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A Night to Remember

Gill Crabbe, ***FNG Research***

A themed exhibition at the Sinebrychoff Art Museum, Helsinki, on the subject of night, has taken an innovative approach in which a contemporary poet, Henriikka Tavi, was invited to contribute. **Gill Crabbe** *discusses the collaborative process with her*

Biagio Martini, *Old Man Holding a Paper Lantern (cynic)*, 1809, aquatint and etching, 33.8cm x 23cm
Finnish National Gallery Collection / Sinebrychoff Art Museum, Antell Collections, Collan Collection
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Aleks Talve

The advent of digital art museums that create immersive experiences from the works of iconic historical masters, such as van Gogh, has had a mixed reception among museum professionals. These new media spaces with their fast-paced moving projections onto walls, ceilings and floors, entwined with intense sensory soundtracks, are a far cry from the unhurried contemplation encouraged in more traditional exhibition formats. So how does a museum like the Finnish National Gallery's Sinebrychoff Art Museum, which showcases old masterworks and art from the Renaissance to the 19th century, create an immersive experience that is appropriate to its holdings, yet speaks to today's museum visitor?

The Sinebrychoff Art Museum has addressed this question with its themed exhibition 'Night' (in Finnish 'Yö'), by revisiting the idea of the *gesamtkunstwerk* or total work of art. Here, this is given a modern twist by including contemporary paintings and sculpture – but no video installations – from the Finnish National Gallery's collections in dialogue with older art. For the exhibition they have used experimental graphic design, as well as reimagining the gallery's architecture to create spaces that enhance the specific moods of the artworks. An innovative part of exhibition curator Kersti Tainio's approach was also the decision to commission contemporary poet Henriikka Tavi to write poems specific to the themes in each room, as a way of departing from traditional explanatory wall texts in favour of poetic texts that form an integral part of the whole artistic experience of the exhibition.

'We audaciously set about testing a new concept, in which collaboration with a poet opens up new interpretations,' says Museum Director Kirsi Eskelinen. **'**Instead of a set of distinct works, the exhibition is a total work of art, with its architecture – devised by designer Lauri Johansson – also playing a major role.'

'The work group met on several occasions and I set out my idea at a very early stage,' says Tavi. 'It made sense to write in dialogue with the artworks selected for the exhibition.' The art is in conversation with the poetry and the poems act as a portal to the present day.

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Aert van der Neer, *River in Moonlight*, 1640s, oil on canvas, 81.8cm x 101.2cm Finnish National Gallery Collection / Sinebrychoff Art Museum, Paul and Fanny Sinebrychoff's Art Collections
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Aleks Talve

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LULLABY TO THE SUN AND THE MOON

Waves soothe the day,
in a cradle, sleeping tight.

Winds makes the ships sway,
murmurs, good night, good night!

Good night, sleep-grey moon,
that holds the waters near.

Sleep well, burning skies!
pull darkness up around your ear…

The visual narrative of the museum's exhibition that Tainio devised takes us through the night, beginning with the end of the day in the first room, which displays classics from the collection, including the French painter Charles Henri Stock's *Departure of the Fishermen* (*c.*1850–53), Aert van der Neer's *River in Moonlight* (*c.*1640) and Albert Edelfelt's *Haikko Villa in Moonlight* (1880), in dialogue with Kain Tapper's red-hearted pine sculpture *Evening Sun* (1969). 'Here the sun sets, the moon rises and at the same time the fishermen are setting out to sea. The dramaturgy was so clear in this room, that it was just asking for a lullaby to the sun and the moon,' says Tavi.

From the opening room we are led into subsequent themed rooms. Sleep invites us to count sheep with a medley of Dutch Golden Age and German Baroque masters' tiny etchings of sheep, which is juxtaposed with larger-than-life contemporary paintings of lolling heads by Emmu Johansson that starkly reveal the body in its unconscious state. A room on life at night includes exquisite chiaroscuro depictions, mostly in etching and charcoal, of nocturnal life illuminated by lamplight. Then the cabinet room becomes the liminal space between conscious and unconscious that touches on the surreal (Mikko Ängeslevä's *The Other Side*, 2024). Dream and nightmare are then dramatically evoked in the next room, with images including scenes from Goya's 'Disparates' series (1816–19) alongside Kalervo Palsa's 'Werewolf' series from 1971, among a rich diversity of art that speaks of the uncanny.

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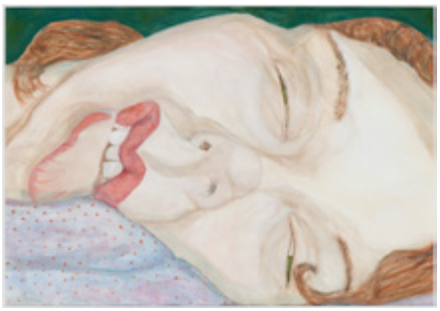

Emmu Johansson, *Beau 4*, 2017, gouache on paper, 29.7cm x 42cm
State Art Deposit Collection
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Museokuva © Kuvasto 2026

Finally we arrive, with a sense of relief, at the morning after the night before, in a room that appears to restore order with Stock's fishermen reappearing in the dawn light (*Return of the Fishermen*, *c*.1850–53), John Tobias Sergel's marble *Faun* (1774) waking up and Esko Tirronen's painting of a woman dressing (*Morning Motive I*, 1975). It was from these and other images which Tainio selected for the show that Henriikka Tavi composed what she describes as 'a mixture of introduction and poem', bringing 'one layer [of many] to the exhibition'.

