

Humans And Dark Matter

A painting is first and foremost a contact surface.

A surface the painter touches when painting, a surface onto which the viewer's eye is then drawn, trying to see what lies beyond. The eye wants to see past the surface, inside – into the content.

Surface and superficiality are conventionally regarded as being light, thin, insignificant, unstable. In a painting, however, it is the surface and only the surface – colours, patterns, images – that enables that which we call meaning. In a painting, the surface is the only thing, the most important thing.

A painting can, of course, pretend and disguise itself. A painting can wear black. A painting can do disappearing tricks.

The subject in Antero Kahila's painting is often the naked, unclothed human being – children, young people, old people's backs – motifs that make the age prominent. Although Kahila paints people and their skin with painstaking precision, the skin is nevertheless an illusion created by paint, as is the surrounding darkness. And nothing but paint is the light, the sheer luminosity of the pictures. For although Kahila's works abound in blackness and whiteness, they are an ever-present background. Or, to be more precise, most of the surface in Kahila's pictures quite often consists of black or white. Can that be called a background anymore? Might not the emptiness surrounding the figure actually be a key player in the work? If so, one may well ask whether light is empty, after all, or darkness. Might it not instead be fullness – and particularly so in the world of painting?

Kahila has appropriated and introduced to contemporary art many of the technical devices of traditional painting, time-honoured techniques whose purpose has always been to recreate the deceptive appearance of real-world objects on the two-dimensional surface of the canvas. Yet, in a strange way, all the images we see in Kahila's paintings – the people, the empty spaces, the small shell-like houses, the wrappings, curtains, and plastic membranes – they remind us also of the fact that they are ultimately made of paint, an illusion-producing material substance. They are something seen but are at once something else.

Painting has never been able to depict the human being and her "deepest" essence, except by portraying her exterior, the skin and its coverings. The surface is the only thing that painting can actually show. And yet, when we look

at a painting, we see something more than the surface. We try to see something more than what the subject looked like.

Instead of the current flavours of painting, such as the many genres of abstraction or expressionist gestures, the long and well-trod road chosen by Kahila, the path of illusionist representation, seems an almost unexpectedly excellent method of refocusing the viewer's thoughts and contemplation on that which ultimately lies beyond the visible world, the unspoken emotions. Adjusted for the contemporary mentality, traditional methods can indeed elicit an even stronger emotional impact than painterly devices programmed to deliver a "pure" emotional impression. When a "neutrally figurative" painting seeks to portray something as difficult and nebulous as the sense of being human, it feels in fact more serious and real than a conventional and established (and hence too easily overlooked) device for expressing an emotion or the ineffable.

In other words, Kahila's paintings remind us that although paintings belong to the traditional domain of illusion, representation and realistic depiction, at the same time we, at heart, *hope* to see into the realm of the intangible, into the fundamentals of existence, even while we *know* that we are looking at matter. Despite our profundity, we are doomed to deal with only the interface, the skin of the painting.

Although the elements in Kahila's canvases are often archetypes, the figure of the naked child nevertheless seems more like a generalised naked "human being", an archetypal human, its humanity stripped of all superficiality, or perhaps humanity that has not yet been stifled by the superficialities of the world. While the paintings of old people's backs show us how we are all shaped by the world, the old people are in fact already looking elsewhere, beyond the surface – in the same direction we all are peering.

The wrappings, shells, covers and membranes, and even the straitjackets that Kahila paints, seem like reminders that the world is suffocating. An interference of sorts is also present in the patterns tattooed or projected onto skin, or the faces and bodies with parts cut off to make them seem like masks or paper dolls. Even the bumper cars in an abandoned amusement park are like the shells of people: absent of joy. Indeed, at times Kahila's paintings almost suggest that all there is in life are the limits afforded us by the surface. Kahila's painted works apparently force us viewers to a struggle between belief in a fundamental sense of meaning and the cynicism that undermines it.

However, the black that dominates Kahila's paintings, as well as the white that sometimes replaces it, are both archetypal colours of the highest order – the

very first or last. It is said, after all, that both black and white contain all the other colours. There are even some people who think they are not colours at all because they don't show up in the prism. And yet, as they cover so much of Kahila's paintings while delineating and highlighting their motifs, these black and white expanses are as equally active elements in the paintings as the human figures in them.

On the other hand, these large colour areas are constructed so that, say, the black background is not merely a plain, monolithic surface but instead consists of numerous layers, with points of colour on earlier layers occasionally shining through the topmost black: an embodiment of depth, space and the time it took to paint the canvas. That plain background is in fact a composite of many kinds of matter. It could be poetically compared to the "dark matter" of physics, a substance that accounts for most matter in the universe and affects everything yet is impossible to see or detect – impossible, even, to truly understand.

Black, of course, alludes to darkness, night, and as such is associated with evil. But what if that black, that darkness, could be – as it is in Kahila's paintings – the ubiquitous original embrace that envelops everything and makes all of us and everything else visible, both psychologically and materially. Once, when I interviewed him about blackness, Kahila said, "It can indeed contain a depth that is not evil at all, that may be a refuge, a hiding place." Perhaps it's the same with white too, with light. The same foundation, the mother of everything.

Perhaps black is that space that contains all colours, the black where we remember being at home and what we ultimately strive towards. The beginning and the end.

A painting has – just as we do – a skin, a shell, a surface, a boundary that hides something alive behind it. It touches us. In between the points of touching we live our lives.

Pessi Rautio