An abstract painting with a textured surface, featuring large, flowing shapes in yellow, purple, red, and brown. The background is a light, pale blue. The overall style is expressive and gestural.

**TARTMUS**

Siiri Jüris

**matter that  
(em)bodies**

Tartu Kunstimuseum

Tartu Art Museum

13.02.–28.03.2021

[tartmus.ee](http://tartmus.ee)

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**Graphic design:** Katrin Kelpman

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**Supporters:** Cultural Endowment of Estonia, Art&Tonic gallery



**ART  
AND  
TONIC**

## Foreword

The Tartu Art Museum is delighted to welcome the winner of this year's "Young Tartu" open call, the painter Siiri Jüris, to the project space of our "leaning building". This is the fourth year that we have hosted this project in the present format and have exhibited works by a young artist associated with Tartu. The series kicked off in 2017 with Sten Eltermaa's Brussel's Prelude. In 2018, Keiu Maasik's video installation The Three Brothers was selected from a list of projects by 25 artists. And in 2019, Mirjan Hinn presented her oeuvre in the exhibition High Voltage.

The aim of "Young Tartu" is to offer opportunities to young artists associated with Tartu and to provide them with the experience of their first solo exhibition in a professional art institution. The exhibition series presents an additional outlet for authors who are either from Tartu or have received their artistic education in the town but who lack opportunities for expressing themselves as artists. Due to the dwindling of artistic education (the Painting Department of the University of Tartu was closed in 2017) and the scarcity of galleries, the Tartu Art Museum has a critical responsibility to enliven the local art life and to also support young artists who are just starting their careers.

Siiri Jüris, who after receiving her master's degree in painting from the University of Tartu (2017) decided to get another one from the Royal Institute of Art in Sweden (2020), has not had many solo exhibitions. As a young artist, she has spent most of her career studying. However, it seems that the time is ripe for Jüris to become active in professional art life as a painter. Her oeuvre is technically masterful and visually striking and her handwriting very original. Tartu Art Museum is glad to be the first to introduce the Estonian audience to the works that Siiri Jüris made in Sweden and we wish her success in the future!

I thank the artist for our pleasant collaboration. I am also thankful to the exhibition curator Kristlyn Liier and the graphic designer Katrin Kelpman. We would additionally like to thank the Cultural Endowment of Estonia and the Art & Tonic gallery for their support.

Joanna Hoffmann  
Director of the Tartu Art Museum

# Siiri Jüris

Born in 1992 in Jõgeva, Estonia

## Solo and duo exhibitions

- 2020 (December) **matter that (em)bodies**, Galleri Mejan, Stockholm
- 2020 (November) **Contact. Siiri Jüris & Kaspars Brambergs**, Valga Museum
- 2019 (February – March) **Touch**, Draakoni gallery, Tallinn
- 2018 (August – September) **dys-appearance. Siiri Jüris & Anastasia Lemberg-Lvova**, Tartu Art House
- 2018 (April – May) **Corpora. Siiri Jüris & Triin Marts**, Gallery of the Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn
- 2017 (October – November) **Siiri Jüris & Peeter Krosmann**, Vilde ja Vine, Tartu
- 2017 (July) **Lahustumine**, Võru City Gallery
- 2014 (April – May) **Luba, ma maalin sind. Siiri Jüris & Alisa Vasina**, Vanemuine Theatre, Tartu

## Group exhibitions

- 2020 (October) **Woman. Replacement Body**, Noorus gallery, Tartu
- 2020 (June – July) **Spring exhibition 2020**, Tallinn Art Hall
- 2019 (November) **Young Painter Prize**, VDA gallery Titanikas, Vilnius, Lithuania
- 2018 (December) – 2019 (January) **Annual exhibition of Tartu art**, Tartu Art House
- 2018 (May – June) **Jubilee Spring 2018**, Tallinn Art Hall
- 2017 (December) – 2018 (January) **Annual exhibition of Tartu art**, Tartu Art House
- 2017 (October) **Young Art Show 10**, Piešťany, Slovakia
- 2017 (August – September) **Mina ka!**, Vana-Võromaa Museum and Art Gallery
- 2017 (May – June) **Graduate exhibition of the Painting Department of the University of Tartu**, Tartu Art House
- 2017 (April – May) **Right Now!**, New Art Museum, Pärnu
- 2017 (January) **Memory**, Noorus gallery, Tartu
- 2016 (December) – 2017 (January) **Annual exhibition of Tartu art**, Tartu Art House

2016 (August – September) **Tartu Art School 65. Exhibition-auction**, Noorus gallery, Tartu