Tavi was a good choice for several reasons. She has collaborated on projects with several visual artists in the past, most notably the renowned Finnish artist duo IC-98, as well as composers and theatre set designers. She also thinks her writing 'maybe able to speak to both adults and children', as the show aims to be a family-friendly event, with some artworks placed deliberately low on the walls and, in the Dream gallery, invitations to write down one's dreams to join a display of texts from the Finnish Literature Society's archive. Perhaps the most important reason she is a good choice, however, is that Tavi describes herself as an experimental poet, whose work has also drawn extensively on the influence of concrete poetry.

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EQUIPMENT FOR NIGHT OWLS

flashlight, lamp, reading lamp, lantern, lampern, woodfern,
ice sheet, straw mattress, pin cushion, light fibre, light sabre, satellite, streetlight, fleet light, snow-bright, moon-bright, moonshine, earthshine

'Typography, and how you visualise a text, is an essential part of my writing,' Tavi says. Here she is referring to her poems becoming a visual element of the exhibition's design, when the words themselves form images on the walls. 'It feels natural to me but the show's graphic designer, Antti Hinkula, was very involved in this aspect.' In one of the rooms, which

Francisco de Goya, *General Folly (Disparate general)*, from the series 'Los Disparates', *c*.1816–23 aquatint, etching, 24.3cm x 35cm
Finnish National Gallery Collection / Sinebrychoff Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen

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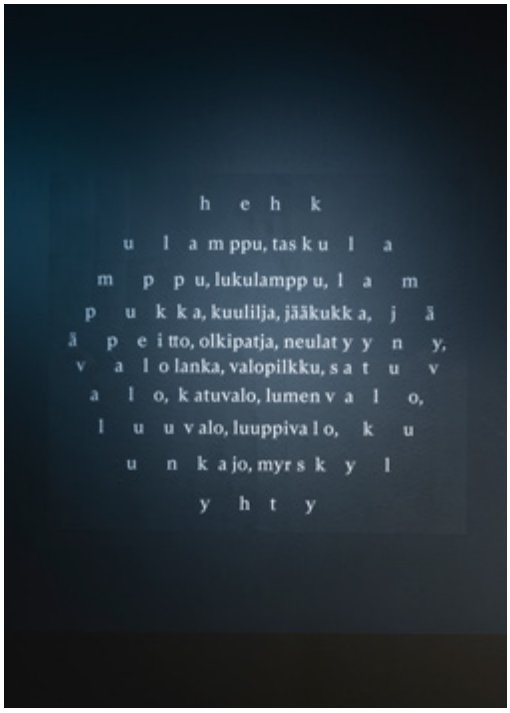

Henriikka Tavi's poem 'Equipment for Night Owls' [*Varusteita valvojille*] on the wall in the room dedicated to nocturnal life
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Aleks Talve

focuses on nocturnal life, the text of Tavi's poem *Equipment for Night Owls* is shaped like a full moon and placed high up in the corner on one wall, shedding light on works. These include a stone disembodied head (*Sleepless*, by Timo Takala, 2009), as well as dark-toned etchings and drawings depicting a lone tramp (by Ester Helenius), lovers embracing under lamplight on a park bench (by Theophile Alexandre Steinler), Biagio Martini's *Old Man Holding a Paper Lantern* (1809) and the solitary contemplation of Helmi Kuusi's *Working-Class Authoress* (1944), an illustration for a book by Helvi Hämäläinen. 'I too often work at night,' says Tavi. 'Many writers write at night – there is something connected to this dream state, it's a semi-conscious, liminal time that suits the creative spirit.'

Having worked largely from the list of works for each room sent to her by the curator, Tavi noticed how, when she came to enter this room in the show 'the works began to live in the exhibition and how the pictures, the sculpture and the text interact is very beautiful'.

Indeed, Tavi's words interpenetrate the visual evocations not only through the graphic design of the typography but also the artworks themselves, especially in the room dedicated to the uncanny and the nightmarish. 'When you write in shapes, it can be very significant and the disciplines merge,' says Tavi.

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One thing looks like something else, let's say it's a duck. As it turns, its head reveals fear. Fear breeds fear, the rabbit grows, a light flickers in its eyes. From out of the sheep hatches a wolf, a swan, a lion, something stands on the sword drawn from the crest, dripping crimson to the floor, you try not to step in the puddle of cracked nail polish on your toenails…

In this room we are greeted by a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, painted in the late 19th century, with its lights faltering in Hitchcockian anticipation. Is there a storm or something more sinister causing the lights to flicker on and off? 'I think the whole room was such a carnival of artwork,' says Tavi. She had suggested her words could be shaped into an earthworm snaking around selected artworks on the walls.

