

Opposite: *Autumn Circle*, 2010, watercolour on paper, 120 x 150 cm





Painting pictures thinking

In the current era, in which we are flooded by images, a large part of the visual arts sector suffers from an excess of content. Both intentional and unintentional references often drown out the actual picture. Content is valued over form and the result moves away from tradition in the visual arts.

Jaakko Mattila is a focused painter who does not overlook the format. He manages to calm his works from overwhelming content and to simplify his ideas to the bare essentials. The aesthetics within his paintings work as an incentive to deliberately awaken emotions and thoughts; they are functionalist in nature.

Mattila relies on an artwork's intrinsic value. His thinking is related to the Modernists; it is complex in its subtle ways but, above all, more transparent than with the Modernist movement; it does not curl up into pure visual design, but reacts with the outside world. Aesthetics related to urban culture and the translucent light of a northern city are not exclusive and non-confined. They breathe in the pulse of the visual tradition and find companionship with the history of abstract painting, classical landscape photography and Finnish functionalist design as well as the tradition of Asian painting.

Mattila employs a number of media in creating his works including gloss and oil painting, watercolour, and metallic printmaking. The different techniques create different marks that in their own terms are influenced by the physical properties of the medium. In his gloss pieces, the surface is essential whereas in the watercolours the difference of colour and tone is the principle concern. In addition to variations in medium, Mattila freely changes the scale of his works. He makes huge paintings, several meters in length, but also paints postcard-size watercolours. Despite the diversity of the works, Mattila's thinking is expressed coherently through them. In their technical extremities, works may differ from each other so much that at a glance it is difficult to see that they have been made by the same man's hand. Still, the bottom line within them is a kind of spatial thinking and a recurring geometrically-based visual theme.

In Mattila's abstract composition works, a link can be detected between a direct natural experience of light and of colour. Light is reflected from the surfaces in many different ways and the colours within them are exceptionally rich. Mattila seeks combinations of colours and shapes that are assertive and genuine; they seem self-born and ageless. Within the works there is a sense of intensity which is rooted in a great focus upon colour. Mattila is a philosophical artist who perceives the world through composition and colour harmony. The precision in mixing colours evokes a kind of meditation, but the underlying philosophy seems basically very simple: the works are either monochromatic or they evenly represent all the colours of the colour wheel. The artist's subjective self in the pictures is made present through a type of 'meditative colour painting' and also through a process that incorporates mistakes as part of a working method. Painting is, in this case, a very tangible process.

Mattila's works always contain puzzles. The viewer is not able to trace their genesis. Paint and colour-related movement is present in the image in the long run. Watercolour drips and the effects of gloss paint dry onto the surface; they seem deliberate and controlled. The tension between spontaneous and deliberate painting is a key part of the spirit of Jaakko's works. Successful visual simplification enables the viewer to focus on the essential tones of the pieces and read the visual content analytically.

In front of Mattila's paintings, one is authorized to be intellectual and reflective. One can indulge in them through thinking. Each image has an aesthetic reason to be there. Mattila does not paint in vain; he is looking for new content from the process itself and, at the same time, painting for the public from a personal perspective. He succeeds in making the viewer feel the passion in the making of the works. Making art is like solving a puzzle but in art this is seldom executed in front of the viewer. In this case, the process of painting is reason in itself for the work to exist.

Veikko Halmetoja
Art Critic

Jaakko Mattila & Christine Kapteijn in conversation

CK: How do you choose the medium for a particular work?
How does that develop?

JM: Most of the ideas come from the media themselves; it's a natural process, they choose themselves...

CK: That's not good enough Jaakko! [laughs] It's too short and simple, you're supposed to go on and on about it! You have an idea for a particular work in mind first, I assume? And then you go on to think of it in a particular medium? What makes you think of it in oil, gloss, watercolour, print or sculpture?

JM: Well, I just think about what it is possible to do with one medium, what kind of image would best be done with that sort of medium. For example, in watercolours I can make some shades pretty close to white, in ten layers and with amazing qualities from the paper and the pigment.

