URBAN ATLAS HELSINKI

A Painting Research Project

Tom Cardwell



UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI HELSINKI COLLEGIUM FOR ADVANCED STUDIES



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In 2022, Tom was awarded the Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Arts at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. He has exhibited internationally in both solo and group presentations, including University of Helsinki (2023), Wignall Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2019), Birmingham City University (2019), Wimbledon Space Gallery, London (2017) and Herbert Read Gallery, Canterbury (2014).

Olli Herranen is a social scientist and social theorist at the University of Helsinki. Herranen is a specialist in classical and critical social theory, economic and environmental sociology. He is a lifelong enthusiast of underground art and culture. His latest book 'The Invisible Order' addresses the structural and institutional order in modern capitalistic societies.

Urban Atlas Helsinki

'The city itself is the anonymous and multiple author of the images they collect and exhibit as artworks' (Bourriaud, 2002, 20).

In this quotation from Postproduction, Nicolas Bourriaud is writing about the works of 'new realist' artists Raymond Hains and Jacques de la Villegle, both known for works featuring layered torn posters collected from city streets and presented as complex abstract compositions within a gallery context. During my research fellowship at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies (2022-23), I began to document and respond to found 'compositions' from the streets of Finland's capital. These (often unintended) tableaux are created by multiple authors using flyposters, stickers and graffiti. Particular spaces in the city are appropriated as a kind of informal message board, where various agendas are promoted, and discourses negotiated. Often, these take place on the housings for electrical junction boxes, municipal signs or building hoardings. Rarely are they placed directly onto walls or private property.

My interest in these sites was initially due to their aesthetic nature, and by the way in which they are usually organised within small, regularly shaped areas that perform the function of the canvas painting support in delineating the composition, and balancing the dynamic, even chaotic, styles at play within formal edges.

The restrained nature of these compositions is, in part, explained by the historic attitude of the City of Helsinki to public graffiti. From 1998 to 2008, the City instituted the 'Stop Töhryille' (lit. 'Stop the Smudge') campaign which attempted to eradicate graffiti in public spaces from Helsinki (Fransberg, 2021, 65), informed by the perception that unauthorized painting was too widespread and was damaging the urban landscape. During this period, the City Council spent around 1M euro per year paying private security firms to guard public spaces and deter or apprehend anyone seen painting graffiti (Jokinen, 2006). Whilst this campaign proved effective, with a reduction in instances of graffiti from around 68,000 in 1999 to around 5,400 in 2005 (Jokinen, 2006), it provoked a backlash from many in the artistic and cultural spheres who felt that the behaviour of the security firms was too heavy-handed, including unnecessary violence and arrests. This protest was organised by the 'Free Helsinki' network, which campaigned for the policy and security contracts to be discontinued (nollatoleranssi.info, n.d.).

Helsinki's crackdown on graffiti can be viewed as part of a wider trend for such approaches across the Nordic countries from the mid-1990s to the mid-2010s, with particular initiatives in Stockholm, Oslo and Copenhagen, as well as Helsinki (Fransberg, 2021, 53).

In this context, the isolation of graffiti and public flyposting in Helsinki to small municipal spaces, e.g. electrical junction boxes, is understandable. The apprehension of graffiti writers during 'Stop Töhryille' apparently also extended to those putting up flyers for cultural events (nollatoleranssi. info, n.d.). Whilst post-2008 the policy has been discontinued, and gradually relaxed, it seems that hardened public attitudes to the decoration of public spaces have persisted.

Having described these sites as 'compositions', it should be made clear that they are rarely designed as such by a single maker. Rather, an initial 'posting' (either a small graffito, a sticker or fly-poster) begins the use of a particular site as a kind of collective 'message board' which others then add to. The nature of the postings can be diverse, from the political or religious to the profane or absurd. Typical examples include stickers promoting football fan groups, posters advertising musical or theatre performances or art events, protest messages, advertisements for streetwear brands, graffiti tags and pieces of graphic illustration either printed or drawn by hand.

Thus, these urban tableaux can be viewed as examples of discourses created by multiple authors across various platforms within the urban space. In some instances, contributors may respond directly to previous postings (Vasileva, 2021, 7), most notably when a member of a football fan group defaces the sticker of a rival, either by scratching it out or placing their own sticker over the top to obscure the previous one. These contestations have something of the spirit of iconoclasm about them, as each ideology seeks firstly to erase the messages of the other by any means available.

