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PORTFOLIO
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The Helsinki School: From the Past to the Future, Vol. 5
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The Helsinki School: From the Past to the Future showcases the work of twenty-eight artists who have taught or studied photography at the Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture in Helsinki, Finland, during the past twenty years. It includes an introduction by founder Timothy Persons and eight essays by international curators, art critics, and collectors. Through spirited stories and ample reproductions, this handsomely produced, historic publication reveals why the program is hailed as one of the most successful in contemporary photography today.

The Helsinki School name was coined in 2003 by the critic Boris Hohmeyer in ART-DasKunstmagazin, but the program itself (Taiteidensa ja suunnitteluna Korkeakoulu, referred to in Finland by its acronym, TaIK) began at Aalto University in the early 1990s. At the time, the small, distant country was emerging from a recession, the cultural scene was provincial, and graduating students and alumni had to seek opportunities abroad. Persons created an academic platform with a core faculty that would not only teach photography as a conceptual art practice, but would mentor students in writing and presenting their work to the highest professional standards. In 1995, he established TaIK Gallery as a teaching and support structure. It was renamed Gallery TaIK Persons when it moved to Berlin in 2005 and became a commercial venue. In 2005, he also launched The Helsinki School series, published by Hatje Cantz, in which From the Past to the Future is volume five.

"We are talking about aesthetic principles and marketing in equal measure," critic Lyle Rexer writes in his essay "Points of Intersection: Helsinki/New York." He compares Person’s model with that of the School of Visual Arts, where Rexer teaches: "No comparable academic program in the United States has been as aggressive or successful in building recognition for its graduates" (266).

Such unparalleled institutional support coupled with private sponsorship has enabled Helsinki School artists to focus on developing distinctive voices that are at once inward-looking and shared. While there isn't one fixed point of view that connects the four generations, their collective vision does undeniably relate to Finnish identity. Much of the work employs nature and light and is imbued with a sensation of isolation or remoteness. But there are external influences, as well.

With a nod to surrealism, Anni Leppälä’s still lifes, landscapes, and portraits conjure fairy tales and childhood dreams. Forest Interior (Aomori) (2013) shows a northern light-dappled forest with a dark center, at once magical and foreboding. Hand (2013) depicts a fair forearm, palm up, draped with auburn tresses against a sandy ground. Hands (Thread) (2014) is a close-up of warmly lit fingers holding a short white thread. Keenly observed and intimate, the images create the impression of a long-lost or long-awaited world, and question how memory and feeling can be captured.

Meditations (2013—present), Wilma Hurskainen’s series, reflects the artist’s involvement with the Eastern practices of meditation and mindfulness. She explores the ideas of merging and dissolving borders, both internally, within oneself, and externally, between the landscape and portrait. Summer (2014) is a photograph of a woman dressed in a grassy green skirt and white translucent shirt standing erect, like the pines behind her, in a grassy landscape. She is positioned in the field so that the lines and colors of her clothes blend with those in nature. In Kimono (2013), a woman dressed in white is positioned in the snow in front of two tree trunks. A brown shawl, precisely draped over her shoulders and alongside her body, allows her to become one with the natural elements around her.

Jyrki Parantainen graduated from Aalto in 1992, and is now one of the program’s core faculty members. His essay, "Intuition and Analysis," underscores the program’s emphasis on nurturing individualism, and draws on references to film and to other artists, such as John Cage, to describe its evolution and philosophy: "Though creativity requires blind trials and failure, critical contemplation helps make sense of these later on." Parantainen’s image Personal Museum (2006), a diptych, is featured on From the Past to the Future’s glossy hard covers. In his work, he combines photography with other media to create a “stage for strong emotions and mental states of negative pleasure.”

From the Past to the Future concludes with a section of artists’ biographies and an illustrated list of the Helsinki School’s books and exhibition catalogs. Its design, by the Polish firm Full Metal Jacket—like the work it celebrates—is smart, refined, and clear.

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