

TARTMUS



Tartu Kunstimuseum

**World  
in the Head**

16.10.2021–  
30.01.2022

Tartu Art Museum

**Vano Allsalu**

tartmus.ee

# Introduction

On 16 October 2021, the exhibition "World in the Head" by the painter Vano Allsalu will open in the Tartu Art Museum. The ground floor of the Leaning Building will be taken over by colourful, emotional and intelligent abstract artworks. Visitors can follow the artist's spontaneous inner world and each can explore it in their own way and in their own time.

The works in the exhibition and in the accompanying catalogue were made over the last decade and the artist has divided them into four sub-themes: "Motive. Singular", "Painting as Landscape", "The Order of Chaos" and "Exit Through the Subject". Although all of the paintings are very characteristic of Vano Allsalu's work (e.g. colourful and vivid abstract works of art), a sharp observer will notice after more thorough inspection differences in compositions: confined and unbound surfaces, horizons and their absence, a clear focal point on the canvas or the general intensity of the image. The exhibition offers a concentrated selection of the works while a general understanding of the conceptual background can be gleaned from the catalogue. In addition to 71 reproduced paintings, and interpretations by Joanna Hoffmann, Jaan Elken and Tiit Aleksejev, the publication also contains the artist's own philosophical and poetic contemplations.

The themes of Allsalu's oeuvre range from natural elements to mythological constructs to states of mind. They also touch upon the intimate and personal, as well as cultural and social issues. According to the artist, what he considers important are the intellectual undercarriage of a visible image, visual and verbal references, and the rise of meaning on the border between the abstract and the figurative.

## ← **The Day After I**

acrylic, canvas

95×135 cm

2021

Allsalu recommends looking at his works together with the titles, as integral wholes, but he concedes that the work itself is still primary. He also emphasises the temporal factor: this means that viewers should take the time to observe and to perceive. The first impression is one thing, but the aftertastes and sensibilities can offer a completely different experience. Upon deeper inspection, the experience will only intensify. "Every painting is like a world in itself, complete in its imperfection," adds Allsalu.

**Vano Allsalu** (b 1967) graduated in 1991 from the Painting Department of the Estonian Academy of Arts. He has participated in exhibitions since 1984 and has been a member of the Estonian Artists' Association, Estonian Painters' Association and Tartu Artists' Union since 1992. He has taught painting as the holder of the Chair of Painting in the University of Tartu, as an assistant professor at the Estonian Academy of Arts and as a lecturer in the Sally Stúdio Art School. In 2013–2019, Allsalu was the president of the Estonian Artists' Association and is currently its vice president. His works are in the collections of the Art Museum of Estonia, Tartu Art Museum, Akzo Nobel and Bank of Estonia, as well as in private collections in Estonia and abroad.

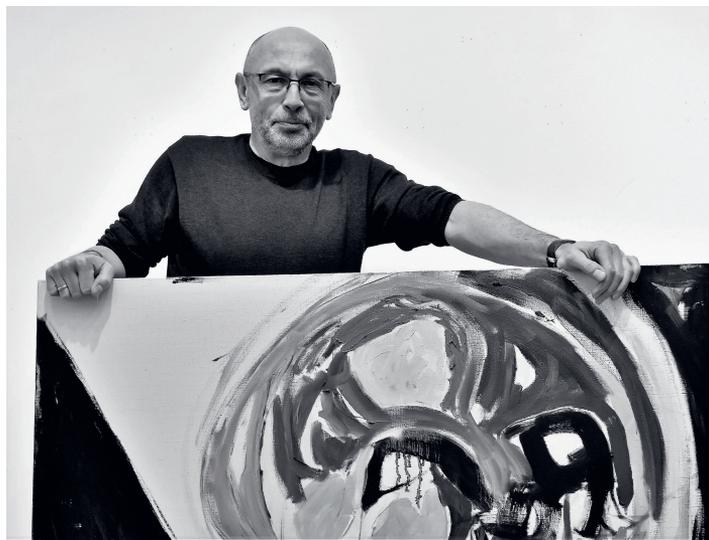


Photo: Alar Raudoja

# World in the Head

Vano Allsalu

Can storytelling take place without narratives, like a small child does it? A child notices and names people and things without planning anything. It is an urge and a desire to explore the world, a kind of natural conquest. Over time, a "me" emerges: a personality, a person who must learn to know herself and to live with others.

