

Notes from a Seamstress' Daughter

Zofia Kulik | Anni Leppälä | Ragna Róbertsdóttir | Niina Vatanen

Exhibition: 12 March – 23 April 2022

Opening: Friday, 11 March 2022, 6 – 8 pm



Anni Leppälä
Rescue Devices, 2010
Pigment print
62,5 x 84 cm

Persons Projects is delighted to present a unique selection of female artists who share a common ground within their artistic practices as they all incorporate and draw from their own personal histories. Their work and overall creative development were influenced by a female presence that played a significant role in their upbringing. Under this aspect, this group exhibition intends to explore four different female perspectives and how they are joined together through the process of objectifying their own fears and doubts in their search for their own identity. Their artistic arsenal ranges from threads and pins to textile ornaments and patterns. Regardless of the materials used, the works collected in this exhibition reflect a tactile sensibility in the way the artists apply them.

Embroidery, sewing, and working with fabric are historically associated with women and 'domestic tasks', overlooking the intense skill and creativity required to create the artwork. But since the early days of Surrealism, these specific activities have been one of the tools used to characterize the feminist voice of discontent. Generations of female artists seeking to negate and escape society's expectations consciously avoided this direction. Today, contemporary women artists are reusing these traditions in their artistic expression, referring to the repetition of daily activities as the basis of our existence.

Zofia Kulik began to create her large black-white photographs after 1987, which brought an end to her collaboration with Przemysław Kwiek as KwieKulik. Her process of working is through multiple exposures of her negatives on photographic paper through precisely cut paper masks. In this way, one work can consist of hundreds, or in some cases, of more elaborate images. Kulik's whole body of work is based on the fact that she permanently collects and archives images of this world. They serve her as ornaments organized into black-white compositions to unfold a vision of history, politics, and art as a continuum of repeated signs and gestures. In her series of *Self-Portraits*, as in the exhibited work *Light Rose I (Smokes)*, 2000, the images emerge as a manifestation of an awakening of self-identity in the artist. This is where the influences of her mother become the most apparent within the picture. Helena Kulik's profession as a seamstress and her collection of materials point to one of the sources of inspiration for her daughter's photomontages. Kulik states in an interview: "As a girl, I watched my mother constantly bent over fabric. I will always remember her among the piles of so-called 'bits', which are pieces of material cut according to patterns which, today, are nothing more for me than 'rags'. She became a master in her chosen field. She was obsessively fascinated by it, especially by its manual scrupulousness". To understand the relationship between the artist and her mother, we can refer to the quotation from Jolanta Brach-Czaina: "The basis of our existence is everyday life". As shown in the exhibited video, *A Sum of Rags and an Archive Next Door*, 2017, the similarities between the artist and her mother's everyday activities concerning collecting are more than evident: Fabrics by her mother, archival materials by the daughter, as well as physical work connected with the archive and daily life.

Anni Leppälä is a storyteller who uses her visual language as a means to trace and unfold the female history of her family. She selects places and objects found in her ancestral home through her poetic interpretation. Her images project a passage of time through her use of vintage clothes, toys, and paper cut-outs in how she uses them to transport us back to another era. Her portrayal of stairways that seemingly lead to nowhere but forgotten memories from another generation reflects a sense of surrealism. In Leppälä's world, we can feel the fragility of the moment as it finds its way into our imagination, creating photographic portals where the past is balanced with the present. She uses the threads of her family's history to embroider a sensibility into a universal understanding familiar to everyone. She is drawn to the "possibility of being able to create a moment motionlessly". Leppälä's subjects are mostly objects that have been dislodged from their original context, places that have been abandoned or forgotten, human figures caught in the seclusion of their own presence, or in their memories. Anni Leppälä's finely tuned sense of staging, together with her acute sensitivity to color and composition, endows her photographs with powerful symbolism. She uses her pictures like words, arranging them in a different installation each time, encouraging us to discover traces of our own story.

Ragna Róbertsdóttir has been a leading figure in Icelandic minimal conceptualism for the past two decades. She honed her new ways of thinking about sculpture and materials at the all-female Gallery Langbrok (1978-1986), of which she was an originator. Her works have been described as "elemental", meaning basic or primary, as well as embodying the powers of nature. She engages with the indigenous materials that make up the diverse Icelandic landscape. Materials, including volcanic lava, mud, seashells, rock, salt, and turf, do not just inspire her, they form the very basis of her creations. *Untitled*, 1986, a work featuring turf, utilizes the old Icelandic tradition of weaving for this unorthodox purpose; In the face of Lutheran Christianity, Róbertsdóttir enters a male-dominated art world with her textile background and radically chooses to interact with this "domestic" medium. The theme of climate change is strong in Róbertsdóttir's works, as, each of her materials carries with them a past; She is able to gracefully depict this in a simplistic manner through the respect of her fragmented materials. In her works, we see nature as powerful and dominant but ultimately engaged in a dialect with humans. This dialect between her and nature reflects the quality of weaving, as, she artistically structures these earthly materials but they simultaneously structure her understanding of our world. Through reinterpreting the physics of these elements, and bringing the outside to the inside, Róbertsdóttir reduces nature to its most essential forms and subsequently makes the incomprehensible, fathomable.

Niina Vatanen has been exploring the impact of nature and the meaning of its passage within our existence since the beginning of her career. In her attempt to represent this passage and our perception of it, she started to collect documents, such as her personal diaries, old photographs, papers, notebooks, and archival materials found in museums, which are capable of capturing these spatial durations. All these collected materials from Vatanen's personal archive serve as her instruments and tools for interpreting her own work. She utilizes these materials as her means to decipher the intricate mechanisms that form these passing moments. The series *A Seamstress's Notes* was created in relation to the artist's experiences connected with everyday work at a post office. It can be seen as an affectionate collection of secret love letters addressed to different people, from different places. Vatanen learned how to sew when her grandmother's eyesight weakened and she needed help. Her mother and grandmother frequently sewed clothing, toys, and other crafts in her household. Vatanen still uses her mother's sewing machine today to keep her familiarized with this generational legacy. With the Polaroid photo (*Notes #01*), taken in Saint Petersburg, the artist uses its backside, embroidering her own encrypted story on a black square. The green page is from the artist's old passport (*Notes #20*), stamped in November 2002 when Vatanen was on an artist residency in West Africa. During this trip, Vatanen reflected upon her heritage and realized how privileged she was to have a European passport. Thereupon, she started encoding these personal thoughts and memories on one of its pages by using green thread. Since then, Vatanen has repeatedly utilized fragmented stationery to resemble a private diary that can only be read by its owner.