2016 (May – September) **XXIII international nude art exhibition Man and Woman: Aliens**, New Art Museum, Pärnu

2016 (April – May) **Muutuv ja muutumatu**, New Art Museum, Pärnu

2016 (April – May) **Tartu young art auction (spring)**, Tartu Centre for Creative Industries

2015 (December) – 2016 (January) **Annual exhibition of Tartu art**, Tartu Art House

2015 (June) **Graduate exhibition of the Painting Department of the University of Tartu**, Tartu Art House

2015 (April – May) **Illusion**, Pärnu City Gallery

2015 (March – May) **Järjepidevus ja uudsus**, New Art Museum, Pärnu

## Education

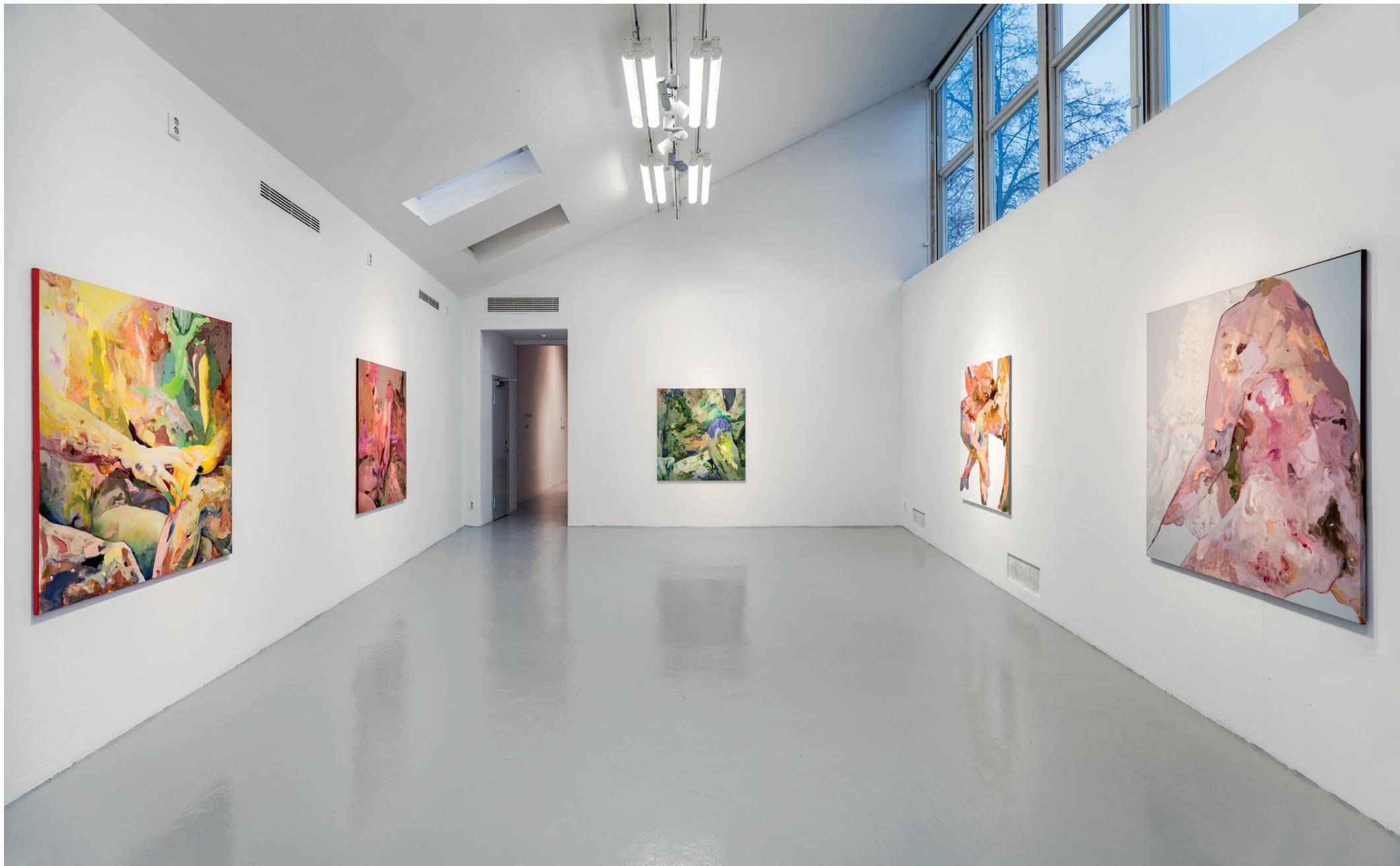
- 2019–2021 Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm, painting, MA
- 2015–2017 University of Tartu, painting, MA, *cum laude*
- 2012–2015 University of Tartu, painting, BA
- 2008–2012 Tartu Art School, decorator and stylist
- 2010 Pohjois-Karjalan ammattiopisto Outokumpu, Finland

