

Heidi Grahn

Nanna Susi *In the Moods*

Painter Nanna Susi has been busy for the past thirty years. During this time a young girl's passion for pictorial art has developed into her life's work. The ardour of the emotion has not diminished, but the force akin to the Big Bang darting in every direction is now under her control. She still paints just as honestly and deeply as ever but focuses on one particular motif at a time.

Nanna Susi lives in the emotion of the moment, "in the mood". The English expression "to be in the mood for something" means "feeling like doing something". Similarly, the word "mode" is an expression used in the context of artistic music. This is where it refers to a fixed structure, i.e. the scale, melody or pattern of rhythm, which the artist repeats at different heights and moods, in major or minor key. The mode is the present state of mind just like Nanna Susi's paintings.

The mode – i.e. the fixed structure – of Susi's work is based on the large size, emotional charge and richness of colour. Nanna Susi has been described as an expressionist and colourist. She has been likened to the strong female expressionists of the 1980s – Marika Mäkelä, Marjatta Tapiola and Leena Luostarinen, who taught her at the Helsinki Academy of Fine Arts.¹

Artist's Journey

Nanna Susi was born in Vääksy, Asikkala in 1967. Her father worked as a physical education teacher and mother had other children for day-care at home when Nanna was young. Nanna also has a sister called Nina, who is a few years older. The parents divorced when Nanna was twelve. Mother Laura with her two daughters remained in the pink family home with a gambrel roof and continued her bohemian life there. She started a flower shop in the 1980s. Later on, she added some gift items, finally expanding the business to include an undertaker's and ironmonger's.

Nanna remembers her mother's shop with great warmth: "*This shop, Laura's shop, has always been a part of Vääksy.*"² The shop was filled with magic – it was as if a fairy had sprinkled her magic dust everywhere. As a young schoolgirl Nanna used to stop at the shop after school, have a bite to eat and do her homework. At the age of nine she worked as mother's little helper making flower bouquets and wrapping them in newspaper, sweeping floors, cutting roses and curling ribbons. At Christmas Nanna worked as an errand girl and ran around Vääksy, delivering flowers.

At the threshold of her teens, Laura's shop was still a source of support for Nanna Susi, even though the young lady wanted to be "as alternative as possible" and her appearance changed radically, pushing the edges of fashion: she spread sugar water in her hair, wore her grandfather's oversized smoking jacket with several undershirts beneath, and long pearl necklaces. Nanna was such a bold sight at the time that she needed to use the backdoor of her mother's shop to avoid scaring the customers.

The bohemian teenager was not interested in upper secondary school. She was thinking of becoming a dressmaker even though she had no talent for it. An art-focused upper secondary school would have been an option but this was not allowed at home. They thought Nanna was oversensitive and too gullible to live alone in another town. Instead, as consolation, she was sent to the United States, West Virginia, as an exchange student.

After Nanna returned to Finland she started giving some serious thought to becoming an artist. A career as a painter or poet seemed inviting, but Nanna was too young to have a clear understanding on how to become a pictorial artist. The Academy of Fine Arts seemed too distant and out of reach, so she started her studies at the Orivesi College of Arts after finishing upper

secondary school. Some of Nanna's fellow students continued their studies at the Academy of Fine Arts but she did not have enough faith in herself yet, so she sought more experience at the Kankaanpää Art School in 1988–1990. The Academy of Fine Arts came into the picture only after that, and Nanna graduated in 1994, in the middle of the worst economic depression in Finland. Thereafter, she continued her studies as a NordPlus student at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts but started to have a foothold in the national art scene with the exhibitions she held in different galleries – Artina, Pintura and Nuovo in Lahti, to name a few. It took a while, however, before she could make a living with her art. Until then, the skills she had learned in her mother's shop became useful.

Starting at the Orivesi College of Arts, Nanna Susi knew in her heart that she had chosen correctly and she has not doubted her mission or place as a painter ever since. The years in her mother's shop taught Nanna Susi how to be diligent and responsible. Besides the work at the shop, the women in Nanna's family also shared housework. Their hardworking way of life mirrored the Finnish saying *"Take with you when you go, bring with you when you return."*

Nanna Susi completed her pictorial art studies in 1997, graduating with a master's degree from the Academy of Fine Arts. The Väinö Tanner Foundation awarded her the *Mazzano* scholarship, which enabled her to move to Italy. Living in an artists' studio wasn't free of challenges, however, but luckily everything changed when she was chosen as the Young Artist of the Year in 2000. Relieved, she moved to Rome, lured in by youth and first love, financially backed by the title of the Young Artist of the Year.³

In the Young Artist of the Year exhibition, Nanna Susi filled the large halls of the Tampere Art Museum mainly with new works, which she painted with fury over six months. Publicity and a positive reception placed Susi among the most well-known artists in Finland. The fact that she was chosen as the Young Artist of the Year was seen as a sign of the return of the painting; in particular, paintings with strong colours were seen as interesting.⁴

A strong Mediterranean mood was seen in the works of the Young Artist of the Year. The influence of Italy on Susi's art was the strongest during the seven years she lived there. She has even described her paintings of that time as schizophrenic in all their colour saturation.⁵

An emotional safety net comparable to her home country could not be found in Italy, and Nanna returned to Finland with her son, Raffaello, in 2005. She has remarked that one of the most significant reasons to return to Finland from Italy was her mother as a role model of an independent woman. Motherhood and the move to Finland in 2005 brought different moods into her paintings, the modes reverberated in lower tones, the colour scale settled down, softened, even darkened.