Often, a contributor does not respond directly to previous postings, but rather seeks to add their message to the space, in the manner of a public notice board. The result of these processes is usually a mixture of types of messages and languages (both visual and textual) which can create a whole that seems disjointed or jarring. In these cases, it is left to the viewer to decode the composition, filtering out content they consider irrelevant or uninteresting, in order to focus on anything of value to them. For many, the whole of the site may be disregarded as so much visual noise, which they choose to pass by (Vasileva, 2021, 7). In this sense, the audience for these communications is self-selecting. For many of the city's users they are a kind of visual pollution which they would rather was removed (Fransberg, 2021, 65). To the groups interested in these discourses (for example, football or music fans, graffiti writers or collectors) however, they have real meaning.

Painting as research

Since arriving in Helsinki in August 2022, I spent much time walking around the city, particularly the central neighbourhoods, as well as some eastern districts, the northern and southwestern areas. Seeing the city with new eyes, all of the examples of visual culture found on the streets were unfamiliar to me, even though my home city of London has plenty of street art, graffiti and a wealth of public signage and advertisement. I began to collect examples of street decoration that caught my attention. The intention was never to compile an exhaustive or systematic archive, although at the time of writing I have collected some 900 images. Examples to photograph were chosen based on visual qualities and anything in the content that struck me as interesting or unusual.

From this collection of photographs, I selected a small number to use in a series of paintings made in response. In some cases, particularly the first 2 or 3 paintings in the series, I used the compositions from the photographs without altering them, or only in very minor ways. This is possible when the compositions have particularly strong aesthetic qualities (arrangements, harmonies of colours etc.) that have the elements that I hope to achieve in a painting. In other examples, particularly the larger paintings, I adapted several source images to create composite works that feature elements of several photographs. This was increasingly my inclination as the project progressed. As the collection of paintings grew, they began to dictate a kind of internal logic that departed in some ways from the original images. I also began to feel that the collection of photographs was sufficient as a process of documentation, and that the paintings could have a more creative and exploratory function. By allowing the paintings to become somewhat imaginative, I sought to learn more about how the distinct elements of the street 'compositions' might function, and how the different elements within them are important.

These processes of image making formed the central methodology of the study. Given the strong visual nature of the original material found on the streets of Helsinki, visual practice has much to offer as a methodology (Grimshaw, Owen and Ravetz, 2010, p.161). Creative research can bring unique perspectives that are particularly suited to the study of visual culture (Bestley and Noble, 2016). Through the processes of photography and painting, multiple decisions were made about the selection and content of compositions. The choices of which examples to photograph, which angle to use, how to crop them, how close to zoom in, whether to include background scenery and other decisions act as a first stage of selection.

The paintings themselves are the product of many more decisions pertaining to composition, contrast, colour and combination of elements. The choices for modification of the original elements are potentially infinite. Whilst several of these stages might be worked out using photo editing software in order to arrive at composition ideas (I think of these as sketches), the process of translating the digital image into a painted version necessitates careful thinking about application of paint and style of rendering. This might include choices about whether to transcribe a source image in detail and at original scale, or whether to simplify it or render it in a gestural or 'painterly' way. Building up layers of paint allows for changes in colour and tone. In some cases, translucent glazes were used to give sheen and colour tint to the underlying paint.

All of these alterations are characterized by the shift from digital to analogue processes that painting involves (Cardwell, 2022, 11). The marks of the hand-made gesture offer a contrast to the slickness or flatness of the digital image, whether printed or viewed on-screen. The organic nature of these renderings means that the paintings themselves offer something wholly different to the lens-based image. The act of creative translation from source to final artwork involves not just translation but also transformation. Through the creative process the original sources are taken into a new thought-space: the space of painting (Grootenboer, 2005). The painting space is one that is outside time in an immediate sense, where images can be deployed in many ways at once. They might be symbolic, compositional, referential, abstract, connected, isolated etc.

Thus, the resulting works, whilst having clear visual connections to the examples from the photographs, become something different as well. My intention was that through these processes, the subject matters of urban cultures are brought into the painting tradition of still life and involved in its ongoing discourse. Still life painting has long been a memorial for the everyday, the transitory and the mundane (Bryson, 1990).

Warburg's Bilderatlas Mnemosyne

German art historian Aby Warburg created his Bilderatlas Mnemosyne between 1924 and 1929 at his house and adjoining library in Hamburg (it remained unfinished at the time of his death). The Atlas represented a somewhat revolutionary approach to art history (and the understanding of images more generally), relying primarily on visual juxtapositions and associations rather than textual explanations. In its largest incarnation, the Atlas comprised some 63 panels, each 2 x 1.5 metres, populated with images of artworks, antiquities, advertisements and other images arranged in thematic groups. Through these collections, Warburg sought to demonstrate the "afterlife of antiquity," or how images of great symbolic, intellectual, and emotional power emerge in Western antiquity and then reappear and are reanimated in the art and cosmology of later times and places' (Johnson, 2016, n.pag.).

