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Sámi Art Speaks Out at Kiasma

Gill Crabbe, *FNG Research*

The exhibition of Sámi art 'We Who Remain'*, now open at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in Helsinki, is timely politically, as well as artistically.* **Gill Crabbe** *gives an overview of the show and interviews the independent curator* **Petra Laiti** *about her collaboration with the museum*

A major exhibition of Sámi art at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in Helsinki, brings together contemporary artworks by Sámi artists and works engaging with Sámi life across Sápmi, spanning Finland, Sweden, and Norway. The exhibition, 'We Who Remain – Sámi Art in Focus', which is jointly presented by Kiasma and the Sámi Museum Siida in Inari, is especially timely, following the recent report of Finland's Sámi Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which includes recommendations to improve the status of the Sámi people and underlines Finland's responsibility as a country founded on the homelands of two peoples.

With recent solo shows of Outi Pieski at Tate St Ives, and Máret Anne Sara's prestigious Turbine Hall Commission at Tate Modern in London – both of whom have works in 'We Who Remain' – contemporary Sámi art and *duodji* (traditional Sámi crafts) are experiencing a renaissance and attracting increasing international interest.

The Helsinki iteration of the exhibition, curated by Sámi rights advocate and essayist Petra Laiti, features works by more than 20 artists dating back to the 1970s. The

Tomas Colbengtson's works in the exhibition 'We Who Remain – Sámi Art in Focus': Left, detail from the installation *InBetween_Colonisation*, 2024, screen-printed images on clear polycarbonate plastic; Right, *Lapland / Sápmi*, 2025, enamel print on metal, spray paint.
Courtesy of the Artist
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

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exhibition takes the visitor through four themed spaces – Land, People, Home, and Burden. The first room, Land, looks at geopolitical issues and includes poster works by Arvid Sveen (*Sámi Liberation* 1972–81), paintings by Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (*Untitled (Self-Portrait / Noaidi),* 1991) and Tomas Colbengtson's *InBetween_Colonisation* (2024), a sculptural installation of life-size historical images of Sámi individuals each printed onto a transparent piece of plastic that together float like apparitions at the centre of the room. One of these ghostlike figures also appears in the entrance lobby of Kiasma on a window that looks out onto the Marshall Mannerheim monument and the Parliament building beyond.

The second room in the show, People, includes a new installation by Outi Pieski, *Du luohti – Relations are the ultimate constituents of you* (2026), which utilises silk threads traditionally used in Sámi headscarfs. Included on the walls are Siri Baggerman's paintings of contemporary Sámi life (*Snow Scooter 1,* 2021), and Lada Suomenrinne's multi-layered photo work *Ancestral Album (Emergency Weather)* (2026). There is also a treated artwork, in which a work from the Finnish National Gallery Collection by Jorma Puranen, of multiple archival photos of Sámi people from his series 'Imaginary Homecoming' (1996), is quite literally reframed by Sámi artist Raisa Porsanger (*When revealing the concealed*, 2021).

In the third room, Home, we find a range of textile-based works, including Britta Marakatt-Labba's embroidered and appliquéd scenes (*Beds*, 2020), in dialogue with *rátnu* (carpet) textiles still being worked on a loom by Márjá Karlsen (*Rátnu Textile*, 2024), and artist duo Johdet Pirak's photo work of traditional rugs laid out on a blanket of snow (*Raanut*, 2023).

Hanging over the threshold of the fourth room, Burden, and suspended from bent weathered birchwood, is a large golden ring, an upscaled version of a traditional talisman found in Sámi homes and often given to a newborn child – *The same rope that hung you will pull you up in the end* (2020), by Joar Nango – which here has been repurposed. Stepping in to the room, we are taken out of the domestic sphere to explore the impact of colonisation. Here Marja Helander's large-scale photo works explore the link between the mining industry and today's standard of living and culture of consumption, particularly the impact of mining on the sensitive northern nature (from the series 'Davvi' (North)*,* 2018–21), including photos from the Russian areas of Sápmi. In the centre of the space, Máret Anne Sara's arresting installation *Gielastuvvon*, *Snared* (2018), comprising

Installation view from the exhibition, including works by Márjá Karlsen *Rátnu Textile*, 2024 (second from left) and Lada Suomenrinne's c-prints from the series 'Ancestral Album (Emergency Weather)', 2026 (right and far right)
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

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Britta Marakatt-Labba, *Beds*, 2020, embroidery and appliqué, 38cm x 46cm
KODE museums, Bergen
Photo: Hans Olof Utsi

coloured plastic lassos used in reindeer herding but here resembling nooses, is a protest artwork pointing to state-mandated reindeer herd culling and encroachments on grazing territories.