Nowadays, Nanna Susi lives and works both in Finland and in Italy. Conscientiously, the artist has faced her paintings daily in her studios in Helsinki and Rome, poured meaning into every colour, shape and line from inside her, breathed the paintings into life. As the painter herself has encapsulated: *"The act of painting, for me, is like a part of my body. It has been part of every day, even those days when I don't paint."*⁶

The Sixth of November

On 6th November, 2001, everything was different. The day before, Nanna Susi had finished the paintings for the exhibition to be held in Turku in early 2002. In 2001, she had already held exhibitions in Italy, Denmark, France and Finland. Her work pace had been long and heavy; she had consumed so much coffee it had caused heart palpitations. The artist had painted herself empty. On the November morning, when the Finnish soul longed for November sleet, cold breeze and darkness – things that justified snuggling under the blanket – her body was telling her the heat in Italy would continue. Just then, she remembered a prediction from childhood about a writer's

career. On that morning, the mode didn't reverberate the fireworks of colour, not even a low tone of woe. The studio was not calling her, the paintings stood quietly, without words. In that moment, Nanna Susi made a decision: *"Today I won't paint, tomorrow I won't paint, nor will I paint in the next four months. I will exist in what I write!"*⁷

Nanna Susi started to write. In a diary-like manner, she shed onto the paper her emotions, observations, thoughts. The text flowed like a stream, at times gushing, at others gathering strength in its stillness. Nanna Susi writes the same way as she paints, without sketches, making large and strong strokes, sometimes with overwhelming openness. She described her writing the book to her friend Maikki Harjanne, this way: *"[...] the result of the writing is probably this 'always lost' description to which Maikki remarked, that's a good name for a book."*⁸

Yet, the unpublished book is titled "The Sixth of November." In the book, Nanna Susi's thoughts and ponderings open new depths into the events in one year of the painter's life, as well as give the reader a unique opportunity to peek into a painter's work, the painting process both in good days and bad. The quotations in this text are mainly from that manuscript.

The decision to stop painting, or the four-month lay-off, was not easy because within a few days, the artist started getting withdrawals and fairly soon the yearning to paint hit her insidiously.

*"Today is also some sort of date of death. The act of painting, for me, is like a part of my body. It has been part of every day, even those days when I didn't paint."*⁹

*"In line in rush hour, it was lovely to watch the sunset. Turquoise, gold, a bit farther some pink, and then a deepening violet. I started to miss colours and paintbrushes a little, but I treat these types of symptoms coldly. I'm laid off. I am my own doctor, but even now, I'm not leaving myself alone. An artist's work is messing with oneself, taking from inside the soul, by force, if you have to. Sometimes the soul says: leave me alone. I want to be quiet for a moment. Don't touch."*¹⁰

Less than a week after the decision to quit, the artist's hand picked up a paintbrush. The result wasn't to her liking, however. The mode was out of tune and she felt poorly. Many questions arose in her mind: *Can I give myself a painting-free space until the end of February? Will I know how to paint after that? Am I crazy to force myself to have this break?*

*"I'm not happy with the painting I have drying in the bedroom at the end of the bed. It needs more work. I'm feeling strange, bad, in other ways too. I haven't painted in a week, and that feels like an eternity. Besides, today all the paintings seem to be jumping down from the walls and catch my eyes. [...] I have always felt drawn to serious, heavy motifs. Everything light has required learning. It feels like I've lived my entire life in a state of upset." [...] why did I have to put on the breaks, pierce through the rush, I will surely find that empty hole and the world, which I thought so necessary around me, also falls. Just like it has fallen so many times before [...] Can the world fall, or am I the only one falling? I've always fallen into my paintings and if I haven't, I've had to jump."*¹¹

After November came the anticipation of Christmas, a trip and daily chores. The paintings started calling her in the studio, but a trip to the Far East drew the artist's attention away from working. By the New Year she was writing in her diary less and less, but the beginning of the year brought a new, albeit tentative, beginning:

*"I have been painting all day. I'm still walking around the studio, somewhat nervous and restless. All kinds of practical issues occur to me, I leave to make a phone call, then come back – I'm like a nervous animal, circling around. After all the optimism I know I'm again sticking my head into the fire. It has never been easy and it never will be. Actually. Painting is damned hard, demanding and torturous. If and when I'm able to get moving again, to that closed, egocentric, tiring and suffocating 'tube' where time is mere painting, following its shadow, recognizing its unfinished impossibility in the heart, through every damned fact, dream, night and day. Why do I, an adult person, do this? Voluntarily? Couldn't I make things any easier?"*¹²