The Atlas has had a profound effect on subsequent approaches to art history and scholarship, and seems in many ways prescient of the ways in which images proliferate in postmodern cultures. Warburg's approach greatly affected Kenneth Clark, director of London's National Gallery, who produced the popular series Civilization, which shaped popular understandings of art history, at least in the UK (Finch, 2019, 176). The juxtaposition of images in the Atlas as a way of communicating complex narratives can also be seen to have influenced the approach of John Berger in his book and television series Ways of Seeing, both of which feature sequences of images of artworks with little or no textual information (Finch, 2015).

Writing about the power of the Bilderatlas Mnemosyne, Georges Didi-Huberman likens the returning power of images from the past to cultural ghosts or phantoms that haunt the narratives of art and culture:

Looked at from this point of view, which might be called that of ghostly return, the images themselves are considered to be what survives of a dynamic process of anthropological sedimentation that has become partial, or virtual, having been largely destroyed by time. Thus, as a first approximation, the image [...] is viewed as what survives of a population of ghosts. Ghosts whose traces are scarcely visible and yet are disseminated everywhere. (Didi-Huberman, 2017, 20, emphasis original).

This gallery of images (the images throughout culture) can thus be viewed as embodying the presence of those that have preceded them, the relics of antiquity which yet haunt the present, even if their influence is not always openly acknowledged. Later, Didi-Huberman describes images as crystallizations 'of what a "culture" (kultur) was at a given moment in its history' (Didi-Huberman, 2017, 25). In the most direct sense then, the image is the kulturgeist or 'ghost of culture'.

These ghosts (or geisten) bring to their images an inescapable connection to history, or histories. That the past is ever-present might seem to be a tautology, but is no less important for that. The anchoring of disparate images in an atavistic as well as a contemporary network would seem to be one of the core functions of the Atlas:

'These opening panels [...] confirm that the phenomenology of history must be paramount in any Bildwissenschaft. In this regard, Warburg had more in common with Renaissance painters than with contemporary montage-makers' (Johnson, 2012, 26).

The categorisation of panels in the Mnemosyne Atlas shows Warburg's focus on the survival of themes from antiquity in the art of the renaissance, as well as the pervasive influence of cosmology. By arranging these images in loose grids, and juxtaposing the panels together, Warburg seems to invite the viewer to consider associations not just between images on the same panel, but also between one panel and another. The atlas as a whole might be viewed as a microcosm of image culture more widely; shifting, contingent and open-ended, ever in flux. As Philippe-Alain Michaud writes about the structure of the Atlas:

That Warburg conceived of Mnemosyne topographically, beyond the montage of maps on the preliminary panel of the atlas, appears to be suggested in the enigmatic phrase "iconology of the intervals" which he used in his journal of 1929. This iconology is based not on the meaning of the figures [...] but on the interrelationships between the figures in their complex, autonomous arrangement, which cannot be reduced to discourse (Michaud, 2004, 251-252).

By arranging the collected images in loose grids, and juxtaposing the panels together, Warburg invites the viewer to consider associations not just between images on the same panel, but also between one panel and another. The Atlas as a whole functions as a microcosm of image culture more widely: shifting, contingent and open-ended, ever in flux.

From Warburg's Atlas we have a powerful precedent for the idea that collections of images grouped together on panels or other surfaces can create new meanings and discourses that yet revive associations of past image cultures. In the examples from the streets of Helsinki, disparate images, texts and symbols are juxtaposed in ways that can initially seem unrelated or confused. Deeper inspection, however, might show that patterns of meaning can be inferred or observed. For example, in the deliberate quotation or appropriation of images from art history, or the adaptation of well-known logos or typefaces inflected with subversive meanings.

In Helsinki's urban message boards, images are appropriated, sampled, reproduced and remixed in apparently haphazard juxtapositions. Texts and symbols advertise or bear witness to contemporary events, or proclaim loyalties and opinions. The informal nature of these spaces gives a platform for expression that is not official, sponsored or legitimate, but can be open to any contributor who is willing to engage. Thus, these spaces stand as a challenge to corporatized hierarchies of public advertising space, and to traditional views of what is valuable in visual culture. Whilst the content of contributions is often ostensibly contemporary, in many cases images, symbols or texts contain references to cultures of the past, whether knowingly or not. These palimpsest arrangements contain ghosts: echoes of historic traditions that underwrite their currency and embolden their meanings.

