

Salla Tykka Talks To Francis McKee Her Recent Works During the Making of Thriller

ST: I feel so weak. Today I ran 9 kilometres, then I had one and half hours kick-boxing.... It's too much.

FM: Have you always been this energetic?

Yeah, but sometimes, in the beginning, it was more like therapy because I had anorexia and then I started recovering from it

How did the running help?

I was weak and I started right from the zero point and got this appetite and still it's very important for me. I mean, in one way, it's like a balance I feel like I'm healthy and I can move and it's really important and I'm also not getting too fat or anything. I think its biggest effect is between the ears.

I feel like I'm worth nothing because it's so long since I did a new piece.

Maybe it's because they are so big now – each project needs a lot of organisation

It's because I had this idea of *Thriller* – did you read the script?

I did

It's not finished yet – I will change the beginning a little bit and of course it's in script format where you shouldn't describe anything, everything should be as pared down as possible. Anyway, I had this idea and it was very clear. Last May I did *Lasso* then I had my summer holiday and I went to England in November when I was quite collapsed after the Masters degree show. At that time nobody in Helsinki noticed my work that much and then I left for London and returned in March.

Were you working in London too?

Yes, I did the script for *Thriller* there and then I started this new photo series about women acting as animals where I shoot photographs of two women there, young women and I've been continuing it here. It's not a huge project – it's more like fun for me.

You must need something like that when you are doing such large projects – when you're writing the script, making the film and that's all taking so long?

Yes, for example, *Lasso* was a longer script written for a 15 minute movie and then I didn't get the money to do anything so I only did the last scene of the whole script. So I decided I would just do this and then I concentrated all my energy into this one part and in that way it was an artistic decision. But now I feel this is the first time I could get all the money to make this whole film, *Thriller*, and I want to believe it will be a successful project but I don't know. I feel like I'm at a breaking point in one way because I've just finished school and up until this moment I've been doing everything by myself.

But why is it a breaking point – because you need to draw other people in?

Yeah, now I feel like people are expecting and I'm expecting a lot as well. Now I have the possibility to make this piece of work. It's the first time I'm getting to do everything, I have my own company, I'm working independently.

On Photography:

So I started with photography in '96 or '95 and I was also painting before I got into the academy. So at first I was painting, then drawing and then I got interested in realism. I have always wanted to go for reality – as found in formal things. And then I had this anorexia which was really difficult for me because I have always been quite social but then suddenly, for many years, I was just not talking to anybody. I was by myself and in mental suffering about what to eat and what not to eat and going to swim and it was controlling my life. So then I started photographing myself and it was quite difficult in the beginning but it was very important and nice to do.

Was this before art school?

No, no, that started in art school – in the first year. The first half of the year I was only drawing. We have this first year where everyone has to draw and I had been drawing a lot and suddenly I thought this is finished I can't do this anymore. Then I took this photography course and that really inspired me. So this photograph is called *My Body is My Art, My Body is My Enemy*. I did some drawings for this too – big posters and that was it. And then this was the kind of image that felt at that time like I was breaking a surface and so I put these big white papers up and I ran through them. Only the photographer was present but I felt it was more like a performance. They are very full of angst.

These ones (*Sick, More Sick, The Sickest One*) I did by myself, this was '97.

This is I presume fake blood. Are they all based on real things or fictionalised entirely?

I think that they are not fiction but a kind of mark, exaggerating reality, making it almost naive in this way

Oddly, they remind me of someone like David Lynch. They're so extreme sometimes because they represents an emotional mood, rather than just the reality, but the reality is pushed that little bit further to make you sense the mood underneath.

This is a woman surrounded by bottles. I don't know if you noticed how much all the film stars drink – five litres of Evian every day – and it's really crazy. It could be an everyday life thing but it's not quite.

These are the oldest photographs – a triptych called *Bitch: Portrait of a Happy One*. The three works are called *Dream, Reality and Nightmare*.

Even as photographs they're quite cinematic. Is cinema is a big influence?

No. I think I'm a TV generation child. I've always been fascinated by movies but I come from quite a bourgeois home and until I went to the art academy I didn't see many cultural movies or anything – it was more mainstream things. But I have always been really fascinated by the moving image so when I started working with the moving image there was one course at the academy that was teaching subjective documentary. At first I was making photographs more than videos but then I started to develop. After the first video that I did I think I have always first

had the image of a video – because *Bitch* is also a video – I did a video about this image and I started to construct photographs around the image that I'm making in my mind so it kind of helps me. Now I'm making this series about women acting as animals and I realised that it's also about sexual identity because young girls are often acting as animals and the kind of animals that have a sexual connotation. When I started doing this photographic series in London I realised it's really connected to *Thriller* in the same way that I did these photographs and then I made the video called *Bitch*.

