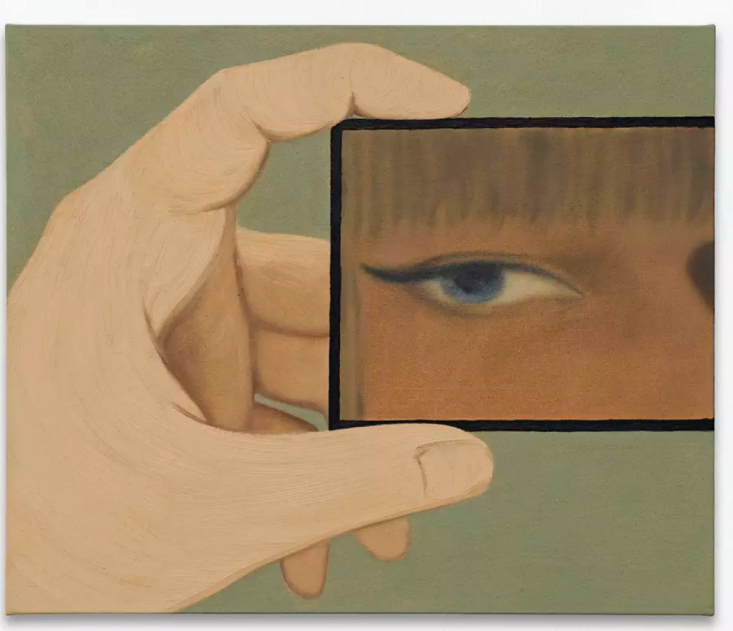


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THROUGH PARIS TO THE ART WORLD OF NEW YORK

by Aino Frilander



Self-Portrait, 2019

New Yorker magazine critic Johanna Fateman described Henni Alftan's exhibition at New York's Karma Gallery as "magnetic."

The influential New York Times critic Roberta Smith wrote that while Alftan's palette is unnecessarily restrained, her artistic vision is distinctive.

Art in America published a longer critique of the cinematic nature of Alftan's paintings, as well as how they evoke feelings, such as expectation or monotony, that are rarely romanticized.

In recent years, few Finnish artists - with the exception of Tom of Finland - have reached a similar media takeover.

Often not much happens for a long time, and then a lot happens in one go.

Henni Alftan (b. 1979) graduated from an art school in Paris at the beginning of the millennium and settled in the city to work. She held exhibitions in Helsinki and France, though mostly in a gallery in the city of Clermont-Ferrand from Lyon, and not at the top addresses in Paris.

But then Karma Gallery in New York came across Alftan's work and invited her to a group exhibition in the summer of 2019. The following summer she was in another

er Karma group exhibition in good company - Nicole Eisenman, Peter Doig, and Lubaina Himid also took part in the highly praised exhibition.

Was this due to Alftan's 2015 Brooklyn artist residency? Was there a decisive relationship with the New York art circles?

Not really, Alftan says via a video link from Paris. It wasn't until her 2019 show in Milan that she got into the eyes of real people on social media, and the invitation went through it.

The enthusiastic posting of Katy Hessel who runs the Great Women Artists instagram account that is liked by thousands of people, could have also played a part.

It's known in the art world today: While Instagram is a pretty horrible place to try to experience art, art influencers can convey their knowledge about art. Alftan's paintings work on this display: their pictorial language is reproduced reasonably well, and the strict snapshot-like compositions attract one's attention.

"At midnight a message came from New York asking if I would be interested in a group show, and I said ok, great, what's in it," Alftan says, smiling. There was only about a month to the opening. As a lucky accident, there was an exhibition at the TM Gallery in Helsinki, which had not been a great sales success, that had paintings in stock to be sent to New York. In New York, the reception was more enthusiastic than in Helsinki.

"A couple of days later, there came a text asking if we could continue working together."

In addition to the solo exhibition, Karma published a large book of Alftan's work.

There are a lot of galleries in New York, but Karma isn't just any New York gallery; it's a prestigious gallery that grew out of graphic artist Brendan Dugan's art book publishing house, with many well-known names in the gallery's roster. Alex Da Corte and Nicolas Party, for instance, have grown from there to exhibiting at museums and listing works at international mega-galleries.

"It's a great gallery and a bigger one than I imagined might be interested in my work," Alftan says.

Through it, Alftan has become more aware of how important the context is: in which gallery the works are on display, and with whom. It can shape public perception and also directs the attention of critics. New York critics know that there is often something interesting in Karma.

"We saw that in her works, in addition to the stunning imaging, there was a certain kind of cinematic, dark-toned quality, some mystery that resonated with us," Dugan said on the phone. "When we finally met face to face, we realized how deep her work is and how serious she is."

The works have gone to many New York collectors, but the names of private collections are not usually mentioned in these contexts. However, Dugan mentioned the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and the Dallas Museum of Art.

When Karma presented Alftan's works at the Art Basel Art Fair in Miami in December 2019, Alftan did not leap to the forefront. "I thought that I would die ashamed if no one cared," she says.

After the pandemic began, Alftan feared the collaboration would end there. Galleries have gone bankrupt as the art world has broken down.

"While others were doing yoga and baking, I was working like crazy," she says.

She needn't have been scared stiff. The exhibition was a success: collectors bought, critics wrote.

"I've just been thinking, as a snob who attended a French art school, that if there is no press, maybe the interest is just commercial. There are a really small number of exhibitions in New York and the competition is fierce."

At least Alftan will continue her partnership with Karma. As for the French gallery, she says they've divorced but remain friends. Many gallerists are suddenly interested in Alftan's work, including some based in Paris, but Alftan is not going to gossip. She does not dream of moving to New York. "I think I'm a little too European," she says.

Alftan just had an exhibition in Seoul, South Korea. She is in another group exhibition held in New York, and is in something going on in Los Angeles as well. So far, however, it is not possible to travel to any exhibition openings.

Alftan reminisces about the opening of the New York group show in the summer of 2019. It was more of a summer party, with an open bar and a taco truck in the yard.

"Next time there's an opening again, without masks, the gallery will be full of people."