'The image of the earthworm was a surprise as I first thought of a snake but it became an earthworm,' she says. 'Worms make the soil by eating everything and this gives you the richness and fertile ground for creating something new. Nightmares also enrich the soil for our personal growth.'

The worm-shaped words twist and turn around works including Frans Toikkanen's 1970s mezzotints of black cats, Olli Piippo's mysterious visitation from a bull, *Toro Toro* (2009) and Hendrick

Installation view from the exhibition 'Night' at the Sinebrychoff Art Museum, showing Timo Takala, *Sleepless*, 2009, stone, 14cm x 27cm x 24cm State Art Deposit Collection
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Aleks Talve © Kuvasto 2026

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A poem snakes around the artworks on a wall dedicated to nightmares. The exhibition architecture is designed by Lauri Johansson
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Aleks Talve

Rohesk's etching after Charles Le Brun's uncanny depiction of *Night,* from the series 'Four Times of Day' (1640).

Opposite the worm wall are Palsa's vivid 'Werewolf' watercolours alongside works from Goya's 'Disparates' series. 'I love the Goyas, which were the most inspirational works as they are so giving,' Tavi says. 'In *General Folly* there is this kind of circular movement where there are so many souls and small detailed forms that you feel you can look forever and still find new things – and at the same time it is so nightmarish. These works are timeless – with many layers of information and ideas, which is ideal material for a poet.'

Was the process of working with the Sinebrychoff Art Museum different from her other collaborative projects with artists? 'In this exhibition the poetry comes to help people take in the art. The poems needed the visual art and had not just a pure poetic function. I wanted to think about the reader in a different way. The writing might be similar but the process is

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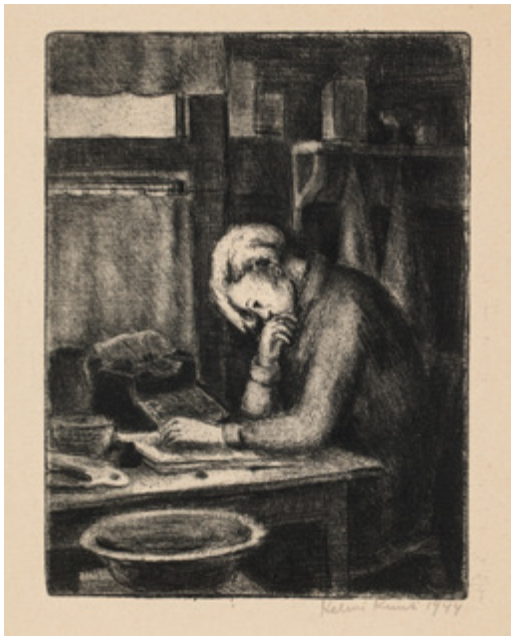

Helmi Kuusi, *Working-Class Authoress*, 1944, drypoint, 15.5cm x 11.5cm
Finnish National Gallery Collection / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen © Kuvasto 2026

Charles Le Brun, *Night*, from the series 'Four Times of Day', *c*.1640, etching, 18.1cm x 23.6cm
Finnish National Gallery Collection / Sinebrychoff Art Museum, Tellervo and Matti Waskilampi Collection
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen

different from my collaborations with artists. Here I was working with art that already has its own history. What was fruitful was the chance to discuss the works and spend time with them.' The exhibition materials were evolving across different historical moments that create different interpretations across time.

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ODE TO A TOOTHBRUSH

The toothbrush,
flattened like a field of hay
trampled by autumn after nightfall,
but there it was. Its sticky handle
formed a banister
until the final burps of sleep
had been gulped back…

Tavi chose to end on a humorous note in the final room, which is dedicated to mornings and wakening. 'I wanted to write an ode to this feeling of having had a sleepless night or a rough night,' she says. 'But then the relief you have when finally morning comes, even though you are tired – the relief that the everyday world gives you when you get out of this aloneness or private place.' The words speak to our contemporary world, in

Frans Toikkanen, *Chase*, 1972, mezzotint, 18.1cm x 29.7cm
Finnish National Gallery Collection / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Aleks Talve © Kuvasto 2026

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Henri Charles Stock, *Return of the Fishermen*, c.1850–53,
oil on canvas, 37cm x 60.3cm
Finnish National Gallery Collection / Sinebrychoff Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen

one sense the world of Esko Tirronen's update of the *femme à sa toilette*, here wearing silk briefs donning her day dress (*Morning Motive I*, 1975), prompting us to look back and wonder what kind of morning rituals did Stock's fishermen engage in, or ponder the hangover cures of Sergel's pandiculating *Faun* (1774).

> *…I filled my lungs with this pleasant air*
> *and breathed it back out in a puff of menthol.*
> *I saw myself mirrored in all,*
> *detached, in a good way,*
> *a figure, heading somewhere.*

'Night', Sinebrychoff Art Museum, Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, until 23 August 2026

Henriika Tavi's poetry collections include *Remu* (Teos, 2023) and *Pinnan alla* (Poesiavihkot / Poesia, 2023) published in Finnish; a selection of Tavi's poems in English is published in *Six Finnish Poets* (Arc Publications, 2013)