Traditionally there's a peculiar relationship between a film itself and film–stills which were made separately and not taken from the film. Do you make the stills first?

No, these are not like stills from the film at all. They are like individual thoughts that have a kind of connection to the film in my mind but they don't have to; you can understand both of the works separately. But, in the case of *Bitch*, the video has the same title as this series of photographs and the first time it was shown, the photographs and a text were in a different space from a large projection of the *Bitch* video but still you could of course understand the connection.

On My Hate is Useless:

So I did this first video in '96.

It's fairly strong for a first video.

Yes. I'm sorry that the tape quality isn't very good.

What kind of role do you feel that this piece has in relation to your later work? It seems to be the most direct and raw autobiographical video you've made.

As I had to make a documentary I realised that the thing I knew best was myself. That's how the work started. I wanted to express the badness inside of me – a hatred directed towards myself and my surroundings.

The whole piece is shot by me and it's a poem of mine that I'm reading. I wrote it earlier but when I saw how the images started to form a stream I chose that poem so I didn't have to use any dialogue.

It is a piece that I feel is a very important part of me and my work. It is a kind of starting point.

On *Bitch*, *Portrait of the Happy One*

So, somehow I feel it's a little naive – the piece – but, then, it worked quite well when it was very cinematographic.

It's direct as well and works because it's direct.

I'm really direct – I can't fake it!

The music works well too.

Yeah, It has something about this fake 'girl power' thing that raised its head in the late '90s as if all these Spice Girls are really strong female figures – of course they are not and I think it adds a good point in this work. The piece is quite irritating because it's long lasting and it's always the same but I wanted it that way, I wanted the repetition and I think in that way it succeeded.

On other film works before *Lasso*:

For *Power* I had this idea of me fighting bare breasted against some huge guy. It took a while to find the means to make it properly because I like working with film material. It was important to use film because the images are quite cinematographic in one way and commentating a lot about these images.

Is it 16mm or 35mm?

Bitch and *Power* are Super 16 and *Lasso* is 35mm.

Going back to *Bitch* – how did you find all those people?

They were all friends from the school and some friends of mine and of my sister so it's really all friends who have shown up here.

But it must have taken a lot of organisation to get that all done?

Yes, a little bit, but it wasn't impossible. At that point, because it was the first big work that I did, I learned a lot. I got more confidence to say 'I can organise this'. Of course now it's obvious that they are all my friends but I think that in another way this is really cute – it's a decision I made at that time.

It also stops it being too MTV-ish.

It's also real life turned into a parody or something.

So then when I was making *Power* I started doing these photographs. These were quite large – 120 x 100 cm.

The photographs are quite retro as well – like a 1920s shoot.

They are, although I wasn't really aware at the time of boxing culture, which is so strong. But now I've done this show in Spain called BIDA (Bienal Internacional del Deporte en el arte) where there were so many people doing pieces about boxing that I began to understand how clichéd they can be and they are quite easy, these clichés.

When you did this one – the '20s image, was that conscious?

I think it was quite subconscious – I already had this image of the video that I wanted to do but of course I didn't know how it would be – just that it would be a little bit grainy, black and white, me and this guy and then I just watched *Raging Bull* and I think I had seen another one from that time but I didn't search a lot. For example, when I did the script for *Lasso* – the whole story – I was watching a lot of westerns but not very scientifically – I was watching many, many, many of them – I kept trying to find what it was that really touched me in those films.

And so this is a diptych – it's called *Power* and it's also 120x100 cm. I did a lot of these single photographs that are addressing this problem of power relations. This is called *American Dream*, and here's *Blow Me* – there is a little bit of sperm here! This is *Darkroom* – an image of me making the other images and it's about how I feel powerful while I'm making images that are more 'healthy'!

And *Hood* – I was thinking about women trying to be very masculine and having this hood that covers your face but still everyone can see from your shape and your clothes that you are a woman although you try to hide. I was wondering about why women are trying to hide themselves in the dark – probably they are afraid and they try to have this cover.

On Power:

How did you work with that boxer?

Initially, I had him punching the camera and then I also punched the camera but I preferred to use mostly tracking shots instead.

Was it easy to get him to agree to do this or how did he feel when you suggested it?

I was very desperate because I was going to gyms and trying to find this kind of guy who could do it. Actually he's also an artist – and he had been boxing for some years already – so I contacted him. At first he thought I wanted some sado-masochistic thing – he wasn't very pleased. Then when I said to him 'it's not really about hitting me – I don't want you to hurt me' – we met and we went to train and at first it was really catastrophic. At that time I didn't know anything – I just knew some of the right punches but I didn't know hooks etc., though nowadays I do

Did he teach you?