But then again, with oils you can achieve so many other effects. They are pictures, so it's all about the surface and how it feels. Nowadays I don't really plan as much as you might think. For example, this piece here I have in the background, the main piece, I didn't really know what I was going to do – I just stretched the paper and then I started painting. ('One', opposite.)

So it's different for each piece of work.

It really is the media themselves; they have these qualities I like about them, their own physicality. Somehow, with the images or paintings I try to make, the medium tells me where to go.

CK: Does the medium also indicate to you the scale of the work?

JM: Yes, actually, because of their physical properties. You can't drip watercolours for more than two metres, for example because of the properties of water.

CK: Do you consider that a technical constraint to be overcome?

JM: Yes, I try to aim for what's best somehow. Then with gloss, there's a physical limit to paintings too. I can't make any paintings larger than three metres squared because I can't really glue them together properly.

I have never been given the scale for exhibiting these larger works either. The show at the James Hockey & Foyer Galleries is the first time I can exhibit the gloss pieces. I always wanted to show three of these landscapes together, because I use three different backgrounds: white, black and grey. They are very large so it is the first time I can present the complete series together. That in itself is going to be quite strong. I am looking forward to it.

CK: Mmm ... Absolutely that will be very strong, I agree.

You say your pictures are about the surface right?

JM: Well, all pictures are about the surface.

CK: Yes, but your pictures go further than that. They are very much about what is behind the surface, it seems?

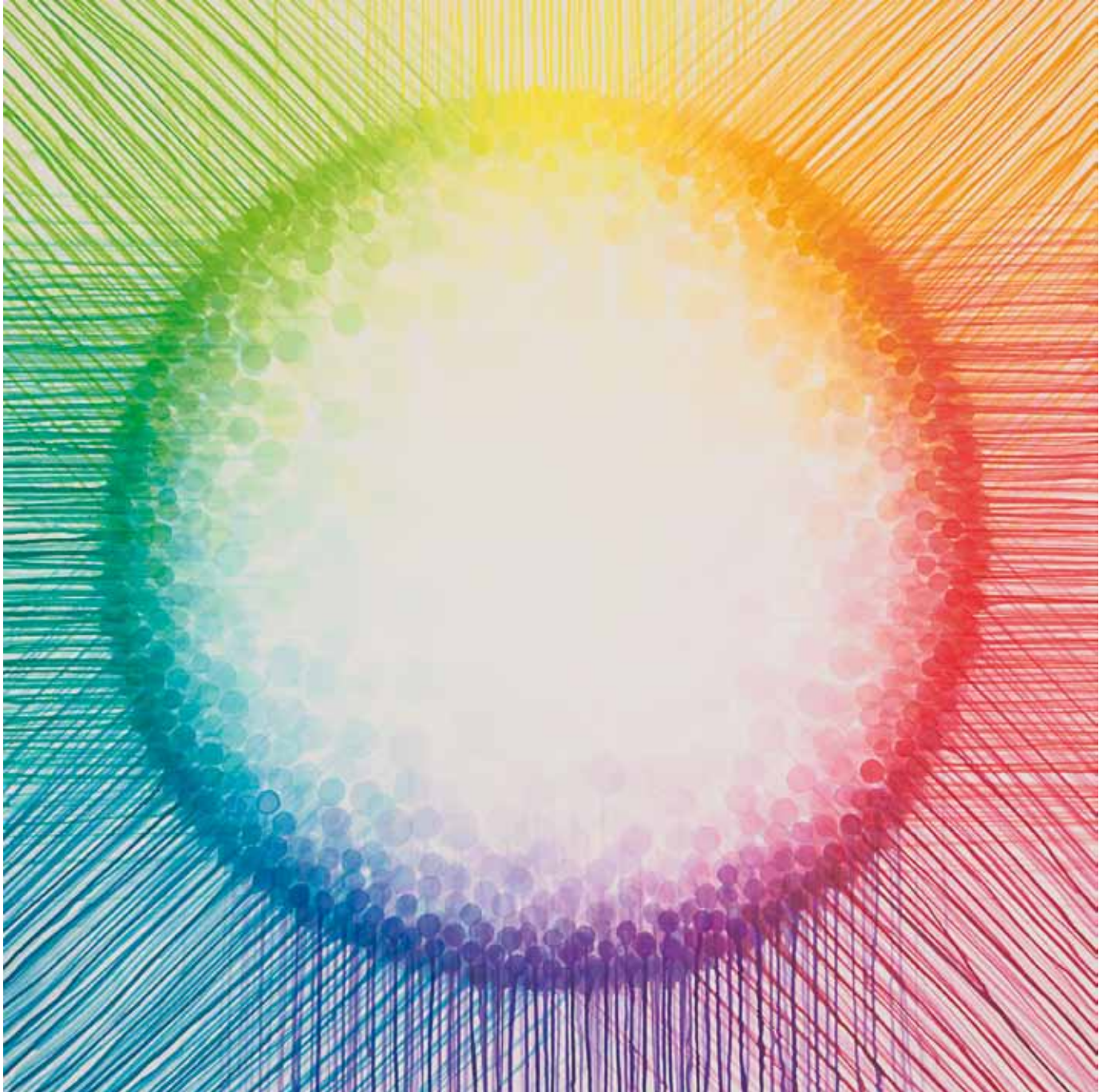
JM: Yes, definitely. I try to eliminate the surface, that's the thing really. That's critical for me. And when I look at paintings too, I like pictures that somehow don't make me think about the surface at all. If the painting is good you'll easily get behind it.