“On Friday, the entire work day painting went all wrong. I tried too hard, I made a mess. I forcefully pushed for a landscape that wasn’t inside me. I splattered blue. Blue doesn’t breathe for me anymore. I should only use it in thin layers, paint as water. I painted blue in thick, smothered layers, and I felt ill. The result wore me down, the sunset, and the sharp shadows arrived again on top of the canvases. Feeling anxious, I washed the paintbrushes and my hands. I had to scrub them clean with soap. Shivering and tired, I was running a fever.”¹³

“I’m deluding myself to think that I’m feeling great. Despite the explosion in my lungs, which has left a painful, hollow hole inside me, and despite the continuing fever, I have worked all day.

I spread out all the distressing parts of the paintings. The paintbrush can be used to cover, fix up, and spread. First you paint with colours. Today I’ve been blending them. I’ve been in a small rising ecstasy. An optimistic day. Today has been promising, much improved and more meaningful. I’ve been painting without symbols, without signs, without points of reference. I’ve been painting colours and shapes according to their dictation. The colours guide their maker. In the best moments, the unfinished painting is like a guidebook, which tells me, step by step, what to touch, what to deepen, what to lighten. And it’s like spring outside!”¹⁴

In February 2002, after a long break in writing, Nanna Susi returned to her diary again and admitted to herself: *“I’ve been reluctant to start writing. I’ve been so afraid of it that writing has felt like making unpleasant contact with my own mind.”¹⁵*

Painting has again filled the artist’s days and taken her on a familiar journey of creation: *“This is damned normal work process. The fact that my heart is jumping on hot stones all the time. Work never stays home, not on the canvas. When the mind is awakened to create and to give birth, and the will is awakened to kick the mind into action, it is time to ferment. It doesn’t help that you’re aware of it, compartmentalization is impossible, the wave moves and grows until it spills again. These spills, combined and honed, twist into those finished paintings. It is so normal that artists lose themselves and work fanatically. To paint is to use the drug of life, the morphine of the mind and soul. It is incredibly difficult ‘after starting the journey’ and after that journey has ‘opened’ to stay away from the activating proximity of the work. It is easier to be in intimate face-to-face contact and influence with it than to be detached from it, in daily life.”*

“In the studio, six purple paintings are finished. It is almost as if they’re blushing upon seeing each other. Two large canvases are waiting on the floor to be used. Red is like a high wave, which splashes over the others. With the next paintings, I will try to move away from the red – to forget it. I will work with space and start painting rooms. Small room spaces in the middle of the canvas, in the middle of states of mind.”¹⁶

Breaks from writing the diary became longer. The spring advanced to the beginning of May before Nanna Susi returned to writing:

“In the midst of an identity crisis and bare-footed. [...] About twenty paintings are finished and two large ones unfinished in the studio. Fine sand, volcanoes, lava, hotness of the earth and balance of the sun. Summer has begun, I’m painting physically, pouring colours onto canvas. The sporadic wind blowing in through the window passes me in warm waves. I can feel the heat starting to slowly breathe, and soon strengthen – the spirit of the heat. And more paintings! In the fall, I must have at least fifty paintings finished so that I’ll hit my target and I can hold the upcoming exhibitions. It is suspicious to think about paintings as numbers. I am in my own presence the whole tormenting time. One tyrant and her empire. Always unfinished and the results of the work are sporadic compromises of grace. And yet, to paint is easier than not to paint.”¹⁷

The diary entries became more and more scarce, extending into months-long breaks. The last two entries are from February and August, 2003. Then the diary ends. Already in February, 2003, Susi remarked that writing had been a mistake, and in August of that year her life changes and thoughts are directed elsewhere.

“The past year seems like a nightmare. This is partly due to this writing. I haven’t been able to forget, I haven’t left myself alone. I can’t make decisions. I am convinced that my life doesn’t look like me. I’m not living my own life. I would like to begin writing anew, but I know I can’t.”¹⁸

In the years 2002–2003 Nanna Susi had several solo exhibitions in Finland, such as in Gallery Ama, Galerie Forsblom, Galleria Krista Mikkola, and Gallery Nuovo. She also participated in group exhibitions in Finland, Ireland, Italy, Sweden, and Denmark. In her last diary entry, on 13th August, 2003, Susi wrote:

“The exhibitions at Galerie Forsblom and Galleria Krista Mikkola took place in early March. We also travelled to St. Petersburg, Prague and Dublin. I could talk about the details with all kinds of enthusiasm, but I have no energy to do that. I can only say that the exhibitions were successful. In April, Hannu Palosuo and I acquired a new studio. At first it was black because it was so dirty, plus there was no electricity. We cleaned and illuminated two hundred square meters. In April everything was a mess. I was sick and tired of myself, and starting work was a panic-like compulsion to think, to cross a threshold, to be near myself again. The worst was after the exhibition. I argued, was about to split up, and dreamt of freedom, so I wouldn’t need to see the other person, so I could be one again. The month of May passed too. And then I was pregnant...”¹⁹

The Artist Filled with Life

Nanna Susi moved to Finland in 2005 although, for the next year, she still split her time working in Italy and Finland. The young newly graduated artist in search of life experiences had become a mother. A long-time love stayed in Italy and her home country had changed over the years.

