

## “Esko Männikkö - An Unending Self-Portrait”

The exhibition *Time Flies. A Highlight* in Collezione Maramotti showcases several different series from the last three decades of Männikkö's production. The emphasis of the exhibition is on the series *Female Pike* from the mid 1990s, which features the lifestyle of backwoods bachelors and other people from remote districts in northern Finland. The series marked his breakthrough in 1995 both in Finland and internationally. The other series on display are *Mexas* (1996-1997) and *Organized Freedom* (late 1990s -) accompanied by examples from his more recent series *Harmony Sisters* (2004 -) and *Blues Brothers* (2009 -). Männikkö's series are left open for the addition of further images. He adds to them as the opportunity arises. Despite working in series each of his photographs is an independent artwork.

The selection in Collezione Maramotti highlights the essence of Männikkö as a photographer. Through his lens he records the mundane details and beauty of everyday life; outsiders, marginalized people and traces of lives lived. He examines people, places, objects and lifestyles with great respect and interest, creating a uniquely intimate ambiance to his photos. What unites all his images is the strong feeling of the inevitable passage of time, masterly use of light and the utmost care in composition. Männikkö's sense of light and colour creates strong painterly qualities: his images have justifiably been compared to older art painting such as Vermeer van Delft from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Fundamentally Männikkö is in search of beauty: it is the whole point of what he does. He makes the images beautiful whatever the subject and finds beauty in things that most us would find ugly or even disgusting.

The pictures in the series *Female Pike* are the ones that Männikkö is best known for – something that irritates him since he finished the series as long ago as the mid 1990s. In the past two decades he has been working on many other series. However *Female Pike* is always remembered and mentioned when his oeuvre is discussed – and with good reason. These images are masterpieces.

Seen from outside Finland, even to someone from the south of Finland, and especially from even further south in Europe, Männikkö's images are perceived as exotic, strange, captivating, but also somehow familiar. These images of marginalized, weird but congenial people and disappearing local lifestyles could actually be taken anywhere. They tell a universal story that is easy to relate to featuring the same kind of people and lifestyles Männikkö chose to photograph in the USA/Mexico border region for the series *Mexas*. This theme of marginalization was repeated later in Scotland among textile factory workers. In these images we recognize a straightforward approach: empathy and respect towards the people portrayed and often a tinge of Männikkö's kind of humor.

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It could be claimed that Männikkö is a follower of no one. He doesn't actively keep up to date with Finnish or international photographic art. He admits though that he, as anyone else, absorbs influences from everything and everything affects him. He doesn't pretend that he has invented anything new in this field since everything has already been done a hundred times. So be it, but at least in action there is this subliminal consciousness loaded with images of the western culture, art history and photography. These underlying allusions, as has been pointed out, are inescapable.

There have been many shifts in Männikkö's production. After photographing marginal people and their lifestyles, Männikkö turned his lens to abandoned houses and messy yards in his environment. These images emphasize the inseparable relationship between time and photography. The passage of time and its wearing effects are in focus here. Männikkö has created classical images with his camera. They are carefully balanced compositions. The use of light, contrasting colours and textures evokes a strong painterly quality. He transforms domestic objects into poetic *natura morta*. Decay and beauty are interwoven – but there is something melancholic about it too. The closed doors of these forgotten houses may never be opened again. The traces of past lives are palpable. The series *Organized Freedom* has grown over the years to become Männikkö's largest series.