CK: What is the mixture of ways in which you plan and execute such works?

JM: I like to question things all the time and think about what you can do and how to present it. Otherwise it would be kind of boring. For example, in my next solo show at the Oulu Museum of Art in 2012 (www.ouka.fi/taidemuseo_eng), I will be creating a mural in watercolour technique, directly onto the wall. It's going to be interesting, I think it will work. At least it does work here on my walls, if you look at the drips at the bottom of the painting.

CK: I see what you mean: the drips underneath the picture. The excess paint drips directly onto the wall. But don't you ever repeat yourself?

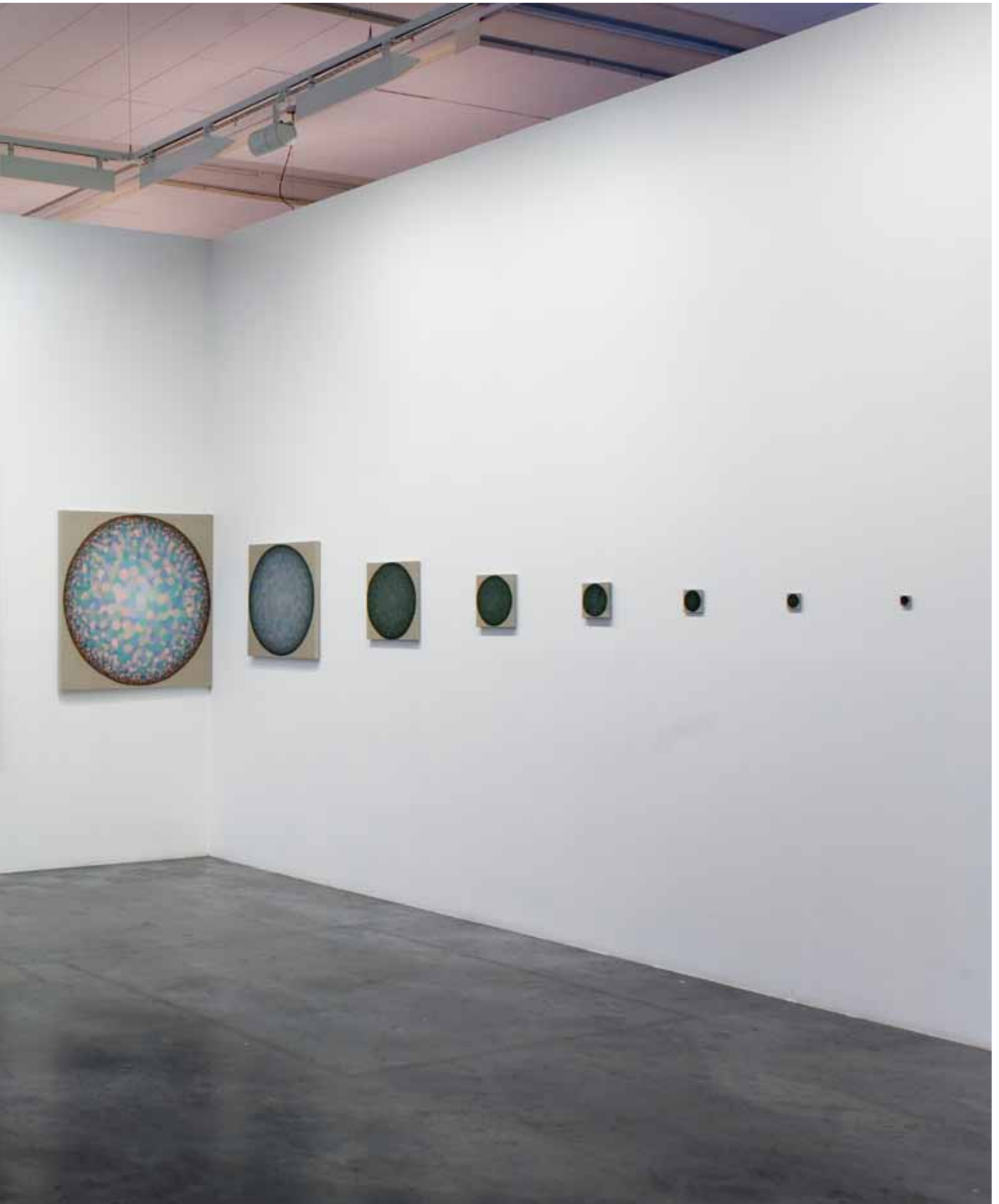
JM: I sometimes do the same thing because I'm quite critical. If I haven't executed some visual idea as well as I should have, in my view, I might do it again or I will try it on a different scale. There are certain elements like this circle or like these spirals that repeat themselves in my work because I really like those forms.