The change of scenery and life circumstances usually shows in an artist’s work in some way. Jaana Saario, who interviewed Nanna Susi for her research on the process of pictorial arts, speaks of worldliness, with which she means the presence of the world in a person. The world constantly moves through the person as processes of sensing, observing and experiencing. The senses filter it, producing material for mental images and memories.²⁰ The artists’ lived world, values and style are part of their personality and guide the process. The paintings are realized in the studios, but they are born and develop in life. An artist’s life doesn’t start and end at the studio door. Instead, it is strongly tied to the lived and experienced daily life.²¹ As Nanna Susi states in her Young Artist of the Year interview, an artist *“must fill herself with life. Otherwise she can’t work.”²²*

The rush that has continued throughout the artist’s life has never ended. Her mind has always been searching for new events, new exhibitions. The fast pace continued all through the beginning of the 2000s, culminating in 2012–2013 in the wide solo exhibition, *Underneath the Eyes*, at the Helsinki Art Museum.

Nanna Susi has been fervently painting from one year to the next, as if chasing the pictures in a hurry. The work day may begin on an impulse and end unpredictably. Each morning can take a strange turn and lead to surprises by the evening. And what is today is probably different tomorrow.²³

Over the years, Nanna Susi’s art has changed, becoming more interactive and exploratory than in the beginning of the millennium. The Young Artist of the Year 2000 in search of life, who filled the Tampere Art Museum halls with brilliant colours, has grown into a woman, who listens to her paintings and converses with them.

Already in her years in Italy, Nanna Susi wanted to paint new works for all her exhibitions: *“I am a bit unrelenting in the choice that I want new paintings in every exhibition. Only in emergencies have I recycled the same pieces in more than one exhibition. I challenge myself to paint for exhibitions, which always function as time circles for one period.”²⁴*

In the same way, a museum exhibition at Tennispalatsi, which was meant to be retrospective, acquired a new direction when Susi, guided by great inspiration as the planning for the exhibition advanced, came up with a different approach to showcasing her work. And thus began a nearly frenzied process, during which she painted within twelve months the paintings where the stylistic language and the themes of her previous works evolved into their own, complete whole. Museum director Gallen-Kallela-Sirén has said that the paintings brought forth the image of a strong, but simultaneously vulnerable person, who has previously been hiding away behind the colour baths spawned by Susi's soul landscape and under the layers of paint creating a relief-like surface.²⁵

As she has matured, she's also become kinder towards her own art. Even though the artist still paints in a passionate and disciplined manner, and admits to aim for perfection, as an adult she is able to express things that she had been striving for when younger. The earlier activity which shot in every direction has become more focused: *"Now I can package one thing. Searching is still strong, deep and even aggressive, but I can now find certain things in a certain period, and then move on to the next."*²⁶

Susi's art has been interpreted using different stylistic trends, specifically neo-expressionism and colourism. In addition, her paintings have been found to have poetic and romantic features. Kimmo Sarje sees Susi's paintings as emotional. He thinks it is specifically the direct, melancholy, or sentimental emotions that are Susi's paintings utmost motives and energy.²⁷

As a painter, Nanna Susi is feminine, sometimes even girlish. Neo-expressionism, which was often seen as masculine, transformed in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s into playful transavanguardia, which highlights the pleasure of painting. Transavanguardia or transavantgarde, namely the style after avant-garde, again highlights the joy and feeling of painting. In Finland, the freedom of transavanguardia, which combines the classic Italian heritage with the large picturesque works, appealed to Leena Luostarinen, who drew influences from neo-expressionism, and her fellow students Marika Mäkelä and Marjatta Tapiola. The way they filled their works with feminine energy has similar features to the stories, colours and feeling of Nanna Susi's large canvases.²⁸

Humane Paintings

Nanna Susi says her paintings are titled with excerpts that are taken from her own writings over the years. She always aims to give titles to her paintings because she thinks they have their own personalities, individual wholes, just like people. Often the titles resemble Native American names, such as "Transient Wind", "Green Water", "Last Boat". The titles depict the spirit of the painting, the mood, and the artist's mental landscape. They also remind their maker of the problems, frames of reference, conundrums, and sources of joy that were present in her life at the time of painting.²⁹

In her diary, on 16th November, 2001, still in the initial enthusiasm, the artist describes her relationship with her works in this way:

