

The poetry of light and shadow

Senja Vellonen (born 1954), who graduated in from the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts in 1981 and also attended the Free Art School, has long been known as a superb watercolourist whose large pieces exhibit a magical atmosphere.

In addition to her watercolours, Vellonen is known for a form of art a little less known in Finland. Since the early 1980's, Vellonen has also been making so-called Artists' Books which are book-like pieces of unique art realised in the shape of books. Such pieces have a long tradition in Western art yet in Finland there are not many other such purposeful makers in addition to Vellonen. In a way, an Artists' Book is also about conceptual pieces deliberating the idea of the book and its material quality. Vellonen herself has said: "In my Artists' Books I hope to get closer to a painting, deeper into painting: into the poetry of light and shadow but also the landscape of my own soul." Vellonen feels an Artists' Book is "poetry of colour in the form of a book." Over the years Vellonen has made tens of Artists' Books that have been circulating exhibitions all over the world.

I vividly remember how in the late 1990's I first saw some of Vellonen's large paintings of roses. I am of the generation that didn't consider floral paintings much of an art but rather saw them as just pretty pictures. Vellonen changed it all. I had never before seen floral paintings so stunning. Of course I knew all about the versatile symbolics of roses that have carried on through the history of art yet Vellonen can combine mere superficial symbolics with almost the actual scent – that is how powerful her paintings are. In addition to very strongly communicating the symbolic language of roses – love, beauty and passion, sensuality and suffering – they are also portraits of actual roses that Vellonen never gets sick of watching.

Just like her Artists' Books, Vellonen enjoys travelling; her hobbies even include studying the Japanese language. One of the places special to Vellonen has been Iceland where she has travelled to on several occasions and whose landscapes – rocks, fjelds, glaciers, fjords, geysers and waterfalls – create a fascinating tension between force and sensitivity, which is precisely what Vellonen pursues in her work.

Vellonen masters the traditional landscape painting techniques but her pieces have elements that may make them almost abstract. With some of the Iceland pictures it is not always even clear whether the topic is a frothing waterfall or an upward-gushing geyser. In fact at times the target seems to be the force of water but also its sensitivity, transparency and fragility. And what better way to depict this than watercolour?

Vellonen is also a rather literal artist. Her Iceland pictures may have been influenced by famous author Halldór Kiljan Laxness, who wrote in her novel *World light*: "Where the glacier is drawn against the sky, earth stops being earthly and gains its share of the sky, there grief no longer resides and therefore joy is not necessary either, that place is ruled by beauty alone, higher than all other demands." At least this is how I imagine it, for it is those heights that Vellonen's work reaches for. They are ruled by such strong beauty.

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