KÄRÄJÄKIVET · KÄRÄJÄKIVET

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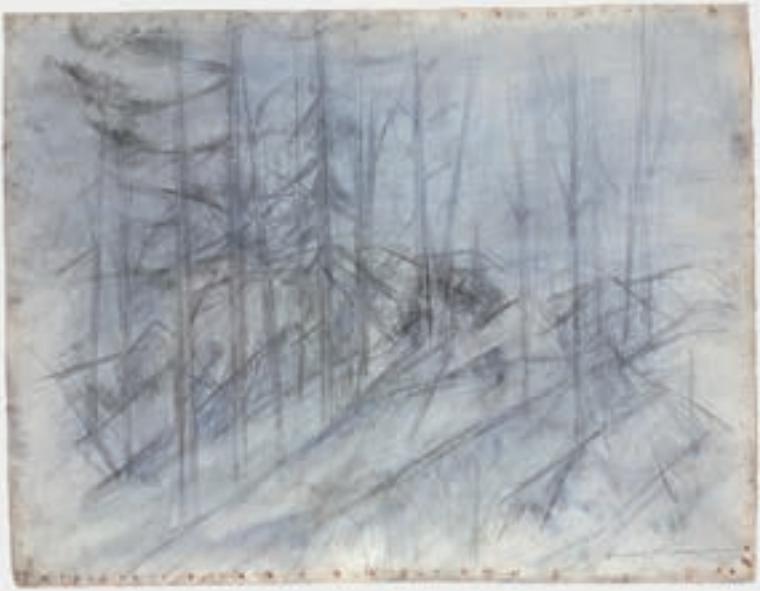
Painting Trips in the North

Aimo Kanerva



KÄRÄJÄKIVET edited by Márcia Nascimento · Nuno Costa

Painting Trips in the North

Summers in Lapland, from the mid-fifties to the mid-seventies

Aimo Kanerva

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Editor's Note

Márcia Nascimento
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In this issue, Käräjäkivet wants to pay a modest tribute to the Finnish painter Aimo Kanerva by re-publishing his text "Recollections from Painting Trips in the North", originally published in 1989 in the book "Omakuva" (Self-portrait). As an introduction, it is also published a short text purposedly written for Käräjäkivet from Anniina Koivurova, Curator of Regional Cooperation of the Rovaniemi Art Museum.

In this particular set of landscape works from Aimo Kanerva it is possible to corroborate the power of place in a work of art. To be in the place is equal as important as painting the place itself. The paintings of Aimo Kanerva are a natural result of a physical experience within the landscape, of the apparently simple and primitive everyday life from those who went deep into the north. And so apparently simple and primitive becomes his art...

This issue would not have been possible without the help of the gallerist Janne Lappalainen who intermediated the contacts with Aulikki Kanerva, to whom we would like to express our special thanks for her generosity and enthusiasm for granting permission to reproduce the text from Aimo Kanerva. We would like also to extend the acknowledgments to the Rovaniemi Art Museum for the permission to publish the watercolors of the artist that belong to the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation Collection.

Inari II, 1957. Watercolour

Wihuri Foundation Collection, Rovaniemi Art Museum. Photo: Rovaniemi Art Museum

Painting Trips in the North

-Aimo Kanerva – Into the soul of the Finnish landscape

Anniina Koivurova[1]

Aimo Kanerva (1909–1991) spent his childhood and youth in a cultural home in Vyborg (Viipuri, part of Soviet Union / Russia since WWII), surrounded by Finnish art. Having a supportive father, Aimo Kanerva began his art studies in the Institute of Industrial Design in Helsinki and continued in the drawing-school of the Fine Arts' Association of Finland until 1937, when he left the school, doors slamming.[2] Kanerva, a master of color, showed to be an independent character.