"Today I feel kind. I have been kind in my studio, looked at my work – isn't it funny that my own paintings comfort me. The studio is now clean, the mood is hurry-free, even sensual. The paintings appear intact but humane and self-motivated in their fragility, honesty. They are already part of their own history, but they're open and eloquent here and in the future. I often wonder where my paintings end up, who looks at them, who converses with them, who sees and feels and what they see and feel. My paintings care about what people want to find in them. [...] I find that the more love I have, the more I am able to love my paintings. I am kinder to them, more patient, more open, I trust more, I'm even funnier, but I'm also stern. They can hurt me more. You have to be present in the paintings with your full weight. The mind has to be able to cover each millimetre of the painting; otherwise you won't make a connection. Each colour, shape and line has to find its meaning and place from inside me. Otherwise, they do not exist as far as I'm concerned. The painting must be seen, internally seen. You can only make it after that. And while making it, you have to keep seeing it, even if there was only a pile of colours on the canvas, you must see them,

*move with them and see... How could I describe the intensity of making a painting because you switch worlds and languages. I paint with some sort of emotional memory.*³⁰

Symbols

Nanna Susi's modes create series of paintings, atmospheric and timely clusters, which convey the mood of the artist. The joyful colours of the early years have sometimes bent into grey calmness, even melancholy, and the initial enthusiasm which darted everywhere has changed into subtlety and sensitive elegance. The symbols flashing in the paintings live for a while, disappear, only to return as elements again.

Nanna Susi herself has described the elements in her paintings this way: *"In the symbology of my paintings, I use a lot of doors, gates, roads, bridges, beds – basically keys to move from one reality to another. [...] The elements are power words: earth, fire, water, air. They depict the personal relationship about the situation, the event – they set up the journey. And for me, painting is always a journey.*"³¹

Stars

Ever since she was a young girl, Nanna Susi has pondered, *"where does infinity end?"*³² On several days during her year of writing in 2001, she pondered space, infinity, moon, and stars – the universe.

*"Someone has said that space is infinite and black. I don't think that's exactly right. One day I was looking at the moon in a tram on the bridge over the Tiber. It was a giant full moon. The first thing I did was ask myself whether I'd noticed anything abnormal in myself since full moon can play personality tricks on you. Then, for the first time, I made myself look at the moon – not as a moon but as the real moon in space. In a short instant, I felt I was thousands of years younger..."*³³

The motif of stars shows up sometimes in the background, a glimpse of something just beyond the gaze or as a subconscious element. Sometimes the hint for the viewer comes from the name the artist gave to the painting, sometimes the star shines brightly in the middle, akin to the North Star so dear to Finns, like in the 2017 painting *Star*.

The miracles of space are not restricted to the moon or stars. The source of life, the sun, appears regularly in Susi's paintings. The sun has been large, it has set, risen, trembled, or been happy. For example, in 2000, the artist reacted strongly to the abnormally strong nuclear fusion reactions on the surface of the sun. That summer, more explosions occurred in the sun than in years. These observations appeared in Susi's paintings as strong, sun-bright colours and thick surfaces. *"All of my new works are either sunsets or sunrises. The light of the sun and the sun itself interested me when I was painting over the summer."*³⁴

Neither are the stars and space always a relaxing, safe or final motif. In May 2001 Nanna Susi was painting a piece called "Close to the Explosion". Suddenly her plans got messed up. Somehow her feet took her to a colour store on Via del Fiume and also to a framing shop next door. Half an hour later she had emptied the colour store's stock and ordered many large canvases even though until now she had always prepared them herself. The peculiar mood lingered in Susi's studio where she continued to paint the explosion. The work was completed: *"I peek in through the studio door a dozen times to make sure that the painting has not vanished due to some odd magnetic or destructive force. Or exploded. New colours are piled up on the worktop and under it. Peace on earth."*

“The destructive force came for a visit, after all. With all your willpower you look at the paintings positively, then get frustrated with optimism. It feels as if your eyes were bulging. They cannot see well enough, they search for an original consciousness in an empty spot of a gaping feeling but cannot reach the thought. Not a single one. A bridge cannot be found, no seductive meaning either. [...] Both large pieces need to be repainted. The colours beneath have dried into clumps, and I scratch them with a palette knife so frantically that the canvas rips. The darkened painting inevitably becomes Night, the bruised blue, misty magic. Its blackness calms and conceals, the eye searches for an answer but cannot find any. [...] The Night-painting is finished. This night has a feel of a passing carnival. The Explosion-painting only needs the last little strokes. The title has changed into “An Arabian Night”. Somehow the painting also brings the three sages into my mind.”³⁵