Through the processes of observing, photographing and painting examples of these visual collections, new perspectives emerge to describe their importance. The painting space elevates the apparently mundane, base or unworthy, holding it up for contemplation within the long tradition of the still life genre. Thus, these groups of diverse messages collected haphazardly in the urban landscape contain glimpses of contemporary life and echoes of the past.

Painting commentary: Are You Entertained

This painting forms the right hand panel of a diptych with its companion piece Versailles. Together, these works are based on a photograph of two electrical junction boxes that are situated side by side on the side of the pedestrian and cycle route that runs through the centre of Helsinki, close to Ruoholahdenkatu. The pairing of these two items of street furniture struck me as visually effective, giving an off-centred composition owing to the difference in size between the two boxes. The right-hand panel is the larger, its surface covered with a selection of event posters pasted over layered graffiti tags. I changed the colour of the box background, initially in a digital sketch, and further in the painting process. Rather than a mid-gunmetal grey, I used a deep pthalocyanine green in semi-transparent layers. This colouring gives the background to the painting depth and lustre, allowing for the construction of multi-layered compositional elements on top.

The graffiti tags are reproduced from the photograph, with some minor alterations. Elements from several tags have been repeated, sometimes flipped vertically and horizontally, with colours changed from the background. These red elements (also found in some of the negative spaces around the tags) help to break up the background, and give a dynamic energy to the whole composition.

The layered arrangement of posters that form the mid and foregrounds of the painting are mostly present in the original source photograph. I have made a couple of additions from other photographs, most notably the 'judgement' painting on the right side of the composition. This is based on a photograph of the painting The Last Judgement (1824) by Carl Gustaf Söderstrand, originally in Keuruu church, now in the National Museum of Finland in Helsinki. The original work shows a folk-style rendering of the judgement of Christ as described in the book of Revelation. The upper section of the painting shows the righteous seated in glory with Christ as he judges the Earth, with sinners consigned to torment in the lower part of the picture. In my version, I have inverted the colours of the original work, giving a sense of dislocation and estrangement from the source. I chose this work partly for its connection to the themes of vanitas and mythology evoked elsewhere in the painting, and to the subject matters of heavy metal music culture found in Finland. Orthodox and Lutheran Christianity form an important and complex part of Finnish national history and identity (Bosley, 1989, xx), clearly represented through numerous church artefacts in the National Museum of Finland. Themes of judgement, supernatural forces and conflicts, and competing religious identities are prevalent in much Finnish metal music lyrics and artwork.

By adding this art-historical image to the selection of contemporary posters represented in this painting, I also aim to highlight ways in which such images can be re-contextualised or re-imagined in popular contexts. Here is an example of the 'ghostly return' of the judgement image in a way that can be likened to the phenomena described by Warburg (see above).

To the left of the judgement painting image, there is a rendering of a concert poster for the 'Vikings and Lionhearts Tour' by the bands Amon Amarth and Machine Head, who visited Helsinki in September 2022. Amon Amarth are a folk metal band from Sweden, whose lyrical themes and imagery are mostly concerned with Viking histories and Norse mythology. Machine Head are an American heavy metal band with lyrics and imagery that often reference heraldry and empire. The poster combines these elements to feature a divided head with the left side based on Amon Amarth's Viking beserker, and the right side Machine Head's lion crest. These stand out on a black background, with the band logos at the top of the poster, and tour name and concert details at the bottom. The image is largely two-tone black and white, with the addition of some muted yellow and orange tones for the crest and concert information.

Once more, this poster demonstrates the juxtaposition of contemporary popular culture with historic narratives and imagery. Both the bands featured reference ideas of ancient or medieval pasts, in nostalgic or dramatic ways. The use of a heraldic crest emblem reinforces these concerns and communicates them visually. The black poster on the right side of the painting, which is largely obscured by the 'judgement' image, so that only the black ground with a few strands of depicted lightning are visible, answers the stark black background of the concert poster visually.