On the way to the exit from the exhibition there is a space where visitors can sit and reflect or converse. Eveliina Sarapää has created an installation, *Paluu* (Return, 2024) that includes a traditional salmon fish weir seat where fishermen would sit waiting for their catch but which is becoming obsolete due to salmon fishing prohibitions. Here it becomes a place for the visitor to rest their feet.

Gill Crabbe interviews Petra Laiti, the curator of 'We Who Remain', about the exhibition's themes, and the collaborative process

Gill Crabbe: What is it like to be curating a show of Sámi art in Kiasma?
Petra Laiti: It's hugely personal for me – I lived in Helsinki from 2014–24 and went to university here. I came here from central Finland but originally I am from Inari and I spent the first three years in Sámi kindergarten. My mother is from Helsinki – I visited Kiasma first as a child and I also visited the Sàmi Museum Siida in Inari and went to its opening. So I have childhood memories of both museums. In Helsinki I also worked in the Parliament for a while and then my career as a Sámi social commentator got jump-started by a protest. Kiasma had bought a piece of art that some Sámi artists and Sámi people considered appropriating. It caused a huge debate about Kiasma's response – cultural appropriation became national news. I and my friends responded with this protest in 2016. So for me, coming to curate this show here is huge act personally.

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GC: You had a personal vision for the show?
PL: Yes and No. Siida's Director Taina Máret Pieski approached Kiasma's Director Kiira Miesmaa about collaborating on an exhibition and she said yes. They agreed that they wanted a Sámi curator for the Helsinki show and Taina Máret called to ask me, would I like to make a proposal? Of course I said yes and my proposal was for four rooms and their themes and narrative and I had examples of what pieces might tell that story. A lot of those works ended up in the final exhibition, so essentially that pitch was a smash hit with the museum teams.

GC: How was the collaborative process with other museum professionals?
PL: We had an exhibition working group consisting of the Kiasma exhibition team, plus myself and Taina Máret and one more from the Siida staff. It was important to know I had the backing of the Sámi institution. Often what I hear from my Sámi colleagues talking about other projects is that there can be conflicts and I am happy this was not the case with this exhibition. In the beginning when we established the working group this was a failsafe against potential conflict. In other situations the conflicts have usually been about the ownership of processes – for example an institution not considering if the processes were built to empower a Sámi participant in that world.

GC: What do you think in general could help change potential difficulties?
PL: Because the Sámi curatorial role is very new and there are very few of us, it is difficult to see what could be regarded as guaranteed good practice just yet. One thing is to avoid having only one Sámi person represented in a working group. The way of working for this show, where there are two museums working on an equal footing, agreeing on an exhibition that will go on display in both museums, is a good starting point in guaranteeing that the narrative of the exhibition has to be alignment with both museums. So my concept was well received by both museums and they trusted my vision.

GC: What changes in the list of works occurred during the process?
PL: The only big changes were the result of not being able to secure some of loans we wanted. Some were about not being able to make contact with institutions that were themselves going through their own changes – mostly it was logistical issues in communication. Some pieces prompted issues over whether we could display them in a way that would keep them safe and still work in sense of the narrative. I made a list of the pieces I thought would be a challenge to secure and I had a plan B for those that would still fulfil the same narrative of the rooms.

GC: What were your research questions for developing the show?
PL: As we are talking about the show now in Helsinki, I would say the main one is the contrast between the Sámi eye and the Finnish eye. The fact is that 98 percent of the visitors to the Kiasma exhibition are going to be non-Sámi and many of them will need help with approaching this subject. So it's a balance between trying to serve the Finnish and non-Sámi audiences, giving them new and interesting perspectives on what Sámi contemporary art is, while keeping the exhibition interesting and having a bit of a wink to Sámi audiences who I know are going to be watching. I was working from a realistic viewpoint that in this building, close to Parliament and in this city with this specific population, the most likely way that the audience is going to get a good experience is for us to hold their hand a little bit.