During his art studies Kanerva had attended military service. He joined armed forces of Finland during Winter War and the Continuation War 1939–44 and was wounded by a grenade shard to his stomach in 1940. When time of peace in Finland begun, his creativity burst out. Young, angry and rebellious Kanerva's life style was pretty rough and full of back lashes. He worked more or less in a Dostojevskian cellar basement and spent a lot of time in an artistry cafe Bronda in Helsinki until he got his life in order.[3] He was one of the main founders of an artist group October (1933–51), but for him it was for the friendship and stimulation of comradeship. In the midst of the boisterous circle of friends Kanerva cherished his freedom and individuality as an artists.[4]

The dark splendor of gloomy landscapes was typical for Kanerva's early, suggestive oil colors. He used boldly black line and fierce colors, searching an absolute and truthful reality from within his own being. Since 1950's he painted more and more with watercolor. In the art criticism for the October Group's exhibition in 1945 his watercolors' refinement and rare delicacy were both praised as well as damned for "sketchy drawing", "lack of discipline" and "arrogant carelessness". In a magazine interview 1947 he explained that "the artist can be set no other requirement that to listen unconditionally to his own inner voice and to obey it." A review in 1948 was a break-through: his art was seen as a coherent totality of rough and terrestrial art of Tyko Sallinen (whose works Kanerva saw already in his childhood home) and immaterially spiritual art of Helene Schjerfbeck.[5]

Kanerva is most known for dedicating his life's work for the Finnish landscape. Rough and simple Lapland sceneries and delicate flower studies in watercolor resonated with the realism in art of the

1. Anniina Koivurova is Curator of Regional Cooperation in the Rovaniemi Art Museum.

2. Aimo Kanerva (1989): Aimo Kanerva. Omakuva. WSOY, p. 22; Waltari, Mika (1978): Aimo Kanerva. In Search of the Image of the Finnish Landcape. Photos István Rácz. Espoo: Weilin+Göös.

3. Aimo Kanerva (1989); Hämäläinen-Forslund, Pirjo & Laurila-Hakulinen, Raisa (1992): Yrjö Saarinen ja taiteilijatoverit. Erik Enroth, Aimo Kanerva, Yrjö Saarinen, C.E. Sonck. Hyvinkään taidemuseo 10 vuotta. Hyvinkään taidemuseo 12.6.–9.8.1992.

4. Waltari, Mika (1978).

5. Waltari, Mika (1978).

The Banks of the Utsjoki River, 1964. Watercolour

Wihuri Foundation Collection, Rovaniemi Art Museum. Photo: Liiti Arto

time. In the aquarelles the power of the landscape and the fragility intertwine. His art catches the light of nightless nights, dark forests, dull swamps and spacious fells. Even though he painted several portraits and still lifes, he truly penetrated to the interior of the Finnish landscape.

In the end of 1940's Kanerva begun his yearly trekking travels, seeking the rugged wilds of Finland, of which Lapland became his most cherished place for next 20 years.[6] The family joined him in these exploratory summer-painting expeditions. The family dog was smuggled in the train's passenger car inside the jacket of Kanerva's wife. If someone heard barking and complained, Kanerva would yap in an absentminded way like a bit of a nutter, when the conductor arrived.[7] From the still snowy springtime until Fall, they arrived early enough to plant the potatoes and left after the harvest. They picked mushrooms and berries and caught their own fish. The living-conditions were harsh, mosquitoes giving Kanerva allergic reactions, but the summers were continuous painting with sensitivity and instinct. Kanerva become ever more vitally assimilated into the landscape, where the material deficiencies were compensated for by the passion of painting. His art resonated the power, fragility and simplicity of the wilds, the expansiveness, clarity and light of Lapland's nature.[8]

Kanerva was also international: he travelled with a cultural delegation to China in 1953 and his works were exhibited in Venice Biennale in 1960. But by the Lake Inari in Lapland he felt liberated from the pressure of alienating biennale art of Venice. In 70's he even criticized the young artists of opening the "windows to Europe" so widely that the other direction (Finnish origins) was closed.[9]

By the rivers of Ounasjoki, Utsjoki and Teno, Kanerva used an ordinary drafting board and attached the paper on it with drawing pins. He emphasized it had to be rag paper, as it did not turn yellow. Kanerva moistened the paper thoroughly and sketched the contours of landscape with a soft pencil, so the marks melted into the paper instead of hard line. Then the colors were added.[10]

6. Kanerva, Aimo (1993): Recollections From Painting Trips in the North. Aimo Kanerva 1909–1991. Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation Collection. Rovaniemi Art Museum 1993, p. 17–21; Aimo Kanerva. Vesivärimaalauksia / Akvarellen 1933–1983. Helsingin Taidehallissa / I Helsingfors Konsthallen 5.4.–24.4.1983.