Above the 'Vikings and Lionhearts' poster there is another large poster, predominantly white, which is torn on the top left and bottom right corners, with several stickers obscuring parts of the original message. The main image is of the head and torso of a figure wearing a checked shirt and brimmed hat, rendered in two-tone yellow and black, with a stencil effect. The face is covered by the stickers, and parts of the text are torn away making the overall meaning unclear. Above the figure is a blue text banner which appears to read 'Are You Entertained' (sic) in a block stencil typeface. To the right of the figure's head is a smaller text bubble which reads 'Do what you want but the future is mine'. The central part of this text is obscured by a circular logo sticker reading 'Eventual'. The face of the figure is covered with a further six stickers. Two of these are from football fan groups (one German and one Finnish), two from bands (Iron Corpse and Black Spiders) and one from a Helsinki streetwear clothing brand, OSW. This configuration of stickers was reproduced unchanged from the source image.

To the far right of the 'Are You Entertained' poster is a red and green pixelated image in a rectangular format. The original image that this is derived from was a poster for a burlesque performance, showing two women posing with rabbit ears on their heads. Rather than reproducing this directly, I chose to pixelate the image in digital image software, breaking down its coherence and lending it an abstract quality. I also changed the colour balance to give it a stronger red and green theme. Whilst something of the original photo can be discerned, particularly when viewed from a distance, the image is much less clear than in the source photograph. In making these modifications I have emphasised the creative aspects of the painting process, and the less direct representation that is possible in painted space.

The other motif in this painting is a stylised skull sticker with a geometric cranium. This is repeated twice, firstly in the upper central part of the painting, where it appears on its side rendered in pink and black, and secondly in the lower left corner where it is upright, with tones reversed, this time in fluorescent yellow and black. As with 'Are You Entertained', these stickers have appeared in many locations in Helsinki, apparently the work of a sticker artist. They do not have any text component, suggesting that the main intention is to be seen, both aesthetically and symbolically. Indeed, the aim of sticker art is often to feature the same sticker in as many locations as possible (Vasileva, 2021, 3).

Taken as a whole, this painting contains disparate visual and textual references, which yet serve to cohere in some senses. References to art and cultural history, themes of religion (judgement) and philosophy (vanitas) and particular tropes of painting history (the portrait figure, the judgement painting, gestural abstraction) are variously represented. The combination of different painting styles and visual languages alludes to the multiplicity at work in contemporary image cultures, and shows how one small location from a city street can contain such variety. While I have made some

enhancements through the painting process, the essential composition, with many of its elements, has been rendered as it appeared on the street in Helsinki. In these ways, it serves to demonstrate visually the complex factors discussed in previous sections relating to street art, contemporary image cultures, and their links to art history.

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Postscript: Some comments on the exhibition Urban Atlas Helsinki

Olli Herranen

I'd like to start with the general theme of your work, which is urban space and its use. As a sociologist, I'd like to add something to this discussion, namely what I call the democratic (re)appropriation of urban aesthetic space.

This is something that happens when people go to put up stickers and posters and paint graffiti in urban spaces and compete with almost pure commercial use of aesthetic space – and I understand that the events marketed by the posters may be 'commercial'. So, we could say that the unplanned ensemble resulting from the application of stickers and posters is thus a description or a representation of the democratic re-appropriation of aesthetic urban space, even though it might be spontaneous: an unintentional result of uncoordinated collective effort. The way I see it, your art describes or represents this process, even though it can only capture fleeting moments of it, since the urban aesthetic landscape is constantly in a state of evolution and change.

Why democratic? We can begin to answer this question by considering what the appearance of stickers and posters represents. We can interpret it as representing a rupture in the social order. Something undesirable, disorderly, and untidy is crawling out of the ground. Sociologically, there are several ways of interpreting this, for example, the way the cultural theorist Mary Douglas saw 'dirt': it is matter out of place¹. It is something that, according to some social and cultural standards, is not in the right place.

If these markers of the underground are considered to be dirt, why? Because they represent a deviation from the commercial use of urban space, and have not emerged from a legitimate process of negotiation. It is worth noting that the terms of use of aesthetic urban space are only negotiated through a commercial transaction: you need money to use urban space for your aesthetic purposes. We don't necessarily pay attention to this when we move around the city because we are so used to seeing almost nothing but advertisements. We might ask: how democratic is that?

In these stickers, posters, and graffiti, the underground culture is seen at least somewhere in urban space – it exists, it's out there, or should I say, it's down there. Everything is not as clean and tidy and bourgeois as it seems, and that is what urban space is generally supposed to represent: a safe, clean, bourgeois, commercial image that does not question anything but invites you to consume and succeed.