“Alone. I feel that I am in between countries and cultures. Partly in time, partly stuck in places. It feels as if I were not grown attached to anything. I shall not become Italian, no matter how much I shout at all the passers-by who step on my toes. I have grown up with Finnish blood in my veins. Even that is streaming away from me. In time, blood circles and changes. I shall not become Finnish anymore, either. Some other person’s blood is circling in my veins ! Who is this me? There is a frighteningly lonely and distant echo inside of me. It is stuck there, circling around, and I don’t know how to detach it and let it out of my system. Perhaps this is why I paint stars.”³⁶

Characters

In May 2001 something strange happened when the artist was painting in her studio: *“The small series is finished! I suppose the sun is shining outside, at least it is an afternoon and a Wednesday. Lo and behold, all that fire of the fiery souls, living in between the fires, flames and water – and then a **human character**. Suddenly there is a human character in the paintings! It doesn’t mean that the cycle has come to an end but an escort has appeared in the painting. A character who walks peacefully around the globe like time, taking you by the hand. He who leads you over the stream, to the other side of the bridge, to another land. He who gives shape to something so that one can frolic beside it, enjoy the colours and wonder at the magic happening!”*

The human character found in the beginning of the new millennium takes over the canvases as we enter the 2010s. In 2008, as the Kalevala Society ordered four paintings from Nanna Susi under the title Pohjola Wedding to celebrate the 160 years of Kalevala, a human being became the central element: a woman and a man at the moment of their joining in holy matrimony. The powerful, blood red works *As a Man is* and *As a Woman is* represent the expectations and pressure in a new emotional state where they have never been before: in a moment where the past disappears and the future does not exist.³⁷

The exhibition at the Helsinki Art Museum in 2012–2013 presented a brand new world of experiences and moods from Nanna Susi. The characters were both male and female. In Susi’s works, women stare straight at the viewer with unseeing eyes, whereas men, with their heads bent down, have turned their backs to the viewer. As always, Susi has given the paintings titles that personify them and give them yet another dimension. Men are often surrounded by Nanna Susi’s forest, which is a wonderland of colours, or a grey, foggy landscape. The strong horizontal or vertical paintbrush strokes create a mystical, often a childish impression, where the intensity of colours sucks the viewer from one reality into another. There the men stand with their feet in the snow or water, perhaps with a pillow, and stars fly overhead.

Nanna Susi’s female characters are often described as large portraits of faces. Their glances – even while shrouded – appear grim and hold the viewer in their grip. Sometimes the women appear as catlike characters but still their narrow eyes stop the viewer with their gaze. The

women's eyes are a strong element in Susi's works. Even when painted closed with thick layers of colour, the eyes succeed in conveying self-consciousness and stopping time.

Flowers

In Turku, at the Aura Gallery exhibition in 2014, Nanna Susi returned to her earlier theme, flowers. Due to her decades-long artist's experience she realized that she could express the things and feelings she had gone through in her younger days in a more focused way, one theme per time period. The upcoming gallery exhibition gave her a chance to revisit *flower* – a theme on which the young artist had received negative feedback earlier.

Friday Flowers tell the story of Nanna Susi's habit of bringing flowers home every Friday, but the theme includes many other dimensions, too. Firstly, Friday flowers reflect a new life situation, in which the painter – having earlier lived for her art – devotes the weekends to her son and family. Nanna the Artist gives way to Nanna the Mother. Through the works with the flower motif Susi recounts her own experiences with female artists' perpetual balancing between family life and making art.

The theme for the exhibition arose from a painting called *Mother Brought Home Flowers*. It had been on display in an earlier exhibition at the Helsinki Art Museum. Perhaps the years as a florist's daughter had motivated her to paint this work or perhaps it was the everyday reality of modern life, buying flowers on Fridays, but above all the painting told the story of the artist quieting down, the ability to step out of the studio, leaving work behind for a moment even from her thoughts.

Through flowers Nanna Susi also analyses different subjects of transition in human life. When do we buy flowers and what do we wish to express with them? In which circumstances does a person hold a bouquet of flowers? Through flowers one can also interpret the moments when someone is kneeling down in a painting, i.e. when getting married, grieving, tying the child's shoelaces, vomiting, cleaning, praying, celebrating victory, Holy Communion, execution...

On her homepage Nanna Susi tells about the exhibition *Friday Flowers* and about the theme in general as follows: "*The bouquets and flowers in my exhibition tell about the weeks, feelings, contradictions and values of painting. They contain apologies but also elation about closeness with someone. Sometimes confusion and nostalgia are part of the package. Sometimes oblivion, fatigue or force raging on overdrive. As an act weekend flowers remind me of peace.*"³⁸

In Susi's paintings, kneeling down and linked hands have more to do with romance than Christian imagery. The characters' positions or gestures seldom allude to a religious event, and hardly any Christian symbols are found in her work. However, for instance in 1998, when Nanna Susi was working on the altar painting in St. Andrew's church in Rekola, she dreamt about angels and had discussions with God during the process. Afterwards she thought she must have been in an oversensitive state, but there are religious overtones in some of her more recent paintings, too – if not as symbols, then in a painting's title, as in the 2013 pieces *Twelve Apostles* or *Eden*. In the exhibition called *Underneath the Eyes* there were also a few works in which the women's linked hands and the pious gestures allude to prayer. The titles *Prayer* and *Unbelievable* confirm the impression.