7. Parkkinen, Pekka (1993): Marsh – Twisted Pine – Marsh Tea. Aimo Kanerva 1909–1991. Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation Collection. Rovaniemi Art Museum 1993, p. 13–14; Peltola, Leena (1993): The Power and Fragility of Nature in Lapland. Aimo Kanerva 1909–1991. Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation Collection. Rovaniemi Art Museum 1993, p. 7–10.

8. Kanerva, Aimo (1993); Peltola, Leena (1993).

9. Waltari, Mika (1978): Aimo Kanerva. In Search of the Image of the Finnish Landcape. Photos István Rácz. Espoo: Weilin+Göös.

10. Kanerva, Aimo (1993); Tauriainen, Heimo (1993): Aimo Kanerva Describes His Work Methods. Aimo Kanerva 1909–1991. Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation Collection. Rovaniemi Art Museum 1993, p. 23–24.

Marsh Tea, 1971. Watercolour

Wihuri Foundation Collection, Rovaniemi Art Museum. Photo: Ruotsalainen Matti

The landscapes were never painted in a studio. Sometimes Kanerva worked with one painting for three hours, during which "watercolors are applied in a thin coat, which is why the paper gives the painting, its colors, a translucence and luminosity, a kind or airiness." Color and line were equally important, an indivisible entity: "before a painting can be called a work of art, its content and form must harmonize."[11]

All the superfluous was eliminated from Kanerva's landscape and figure paintings, but it did not mean Kanerva would not study individual trees and wild flowers in quite some detail. His palette was the nature, the nature itself to be his point of departure. Nature gave him basis on which he constructed a painting rhythmically. With a landscape he aimed to achieve an impression of the whole view that opened before him, to the sides and behind. Kanerva believed a painting like this had a more universal significance since it captured the truth of the surroundings. "It is like a synthesis of nature as a whole".[12]

A Finnish writer and a friend of the artist, Mika Waltari, describes Aimo Kanerva as a universal humanist, growing from his own roots of the rugged country, with a reserved nature, exacting standards and interior tenderness. According to Waltari, Kanerva was patriotism's great Finnish realist, who "has found his origins in his own land and with sinewy fibers has intertwined his roots with the best traditions of Finnish art." He has bounded himself with the people of the rough wilderness lands, in the marshes, on the banks of the swift streams and at the foot of the fells.[13] One "landscape" Kanerva dived into again and again was gloomy spruce forest.[14] Mika Waltari put these paintings into words:

The snowy forest rose
out from the mighty country of death
like a dream of a hero,
like the anger of flashing blade.[15]

11. Tauriainen, Heimo (1993).

12. Tauriainen, Heimo (1993).

13. Waltari, Mika (1978).

14. Aimo Kanerva (1989): Aimo Kanerva. Omakuva. WSOY, p. 71.

15. Waltari, Mika (1978).

Landscape at Syväjärvi (Marrasjärvi), 1955. Watercolour

Wihuri Foundation Collection, Rovaniemi Art Museum. Photo: Ruotsalainen Matti

- Recollections from Painting Trips in the North

Aimo Kanerva, Painter

After an autumn excursion to Marrasjärvi in 1955, the whole family was in Uppana, at Marrasjärvi, right from early summer the next year, at “Uppana Kalle’s” house a short trip by rowboat from where K. M. Wallenius lived. This colorful general and author was an admirable woodsman, and with him as my guide I made a thorough study of the area around Marrasjärvi. We made trips to his wilderness hut at Syväjärvi, where we fished and I painted a few watercolors.

Marrasjärvi was the start of my family’s sojourns in Lapland, which were to continue for a score of years. Most summers were spent in western Lapland, on the banks of the wilds Ounasjoki River; we stayed for several summers in a row at some places, for example at Raattama near the Pallastunturi Fells and at Ketomella near Enontekiö. And we went even farther north to Inari, to Menesjärvi, near Kultala on the Lemmenjoki River, all the way up to Utsjoki.