Back to the work. First of all, the way I see your paintings is exactly the way people see any, for example, landscape painting, but with the difference that you're bringing out something dirty, subcultural, and deviant, whose visuality and beauty cannot be necessarily understood with the aesthetic toolbox that people are used to and are socialised to work with. It is not a fruit bowl, nor a national landscape, nor a historical building, but an urban underground landscape that is firmly rooted in the present and that for many people represents something completely alien and even undesirable.

In your earlier work you've talked about the negotiation between legitimate and established art forms and underground art. Now you're – in your own words – transcribing these collective and spontaneous ensembles into works of fine art. You say in the text for this exhibition that "[s]paces in the city become informal message boards, where various agendas are promoted, and discourses negotiated"². In your earlier book, you also discuss how underground "images can act symbolically to communicate ideas and associations"³. Referring to what I said earlier, I would also add that while they communicate some message encoded in a symbolic language, they also negotiate between different types of social relations. It is interesting to ask which forces in society dominate and whether these forces are willing or agreeable to any kind of reciprocity and peaceful coexistence, or whether they seek to suppress any deviation that comes along?

How do you feel about that? Moreover, are you making them safer and less threatening for the consumers of the established urban landscape, or do you rather force this subculture into a legitimate urban landscape and art institution?

¹ Mary Douglas Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo, Routledge, 2002.

² Tom Cardwell Urban Atlas Helsinki (exhibition text), University of Helsinki, May 2023.

³ Tom Cardwell Heavy Metal Armour: A Visual Study of Battle Jackets, Intellect, 2022.