Blue and Red Art as a Mode en Route

Nanna Susi has travelled a lot in her life. She has studied abroad, lived and worked in Finland and Italy. Everything she has experienced and seen in her journeys has travelled through her, and her senses have filtered material for the purposes of visualization and memories. Apart from the time spent in Italy, however, it is difficult to see a direct influence from her travels on the artist's work.

In 2015 two artists, Nanna Susi and Canal Cheong Jagerroos, came up with an idea for a project in which the artists with different cultural backgrounds come to experience each other's worlds during a shared journey. The aim of this project was to deepen the understanding between the two cultures, create relationships and build co-operation between Finland and China.

The artists decided to make a journey which took them through foreign cultures, values and moods. Straight from the beginning, *Blue and Red* was planned as a comprehensive project where the artists crossing each other's home countries gathered local experiences and influences which they could later utilize in their art.

These two artists were very different from each other, opposites almost, but they both wanted to experience new things, break the everyday routines, see through their own eyes, be present with their eyes open and not via the Internet. Even though these two women and mothers found a lot in common during the journey, it was a challenging project – they argued and they reconciled. Nanna Susi encapsulated the journey in a single word: "Fantastic".³⁹

The influences of this journey can be seen in Nanna Susi's work not only in materials but also in technique. The colour scale is orientally soft, the delicate shades reflect the shades nearby or complementary colours and, thus, create an airy, light mood. In this mode, no heavy paintwork is seen – no surfaces scratched by the artist until they were almost three-dimensional. Also the size is very different from what it was before: a narrow and tall series painted on silk, which brings Chinese water colour and ink to mind.

As a concept, this journey has meant different dimensions for Nanna Susi. It has been the creative work of an artist, a journey into the painting, a lonely journey into her own head. Furthermore, there are symbols of a journey – a boat, door, road, bridge, which have all been gates to another reality; open doors through which the viewer has been able to journey into the painting.

Nanna Susi has travelled a lot in her life. She has been seeking life in these journeys. The author Erno Paasilinna has stated that to become a writer, one has to lead a writer's life. Nanna Susi agrees on this also as a painter. "*One becomes a painter also by leading a painter's life. One has to take over one's life and feel the both sides. There are only the moments. One needs to do and experience all the right and the wrong.*"⁴⁰

The Master of Modes and Moods

Nanna Susi paints life with large strokes and a wide palette of emotions. The structure of her art, *the mode*, is unique and recognizable. Youth, joy and boldness effervesce in broad canvases, brought into life by skilful play on colour – or, alternatively, the motifs are hidden in the everyday-grey, the darkness of loneliness. Different symbols, such as roads, gates, bridges, curtains, beds and the traditional elements, i.e. earth, air, fire and water fill the canvas at one stage in order to give way to others later. Nanna Susi's mood is reflected in her work.

On top of all this, the artist is diligent. The disciplined work moral learned at home takes her regularly to her studio where the lonely journey, only accompanied by her art pieces, starts each time all over again. Adulthood and motherhood have brought their own restrictions, in regard to which the artist has found a balance – at least temporarily.

Nanna Susi has been "in the mood for painting" for over thirty years. She has wanted to portray her own life in her paintings sometimes more, sometimes less. However, in November 2001 everything was different. Exhausted after a long period of hard work, the artist could not find the joy of creation, and she did not hear the modes neither in major nor minor key. All was quiet. This is when Nanna decided to lay off – four months without painting. The thought of writing, instead, felt right.

"I decided to start writing this diary because I am tangibly trying to slow down and also to comprehend it. A human being is not a machine (although I've never felt like a machine), but you need to be alert enough to hear different alarms, intuitions, feelings. One also has to endure silence. I was supposed to stop painting for four months. I was capable of two."⁴¹

In 2001 Susi wrote down her thoughts daily at first but as time went by, she wrote less and less until finally there were several days in a row when she did not feel like writing. The manuscript "The Sixth of November" offers a unique read: this is the story of an artist's life for a year, through different phases, from the moment of total stagnation to finishing a series of paintings. At times, it has been challenging to pick just a few entries for this article, as so much was left untold. I thank Nanna Susi for letting me read the diary and hope it will be published for a wider audience to read.

