

## I.

Salla Tykkä (born 1973) is a young Finnish artist-exhibiting only since 1997 even before she completed her degree at art school-who is beginning to receive meaningful, international attention for her photographs and short films. Like many emerging and established women artists, Tykkä is heavily influenced by mass media imagery, and her work always centres around a young, female protagonist. Although the characters and experiences she represents are fictionalised, Tykkä's practice can be understood as an exercise in extended self-portraiture. She examines her own emotional life through a series of situational abstractions in which meaning is conveyed through image, action, metaphor and symbol.

Tykkä's shifting understanding of her personal subjectivity is at the core of her creative process. Indeed the artist invites, even encourages, biographical readings and interpretations of her works, the meanings of which are otherwise purposely open-ended, or even opaque. Tykkä tellingly locates the origins of her artistic ambitions in a childhood experience. She recalls that when she was five years old, her family moved to a new house. Upon arriving in the strange place, she discovered a makeshift swing in the yard. Intuiting an opportunity, she "started to swing furiously, systematically destroying my feelings of anger and longing." The example is revealing, not only because it locates Tykkä in and around an unfamiliar family house-a visual and conceptual site that will be repeatedly examined in her work as an artist-but also because it describes, with some urgency, her drive to find both physical and emotional release from melancholy or anxiety through exertion. (Tellingly, a recent interview with Tykkä opens with her seemingly unprompted announcement: "I feel so weak. Today I ran 9 kilometres, then I had one-and-a-half hour of kick boxing. It's too much." It is, to say the least, a curious way to begin a conversation. One can presume it is also strategic. Just a moment later, she adds, "I feel like I'm worth nothing because it is so long since I did a new piece." )

All of Tykkä's work, in one way or another, expresses an awareness of physicality that is coincident with a desire for transformation. Whether it is through actual representations of fitness and sport, or through more complex expressions of sexuality, Tykkä continues to exorcise personal and collective anxieties about the body and self-perception. This aspect of the work emerges from a painful part of Tykkä's recent past. During her years in art school, she suffered from an eating disorder that seriously compromised her health. Making art-specifically photographic self-portraits -was central to her recovery, and she continues to recognise the therapeutic potential of engaging in a representational practice. With her photographs, Tykkä self-consciously participates in a long, well-rehearsed tradition of women artists using their own bodies as vehicles both for individual creative expression and cultural analysis.

In the photograph *American Dream* (1999), Tykkä appears for the first but not last time as a topless female boxer. Her face is partially cropped out of the frame and her breasts are bound with medical bandages, a gesture that could be read as either a futile attempt to disguise, or a perverse bid to accentuate, her sex. Striking bloodstains are visible over both nipples. (Tykkä has made another photograph of herself bleeding: *Sick* [1997], one image in a triptych that stages a fictional drama of progressive illness.) The stains presumably mark a violent act, but one is forced to wonder if the injury is the result of a previous match, or if it is self-inflicted. If self-inflicted, are there auto-erotic or sadomasochistic implications? In spite of the evident wound, or perhaps because of it, Tykkä assumes a posture of agility and aggression, with clenched fists raised to her face. Numerous imaginary narratives could be built around this image; all of them include a damaged but still keenly combative woman. Here and elsewhere, Tykkä makes the point that shared understandings of such concepts as pleasure and pain, particularly as they relate to self-perception and sexuality, depend upon objectified representations of the body. On the level of popular culture—from rock music, to fashion, to Hollywood cinema—that body is almost always female.

## II.

Although the artist continues to make photographs, her emerging international reputation is based primarily on her films. To date, she has made five shorts, and is presently at work on another. With the exception of her earliest, student work, these pieces lack dialogue. Their expressive potential is conveyed by means of printed language, tightly written concept scripts, sophisticated camerawork and editing, evocative casting and location, and emotive musical scores. The three, most recent works skilfully distil the look and feel of certain cinematic genres—such as the horror movie or the Western—in an ongoing exploration of gender identity, fantasy, sexuality, and power. Tykkä's latest films are at once epic and simple, violent and elegant, sentimental and cool.

*Power* (1999) is a black-and-white 16mm film that begins with an Oedipal caption: "I wanted to make a work about my mother. All I could think of was my father." We then see the artist, reprising the role of a topless, gloved boxer, in a sparring match with a much larger, older man who is presumably a surrogate for Tykkä's own father. Initially, given this scenario and traditional assumptions about gender and

strength, one might approach the film as a meditation on domestic violence or sexual abuse. Upon reflection, however, the film allows for a more tangled reading.

Soft piano music plays over the opening shots of the match, creating a delicate, reflective mood that is quickly contradicted by the agitated pas de deux that unfolds. Boxing is, obviously enough, a male-dominated spectacle. As such, Tykkä's very presence in the gymnasium reads as transgressive. Expectations are further complicated by the attire of the participants: the male boxer wears the shirt and shorts of an amateur or student of the sport, while the female boxer fights, as a professional male boxer would, shirtless with traditional satin trunks. At first the woman's blows are easily blocked, and her opponent strikes her repeatedly. Here Tykkä breaks conventional taboos that have long surrounded representations of men striking women. The sequence possesses an awkward, slapstick quality, the effects of which are both oddly amusing and painfully sobering.

Her state of partial undress remains the curious focus of the piece. Rejecting the passive, demure, or otherwise seductive associations that usually accompany mass media representations of topless women, Tykkä transforms the nearly clichéd role into an active, even violent, version of the stereotype. Her choice to fight topless-uncomfortable for her as well as for the viewer-make her at once more vulnerable and more powerful, as she is exposed to direct, sensitive hits at the same time her frankly sexualised presence disarms her opponent. As the match progresses, she gains in confidence and agility and the music shifts in tone to match her improving efforts. Here as elsewhere in Tykkä's work, the use of an appropriated musical score provides a conceptual foundation for the otherwise silent narrative. Although the artist cites the cinematic influence of *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese 1980), the soaring, now purposely clichéd music used for *Power* is excerpted from two numbers ("The Final Bell" and "Alone in the Ring") from composer Bill Conti's crowd-pleasing score to the indelible Sylvester Stallone vehicle *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976). With Stallone's righteous underdog hero as her model, Tykkä's female boxer participates in a larger narrative. Unlike *Rocky*'s soaring victory, this match ends in a draw, as both contestants exit the mat in silence. Tykkä's fight has no clear winner, only the possibility of endless re-negotiation. If considered as a metaphor for gender identity in the context of relationships, one might conclude that Tykkä actually succeeded in making a film about not only about daughter and father, but about her regard for all forms of interaction between men and women.

III.

Two more recent films, *Lasso* (2000) and *Thriller* (2001), form part of an unfinished trilogy designed to explore rites of passage from childhood to adulthood. Both films were shot in Finland, and convey something of the late-winter bleakness of a Nordic landscape. Although *Lasso* was made first, *Thriller*, which features an adolescent girl, seems to mark both the chronological as well as conceptual beginnings of the cycle.

A 35mm colour film that mines the generic conventions of the Hollywood horror movie, Tykkä's neatly condensed *Thriller* opens with shots of a large, rustic farm nestled in deep woods near a lake. A young, rather gothic-looking man and woman busy themselves in eerie silence in the unkempt yard tending sheep and clearing brush. The house is surrounded by wet grass, mud, and melting snow. Inside, sequestered in a bedroom upstairs, the girl-whom we assume to be the couple's daughter-is lying fully clothed on her bed.

As soon as the girl is introduced, an iconic soundtrack begins. The creepy piano music-immediately recognisable to several generations of movie-goers-is the theme from the hyper-serialised horror classic *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978). Fitful and restless, the girl appears to be emotionally unsettled, even demonically possessed; her reverie might perhaps be read as masturbatory. Rightly sensing that something is happening (or about to happen), the father climbs the stairs to the bedroom but stops just short of entering. The camera work and edits heighten the tension, using cinematic shorthand to convey a sense that the relationship between these two is awkwardly charged, if not problematic. The father retreats down the stairs, goes outside, and takes a rowboat onto the lake. Sensing an opportunity for escape, or another less literal form of liberation, the girl runs out of the house, past her oblivious mother, and down a muddy lane. Entering a cabin near the edge of the property, she regards herself in a mirror. Whatever secret or shame she carries manifests itself as aggression: the dénouement of the piece arrives when she looks out the cabin window, sees a single sheep standing just outside, and fatally shoots it in the head. With this mysterious short film, Tykkä bleakly equates the main character's sexual awakening with violence. The death of the sheep-long a symbol of innocence and sacrifice-is then understood as a perverse corollary to the girl's own impending maturation and consequent loss of sexual naiveté.

IV.

Lasso, like *Thriller*, is a confident, seamless piece of filmmaking, a short 35mm colour film with a grand sensibility. (It was written as the last scene in a longer script.) This winning, widely praised piece opens with a shot of a female jogger returning from a run in the suburbs of Helsinki. She approaches a tidy, modern house and rings the bell but receives no answer. She tries to open the door, but finds it locked. Her demeanour suggests to the viewer that she is surprised, even concerned, by the lack of a response. And so she walks around the side of the house, where she discovers a large picture window. At first, she sees only her own image reflected in the glass. Stepping closer to the window, she is able to see through the blinds to the scene inside.

The music swells as she spies a young man (in her script notes, Tykkä imagined him to be the woman's brother, and the house that of their parents) performing-or perhaps playing or rehearsing-with a lasso. Barefoot and shirtless, he is wearing only denim jeans. Unaware of his observer, he agilely twirls his rope, feverishly jumping back and forth through the spinning loop. (His antics are accentuated by a hypnotic, slow-motion effect.) Again, Tykkä's soundtrack demonstrates a canny eye (and ear) for cinema history. The music for *Lasso*, equal parts poignant and farcical, is borrowed from Ennio Morricone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1969). The selection equates this classic 'spaghetti' Western with the faux rodeo antics of Tykkä's male protagonist. After a few minutes of cowboy-inspired delirium, the man abruptly snaps the rope to the floor and stops his unwitting performance. The film returns to real time, slapped back to reality. Marvelling and entranced, the young woman-whose breath is visible on the glass of the pane-slowly backs away from the windows, with her gaze still fixed on the house. Tears or sweat run down her face. The camera pans back over the wet grass, finally settling on a clump of melting snow.

Despite Tykkä's schematic character notes identifying the man and woman in *Lasso* as brother and sister, there seems to be a certain sexual charge to this voyeuristic episode. Or perhaps a theme of sexual desire is, in the end, too obvious a device. One could consider the drama in terms more strictly emotional than sexual. As critic Polly Staples acknowledged in an early review of the work, the film allows both euphoria and melancholy, and here these emotions are deeply interrelated. Ultimately the subject of the film seems to be the experiences one misses, or those aspects we do not understand or fail to acknowledge in the people we know and love. The female jogger, whether she is returning home to her brother or eavesdropping on a lover or a stranger, discovers that she has been excluded from the wonder and joy and amazement of his secret passion. As a surrogate for the viewer, she is as an outsider looking with no access to his pleasure. Confronted with the knowledge of this loss, we are moved.

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