One, 2011, watercolour on paper, 140 x 140 cm



Being, 2005-2011, oil on 13 canvasses, pictured at Korjaamo Gallery, Helsinki 2007



CK: But you work in very sharp bursts don't you?

JM: Well it depends, really. On this painting ('One') I've been working for two weeks now.

CK: Incredible, how large is this painting?

JM: It's 140cm square, this one, and I have four pictures of the same size.

CK: It will look stunning to have all these together, absolutely amazing.

What I find strange is that your work looks really planned and considered but at the same time utterly direct and in the moment.

JM: Yeah, for this circle here there was no preliminary drawing or plan. It's not even a real circle; it's a little bit wonky. I repair it and fix it a little as I go along.

CK: Right, so are you on a continuous feedback loop: adjusting all the time?

JM: Yes, like these big gloss works, which take a few hours a day for one piece and are absolutely huge. You wouldn't think that. It's a very different process all the time.

CK: How do your prints relate to your original works; do you find they provide a release, a different distance to the process?

JM: Yes, prints are strange because they are the only works that involve a lot of planning because of the process: it is really slow. The copper prints are especially slow, involving a lot of chemicals and a lot of different phases within one work.

I have one new piece that I haven't printed yet but I will do it before the show; like a grey square but with five different colours. I will be able to finish that one when I bring my own studio to Farnham for three weeks.

CK: You mean you're going to set up your studio in the gallery? You're going to take over?

JM: Yes, why not?

CK: Yes, why not? Why not a coup? [laughs]

I looked at your website (www.jaakkomattila.fi) and thought this work looks so amazing already on the screen.

JM: Well, it is impossible to tell scale from the small size of the images. Everything looks bad on a computer screen.

CK: You think so? I could almost imagine people just having your picture on a computer screen in their room as art work.

When you refer to 'global visually interesting art' in your statement what do you mean?



JM: Well that's the central point: 'Lowest Common Denominator' refers to what people find aesthetically or visually interesting. But that should not depend on where you are from or what you have seen, for instance, how many TV shows or movies or Disney films you have seen as a kid.

CK: So it's looking at something and sharing that immediacy with everybody and looking again or thinking about it again? It basically has a powerful and direct impact; it goes straight to the core?

JM: Yeah, exactly. I have absolutely no political agenda whatsoever in my work and I'm not trying to be clever about it, the opposite really.

CK: So would you consider this a craft attitude to art?

JM: Maybe, I don't know whether you can call it that. I think a lot of craftsmen are real artists.

CK: Yes, I know, true, true, but those terms continue to have meaning, don't they?

JM: A great painting is both craft and art. That is associated with a lot of things in life. It sounds very good in English but somehow in Finnish...

CK: Ah, right, does it refer to a level of status?

JM: Yes, but I was just thinking in terms of the language – how it sounds – not in terms of meaning. I just went astray a bit in my thoughts.

CK: I am intrigued by what you mean when you talk about 'mediocre' in relation to your work.

JM: Hmm, well, normally 'mediocre' is a word that has negative connotations.

CK: Definitely.

JM: Which I like, actually.

CK: You do? But why? Because it relates to the ordinary, common, everyday and doesn't set up barriers?

JM: Yes, everyday common things.

CK: And refers to the general, therefore, the universal?

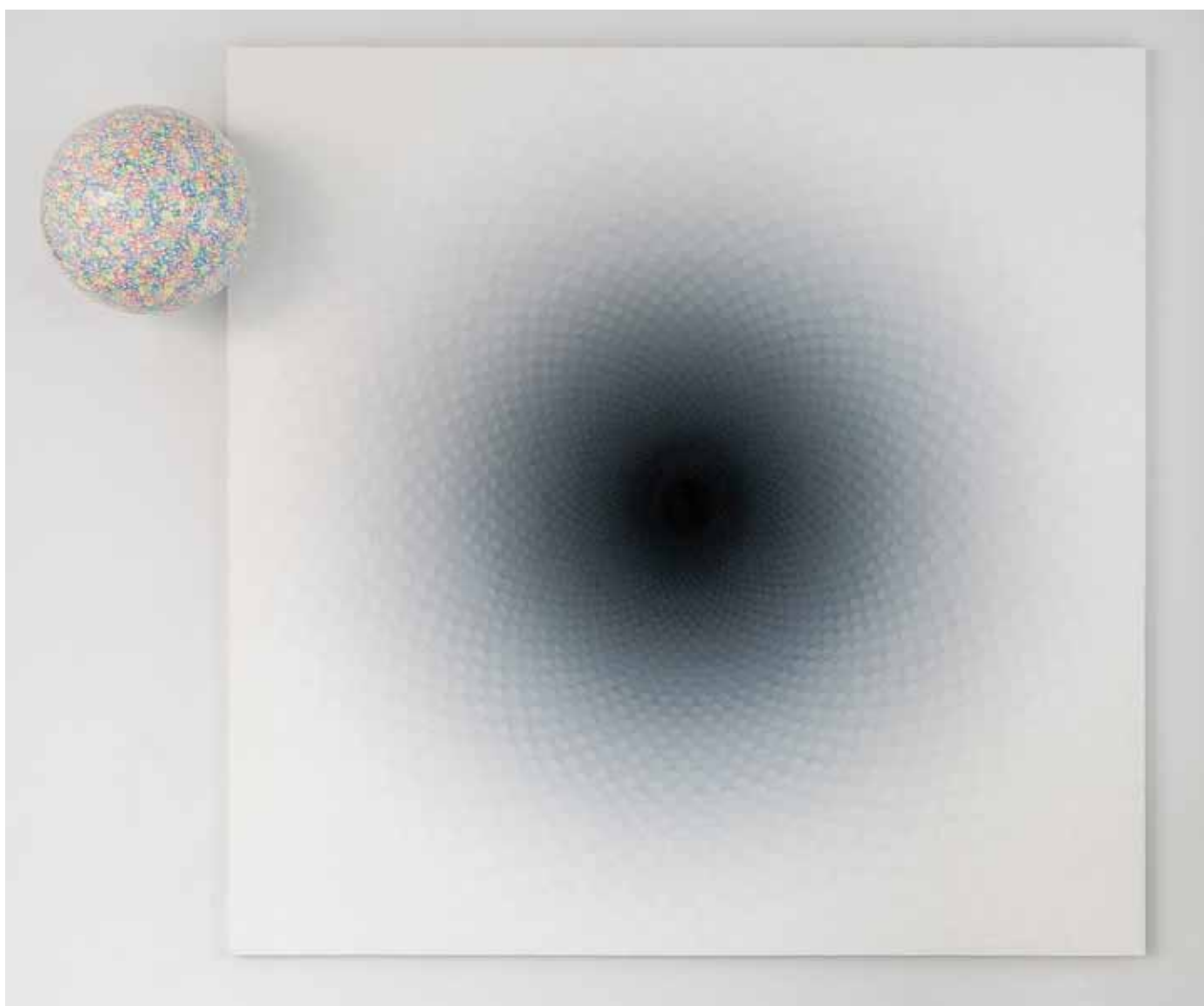
JM: Mmm.