Marrasjärvi was where I first began to make plant studies with watercolors. Marsh tea, which grew at the edge of the nearby bog with cloudberries, with its white, ball-like flowers, served as a model on many occasions. Marsh tea, which becomes almost invisible after its blooms wither.

During my brief visit to Marrasjärvi the previous September, I got a taste of the autumn colors of Lapland for the first time, made a few watercolors, but could not really get enthusiastic and have not visited Lapland again so late in the autumn. I have sometimes thought that Matisse would surely have gotten something very good out Lapland’s autumn colors!

After Marrasjärvi, it was time for Tapionkylä, on the other side of the Ounasjoki River. This is where the river forms Murhakorva, “Murder Rapids”. The name is said to come from an accident ages ago in which many people were killed when a boat overturned. I painted several oils by the rapids and a somber forest scene called Before the Thunderstorm. The sky suddenly darkened and the forest turned black. I painted quickly and just managed to drag the canvas into the house before the fierce thunderstorm broke loose.

Spring in Ketomella, 1973. Watercolour on paper

Wihuri Foundation Collection, Rovaniemi Art Museum. Photo: Rovaniemi Art Museum

In addition to landscapes, I painted several works with plant motives at Tapionkylä.

In 1964, we were already as for north as Utsjoki, where the Utsjoki River joins the Tenojoki. We lived at the elementary school. First I used watercolors to paint the Utsjoki's steep banks. Then I made a few oils with the same motive. The mosquitoes were a torment. Later I was sorry that when hundreds of mosquitoes got caught in the paint on one canvas, I pecked them off one by one instead of letting them dry together with the paint. I'm sure that some Lapland enthusiastic would have paid a good price for a "mosquito landscape" like that. Mosquitoes have always been a nuisance to me in the north. I guess I'm allergic to them. Sometimes I've had to travel dozens of kilometers to see a doctor.

Raattama and Ketomella were the villages along the Ounasjoki River where we spent the longest periods. We settled in, planted potatoes, caught our own fish, gathered berries and mushrooms. During our very first summer in Raattama, we got know Armo Raattama, the foreman of the log floaters, and his wife Linnea, who was in charge of the post office. And we still keep in touch.

Early in the spring I painted several oils of the marshes. Sometimes I lit a campfire at the edge of the bog since my paint covered hands had a tendency to get stiff from the cold. The villagers were puzzled by my goings on. After all, I had turned my back on their very own fells and was painting something that was completely useless, the drab bog. But of course the fells had their day, too. I made several oils and a few little pieces on the covers and bottoms of cigar boxes. An old, familiar support. I made a great many watercolors, expansive views, landscapes with the banks of the Ounasjoki River, groves, compositions with trees.

One spring, we got to Raattama so early - it must have been in the latter half of May - the ice had still not broken up on the river. Armo Raattama put us all into his motor sled and drove us at top speed in the middle of the light night across the still snow-covered Ounasjoki River to the other shore and then right to

Ounasjoki River, 1972. Watercolour

Wihuri Foundation Collection, Rovaniemi Art Museum. Photo: Liiti Arto

our yard. Our boat was pulled along by ropes at the same time. On a sunny day, I was painting a landscape on the shores of the Ounasjoki River with the snow-covered tops of the Pallastunturi Fells in the background, with the snow still shining clean on the ice and the blue of spring already in the shadows. The snow got darker day by day, and it would soon be time for the ice to break up. We just tried to predict what day or night it would happen. We saw strange goings on over on the opposite shore: young men were lugging milk cans to the river edge. We didn't understand at first was happening until late at night we heard a crashing sound and shouting on the opposite shore that later turned into quite a racket. The ice was moving, and the party on the far shore was under way.

Early in the spring of 1973 we were at Ketomella, a village comprising two houses along the road from Raattama to Enontekiö. The Ounasjoki River could be crossed at Ketomella by ferry, and the ferryman was named Akso Autto.

Our home was small, but it included an old stone barn that served as a studio and to which I gradually became very much attached. This was one reason why we came back to Ketomella the following summer.