## Awards

- 2010 Tartu Art School's Golden Pencil

## Additional information

- 2019 finalist for the Young Painter Prize
- 2019 *Virvarr. Paberist muinasjutt*. Scenography and video design, Vanemuine Theatre / Theatre House
- 2013 (September) Animated music video for the song *Survive* by the band Almost Natural
- From 2020 member of the Uppsala Artists' Association
- From 2018 member of the Tartu Artists' Union
- Works in private collections in Estonia, Russia, Finland, Germany and France



Näitusevaade Galleri Mejan, Stockholm  
Exhibition view Galleri Mejan, Stockholm

# Interview with Siiri Jüris

**Interviewed by Kristlyn Liier**

**December 2020**

**How did you get involved with art?**

**Did you already have the “bug” as a child?**

I remember looking at my mother’s paintings as a child and deciding that I wanted to have the same skills in the future. Over the years, this desire kept growing.

**When did you realise that you would become an artist?**

The final decision was made during my first year in the gymnasium: I stopped studying in a regular school and was accepted into the Tartu Art School.

**Have you ever planned to study something else besides art?**

I have always had four main areas of interest: art, sociology, languages and everything to do with medicine (including veterinary medicine). My first choice was constantly in flux up to the time I got into the art school. I know that as a three-year-old I tried to “cure” the frogs in a pond and dreamt of becoming a veterinary. But from grade three to grade five I was sure that I would become a sociologist. Besides art, I also studied for a while to become a radiology technician.

**Why did you choose painting as your medium?**

The original impulse for this was the Tartu Art School. One of the teachers of painting asked me to never paint anything again, so it seemed only natural that as a response I should go to the university

to study precisely that. In all seriousness, I think that painting is an enticing challenge. Everything about it is full of traditions. Paintings are still interpreted based on a clearly defined system of rules; it is thought that paintings are understandable to everyone (you can even exhibit them in a small town). The paint will usually find its way onto the canvas in a traditional manner. Certain techniques and colour tones are (still) associated with manual skills and/or femininity. There certainly are surprises, but there could be more of them.

Yes, working on a level surface with traditional tools the possibilities are limited, but this is actually the challenge: how to use the medium differently, to be traditional yet original (or at least try to be). For this, the artist should know the materials in depth, but a conventional approach doesn’t allow this. Or at least it seems to me that this prevented me from getting to know painting materials. My whole focus has been on form, shape, tonality, light, space and everything else. That is why, in order to develop, I have spent the last couple of years working on getting to know paints and base materials while also working with the theme of bodies. I decided that besides the organic corporeal body I also have to focus on inorganic acrylic paint. I have systematically tested how the hobbyist and professional paints of different producers work and even how acrylic paints that have been mixed together from pigments work on various canvases: how they mix, their translucency, reactions to additional pigments, etc. There are other areas that I should try out since acrylic as a material “knows” how to do many things.

**Both your bachelor's and master's degrees are from the Painting Department of the University of Tartu, which no longer exists. Why did you choose to study there and not the Estonian Academy of Arts or the Tartu Art College?**

It was a deliberate decision and an utter accident at the same time. I had two preferences. My results on the entrance exams to the other institution were catastrophic because of my nerves. Of the places that offered artistic education, the Painting Department of the University of Tartu seemed the most inviting since during the undergraduate years you could choose a minor and take courses from numerous other departments. The possibility of learning various languages also seemed attractive. Continuing my master's studies at the same place seemed logical and safe.

**How did you feel when the decision was made to close the Painting Department?**

It was not pleasant news.

**What are your fondest memories of your studies at the Painting Department?**

I really liked the people, the atmosphere and the rooms, both on Lai street and later in the anatomical theatre. My memories are warm. I mostly remember the time in the anatomical theatre since I painted alone there for a long time in the evenings and during the holidays. At one point I was almost living there and only went home to sleep. I had at least one large room only for my use most of the time. At that time, I also developed the habit of painting at least four to eight hours per day. I still try to do that.