Paintings

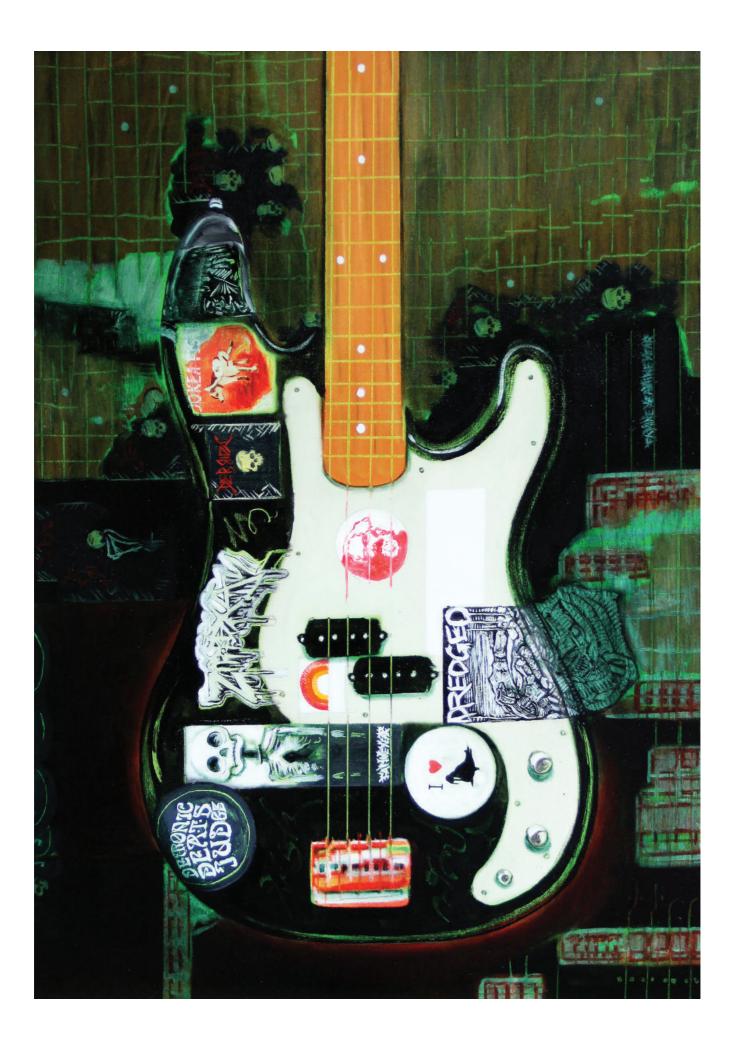








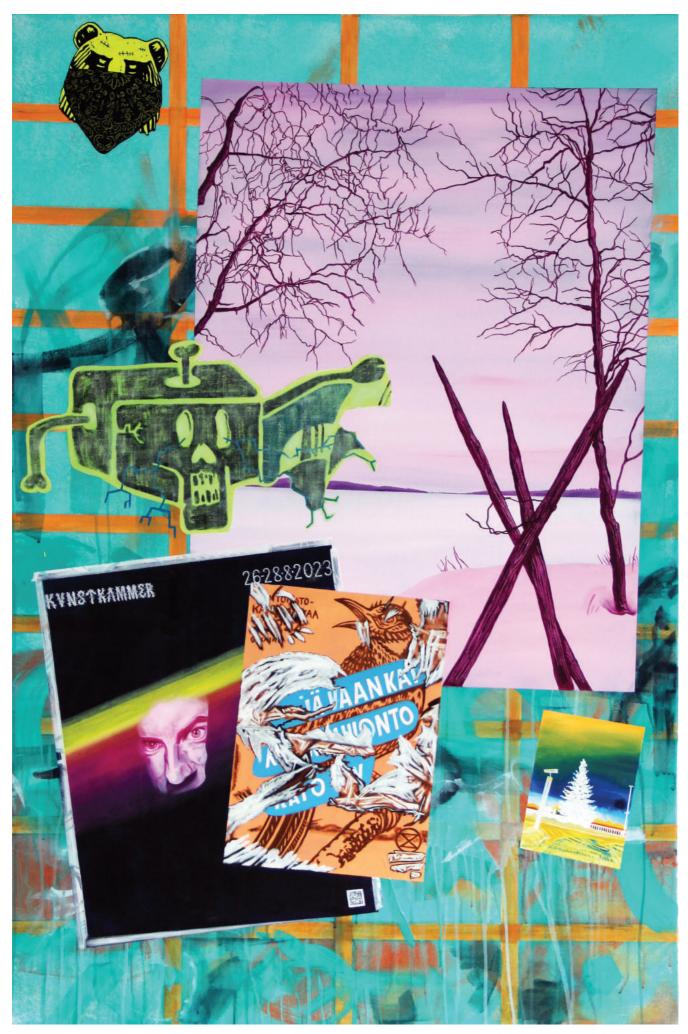
Make Cars Illegal 2022 acrylic on canvas 120 x 80 cm