CK: Because it's actually a very derogatory word, 'mediocre', isn't it, especially in art. Is that something you like to play on?

JM: Well, I don't like being bad. The works I exhibit I think they're OK, at least...

CK: I think they're more than OK. You're pleasantly modest!





Everything and Nothing, 2008, oil on canvas, mixed media 180 x 180 cm, dim. 44 cm, collection of Sara Hildén Art Museum

I'm just intrigued by the idea – I think it's really interesting – of art having impact regardless of the cultural background of the viewer. Is this a political aspiration, or not?

JM: No.

CK: No, so why would you go for it then? Why would you want to reach everybody?

JM: No, I don't want to reach everybody. I just want to make work that potentially reaches everybody, that does not discriminate against any viewer. I'm not sure if I quite understood what you meant.

CK: Well, you're saying that you would like to make art which has impact regardless of cultural background or education. Is that because you are working towards this potential of art? Is it an overarching theme in your work, an aspiration which informs all of it?

JM: I don't really think about it in that way. When I make the work, I just make it. Maybe it's a way for myself to understand what I do a bit better. But if you look at my website, for example, people from all over the world go there, so it has succeeded in some way. Great art speaks to all people.

CK: Great art speaks to all people but that may not have been the overriding intention behind the work, is that we are saying?

JM: Yes, because it's a personal thing. You have personal reasons why the work appeals to you, which you can't explain. When you go to beautiful places in nature, for example, you don't question the concept behind it and behind finding it beautiful. People have different viewpoints all over the world, their own opinions. I respect that.

CK: Well, I was thinking that natural harmony is an essential part of the aesthetic in Finland. There must be something in your background which makes you think of that link between nature and aesthetics. Do you recognise that as an influence?

JM: Yes I think so. Flat landscapes are an Oulu thing. The more I think about it, I guess we don't really have this cultural heritage and long history of successive eras like England. We're still a young nation. That is why the Modernist aesthetics I've grown up with must have been a strong impulse. But, interestingly, in the Finnish art world there are not that many people who make my type of abstract art.

CK: No, that's right. I noticed that when I visited Finland in 2008. Your work is totally different from what I saw in most museums with an international agenda, which didn't really seem to connect with the Finnish sensibility. We talked about that at the time.

JM: Yes, I guess so... especially in the area I'm from where there are huge flat landscapes like the bottom of the sea because of the ice age. We have this amazing horizon here. Landscape is such a traditional form of painting also, I wanted to give it a go somehow - and I'm quite thrilled to have three of them on the same wall in this show, definitely one of the big motivators for doing this exhibition.

CK: To what degree do you carry out research for new works in terms of the medium and how far to push it?

JM: I research pretty much in depth. It's like chemistry: I buy the pigments not the names of the colours or anything like that. I have a list of all the pigments in the world; I know all the chemical formulae.

But it's still pretty basic. Each pigment and each colour have totally different qualities. You can clearly see in the watercolours and in all the paints that certain areas of colour are really difficult to make; you have to work at a mixture.

I was very spoiled when I went to see this Colour Scope event, two days ago. I think it's actually from the UK. They have different colour tents like a walk-in maze of pure colour, pretty amazing. That was great for me. Colour and tone are these elements that we separate visually. And that's why I use all these colours...

CK: ... of the rainbow, of light refracted through a prism.

Finally, what installation are you going to show, do you know yet?

JM: 'Being' (page 8-9), which consists of thirteen canvases. It's in the catalogue as well. Then I've got some pure pigments, oil pigments, on a floor or stand or shelf, but I'm not quite sure yet.