I am a creator and observer, the will and the tool. Sometimes this journey tangles in itself. I take a long step into the unknown and then back away. I try to escape this contemplation, wander down new paths and suddenly find myself in a familiar location. This is comforting and depressing at the same time. My internal monologue becomes deafening and then calming. Everything is alright. Feelings and knowledge become one, a wordless vision.

Somewhere at the beginning is temptation, then compulsion and acceptance. I must do it. The purpose can only be external. I am here and now. I feel that I am in many places at once. My thoughts traverse time, bringing barely perceptible recognitions that threaten to disappear immediately. By giving titles to my works, I capture them. But often these are only disguises. Every painting is like a world in itself, complete in its imperfection. An arrangement with a great level of freedom. A self-fulfilling prophecy, self-sufficient.

As an artist, I don't create out of absence or abundance but in order to understand something. To understand what has been and what could still be possible: here and now, somewhere, somewhen. "Everything returns by strange paths," wrote the poet Artur Alliksaar. One image is all words. One word is all stories. All stories are one. Motion ensures balance. And there is so much of it.

Listing all of the titles of my solo exhibitions thus far would reveal the world in my head: Black and White. Still Life. Nice World, Nice Weather. Beauty Found. Coloured Light. Painting Is Landscape. Lovely Times. Nocturnal Icarus. In Every Way. The Age of Innocence. Night Terror. Motive. Afterburn. One Other Time. All of It. So Much. Of Nature. Order of Chaos. However, an exhibition is only a gathering of works. Like a meeting or a party or a family gathering is for people. Every work is a unique story, a relationship, an experience, a birth.

The surface of the picture becomes a whirlpool, an eruption, a danger zone, a battlefield, a messy room after an orgy. I am riveted by the mild fury of painting, letting go and returning. And I am thrilled by the moment when the hidden is suddenly revealed. After working, I sleep restlessly. My brain, like a chess player, tries to make the right move on the board where visions act as chessmen, but in the end I will still lose to the nameless and formless opponent.

In dreams, I have some secret studios: places that were abandoned years ago that I reach after roaming gloomy streets. I recognise the stale air of the basement space with its encoded elements of pigments; I see familiar things sticking out of heaps covered in dust. I feel melancholic and excited. I light the stove. Sometimes I notice that the fire is already burning, but in those moments it is in the attic and the flames are licking the beams. The blaze continues, but the building never burns down.

# I Motive. Singular

To me, the answer to the question “What should I depict?” (i.e. the motif) mainly comes down to the question “Why depict or paint at all?” (i.e. the motive). The Estonian language allows us to inseparably join these two concepts, as the term “motiiv” represents both of them.

If I leave aside the story of my own development as an artist in its everyday, heroic and professional aspects, something else still remains. Maybe this is the ultimate manifestation of freedom, the will penetrating into shapeless matter like a spike, floating above my own ego. The freedom to decide why, how and when to act. The freedom to depict or not to depict. The freedom to choose my own motive/motif.

This delicious and imperceptible moment of decision is like falling into nirvana or a maelstrom, metaphysical masturbation, a masochistic imitation of the primal eruption of creation, a narcissistic sneer at the viewer, an exciting self-reflection, a desolate recognition of how everything is.

Life and the world around us, our internal world, the construction of our brains, the network of relations: all of these are complicated, consisting of a zillion fragments and an even larger number of connections between them. And yet, in this endless biodiversity and unfathomable abundance, what is of utmost importance is number one.

We are all one: everyone. Some are big and some are small, but everyone is presently present uniquely. When I say “I”, I don’t mean anybody else. One mother and father, one life – maybe – often one aim, one god, one obsession. One love, one universe, one ignorance. Mathematically: one at one end and infinity at the other.

When it comes to the composition of works, the playing field actually becomes wider at three: with two shapes it is hard to create motion or mood. One is by nature a point, a stoppage but it is also inevitable: the beginning of everything, the pinnacle. Even in the most colourful scene, after patient observation the most important element will stand out: like somebody in a crowd who looks at you for a moment.