No. My husband boxes as well and he taught me. I met the guy a few times just to practise and I liked how he had to make his judgements – how he could hit me without touching and then we had to hire the space and...

The music's from *Rocky* and it's quite triumphal, suggesting winning, which is quite contradictory as it's not about losing or winning it's just about how I feel life is – about struggling.

***Power* begins with the line 'I wanted to make a work about my mother, all I could think of was my father'. What did your parents think?**

I don't know. Of course in the beginning they were not pleased at all about me doing art. I asked my father if he would want this text in the work and I said I don't want to if you are uncomfortable – it's about power and how I feel. But he said 'OK it's your own business and you don't have to think of my emotions – it's your business and I do my business'. But my mother, she has freaked out several times. Now, though, they are much more relaxed.

And after *Power* then I started doing *Lasso*.

I'm fascinated by the fact that there is a larger script for *Lasso*

I had to do it. When I realised that I couldn't make the whole story as I wanted – I just thought that this last scene has all the things in it – it has the story so I just made this one. I think it was a good decision. Now sometimes I feel what a pity that I didn't make the whole thing but in one way there have always been limits in my work because usually – I haven't always been able to show this boxing video, for example, as a projection like I wanted to show it. I couldn't do this or that because I didn't have money so I think that was in one way the same situation. I again had to choose and I'm very happy that I made that choice.

And with *Thriller* are you making the full thing?

Lasso was different – the script for *Lasso* was called *Pain*. That was the original title – it's difficult to explain how the script, which was very abstract, worked – but it was four different stories. First it was four different stories, then I picked the last story and from the last story I did scenes and this is the last scene of the last story.

Again there's a very heroic element in the music?

Yes, it's important always.

Just how important is music for you in the work?

I don't know. I think it's very important for creating an emotion but I'm not living for music or I'm not singing if someone listens.

It has, though, been a key element in the last three videos – a structural element.

It's also important that the music is from these genres of movies. While I was making *Lasso* I was making these photographs *Pain, Pleasure, Guilt*. I think with these I returned to where I started – they are all taken by and of myself, nobody else is present and for me it's very important I just go to some place in the countryside. A few of them are taken at my place but the others are in the country and it's about fear and a certain kind of pain inside – now when I've just watched *Lasso* and looked at this earlier work I felt like it was the first work where I stepped out – it was light and somehow in these photographs they are all inside but somehow you can see outside. In all of them there is something – like a window – and it's as if inside is frightening, it's a space you want to escape.

Do you mean you literally moved outside with *Lasso* or, because it also seemed to be a more objective work, moving outside yourself?

I think both – it's much more objective, not so tied to my history, you can't see it like that and it's not so aggressive.

It becomes more ambiguous and similarly with this series of photographs. Both the photographs and *Lasso* are very seductive, formally very beautiful. The photographs can express pain as well as healing and, in *Lasso*, the girl cannot reach something but also seems to admire and be moved by the elements she can never reach. The frustrations of *Lasso* seem to be offset by your growing sense of power in the making of the work as you said earlier.

I think I always work quite emotionally and directly. These works aren't underlining anything – they are direct but maybe they are not so literal. I think I always work subconsciously. These videos are always visions that I have had like when I did this tongue-cutting image (*Bitch*,

Portrait of the Happy One: Nightmare) which appeared in a nightmare. It's always very instinctive.

What kind of work has influenced you...?

I think there are a few Finnish video artists that I really like – for example Teemu Maki – he's not very well known outside of Finland but he's very well known here (he has some paintings in Kiasma actually – though they are about capitalism, consumerism – they are like labels). What I like in his work are his first videos; they are very touching and they were maybe the first big video series that I saw from one artist and I was very taken by the power of his personality. I think I like work when the artist is very much present in it. That doesn't have to be a literal presence – I mean the spirit, the voice, everything, it's like a big emotion. But I really liked his work and I still like it a lot.

Is he from an older generation of artists?

He's five years or six years older than I am – he started earlier. I started studying in '95 and I think he was already out of the academy and he's doing a PhD there now. I like Eija-Liisa Ahtila's early works in particular – they were more direct.

In cinema, I very much like Ingmar Bergman's films – almost all of them. Of course, he has made some silly works as well but they are very powerful emotionally. As I said, emotions are the thing I'm really interested in – I really think they are important for human beings.

They're all Nordic artists that you've mentioned. Is that important or simply geographical accident?