**You are currently studying in the Royal Institute of Art In Sweden. How is the atmosphere there different from Tartu? Is there anything that you find especially pleasing or anything you don't like?**

The Kungliga Konsthögskolan and the Painting Department of the University of Tartu are different. The environment in the Institute is not authoritarian but in Estonia it tends to be like that. In Sweden, independence is emphasised: the education of a student depends completely upon their choices and how active they are. The school creates an environment where everything is possible: you just have to know how to ask. There is no evaluation of works or ideas on a numerical scale, and no commands or restrictions. Instead there are recommendations, references, articles, etc. and studio visits with curators and professional artists: everything that can contribute to your development. Another positive aspect is that every student has a studio or at least a cubicle to work in alone. There is no painting together. In Stockholm, I found new freedom and courage to experiment. Besides painting, I have also cast bronze and spent some time in the woodworking shop. I needed different experiences. The time spent there has been good for me in every sense.

**Your works often depict displaced bodies and their main themes are corporeality and physical contact. They are very intimate, but also distant and deliberate. Why are you interested in these themes or motifs?**

Corporeality is a challenge because a lot has already been done with it. If you think about (figurative) painting, then this has (usually) been accompanied by the compulsion to transform the paint on the canvas into something as body-like as possible, to transform the body into something body-like, which means that mostly work is begun or

concluded with skin and hair, and/or the body is used as a symbol, as a metaphor. It is also (usually) not possible to avoid narrativity when you are depicting a body. However, the latter has been secondary for me (I consider the surface of the painting to be most important). Trying to depict individuals, emotions or the general human experience doesn't give the desired result. The body is so much more. By "more", I mean the whole material that the body consists of: the living matter that exists in us all (for example, microbes whose total cellular mass outweighs that of other cells almost ten fold). "More" also denotes the environment that the body exists in. Even though my works have always been very human-centric, the very idea of human-centrism now seems somewhat schizophrenic (knowing what the effects of human activity are on the larger scale and at the individual level). I'm mostly interested in the (human) body but working with it supports the anthropocentric world view by focusing on people. Okay, we do live in the Anthropocene Age and it is talked about a lot, but I find it hard to come to terms with all the accompanying doom n' gloom, finger-pointing, cynicism, unease and game-over attitude... I prefer Donna Haraway's alternative idea (or maybe it is a slogan?) of the chthuluscene, which in a simplified interpretation refers to not engaging with problems from the power position of humans but as a symbiotic and emphatic coexistential system of all species and forms of life. ("We are humus, not Homo, not anthropos; we are compost not post-human.") This idea exudes at least a sliver of positivity, equality and less narcissism and capitalism. It also goes nicely with Lynn Margulis's endosymbiotic theory. Inspired by these two women, I focus on the physical and emphatic inter-personal contact and, instead of the outer form of the body, I work with the material that the body directly and indirectly consists of. In other words, I try to find a painterly technique that allows me to connect organic matter, the theme of physical contact/

touch and the environment that the body exists in. All the while, I'm also researching the painting material itself. I want to achieve a lot at the same time. I don't yet know how successful I have been in expressing all of these ideas since I'm still in an experimental phase.

**Physical contact and touch often last barely a couple of seconds. How easy or hard is it to depict something whose temporal duration is unpredictable?**

I think that the most difficult element about depicting physical contact and touch is finding the correct base material, the right way and the right tones with which to convey an idea on canvas. I mainly base my works on archive photographs since they contain more honesty and moments of tenderness have been frozen in time. The philosopher Laura U. Marks thinks that merely seeing hands might evoke the feeling of touch in the viewer since we identify with the figure to whom the hands belong or even with the depiction of the hands themselves. This power of identifying doesn't necessarily always work but based on it we can assume that merely seeing hands in a painting or a photograph might be enough. I should also mention that there are people who have actually been blessed with mirror-touch synaesthesia: this is the most humane form of synaesthesia since these people can experience physically what other people are feeling (looking at an image, a TV series or people on a train, in a café etc.). This ability correlates with a sharpened sense of empathy.

**What inspires you or where do you get your ideas from?**

Mostly I get new ideas from reading or through working. I have spent quite a lot of time looking at archive pictures. I have searched for intriguing material and visible physical contact that has that special something that cannot be staged.

**Is there anybody who has significantly influenced your art?**

I tend to take others' commentaries directly and seriously so I am influenced to an extent by all the feedback from friends, teachers or even anonymous commentators. I have lately started writing down all of the jabbing comments and have consciously taken on the additional task of using them somehow when I start a new painting: for example "use more yellow", "be more / less abstract", "there should be more bright tones", "too beautiful, be more ugly", "horrible ugly art, it should be more beautiful", "use less pink", "monochrome would be better", "the approach is too soft, be more forceful" and so on. It is completely impossible to take all of them into consideration in one painting, but using some of them is quite interesting.

**What is your painting process like: how does it start and when is a work ready?**

Lately I have mainly painted horizontally, with the canvas on the floor, and am always working on many paintings at the same time. Before I start, I collect material and make decisions: which archive image, canvas, colouring, new approach to use, how to apply colours (their order, level of dilution and dilutants) etc. The choice of canvas determines absolutely everything that follows: for example, the same paints and techniques on 100% fine cotton, 100% synthetic or 100% linen canvas result in completely different outcomes. One painting takes three to six hours on average. In the end, some areas might only have one layer while others may be covered in twenty or even fifty layers. I stop (or pause) painting when I feel that I don't know how to add anything. This doesn't mean that the painting is actually completed, though.

**What do you consider important in painting? Do you have any principles that guide your creative process?**

It is very important that the painting process be stimulating for me. Each new series and each new painting must have a slightly different approach.

**How much of yourself, your experiences or your emotions do you put into the works?**

I don't know how to answer that. Consciously using my own personal experiences and emotions seems a bit too sentimental. I usually work with clearly defined themes and I start with a thorough period of preparation. But I do transfer myself physically into the painting. The way I am currently working is very bodily. I could say that I surround and touch my paintings the same way that the figures hidden in the spots of colours surround and touch each other.

**Does painting have a calming or therapeutic effect on you? Why?**

I consider painting work that I enjoy doing. I also know that I am a better person if I get to spend enough time in the studio. A long time away from it will make me quite unpleasant.

**Your works are often layered and thickly painted while other painters work completely differently: their surfaces are very smooth and even. Why did you choose this approach?**

Sensing the body happens through a system of contradictory textures, colours, surfaces and rhythms. An even painting surface creates an illusion, but a thick and layered surface has both an illusory component and the potential to be (in places) actually tactile. This is enchanting. I

like deep surfaces that have something that can be “touched” with the eyes; surfaces that don’t let the eyes immediately focus but force the gaze to move from one point to another, that allow both the viewer and me to see the form/shape/body hidden behind the active surface only after we consciously force ourselves to look deeper. That is the feeling that I want to elicit in the viewer.

**Continuing with colour: your tonality has changed over the years. For example, your 2017 graduate works were dark, with black and brown dominating. But a year later, at the exhibition *dys-appearance*, the colouring was somewhat brighter and pinker. How do you choose the tonality?**

The theme of the 2017 graduate work was a bit dark: loneliness and anxiety. But with *dys-appearance* I tried to do something different, to create a contrast: the theme was serious but the context of the base material had changed. I wanted to see whether a more colourful tonality would emphasise contradictory emotions that I myself had had while carrying out the procedures that the works depicted. In general, however, the selection of tonality is quite random. I do have a clear plan when I begin each painting, but the method that I employ creates unpredictable results, which means that the tonality of a painting changes numerous times throughout the process.

**Do you have a message that you want to convey to viewers through your oeuvre?**

My main desire is for viewers to experience the colours and allow themselves to concentrate first on the surface of the painting, to let it direct them at least for a moment. Living together is the basis of everything. Not rivalry or constant struggle but processes of symbiosis have been the basis of our development and especially the triggers and assistants of the development of our creativity.

**What kind of art do you like when you yourself are the viewer? What interests or addresses you as a viewer?**

I’m quite easily pleased when I go to exhibitions of other artists. Then I am addressed by art where the content, technique, colour, material or some other component demands my attention as a viewer and surprises me somehow.

**Who are your favourite artists in Estonia and abroad?**

I don’t have any favourites in specific areas but there are creators whose works I know I will enjoy. Of Estonian artists, these include Edith Karlson, Merike Estna and Eike Eplik. Right now from the wider world I would definitely choose Elizabeth Glaessner, Ambera Wellmann, Berlinde de Bruyckere, Donna Huancka and Lynda Benglis.

**What are your plans as an artist? Do you have a big dream that you want to achieve during your career?**

I have big plans and I am constantly working to make them happen. I hope that they will come to fruition over the next decade if the climate and everyday life allow it. At the moment, I am working on many smaller projects and preparing for exhibitions in Uppsala, Stockholm and possibly in the summer in Estonia.

**If you could go back in time to the Siiri who was just starting out in art, what would your advice to her be?**

It is completely okay to be different.



**Akrüül lõuendil.** 120 x 120 cm. 2020–2021. Autori omand.  
**Acrylic on canvas.** 120 x 120 cm. 2020–2021. Courtesy of the artist.



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**Acrylic on canvas.** 120 x 120 cm. 2020–2021. Courtesy of the artist.