



PETRI ALA-MAUNUS
NINE YEARS OF SUNSETS

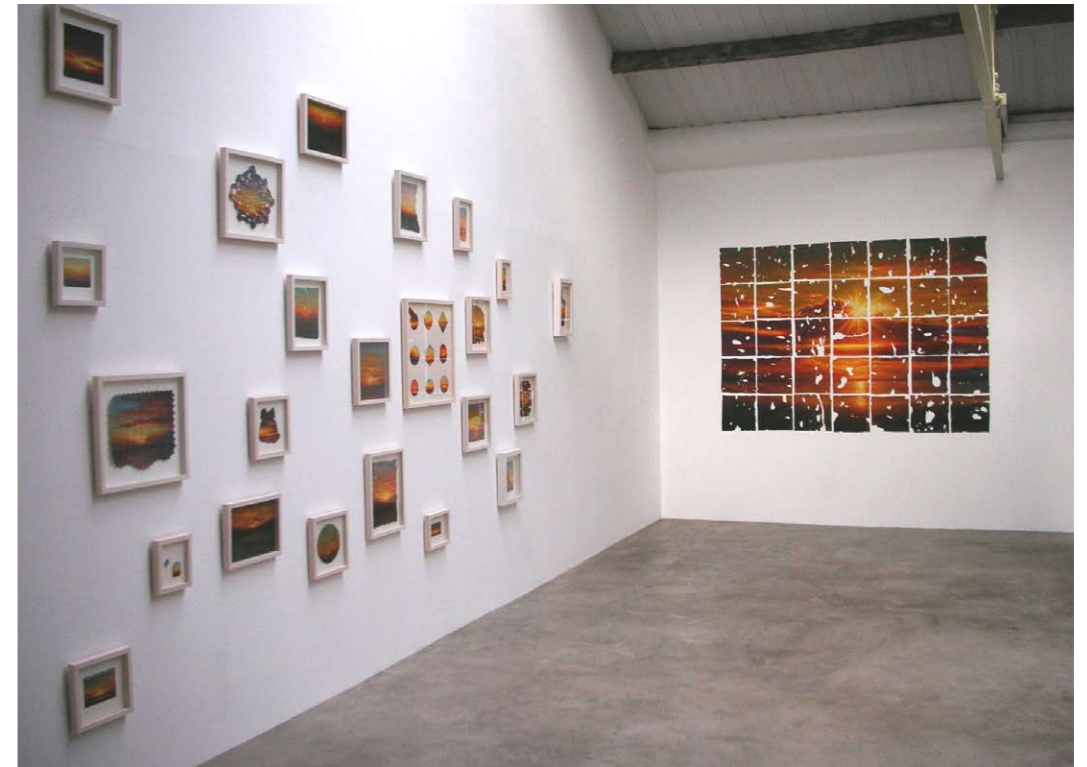
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SUNSETS AT DAWN

Sunsets happen at every moment of the day. As the world turns, the sun constantly dips under the horizon, refracts and bounces light around, leaving behind that fleeting mess of harmonious colour. This glowing spectacle persists in providing a hypnotic beauty and indeed plenty of cultural kitsch in its afterglow. Why this fascinates so many, despite its daily occurrence and its over-abundance in reproduction, is probably one reason why Petri Ala-Maunus has continued to paint sunsets over the past decade. This is however not the only starting point.

There is a challenge within this work to look beyond overly familiar sunscape vistas, to other questions surrounding beauty, originality and melancholia. In a quietly non-confrontational way, the repetition of sunset upon sunset sets these ideas in motion. Each painted sunset is different, unique and thoroughly imagined. Every support is also different, from the eclectic array of bric-a-brac items through to the flea market paintings where a sunset has been added in to the existing 'scene'. The unusual choice of supports are not mismatched but strangely compatible; making it seem quite appropriate that a sunset should appear on a tea-bag, crochet doily, panty liner or cheering up some drab found landscape. Each is titled as a 'connection', a new conflicted union and a promise of happiness. This is not a disinterested pleasure trip, however, which traditional aesthetics and notions of the sublime would imply. The deliberate re-appropriation of beauty or its re-application, presents spaces that are not dependant on the superiority complexes and socially divisive notions of taste and judgement. The 'popular', 'folk', and 'lowbrow' remain as such, the sunset cannot elevate them to a higher cultural status but it does bring them into a new imagined community. If traditional landscape painting is a manifestation of social engineering, through the implications of ownership, status and patronage, then the addition of a sunset helps to complicate this particular lineage. Instead the scene or objects are re-located, or rather remain, within the cultural matrix they came from. Social and cultural relations are asserted and affirmed, not negated by their new imagined context.

The works are not just overpaintings, but in a sense, overwrite the support with a new meaning and enhance its original function. Overwriting can also mean an excessively ornate or effusive style, but there is none of the furious gestures that Asger Jorn, for example, found so appealing and pertinent to his attack on painterly values when he overpainted banal oil-paintings from junk shops. Similarly there is a different fetishisation of the amateur thrift store paintings as amassed by Jim Shaw in recent years, with the critical mass of sunsets having none of the voyeuristic aspects of such similar accumulations. Overwriting with sunsets implies the re-inscription of a discourse over an existing one; it may destroy original data that cannot then be recovered, but it results in something fresh not blank. If we see the sunsets as beautiful, then their application compounds notions that are fraught between unity and painful vacuity, rationalism and an ominous generalness. These would be mid-twentieth century understandings of beauty, a blend of Adorno and Friedländer. Part of the heritage from this modernism was a disavowal of pleasure, seen as trivial or a distraction from modern art's work of uncovering authenticity.