GC: That's a big debate isn't it, about how much minority populations should be really educating the majority?
PL: There are different schools of thought this. I don't think there's a right answer to that question – it's really contextual. Some Sámi colleagues find it liberating consciously to choose not to think about the non-Sámi population and while I enjoy visiting those exhibitions, for me as a curator, I don't find that liberating. I notice it's very important to me that the people understand what I am trying to convey. So in this exhibition I asked, where do we draw the line? In the end I wanted Finnish people to be curious about Sámi art, and to understand the references and perhaps become curious about their own Finnish self-image. I can't ignore

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that need and the opportunity to be able to provide some possibility to build that kind of understanding.

GC: You're talking about reaching out to enable the non-Sámi visitor to connect. Isn't the idea of interconnectedness an important part of Sámi culture in a particular way?
PL: There are different schools of thought on this within Sámi cultural space. I have been raised in a way that considers knowing both my Sámi and Finnish family equally. So I sympathise with those who are searching for meaning and place and roots. Finland as a country has struggled with finding its own roots. In non-Sámi areas of Finland people are struggling with similar issues: that no one cares about rural areas that they are not of economic value and are somehow left behind.

So instead of connecting over, say, snow and the Northern Lights, Sámi and Finnish people could connect through asking how to discover information about their family and what do one's roots mean for one's identity specifically. Finnish and Sámi people in Finland have, for example, shared war trauma that has often not been discussed. That's one of the challenges of curating an exhibition like this, because since these themes are rarely explored there are so many different tangents you could follow.

GC: You were curious to examine relationships between a mostly Finnish audience and the art in this show
PL: A lot of Finnish people in public discourse seem to have a mystical view of what it means when we say the 'Sámi community'. So in this show, especially in the rooms on People and Home, I tried to give one answer to that and the room texts and pieces I chose reflect everyday things like family, home, like the guy brewing coffee in the painting *The Drone* (2021), by Siri Baggerman, and tried to demystify the community aspect. A Finn might say that it's a closed community of sorts but I don't agree. I think the Sámi community is very open and welcoming but I think the approach that it is a closed community is prohibiting people from making a connection in a genuine way.

So while, the first and fourth rooms are about burdens that are carried by the Sámi, indigenous and uniquely colonial burdens, the two rooms in between are about things that

Siri Baggerman, *The Drone*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 110cm x 150cm
Courtesy of the Artist
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

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Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, *Untitled (Self-Portrait/Noaidi)*, 1991,
acrylic on canvas, 91.5cm x 72.5cm
Stiftelsen Lásságámmi, Oteren
Photo: Øystein Thorvaldsen

Sámi and non-Sámi Finns could have in common. For example, just getting to know each other socially, visiting each other's homes and what that means. When I do the guided tour of the show, that is the narrative I take visitors through: so now you know the history of our lands, now you can meet our people, and when you meet our people you are invited into our home; now that you've been in our home, you're invited to share the burden that we have carried.

GC: You touched on misconceptions about a mystical connection, but what about spiritual values in Sámi art?
PL: Usually when asked about spirituality, I don't consider myself spiritually attuned. But there are some hints of it in the show, such as the sculpture with the giant ring hanging above the doorway between Room 3 and 4, *The same rope that hung you will pull you up in the end* (2020), by Joar Nango. Not all Sámi homes have these rings but it's still important for people to have some presence of a spiritual object. I liked the idea of having something in the home-themed room of the exhibition that you can't ignore.

Another thing that was very important for me was the self-portrait by Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, *Untitled (Self-Portrait/Noaidi)* (1991) in the first room. I saw it when I was a child and thought, now I understand what art is. It has a huge presence, it's so brave to paint yourself on such a large scale in the landscape. It challenges Sámi stereotypes of being small, humble. Here the artist depicts himself as a deity and challenges notions of what people today

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might think of as Sámi spirituality – small, inoffensive, underplaying ritual as just habit, and everything heavily Christianised.