Wide-open spaces. The Pallastunturi Fells loom in the background and continue from Ketomella as the Ounastunturi Fells all the way to Enontekiö. I painted several watercolors and a few oils with the same motive.

I have always considered the unhampered rush of the spring snows towards the viewer and to both the spring snows towards the viewer and to both sides across the frame important for the composition of the large landscape Early Spring at Ketomella. This is why I put my signature and date on the back of the canvas. I was allowed to paint in peace even though people in the village were naturally inquisitive. When I finished the work, I showed it to Akso, the ferryman who could neither read or write. Akso's comment: "Well now, this is our whole world, isn't it!"

Grove (Rainy Day at Raattama), 1966. Watercolour

Wihuri Foundation Collection, Rovaniemi Art Museum. Photo: Liiti Arto

On the ridge at Ketomella I painted a forest landscape during the spring snows, and struggled with it during the winter in Helsinki, and since I was still not satisfied, I lugged the canvas back to Ketomella the following spring. On the same ridge, in the same place, under the same conditions, it got better and looked the way I had planned it in Helsinki. The work is in the Oulu Art Museum.

I painted a great many watercolors on the same ridge, and in the same stone barn I made various plant studies. I even painted cornflowers, though they don't grow this far north. Veera and Eeva had taken a bag of seeds bought at a discount store and planted them in a big cement ring, and this is how cornflowers came to Ketomella.

On Midsummer Day I was in the village wood when I heard a strange pounding noise. I saw a hundred head of reindeer rampaging towards the village, through the thick brush. The great bucks were leading the herd. I ran off to alarm my neighbor. Men went out with their dogs and, like the professionals they in fact were, both men and dogs, they got the herd under control and drove it across the river, so it could reach the fells. Plagued and enraged by mosquitoes and horse flies, the herd could have badly trampled the village fields. What a magnificent sight it was, a herd of reindeer crossing the river! High in the fells, the reindeer are safe from mosquitoes.

The second summer at Ketomella was a rainy one. Even in July it rained almost every day. I holed up in the stone barn, went on fishing trips, fought off the mosquitoes, and as summer progressed into August, fought off the black flies. My allergic rash was worse than it had been in ages. I went all the way to Muonio to see a doctor.

I made a self-portrait in India ink and red pigment, with a red allergic rash on my forehead.

Aimo Kanerva at Marrasjärvi, 1955

August was at an end and the leaves were turning when we left Ketomella. I began to feel in the train that northernmost Finland was now being left behind. I remembered numerous springs when the train was rushing towards Rovaniemi and at Oulu's latitude I began to observe how the green in the landscape that was fleeting by gradually became lighter and how, as we approached Rovaniemi, green was nowhere in sight. What a relief! In Helsinki, before we had left for the north, I had sat with my watercolors in Hesperia Park, on the boulders of Alppila, and somewhere in Malmi alone with the southern spring. This is why I was always excited when I looked out the window from the train to Rovaniemi: Would I manage to see another spring? I would!

Käräjäkivet is an independent publisher of thought and criticism of art and architecture that was born from an artistic research around the unbuilt Saivaara Monument designed in 1978 by the legendary Finnish artist Tapio Wirkkala for the Saivaara fjeld in Lapland. The publisher has been achieving, not in form but in content, the concept of Käräjäkivet that Tapio Wirkkala wanted for the Saivaara Monument: the creation of a place where men of all races and colors can gather to think. In this sense, there is an online platform - www.karajakivet.com - where several invited authors are able to gather through literary constructions produced by them, sharing their ideas about architecture, art and culture in general, in a sort of modern-day assembly.

Evoking the place that Tapio Wirkkala wanted to create at the top of the Saivaara fjeld, Käräjäkivet meant to be a place of slowness and introspection where to stop, “observe the landscape” that surrounds us and think.

KÄRÄJÄKIVET

Finnish word meaning “court stones” or “circle of stones”: places of judgment (originally iron age graves), where judgments were held and justice carried out, accordingly to the Finnish National Board of Antiquities.

In the ancient times, they were important places where the primitive leaders of the North got together in order to discuss and decide about common matters.

www.karajakivet.com

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