This is hard for me – it's easier to understand than it would be if it was an Australian artist for example – different content, different continent, different culture. Of course there are themes and subjects that always appear in every artist's work but for me it's a certain type of approach and how society is constructed – how to understand all the small symbols and markers around you – so it's kind of natural to read all these familiar symbols in Nordic artists' works.

There seems to be a different type of sensibility at play as well. With Bergman it's quite internal even though it's realist,, and Aki Kaurismaki too.

I don't like Kaurismaki films so much – a few of them that I saw I liked but they are not so powerful.

Why do you think that?

I don't know. I haven't really seen enough of them to say that. The ones I have seen, they are more poetic and not so deeply touching. I can't describe it. There are a lot of films that I do like though. I like *The Ice Storm*, for example but it's many years since I've seen it, maybe now I wouldn't. I remember it very well.

What's the attraction of the moving image for you? Why not make a series of stills, given the logistical difficulties of making the films?

I think film comes even closer to realism, almost naturalism. That's possible with film. For me the attraction is that I think this *could* be real life. I have wondered about the way people see their lives. If you close your eyes and then use your memory it's like a film – the image enters and is projected in the back of your brain. I think there's something that is inside you, built in already, innate – it's connected to memory – so that's why I use film.

When you said naturalism and realism, in *Power* and *Lasso* they're both really surreal images. So, although it's realism in the way it's approached, the central image seems quite surrealist ?

One could say it's surrealistic but I think it's not. It's nothing that couldn't be true. I like using the material of film because it has this realistic quality and at the same time mixing my own life and my own experiences with my imagination and things that I wanted – for me it has just become the perfect way of saying things and thinking about things. I think with film. Sometimes certain sequences or scenes are already played out in my mind. I told you earlier that I'm a child of TV so it might have something to do with that too.

The films always seem to be built around one striking image and that image creates a mood or stands as a symbol and all three have music. Are you moving towards composed music rather than found music and are you moving towards dialogue?

Not dialogue. For *Thriller* I might have one word and in that film I want to use a Michael Jackson song. With that film it's important it's that music but for my next piece, after *Thriller*, I want to use composed music because it will be more abstract – it's difficult to speak about work that doesn't exist even on paper but it would create a more imaginary space or feeling. With these three previous pieces the music draws the image to a certain moment – or to a certain year. All the songs that I've used are familiar. Everyone has heard them and maybe they associate this music to with certain point and it helps them to put it in a timeline.

When you do that are you thinking of specific moments for yourself as well and are you thinking of the original images associated with the music? Do you also want people to think of *Rocky* and *Once Upon a Time in the West* in relation to your films?

Yes, but I think it's a larger context. It's not as specific as *Rocky* – the music is from the first *Rocky* movie but it's more the subculture of boxing films, earlier boxing films made in the '40s and '50s and not just the *Rocky* movies. And with *Once Upon a Time in the West* there is no scene in that movie with of young man with a lasso so it's more a kind of emotion that interests me in this music and in these films. When I was making *Lasso*, for example, I was watching westerns and they are very different – the 'American' style versus the 'spaghetti' and I wanted to look at the roles for men and women in these films or how the different sexes are shown and what kind of roles are given to them. What are the heroes like? And I was interested in the contrasts between good and bad, natural and moral and so by doing this kind of research I then did the script where I wanted to take these roles and transplant them into our society.

Did you start with the music in each case?

No, the music came later, it was the last thing that I chose. I did the shooting and cutting but I was listening all that time to these songs. I didn't know which one to use. At the same time as I was editing the piece I was thinking this piece of music fits very well because it is the most romantic and it's also very emotional. One thing that I think is horrible in westerns is that they romanticise violence so much and so I wanted to bring this romanticism to *Lasso*.

Of all the spaghetti westerns *Once Upon a Time in the West* is maybe the most sadistic.

It is awful because there is no air in the film at all – it's too much of everything and it's so staged and there are perfect scenes – very nice looking and very powerful, but it's over-made

It's also quite dark – none of the characters have an entirely peaceful ending.

It's also quite plastic. But the music is very nice!

What about *Thriller* then – because it also has a very famous film attached to it already?

I think Michael Jackson is a very dark character at the moment – really insane. I don't know how light my film will be – the ending. I've been thinking of the script a lot these past few days and I'd like to change the beginning but it will be quite horrible.

In a way they're silent films, there's no dialogue but there's a lot of writing in the making of the scripts. Where does language fit into all of this for you?