Nine years of sunsets. Installation view

Connection (Napkins). 2004. Oil on paper napkins. 180 x 250 cm





Connection (Finland). 2001. Oil on found flea market painting. 46 x 60 cm

Connection (Finland). 2001. Oil on found flea market painting. 36 x 46 cm



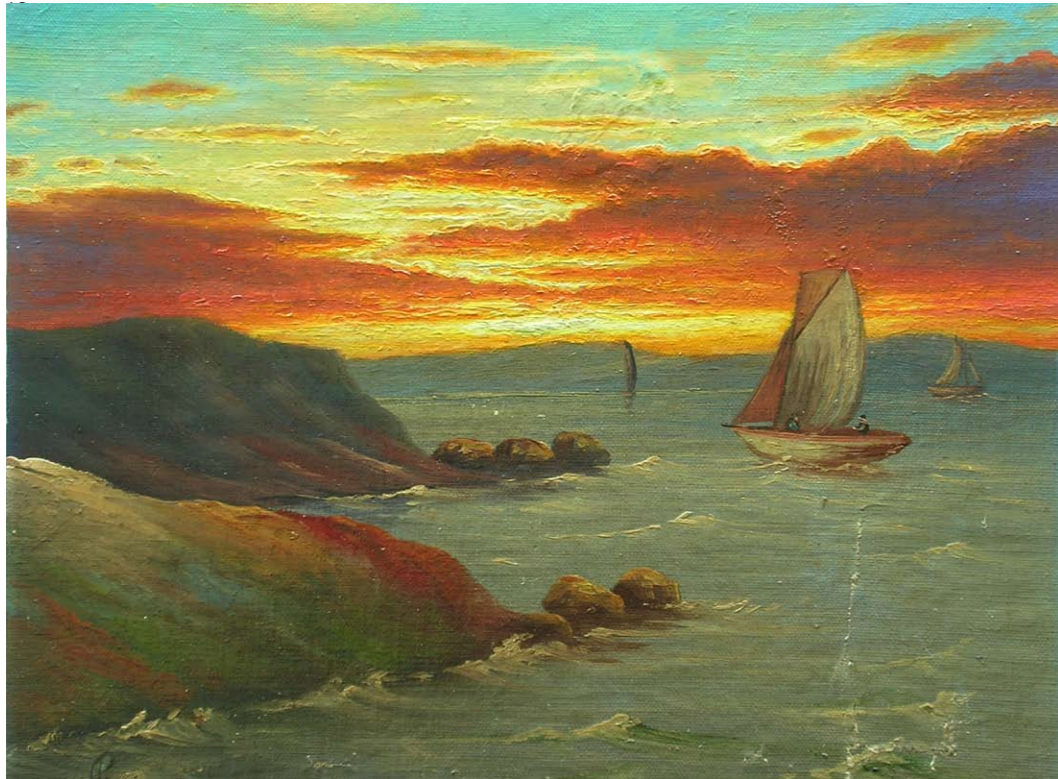
Fifty years on and, nine years of sunsets later, we are presented with a world where ideas of beauty and indeed the sublime have been inverted, with the abandonment of reality and search for absolute truths. This inversion is not the grotesque, as a binary opposite of beauty; it's more of an epistemological and ontological difference; a change in the way knowledge works. In a world without the homogenising force of a Greenbergian avant-garde, one that is ruled paradoxically by pluralism, the sterile low cultures that were once seen as so despicable are no longer a threat. An inverted sublime also does away with the boundaries that separated nature and culture, where it was the overwhelming awe inspiring fear that produced new knowledge and pleasure. In the original sublime we wanted to go 'there' because we wanted to know more. In the inverted sublime we don't want to go there because we don't want to not know. More information does not lead to more understanding and by looking at something we will potentially know less about it. In this way we can be protected or shielded from reality by luxuriating in what Jean Baudrillard calls an "over-reality". The sunsets here maybe be invented, imagined or simulated but they are not trying to present a simulated fake world, like a theme park of eternal sunsets. The intervention is all too obvious and draws attention to itself. The sunset do not look real, they look 'over-real'.

This inversion could also be continued to invoke not happiness but melancholia. The evening brings with it not only the sunset but the end of the day, and with it a sentimental twilight that heralds the finality of night, darkness and eventually death. The zealous repetitive sunsets overcompensate for this emotional downturn, offering a colourful foil to reflect on. This productive melancholia indirectly enables a new experience of memory, of places, situations and objects. Lost horizons are revived, more vivid and saturated, creating new narratives. Random objects are re-surfaced to displace their original function, and transformed elsewhere. The thin line between sentimentality and melancholy is wonderfully engaged not to debilitate, but involve the pleasure of reflected light as it bounces around the sky, unavoidably self-referential but curiously ineffable.

Alan Phelan



Nine years of sunsets. Connections (objects) 2004-6. Installation view



Connection (France). 2002. Oil on found flea market painting. 32.5 x 40 cm

Connection (France). 2001. Oil on found flea market painting. 50 x 69 cm



Connection (France). 2002. Oil on found flea market painting. 51 x 63 cm

Connection (Finland). 2002. Oil on found flea market painting. 40 x 48 cm

