

The Helsinki School—Out of the Depths of Photography

Milja Laurila | Anni Leppälä | Niko Luoma
Jussi Nahkuri | Jyrki Parantainen | Niina Vatanen

Exhibition: 16 November 2024 – 25 January 2025



The exhibition *The Helsinki School—Out of the Depths of Photography* continues in its longstanding tradition of pushing the boundaries of how we perceive and interpret the photographic image. This presentation features a range of explorations into how different materials—such as fabrics, layered collages, and folded film negatives transformed into sculptures—can be utilized to form a new visual language within the photographic process today. It represents a collective effort to redefine the material qualities of the photograph, attempting to recover its magic as a physical object. This is the first fully dimensional overview from any previous Helsinki School presentations to conceptually challenge these existing parameters.

Fascinated by the photograph's ability to use time to visualize surrounding phenomena, Jussi Nahkuri compresses, combines, and finally assembles on aluminum profiles collected photographic material. In his work he gives existential and abstract concepts a tangible form. Their three-dimensional quality allows the viewer to perceive the photographic content differently with each encounter. As angles and lighting shift, diverse aspects are revealed, emphasizing the notion that landscape can be approached from multiple perspectives, both literal and figurative. In *Some Nice Thoughts*, the camera follows the artist's gaze, recording his observations in 10-millisecond intervals as he interacts with his surroundings, *walking under the branches, leaning against the trunk, and watching the shifting light*. Nahkuri thus creates artworks that both capture and generate a multitude of unique moments.

Interested in photography's ability to suspend time, Anni Leppälä explores themes of memory and nostalgia throughout her work. Her visual language weaves together an array of textures, materials, and objects, often playing with a distorted sense of scale. In the works displayed at the exhibition, she pushes the boundaries of traditional photography. Combining and pairing images, she unveils a new understanding, a "third image." Leppälä's works are imbued with a dreamlike, narrative quality reminiscent of the magical world of childhood fairytales, where recurring motifs such as curtains or closets offer mysterious passageways to the unknown.

Feminism and memory are central themes in Milja Laurila's work, which delves into the intricate relationship between knowledge and the subconscious. By using borrowed images—particularly photographs from old medical books—as the foundation of her work, she frees them from their original context, allowing them to take on new meanings and speak on their

own. Her alterations subvert and disrupt the socio-political structures underlying the original photographs. In her series *In Their Own Voice*, the works evoke early photography's glass plate negatives, the use of acrylic glass lending a weightless translucency to the images. This material becomes a metaphor for the delicate fragility of the portrayed subjects, casting them as shadowy reflections on the walls. "With the help of archival imagery," explains Laurila, "this series continues my research into the perception of femininity."

Known for his experiments in photographic abstraction, Niko Luoma plays with illusion and three-dimensionality, beginning with light as a raw material to combine multiple exposures on the same negative. In his current series, he bends these negatives into sculptural shapes, challenging conventional processes and transforming the flat image into a dynamic form. Luoma thus questions the usual formality of photography by moving beyond the standard rectangular film format and introducing the idea of folding as part of the finished works. In his two works *Self-titled Adaptation of Untitled (Gingham Woman, Albers Wall / 1965–1974)*, negatives hover over copper and polished steel plates, representing two ways of projecting light. Copper, traditionally used in printmaking, slowly reacts to light, suggesting a negative that eternally reflects and imprints on the surface. In contrast, the steel, unchanging, perpetually mirrors and reflects light into space. In Luoma's body of work, form and content hold equal significance, seamlessly intertwined to question the limits of the medium.

Jyrki Parantainen begins with photographs or found images as the foundation of his work, pairing text with specific areas of the image. Through this, Parantainen explores the themes of human physical and psychological vulnerability, marking points of perceived weakness on the body with pushpins and threads. Each chosen word is linked by taut strings to these vulnerable points, creating a powerful visual and emotional tension that deepens the viewer's experience of the work. His work grapples with fundamental human experiences—life and death, flesh and blood, love and hate—often with an undertone of absurdist humor. His latest work, *Eternal Garden*, draws inspiration from the Book of Judith, which tells the story of Judith using beauty and charm to slay the Assyrian general Holofernes.

Niina Vatanen's works challenge our perception of time and space, drawing from a personal archive accumulated over decades that includes both her own memorabilia and images from outside sources. Her large-scale fabric works, *Gravity Experiments and Cyclic Phenomena*, evoke the interconnectedness of nature's cycles and the passage of time, seamlessly combining the idea of earthly gravity with the vastness and weightlessness of space. The materiality of the hanging fabrics highlights this paradox, capturing both the pull of gravity and a sense of delicate suspension, their semi-transparency accentuating the appearance of weightlessness. The installation of the works evokes both the historic archive, with its concealed truths, and the fluidity of the Japanese *ensō* circle, inviting the viewer to experience the cyclical flow of time.

Milja Laurila, *In Their Own Voice*, 2016