In De Chirico's painting *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*, a shadow is cast around the corner of a building. It's sharply elongated onto a square, announcing somebody who is invisible to us. To me, this image holds one of the central notions of culture and the essence of humanity: mystery. Finding out and experiencing things that have thus far been unknown to us is the essence of our lives, at least to the point where we think we have seen everything. The meaning of life is also a secret: we can only guess, trying to look around the corner to where the light is coming from and the shadow is being cast.

An actual secret – one that makes you sad and joyful at the same time and also a bit restless – can only exist somewhere between one and infinity... If we move towards infinity, there will come a point when we will no longer be visible: we lose sight of the land and fade into nothingness. Wanting to become one with one, we seemingly fall into a black hole: speculating and trusting, but still not knowing what lies beyond the event horizon.

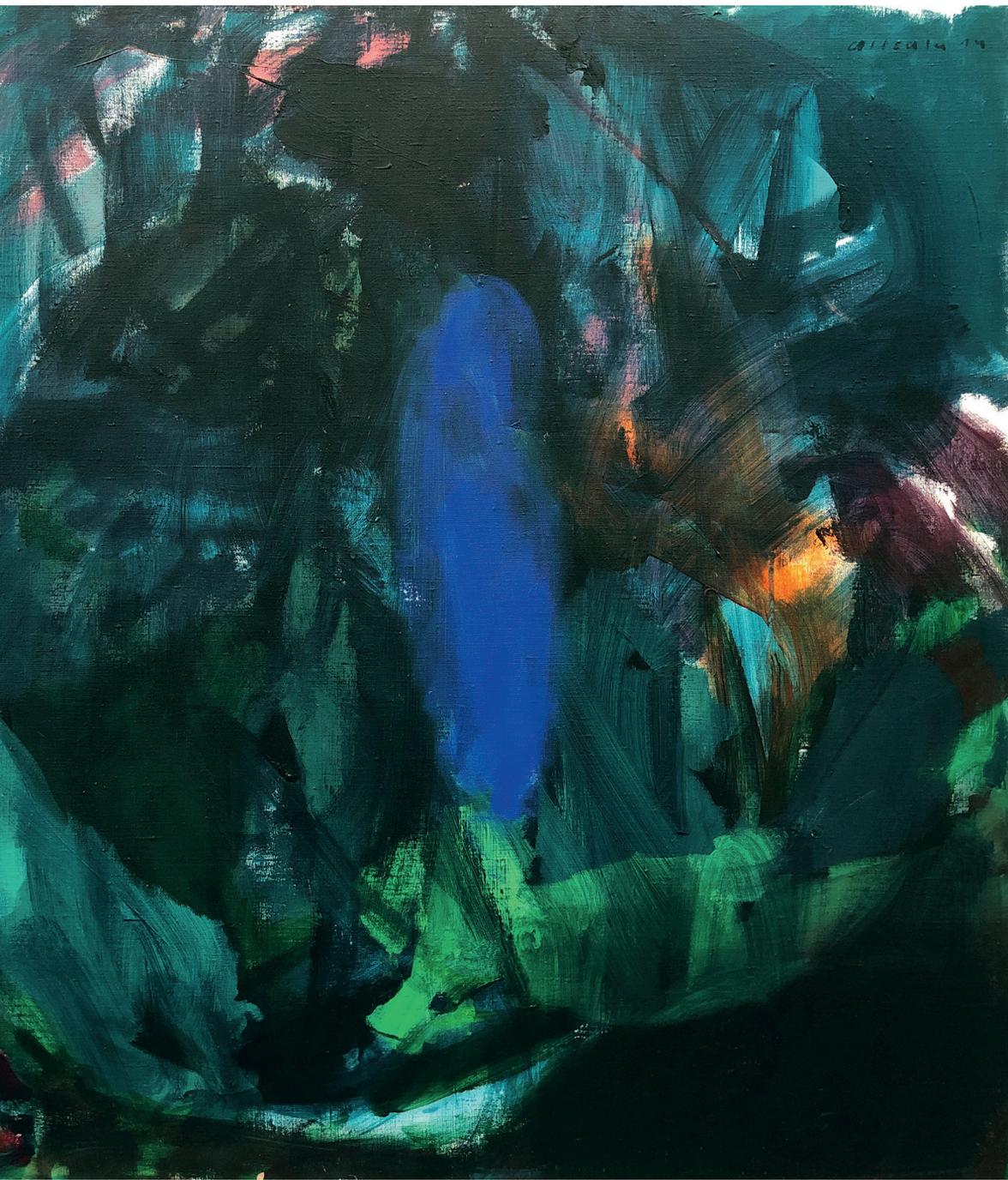
**Heart of Darkness**

acrylic, canvas

110×125 cm

2014





# II Painting as Landscape

The horizon often holds an important place in my works as the line that organises our world, determining the upside and the downside, heaven and earth. Take a white piece of paper and draw a horizontal line. If you wish, you can colour the upper half blue and the bottom half green and you will get a calming view of a summer field under clear skies. This might be the simplest and most elegant visual thought experiment on the border between depiction and non-depiction that shows how little is needed to reach figurativeness from abstraction...

To me, landscape is not just a view from a window or an image with a certain composition captured by a camera or on canvas, and it's definitely not a pretty postcard. A landscape is an archetypical motif, the feeling of having solid ground under one's feet accompanied by the excitement of the unknown that lies on the other side of the horizon.

An implied landscape motif was present at the beginning of my career and keeps popping up from time to time as an inevitability, as a result of the reality that surrounds us and that natural sense of space that we receive at birth.

Sometimes the starting point is a personal experience of nature. And this may not even be based on colours, but can be influenced by rain, wind, the sun in my eyes, the pattern of my steps during a walk, or the visual flow that forms outside the window of a car moving at great speed. A landscape can also be an implied stage for colours and shapes. In a way, every image is more or less an implied space.



## **Landscape**

acrylic, canvas

92×132 cm

2013

In 2004, I wrote in my notebook: "This same landscape where we are and that we inhabit is also inside us. Some of my works are fragments of that landscape. I don't dig around in my memories: I just look outside myself."

The horizon expands when we rise higher... and disappears completely if we look down. Thanks to technology, we know what our planet looks like as a whole and what our home street or home forest looks like from space. Now the availability of drones has made various birds-eye views common. However, for me this doesn't reduce the romantic value and existential meaning of the vision – and dream – of actually flying like a bird.

# III The Order of Chaos

If something takes shape on its own, it cannot be said to be wrong in any way. There are only impermanent and non-existent rules... and even these have been made up by me. It is a good feeling. Indeed, my works should be sensed rather than seen: like we sometimes sense the whole of a person.

Mediating my own visions to others, I must draw a line, to limit and to finalise, and always give something up. When it comes to painting, knowing when to stop and when to end is perhaps even more important than making as a process... Therefore, I want to start again, to continue looking. But why, in the name of heaven, should I start again at all, why should I stand once again in front of a white canvas, all the while being completely free?

Actions must be preceded by decisions, just as reactions are preceded by stimuli. When I burn my hand, I remove it quickly from the source of pain. In everyday life, I must be guided by objectives and existing possibilities, I have to analyse situations, find solutions and make decisions. But should I turn right or left if there's no difference? Should I remain seated or rise from the chair if there's no rush? How does our will become operational if our lives are not at risk, or if the question isn't even about pleasure or displeasure?

In addition to the factors of will and time, I am also interested in questions about the artist's handwriting and visual language as a structure that in its variability can even become its own antithesis: a systematic chaos, a disorderly pattern, a (self-)ironic (self-)admiration. A collection of visual elements that are brought into order by their own "wisdom of the flock", the creator left with the role of the person trying to shoo thrushes from berry bushes by clapping his hands or shouting in a loud voice.

To me, nature is not one of many possible themes for painting, but acts mainly as a process or, actually, a myriad of processes: growing and waning, blooming and fading, motion and stillness. We are surrounded by elements, a brutal and tenacious urge to live and to endure, the simultaneous vulnerability and durability of living nature, a steadfast surging and resurgence, a totality that is constantly changing and continuously turning in on itself.