Reading the diary it became obvious that the writer is a painter. Her text is so strong, figurative and expressive. Nanna Susi writes as she paints, large and emotional. However, as the diary has already been written and the paintings are still being created, I wish to believe in what the artist says:

"I once decided that I shall paint all my life. Every year I ponder whether this is still the thing for me, whether this is what I want to do... I suppose I could do other things, too, but there is not enough time to try everything. I want to die as a painter. There is something honest about it."⁴²

Light Shower, URSA, 2002

"I painted, painted, and painted. I thought to myself that someone wise will ask me whether the stars in my works belong to the European Union, and I'd say that no, they belong to Esko Valtaoja. In March, when I held an exhibition in Turku in his wife Virpi's gallery, Esko gave me his book: At Home in the Universe. He had received the Tieto-Finlandia award for it. After I finished reading the book, I was excited, but mostly I felt dizzy. I interpreted it to everyone I met. Now, less than six months later, I hit my paintings with the star mood. Even though I've done stars before – for a painting for Rekola church and for a ceiling painting at the Meilahti cancer clinic treatment rooms – they hit me harder than ever. Stars!" (Nanna Susi, diary, The Sixth of November, 2001, 17th July)

- ¹ Sarje, Kimmo, 2012: Nanna Suden maalaustaide, 20.
- ² Susi, Nanna, *The Sixth of November* (2001), twenty-sixth of July, 155.
- ³ For *Artist's Journey*, information gathered from the unpublished manuscript "The Sixth of November, 2001, Young Artist of the Year interview 2014, and Kultakuume interview 2018.
- ⁴ Matikainen, Katja, 2004, *Young Artist of the Year 1984–2004*, Tampere Art Museum publications 116, 143.
- ⁵ Young Artist of the Year interview 2014.
- ⁶ Susi, Nanna, *The Sixth of November* (2001), 1.
- ⁷ Susi, Nanna, *The Sixth of November* (2001), 1.
- ⁸ Susi, Nanna, *The Sixth of November* (2001), 1.
- ⁹ Susi, Nanna, *The Sixth of November* (2001), 2.
- ¹⁰ Susi, Nanna, *The Eighth of November* (2001), 6.
- ¹¹ Susi, Nanna, *The Twelfth of November* (2001).
- ¹² Susi, Nanna, *The Fifth of January* (2001).
- ¹³ Susi, Nanna, *The Twentieth of January* (2002).
- ¹⁴ Susi, Nanna, *The Twenty-First of January* (2002).
- ¹⁵ Susi, Nanna, *The First of February*, (2002).
- ¹⁶ Susi, Nanna, *The First of February*, (2002).
- ¹⁷ Susi, Nanna, *The Second of May* (2002).
- ¹⁸ Susi, Nanna, *The Nineteenth of February* (2003).
- ¹⁹ Susi, Nanna, *The Thirteenth of August* (2003).
- ²⁰ Saario, Jaana, 2008, *Läpivalaisu, kuvataiteellisen prosessin jälkiä*, Nanna Susi: "Tila tulevaisuudelle" painting, 13, 19.
- ²¹ Saario, Jaana 2008, 9-10.
- ²² Susi, Nanna, Young Artist of the Year interview, 2014.
- ²³ Toiminen, Marjaana 2012: *Voimistettua läsnäoloa*, 14.
- ²⁴ Susi, Nanna, *The Eleventh of May* (2002).
- ²⁵ Gallen-Kallela-Sirén, Janne, 2012: Foreword, 10.
- ²⁶ Young Artist of the Year interview, 2014.
- ²⁷ Sarje, Kimmo, 2012, 20.
- ²⁸ Lavonen, Kuutti 2015, *Postmoderni romantikko*, 32; Sarje, 2012, 20-21.
- ²⁹ Susi, Nanna, *The Ninth of November* (2001).
- ³⁰ Susi, Nanna, *The Sixteenth of November* (2001).
- ³¹ Susi, Nanna, 2001: 4 artists in Kerava 14.1.–18.2.2001, Nanna Susi.
- ³² Susi, Nanna, *The Seventh of November* (2001).

- ³³ Susi, Nanna, *The Twenty-First of November* (2001), 24.
- ³⁴ Pitkänen, Anna-Kaisa, 2000: Susi aurinkoa palvoo, *Ylioppilaslehti*, <http://ylioppilaslehti.fi/2000/11/susi-aurinkoa-palvoo/> 9th July, 2018.
- ³⁵ Susi, Nanna, *The Eighth, Ninth and Tenth of May* (2002).
- ³⁶ Susi, Nanna, *The Twenty-Fifth of July* (2002).
- ³⁷ <https://taika.kalevalaseura.fi/2014/09/18/teos-nanna-susi-niin-kuin-mies-on/>
- ³⁸ http://www.nannasusi.fi/katalogi/index.php?main_page=index&cPath=8&sort=20a&page=1&language=en&zenid=abm8tkjonqhqi15lct72ea9vc4
- ³⁹ Kultakuume, Yle Areena, <https://areena.yle.fi/1-4135833>, 20th July, 2018.
- ⁴⁰ Kultakuume, Yle Areena, <https://areena.yle.fi/1-4135833>, 20th July, 2018.
- ⁴¹ Susi, Nanna, *The Nineteenth of May* (2002).
- ⁴² Gallen-Kallela-Sirén, Janne, 2012.

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