Jäätynyt Järvi 2023 oil and acrylic on canvas 150 x 100 cm

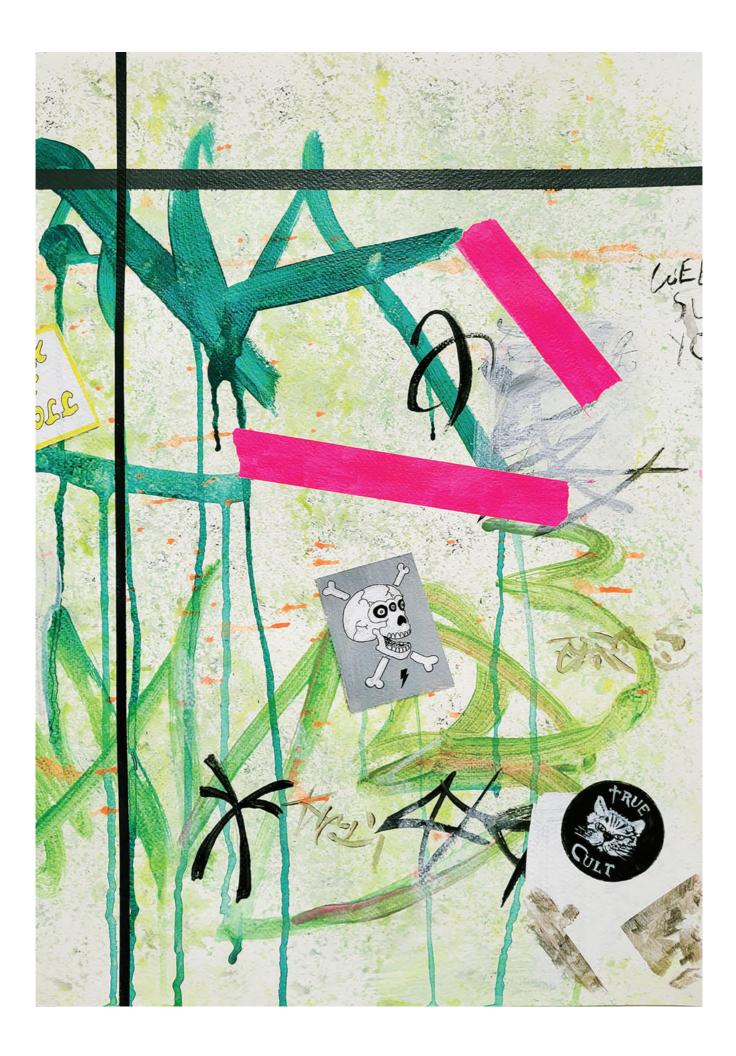


Iron Shirt 2023 oil and acrylic on canvas 150 x 100 cm



Be One 2023 oil and acrylic on canvas 150 x 100 cm





Prints



























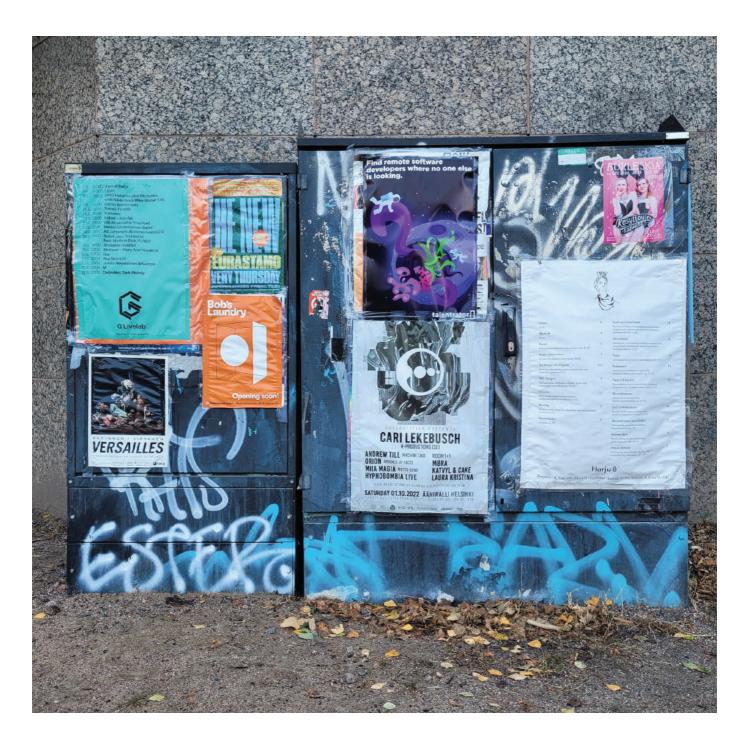




Bass Solo Take One 2023 digital print based on original paintings 340 x 190 cm



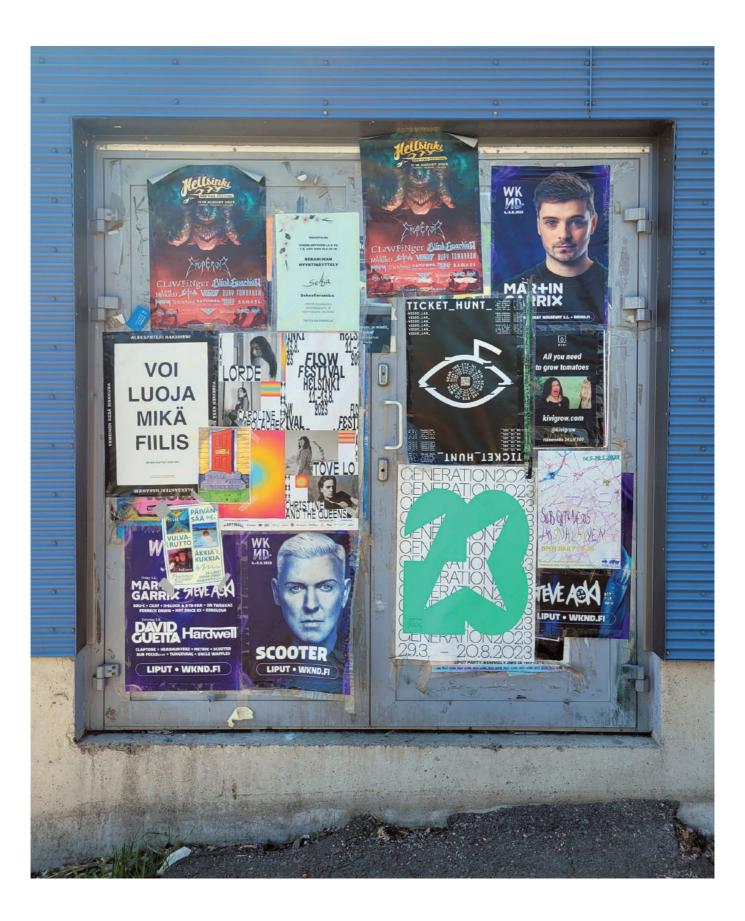
Photographs

















(Top) Helsinki 2023 (Bottom) Helsinki 2023