Without notions like order and chaos, it would be difficult to describe the world, be it the cosmos, politics or everyday life, be it objectively existing things or figments of our imagination. The “imagined order” of the contemporary star intellectual Yuval Noah Harari seems to be one of the most powerful factors in the development of our civilisation...

Clearly, one thing must exist inside the other: even in chaos, certain hidden structures and dynamic patterns can be seen and excessive order can ultimately become the antithesis of itself and crumble into dust. To me as an artist, the structure and composition of a work are open to both chaos and order: both are absolutely necessary and they are interconnected. I think that my understanding of the nature of my own creative process is best described by the phrase “chaos with a high level of order” or “order with a high level of freedom”.

No matter whether it is order or chaos, the passage of time is equally painful. I don't want time to get tangled up in my works. Although a finished painting is a static object, I like to think that the things I experienced during painting – all that toil and delight, the thoughts and feelings – are stored in the work as layers and strokes. For a sensitive and inquisitive eye, these are revealed as a reversal of the painting process.

# IV Exit Through the Subject

I believe that the highest level of expressiveness can only be based on concentration, the withdrawal of the artist's self until it falls away. The composer Arvo Pärt has said: "It is always a beautiful time when you are at an utter loss; when you seek from almost nothing. First of all, you must make yourself nothing. There must be silence. You must make peace with your powerlessness. And that which is then given is like a gift."<sup>1</sup>

To create art that is credible and truly touches and appeals to someone, you must be both self-confident and exceedingly self-critical. This is a somewhat schizophrenic situation. But also joyful and full of contrasts: hot and cool at the same time, like an apple strudel straight from the oven served with ice cream.

When it comes to this, I think it's better to gaze at your navel and see the world than to look at the world and see your navel. In some sense, the world *does* revolve around us, throughout our lives. It doesn't matter that, looking at what is known dispassionately and analysing it purely intellectually, we must conclude that we are merely carried along by the deluge and we can only try sometimes to swim against the current or to weave around it.

From time to time I have used the titles of the works that have influenced me (art, music, books, films, etc.) as a verbal supporting structure and a network of references for my paintings. The title of a work is just as important as the image itself: it is a companion, a partner, a denominator, an interpreter, a guide, an opponent. But I don't only "milk" the treasury of words for my titles. The keywords, sentence fragments, exclamations, descriptions – they are also entries into my visual language, my handwriting and my imagery... Since I want to mainly cover existential, humane and worldly questions in my oeuvre, this has resulted in raw material that can be seen as texts and that will be made visible during the painting process through pigments and other materials.

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<sup>1</sup> *Arvo Pärt. Diaries.* Erle Veber (director). Estonian Public Broadcasting, 2020.