Áillohaš [Valkeapää's stage name] in death has been reified and his art carries deep spiritual meaning for many Sámi people – for me his legacy is that, out of all those from that generation, he was one of the very few artists from the Finnish side of the Sámi world at that time. If he were alive today I think this exhibition would have happened 10 years earlier. In fact he influenced a lot of Finnish artists and his life had meaning for the history of the arts scene in Helsinki.

GC: The Sámi approach to museology is going to diverge in some ways from the Finnish National Gallery's. How did the exhibition evolve in relation to the burdens that have emerged in relation to Finnish museology?
PL: It comes down to a question of who is experiencing this show and from what perspective and with which eyes. Some of the works I chose, such as Raisa Porsanger's frame *When revealing the concealed* (2021) for the Finnish artist Jorma Puranen's portraits [*Untitled,* from the series 'Imaginary Homecoming', 1996], are a literal and practical interpretation of that tension between the two worlds and two ways of looking at the same piece. Some are more finessed in terms of this question, like Arvid Sveen's posters such

Raisa Porsanger, *When revealing the concealed*, 2021, frame, reindeer leather, goat leather. Courtesy of the Artist. The artist has utilised a photographic work from Jorma Puranen's series 'Imaginary Homecoming', 1991, 90.5cm x 116.5cm, Finnish National Gallery Collection, Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma
Photo: Kansallisgalleria / Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen © Kuvasto

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as *Sámi Liberation* (1972–81). Like Puranen, Sveen is not Sámi but his posters have been made in an act of solidarity with the Sámi cause in Norway. So I think some pieces by their own existence tread the line of a non-Sámi artist creating something in solidarity, and Sámi artists taking that and claiming that as part of our imagery of ourselves, even though the person who made it isn't Sámi. Some works are in active conversation with this question: on whose premises and in whose rooms is something exhibited and in which way.

Then there is the presence of traditional *duodji* and handicrafts. Many Sámi contemporary art exhibitions feature traditional handicrafts and/or pieces that are made using traditional handicraft knowledge. And there is a question of the relationship between *duodji* and handicraft and when it is considered art and when not. I tried not to address that question because *taide duodji* [art duodji] is a form of Sámi contemporary art and traditional art expression that I think is the most difficult and inaccessible expression of Sámi art for non-Sámi audiences. So for this exhibition I tried to select pieces that have 'one foot out of the door' with that *duodji* aspect but that are also interpretable in a more traditional art-viewing sense. For example, Rose-Marie Huuva's mixed media work *Ahkku's 448 Stashes* (2006) showing grandmother standing between two walls of textile samples, includes *duodji* methods.

With regards to the non-Sámi visitor, if you show a Sámi artefact like a *kuksa* [wooden mug] it might take a long time to explain what it means in Sámi culture before they are able to understand the premise on which the artistic representation rests. For this show I wanted to avoid having large amounts of explanatory wall texts. I wanted works that can speak for themselves. That was a guiding hand in my selection. When the show travels to the Sámi Museum Siida I don't have to explain the works, so I asked what can I include there that I wouldn't have been able to include in Kiasma?

GC: You started with a clear vision of what you wanted in this show. Looking back now that it's open were there any surprises that came up?
PL: There were some parallels that I can see that I hadn't consciously drawn out. For example I wasn't aware how strong the emphasis was on textile works. With the *rátnu* carpets, I always knew I wanted to include them but I didn't realise that, together with the loom and the picture of the carpet in use and then the deterioration of the carpet in the rusting loom in the sculpture in the fourth room, the exhibition includes the entire life cycle of the carpet.

GC: Now that the Kiasma show is open, how has the experience of curating been?
PL: I have been really pleased and proud to say it has been a pleasure to collaborate – inspiring and rewarding. I had no limits placed on me by the Kiasma team. Perhaps if I had known that would be the case I might have pushed the boundaries more, but now I know what might be possible to ask for.

We Who Remain – Sámi Art in Focus, Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, until 6 September; Siida Sámi Museum, Inari, 16 October 4 April, 2027