Quantity-wise I have completed the show, but I have an idea of what I'm going to do next with the watercolour. In fact there are two ideas I will do. I have one more idea in oil, it's an old one, and I will see if I have time to complete that.

Circle, 2008,
aquatint, 40 x 40 cm,
edition of 40





Combusting Cube, 2010, watercolour on paper, 150 x 120 cm

Jaakko Mattila

www.jaakkomattila.fi

Education

BA (hons) Fine Art 2001, The Surrey Institute of Art & Design (now University for the Creative Arts)

BTEC Diploma in Art & Design 1998, The Surrey Institute of Art & Design (now University for the Creative Arts)

Future Exhibitions (selection)

2013 Gallery Ama, Helsinki, Finland (solo)

2012 Oulu Museum of Art, Finland (solo + catalogue)

Solo Exhibitions (selection)

2011 Lowest Common Denominator, James Hockey & Foyer Galleries, Farnham, UK (catalogue)

Galleria Himmelblau, Tampere, Finland

Galleria Harmaja, Oulu, Finland

2010 Youkobo Art Space, Tokyo, Japan

2009 Pohjanmaa, Myymälä2, Helsinki, Finland

2008 Galleria Harmaja, Oulu, Finland

Less is a lot more than nothing at all, Kellarigalleria, Oulu, Finland

2007 Olento, Korjaamon Galleria, Helsinki, Finland

2006 Teoksia, NUKU, Oulu, Finland

Group Exhibitions (selection)

2010 Condition Ok! and other new art, Sara Hildén Art Museum, Tampere, Finland (book)

Paintings, Aine Art Museum, Tornio, Finland (with Henri Hagman)

Himmelblau, Galerie Arktika, Marktobendorf, Germany

Panda Gorilla & Co. Shau Fenster, Berlin, Germany

2009 Flash, Sara Hildén Art Museum, Tampere, Finland (catalogue)

Worth Painting, Amos Anderson Art Museum, Helsinki, Finland (catalogue)

2008 Gooden Gallery (ex- VINEspace), (with Robert Currie), London, UK

Salmela Art Center, Mäntyharju, Finland

2007 Gallery Terttu Jurvakainen, Muhos, Finland

Angel Of Dog Exhibition, Mezkalito Gallery, London, UK

2006 Helsinki International, Korjaamo Gallery, Helsinki, Finland

Scandinavi-ART, Camaver Kunsthaus, Lecco, Italy

IHME-Oulun Region Art Show, Oulu Museum of Art, Finland

2005 Random Access Memory, Toppila Mill, Oulu, Finland

2002 Sabotage the war effort, The Foundry, London UK

2001 ISSUED International, 'art-squat' at Rue de Rivoli, Paris, France

Raw Canvas, former Aldwych underground station, London, UK

ISSUED at Five Years, Five Years, London, UK

37 too many, Candid Arts Centre, London, UK

Self-Service-Painting, Five Years, London, UK

2000 Meat Tree, The Maltings Gallery, Farnham, UK

Public Works

2008 Omat Kuviot-mural, Toppila Oulu

2007 A Detail of the Cosmos (45 remix)-mural, 45 Special, Oulu

2006 Mural (with Petri Yrjölä), 45 Special, Oulu

2005 Pallautuneet - sculpture, Nallikari Camping Area, Oulu

Publications

2010 Condition Ok! and other new art, Sara Hildén Art Museum, Exhibition book (hardback)

Homanen/Mattila/Törmänen, catalogue for exhibition

2009 Flash! Sahim, Sara Hildén Art Museum

Prosenttitaiteen Vuoksi, Oulu Museum of Art

Worth Painting, Amos Anderson Art Museum, Finnish Painters Union

2008 Teoksia 2003-2008, self published book (80 pages)

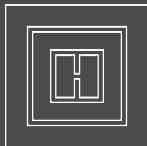


Jaakko Mattila

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Acknowledgements

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Sara Hildén Art Museum

Veikko Halmetoja

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Tracy Scares and the Sandy Hill Detached Youth Project

Kerry Tuckett and the Richard Clarke Trio

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Thank you."

www.jaakkomattila.fi