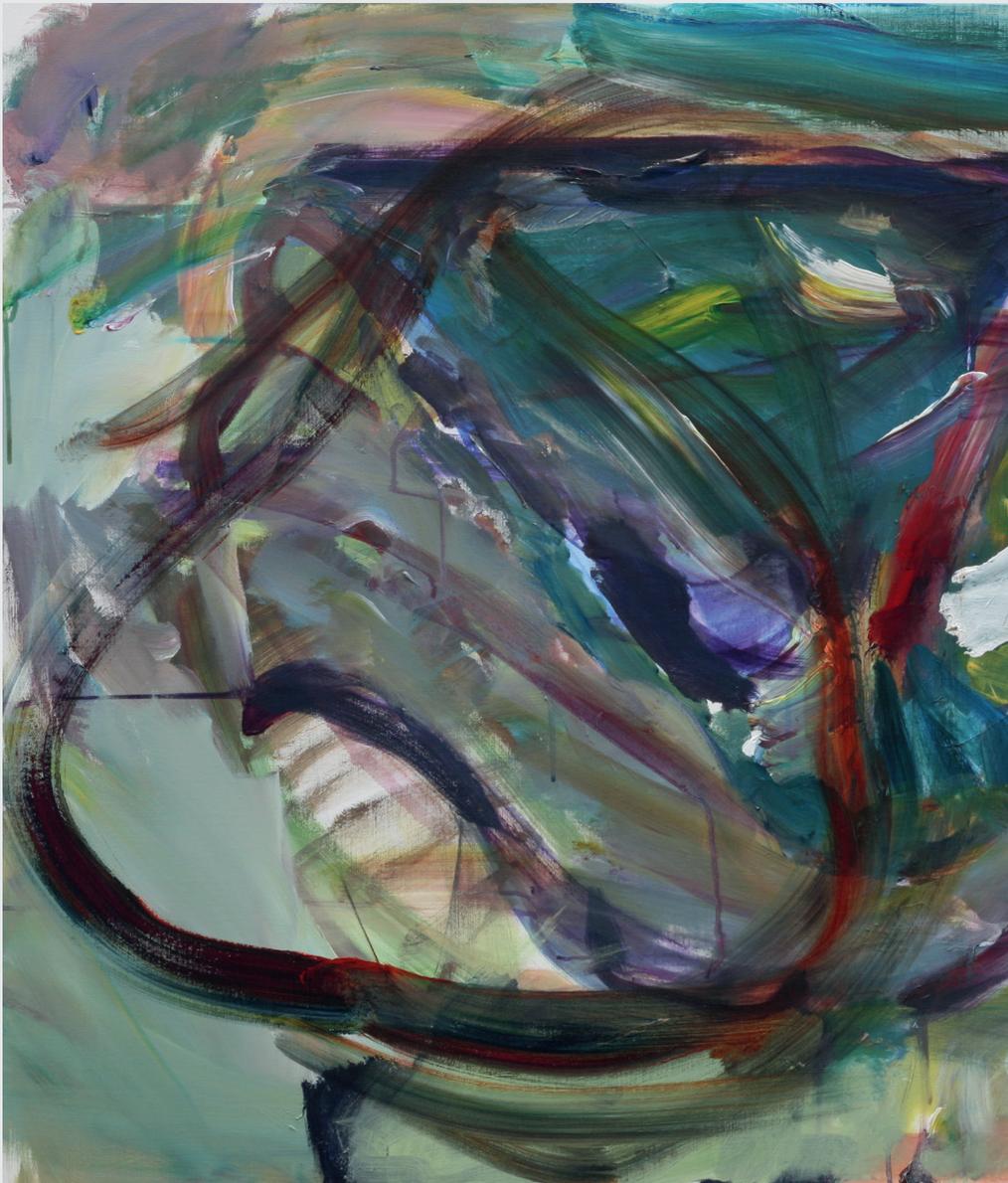
In 2008, I wrote: "Somewhere in the beginning is the moment of creation. Not an illusion, but the first glance, the first recognition. Look, this is good. [...] When I work, I concentrate on that moment, when the hidden becomes visible, the imaginary becomes real. It is like lingering on that boundary of time where the future becomes the past. I obtain my themes from myself and my surroundings, the general flow. The play with colours and shapes is more of a means than an aim."

I am indeed sometimes motivated by world-weariness, sometimes by a glimpse of some prosaic motif, a human touch, a short sentence, a word or a sound that continues haunting me. Sometimes my works seem to come from the emptiness where everything is still being created.

At the end of the horror film *The Langoliers* (1995, director Tom Holland), which is based on a short story by Stephen King, the survivors of a catastrophic temporal shift in an abandoned airport find their way back to reality from a world that seems to have come completely apart at the seams and has nearly faded away. In mere minutes the surroundings once again acquire colours and smells, the air starts to move, and, as if emerging from a fog, the crowd in the terminal appears again, with the babble of voices growing louder. And suddenly everything is back to normal...

My approach is semi-subconscious: starting to work on a preliminary idea or vision, I let the process sweep me along and the work itself leads me to its conclusion. Non-figurative material becomes figurative and meaningful, and in the symbols the cultural intertwines with the personal. Sometimes I refer to the works of other authors, touch upon great narratives and names from history: themes that have enraptured many.

So, in the end, I am still interested in the life that we live here and now – having reached this place from the past and inevitably continuing to the next moment, to tomorrow – always alone and always together.



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