In the first films that I made there was a voiceover but it was my voice. Then, in *Bitch*, there is the artist's internal monologue though no dialogue. I feel maybe I try to communicate with images and for me spoken words might not mean anything. I like quite short films, intense pieces just as I'm making them myself. I don't know if there could be a dialogue – it might crack the silence and then I don't know what would happen. But as I said there will maybe be this one word in *Thriller* but I don't feel it necessary because I haven't used it yet.

The films seem voyeuristic – even in *Lasso* the main character is looking at someone while we are observing her looking – often your characters seem to be perceiving male power in some form and, for me, that seems a reason why there may be no dialogue as they are about that observation.

That's true. Yesterday I was thinking about *Lasso* and it seems to be one type of self-portrait; I think all my pieces are self-portraits. In another way, it's also a portrait of an artist in terms of being always confronted by your own image – when you try to see behind it. Maybe you can't go further than in *Lasso*; it's open and maybe you will have to try again. I feel there is something very self-conscious in the action of that scene – whether she really wants to be part of his world or if she doesn't want to be there – if he's only a figment of her imagination.

Is it deliberately that ambiguous?

It is – because the whole script that I wrote all led to this situation where she is now. In *Power*, as well, it's not clear. There are no solutions in these films, they simply state 'this is how it is'. My work is usually direct but I'm not trying to state what's right or wrong in the end. In *Power* you can't say who won or who lost or why they stopped the match – we never hear a bell ring ... all interpretations are possible. It's not closing doors but trying to point to all the different ways it could go.

Is it fair to say it's a complex reaction to the notion of male power? Is there a feminist idea running through it?

Of course there is. When you see my earlier work it's very easy to see that. In the darkroom photograph where I was making one photograph it's only a portrait but it's about having power and the feeling of surviving when you can't make your own ideas and your own images. What is feminism for me? It's not the opposite of chauvinism. I'm not very ideological but I have a strong sense of right or wrong. I don't know if all the interpretations of *Lasso* can be reduced to whether it's feminist or not. Of course I had feminist intentions but it is something that is inside me, this feminist thinking. I've been growing, studying, reading about it. I feel it's important and I feel that in my life story it's protecting me in a way too, so it's always there in my thinking about the power relations between the sexes. But it's only one element of the work otherwise I would be doing sociology or political research.

In *Lasso* you step back by having an actress as well – that seems important in terms of distancing yourself. Is she an important discovery and will she continue to be in the work?

That's the only piece she will feature in but it's a pity because she's a very good actress! I think I was trying to find a person who could act as me. In the future it will continue to develop though and I will try to find different kinds of characters. But we understood each other very well and she was great in the role and the guy was too.

How did you find him?

It wasn't too difficult. I found someone at a circus school actually and I explained to him what I wanted and he said he knew someone

It will be *Lasso* and *Thriller* and then I have this idea for the last part of the trilogy. Now it's a year since I made a piece – I need to find a schedule to make all three works. The trilogy will be about the girl character who is in *Lasso*. *Thriller* focuses on her when she is younger, the year 1982. The last part will be more like science fiction and it will go further into the future.

You think of them very specifically in terms of time?

1982 was the year the *Thriller* album came out. It will be about this girl's childhood in the '80s.

Will all the work become part of a larger autobiography?

I think that the element of self-portrait is in every artist's work. It's about living, feeling and getting as much experience as possible and then trying to talk about this in my work. I believe people have many things in common emotionally and so, if I understand myself, this feeling can be transferred to my pieces and through them to the audience and they can feel the connections to me or to themselves.

Would you ever want to make a full-length film?

If I was more skilled at scriptwriting then I could feel confident enough to take over the whole process but up to now that's not been so important. It's only a medium for telling and transforming my experiences and my thinking. It's not a goal – making a feature film – I might make shorter and shorter pieces! But if I did make a feature film it would be fiction, documentary is too far from my interests.

How close do you want to get to cinema?

I think art and film are like two different types of industries – there is the film industry and this art culture, different circles. But if I see a good movie, a powerful movie, then I think it's art – I don't see that much difference. But fine art is a certain kind of world – it has its museums and galleries and sometimes it would be very difficult to understand something as a piece of art if it wasn't exhibited in the museum.

There's a classic iconography of the 20th century that runs through a lot of your work as well.

It's not intentional – or some of it is not intentional – but I feel now that I am really at the beginning of something – it's a good feeling, everyone should have that always. A few people have seen my stuff and then they are quite impressed because of course I have just finished school and have a long career ahead of me. Maybe if you see *Lasso* – I realised this in Venice – that it has this finished quality that leads people to think that I've been working more than I have but it's only been three years. I had my first show in '97 –so it's three and a half years I've been working.

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