

4.–27.2.2022

Photographic Gallery Hippolyte

Milja Viita

Bambi - darkness washed away

SILVER AND DARKNESS

- Kari Yli-Annala

Milja Viita's 35-mm film *Bambi* (2022) draws its viewers into the materiality of an analogue, photochemical film—physically, haptically, and emotionally. The starting point for the work was a 35-mm copy of the famous animated picture *Bambi* (1942) produced by The Walt Disney Company, which Viita acquired from an American collector. The artist has re-recorded the details of the film with an optical printer, Oxberry 1700. A Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM) has made it possible to get close to the "skin" of the original—and even under it. At Photographic Gallery Hippolyte, the work is presented with a 35-mm cinema projector dating back to the 1950's—the golden age of analogue motion-picture culture.

Disney's *Bambi* is based on a story by the Austro-Hungarian writer Felix Salten, published in 1922 as a serial and 1923 as a book, in which a young roe deer grows up in the woods and witnesses the death of his mother and many other animals to the guns of hunters. The book's themes revolve around violence, escape, death, loss, and hiding. Viita has cut the footage for her film as well as the emotional sound fragments from the soundtrack of the original movie in the style of Structural/Materialist films. The layered processing puts the viewer amidst kinaesthetically intense and fragmented moments. Simultaneously, the film seems to mimic rapid yet stagnant movements of protecting and escaping, hiding and stalking.

Milja Viita's new film has a thematic connection to her previous work titled *Animal Bridge U-3033* (2018). The artist placed automatic cameras in a forest patch that had grown over a concrete overpass designed to mend the break to the natural paths of animals. The cameras recorded whenever there was movement nearby. Viita has stated that as a human, she belongs to a species that is an "extreme beast" that loves aesthetics but also engages in industrial violence. In her current work, the examination of the analogue reel can also be seen as a material manifestation of human exploitation on the planet. With oil-based plastic, it is built on the key fossil material of the end of the last millennium, and its other main ingredient, the binding material gelatin, is made from animal hides and bones.

Dripping with oil, banged up, heavy, and loud—the cinema projector manufactured in East Germany and operated with three-phase electric power brought into the gallery for showing the film, was common in many Finnish cinemas since the World Wars due to its reliability and ease of use. However, the projector requires constant maintenance and upkeep during the exhibition. Viita reminds us, "the oils need to be monitored, the cogs cleaned, and the film copy needs to be changed. The analogue world is heavy, laborious, and physical". The presence of a film projector is also reminiscent of Photographic Gallery Hippolyte's past life as 'Diana', the old cinema.

The exhibition space will also feature glass plates with luminescent silver from fixer fluid, illuminated from behind by a live flame. For Milja Viita, the two keywords for this exhibition are silver and darkness. Those words lead me to think of the term *schein* in the context of philosophical aesthetics; it conveys the radiance or lustre in everything that manifests onto the senses but also as an illusion. As described by Viita, the process of developing film sounds like an alchemical experiment in the dark. The 35mm colour negative was processed manually using a colour developer. In even the black-and-white images, the scratches are indications of the previous colour of the material, and the layers of colour in the negative. In the fixing phase of developing negatives, the exposed silver is permanently bound to the celluloid, while the unexposed material detaches as crystals and flakes, slowly sinking to the bottom of the basin. As Viita sums up, "when the precipitate is filtered, and the liquid evaporates, what remains is darkness materialised".

Milja Viita is a media artist and filmmaker; the themes of her works often repeat experiences of nature or natural science observations. Viita's experimental film *Animal Bridge U-3033* (2018) won the Risto Jarva Award at the Tampere Film Festival in 2019, after which it has toured at international film festivals. Viita attended the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT) artist residency in 2019, where she worked on her film installation, *Bambi*. Milja Viita was recently selected to realise the 6th Contemporary Art Project at the Lönström Art Museum (2022–2023). <https://miljaviita.live>