



Interview: Art with Tress

'I wanted to show the whole living thing called a forest.' Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila wants more attention on the non-human drama in her work: "Trees, mushrooms and people."

by Janneke Wesseling (April 4, 2024) [TRANSLATED]



Eija-Liisa Ahtila

The forest is on eight large video screens. Zooming in further and further, it slowly unfolds from left to right the transition from forest floor with melting remnants of snow to pale green seedlings among half-decayed leaves. While at first a single bird sings, a whole concert gradually erupts. This monumental yet intimate work *APRIL = 61°01' 24° 27'* by Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila (b. 1959) can be seen at the exhibition *Through the Trees in the Woods*. It shows the almost tangible closeness of the forest, where the trees are actors in a spectacle about the transition from winter to spring.

This piece is greatly different from Ahtila's earlier work. She gained world fame in the late 1990s with narrative, multimedia installations in which she theatrically expressed the drama of human existence. For example, the Algerian war was the subject of *Where is the Where* (2005), which dealt with failure and death, futility and heroism. Her installations have been shown in all major exhibitions, from the Venice Biennale to Documenta, and in many leading museums.

Now there has come a kind of lightness and openness in the work and also a simplicity in the direction, especially in *APRIL = 61°01' 24° 27'*. There is no longer any question of a narrative. The human presence has been relegated to the background and only perceptible in the camerawork that carries the viewer along step by step.

Ahtila spent two years, between March and May, filming in a vast forest half an hour's drive from her hometown of Helsinki.

Eija-Liisa Ahtila: "I am very familiar with this forest. It is near my birthplace; my parents lived half a kilometer away, in Hämeenlinna. As a teenager I had a dog and walked here a lot," she says when we speak at the Kröller-Müller Museum.

"At some point I asked myself: how would I, as a 64-year-old woman, portray my surroundings? What is my point of view, my gaze? I wanted to show the whole living thing called forest."

Your earlier work was explicitly politically motivated. Has this changed?

"I was raised in an environment where political awareness was important. My great-grandfather and his brother died in the Civil War in 1918. This war [in which socialist and conservative Finns fought each other, supported respectively by Bolshevik Russia and the German Empire, ed.] is still a trauma in Finnish history. Throughout my childhood it was talked about. I wanted to save the world, but didn't know how.

"As an art student, I was 22 years old, I had a strange dream. I dreamt that I had a white lotus flower in my hand and was eating it. The dream told me that it was okay to be an artist and think about politics at the same time."

How has political engagement changed in your work?

"I started asking myself, fifteen years ago, what could be an ecological way to represent the world. By that I mean that it shouldn't just be about the human perspective. This is what I mean by *APRIL = 61°01' 24° 27'*. Here it's about the spaciousness of the forest and the realization that everything in it is communal, in cooperation, making this space.

"It's not easy to work this way. Who is the protagonist? Is it possible, as human beings, to take a standpoint other than one's own? Can we say something that does not concern only ourselves? How are we different from other living beings, and why? How can I represent this? "

Do you think the artist has a moral task in this?

"Most artists have something to say, they make their work so that it will be seen. In and of itself, it is enough to 'just' be a painter and make paintings - this is a political act alone.

"As for me, I have to be able to justify myself to myself. I live in a prosperous country where it is good to be, and people are generally happy. This realization brings with it a responsibility. For example, it is wrong to close the borders to migrants. That is short-sighted."

In 2010, you created a work, "The Annunciation," that dealt with the idea of a miracle and what a miracle might mean today. What, in your opinion, would be a contemporary miracle?

"It would be a miracle if people manage to get along together, with each other and with other living beings, no matter how great the differences between them. It is imperative that we build a different image of the world we live in. This is already happening: we see in art, more and longer films of landscapes and of animals. We also need to change the rules of filmmaking. It is about developing a non-human drama and showing that everything is important and has its rightful place. Trees, mushrooms and people."

Through the Trees the Woods, with work by Andy Holden, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Julian Charrière and Hans Op de Beeck is on view through 15/9 at the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo