



Meeting Aili — Lena Ylipää and Aili Kangas

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**Kin museum för samtidskonst—dáládáidaga dávvirvuorká
nykyaijantaitemyseymmi—Museum of Contemporay Art**

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In the exhibition *Meeting Aili—Lena Ylipää and Aili Kangas*, Lena Ylipää meets a kindred spirit in the artist Aili Kangas (1924–2000). This “conversation” surpasses generational boundaries, coincidentally in time also for Kangas’s 100th birthday. Both artists share daily life in Norrbotten County as a common theme in their work. In her drawings, Lena Ylipää studies everything from mosquito repellent and traditional shawls to societal structures and perceptions of what counts as being peripheral. Ylipää currently lives in Lainio after having studied in Stockholm at Konstfack and lived for several years in Kiruna. Other themes in her work include inheriting forests and how best to reclaim one’s mother tongue, in her case Meänkieli. The work *Elmina, Eugenia and Brita-Kajsa*, is a kind of portrait of women from former generations living in the Torne Valley: the grandmothers Elmina and Eugenia, and her grandfather’s sister Brita-Kajsa.

Delicate still life paintings in muted tones with motifs from the Torne Valley and other parts of Norrbotten County make up a significant part of Aili Kangas’ body of work. Her distinct visual language is seen in her tender interpretations of everyday objects from the family home in Kiruna, a theme she began developing already as a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm during the 1950s. Following her studies, the “Morandi of Norrbotten” returned to her hometown. In Kangas’ rich body of work, traditional Sámi drinking cups and wooden boxes, vases, rag carpets, and wooden chairs come together with lingonberries, cloudberry, angelica, and other plants from the region. These often-overlooked objects are painted using diluted watercolour or oil paints and are usually associated with the culture of the Torne Valley and the Lantalaïs-people from the area around Kiruna.

Kangas also painted landscapes, although with her gaze turned towards the ground, which resulted in close-up landscapes with no horizon. Her work is both matter of fact and intimate, and it comes from the heart, displaying elements of Naïvism. She was born with only one hand, making her paintings with her left hand, something which has rarely—if ever—been mentioned in public. In 2017, a street was named after her in the new centre of Kiruna.

Now, around eighty of her paintings and drawings will be displayed alongside older and newer works by Lena Ylipää—the earliest of which dates from 1998 and the latest from 2024—in an exhibition that highlights their shared Torne Valley background. They participated in the same group exhibition at Norrbotten Museum once, although they never met.

Meeting Aili—Lena Ylipää and Aili Kangas is a part of Kin’s ongoing thematic thread *Women in the North*.

Maria Lind

Art as First Language — A Conversation with Lena Ylipää and Judith Schwarzbart

For Lena Ylipää, the return to the north after studying at Konstfack in Stockholm was essential for the development of her artistic practice. Despite widespread prejudice in Stockholm that it would not be possible to commence a professional artistic trajectory from the north, she settled in Lainio. Located in the north of the Torne Valley, the tiny village where her grandparents once resided, had until that point only been a place for summer retreats. But it has since formed a center and a starting point for examining both personal and cultural questions through the art.

In the spring of 2024, Lena Ylipää met with Judith Schwarzbart, Kin's deputy director, for a conversation about her artistic practice, about reclaiming her cultural heritage through art and art through life.

Judith Schwarzbart: "Life in the north" seems to have a central place in your practice. How and why did it turn out this way?

Lena Ylipää: When I moved to Lainio, I suddenly felt that I did not have access to my own history and the language that was once my mother tongue. It became a project for me to acquire historical knowledge and to learn Meänkieli, and art provided a method of learning.

JS: An example of this is the ongoing project where you offer daily weather reports in Meänkieli. You call the project *språket, skammen, skrattet—kieli, häpeä, nauru* (the language, the shame, the laughter). Why this title?

LY: I spoke Finnish or Meänkieli before Swedish, but that language disappeared fast. I guess it is there somehow, because it is easy for me to pronounce the words, but at the same time it is surprisingly difficult to learn. I came across a theory about this, that it is harder to take back a lost language, because it is associated with shame. On the one side, there is the shame of not having learned it earlier, on the other side, you inherit the shame of your parents who were ashamed to speak the language in the first place. This makes sense to me. When you think about the process of "Swedification" that started already in the late 19th century and continued far into the 20th. It was a force that happened on many levels. For the military it was a question of loyalty and eventually national security. In the school system it was also a cultural question, that system worked hard on erasing languages other than Swedish. The Swedish State Church, in its course, wanted to supersede the influence of Laestadianism, that was widespread in the north.

JS: And yet there is also laughter...?

LY: It is a wonderful part of getting older... you are more able to laugh at yourself. And it is a strong force against the shame.

JS: I guess there is also an insight in discovering that things do not need to be perfect to be important.

LY: Exactly. It is the same with the drawings. There is something enticing about the error. For that reason, I really like to enlarge them, so you see the mistakes and the seeking uncertain line.

JS: What does it mean to you to be invited to enter an artistic dialogue with Aili Kangas who passed away twenty-four years ago?

LY: To meet Aili Kangas is an honor. Aili is, for so many reasons, a role model for me, and for all of us who today are active as artists in Kiruna. She left to get an education and meet an art society elsewhere, and she came back to the north. She made a life choice that was brave and perhaps unexpected for that time in the 1950s for a woman from here. Still, in the 1980s, when I made the same choice, that choice was not an obvious one.

Aili was also a pioneer in the choice of motifs in her works. She saw the interesting in the everyday, in her immediate surroundings. I admire and recognize myself in her diligent exploration of objects and materials. The portrayal of objects from the Torne Valley culture is something we have in common, even if our reasons for choosing objects probably differ. We meet in the selection of objects that are used in everyday life or that are just around us. I also recognize her recurring repetitions of certain form elements in myself. The work in some cases becomes a meditation where thoughts are formulated in the repetition of a detail.

I appreciate her surprising slice of reality where all elements of the images are given the same value. I naturally wonder what a meeting between us would have looked like if it had happened when we were both at the same stage of life. And I wonder what Aili's art would have looked like at this stage in Kiruna's history.

JS: You and Aili Kangas both share an interest in the still life as a type of motif. Not without humor, you have done almost classical still lives with mosquito repellents. But I also see a lot of materials from the wood such as seeds and pine needles.

LY: Yes. Aili Kangas painted a lot of berries, even if she is known for having said that it annoyed her. I probably feel the same way, drawn by the motifs.

JS: A lot of your work revolves around the forest, women, and objects used by women. For example, women wearing a particular type of scarf. Do these scarfs have a certain relation to the local culture?

LY: Not really. Well, I always wear such a scarf when I am out walking. It is very practical. It protects against mosquitos; you can collect mushrooms in it or use as a towel if you go swimming. You see it often around here, but the pattern is from India. You know, it is claimed by many subcultures around the world. I guess it does have a particular meaning for us, though. In the Laestadian tradition women are instructed to cover their hair and many wear them both for worship and in the everyday. It is probably the only colorful thing we wear around here. I have also portrayed my grandmothers with the beautiful woolen shawls in light colors.

JS: Your work examines your own heritage in different ways. Both the materials and the stories. The work *Elmina, Eugenia and Brita-Kajsa* can be seen as an homage to an earlier generation of women through an installation with knitting wool. What is it about these women that fascinates you?

LY: As I grew up, many stories were untold. My grandmother, Eugenia, died at an early age while in childbirth when my father was just six years old. Yet, in her short life, she became a surprisingly entrepreneurial woman for her time. In the Laestadian countryside of the late 1920s, the role of a woman was clearly defined by the upkeep of the household and childcare. However, she acquired a knitting-machine and was making a business for herself. I found a notebook she left behind. Even if she was only Finnish speaking, she carefully kept a record in Swedish of all her business transactions. This must have been hard work. The book became an important document for me.

It was a nice discovery in the city hall in Kiruna to find Aili Kangas' portrait of a knitting woman, Angelika. In this portrait, I see the unwritten history of that generation of women in the northern Torne Valley. It is the same story that I wanted to convey with the work *Eugenia, Elmina and Brita-Kajsa*.

JS: You have talked about heritage, but I also see a strong presence of your own life experiences. I am curious about your hand, which sometimes turns up in your drawings. For me there is conceptual relevance to that. What are your own thoughts on that hand?

LY: It has to do with the sensation of holding something in the hand, the encounter between the skin and a material, the temperature etc. But it is also a way of involving myself in the experience of the beholder. It is my hand and I become part of the work.

The hand came into the drawings in the project, *Korpela Land*, where I researched the Korpela movement through an archive of news articles, court case documents etc. I wanted to talk about the experiences of the people who were part of this movement, but I had no personal accounts, no testimonies, only other people talking about the movement. Yet, I was very inspired by reading the accounts of strong characters reacting and protesting the conditions in Norrbotten. These are stories I wish I had known of when I grew up. Stories, which could have provided me with a stronger cultural self-confidence. Hence, for the exhibition, I created an archival environment and made drawings of the document where my hand was visible.

JS: To emphasize your personal engagement in the material?

LY: In this way, the narrative has become an account told in the first person. When I started the projects related to the Torne Valley,

I commenced as a beholder of the culture, but as the years have passed it has become clear to me that the projects are very much about me as well. In the more recent work, I have become more visible as an active and acting part. The latest of which is a large wall drawing for Bildmuseet in Umeå. In that I appear with my sister in the landscape.

JS: Do you see it as a performative dimension?

LY: Art has become part of my life in a different way. Earlier, I have seen my practice as a rather separate part of my life. Some years back I resumed my practice after a longer pause. Since then, art and life have been woven together into a more sustainable whole. Art is what I do best. I achieve everything else through the process of artistic embodiment. Art is, somehow, my first language.

This conversation took place in Lainio, April 6, 2024.

Lena Ylipää self-presentation

I draw. This is something new to me, having originally come from a tradition of crafting and working with objects and space. Drawing has become my method of learning something new. This can be through the meticulous investigation of a pine tree when I need to understand my responsibilities as a homeowner, or it can be the slow process of replicating the intricate pattern of a mass-produced shawl worn by my mother. Drawing gives me time to think and to formulate what our presence here means. The object that is at the receiving end of this careful observation and interpretation might be an irrelevant detail, but one that has importance for the whole picture and that can describe our present day.

After studying at Konstfack in Stockholm I settled permanently in Lainio, where we have a small cottage. I am a typical cottage kid from the Torne Valley. As a working adult in Lainio, I came to realize how little I knew about myself, about the Torne Valley, our cultures and our territories. So much knowledge about northern Sweden has been denied to us all. It took a long time for me to realize what events and structures lay behind the feeling I had of lacking in history, and why the longing after a lost language is so strong. This is the driving force behind my work: getting to know my own history and depicting the turbulent present-day in the north. For this reason, many of my works appear somewhere between forests and mining pits, between the nation state and multilingualism, past and present. I am also working hard on being able to present my works in Meänkieli.

Work descriptions

Elmina, Eugenia and Brita-Kajsa 1998

The installation is a portrait of the artist's grandmothers Elmina and Eugenia, and her grandfather's sister Brita-Kajsa. The work came about when the artist had recently moved back to the north and realized how seldom women were mentioned history of Norrbotten County, a history that has been sparsely documented either way. The tales that the artist got to hear about the women were primarily about their capabilities, the many childbirths, their crafting skills and their generosity. In this piece, Elmina, who was a firm follower of Laestadianism, represents faith. Eugenia represents diligence. With her knitting machine and her thorough bookkeeping, she was a driven entrepreneur. She died while in childbirth, at far too young of an age. Brita-Kajsa represents generosity, the act of always sharing what you have. She was also a very capable woman. The artist has only met Brita-Kajsa and Eugenia through stories. She got to meet her grandmother Elmina as a child.

Lannanankojärvi, Vinsa and Markkasuando *and Taken out of their context* 2019, 2021

The drawings are of women in the forest wearing paisley-patterned shawls. Together with her sister and mother, the artist can often be found in the forests by the Lannankojärvi lake, on the hills of Vinsa or by the river in Markkasuando. Usually, they will be wearing the shawls known as *huivi*. Wearing a *huivi* in the forest is good for many reasons: it keeps your hair in place, protects against mosquito bites, you can pick mushrooms in it or use it to dry off after a swim. Interesting to note is that the pattern on this item of clothing has an Indo-Iranian origin and a history spanning several thousands of years. The pattern was claimed

by the British colonial powers and brought to Europe with the East India Company, to be weaved in the town of Paisley. The pattern has since then been worn by many different groups, including cowboys, hippies, bikers and skiers, all groups that seem to have a particular desire for freedom. It is almost a dizzying thought, that all this history can be found on top of these women's heads, while they traipse around the forests in an area that can be perceived as a periphery in comparison to how it was perceived originally. To the artist, the huivi are at their most beautiful when they are worn to the point of almost falling apart. In these drawings, only the shawls are drawn in detail, while the people wearing them are merely suggested.

Lena and the Elk

2019

The artist returned to crafting for this piece out of sheer enjoyment. She wanted to wear a woodpile, which like the art of jewelry making, is a statement among people. *Lena and the Elk* is a part of the life-long project "Heritage," which is about inheriting and managing forests. The project is currently tainted by concern over the future, due to the fervent exploitation of land through colonial methods that are transpiring in the north. *Lena and the Elk* is a quirky story, which allows for a moment of laughter during hard work.

Prepared, Ready, Fitted, Secured, Armed, Guarded

Alleviation, 2024

These drawings are inspired by Aili Kangas' paintings, in which she meticulously depicts objects and returns to them again and again. Most of her chosen objects are from everyday life and are not the kinds of objects one expects to find in a still life. Her choice of motifs was both brave and ahead of its time. Lena Ylipää is fascinated by the number of different types of mosquito repellent

she has at home. In the summers, these bottles, jars and appliances can be found scattered in and around the home. In this series of drawings, she has let the mosquito repellents get acquainted with one another, working with composition through the relation between objects and the directions of their "means of attack." There are, it seems, even stories to be told by mosquito repellents. In these drawings, she has focused on the details in the objects that she most enjoys drawing.

Transfer Viä yli tietoa from Tietysti, varmasti, jo ainaki

2003

This work is about how customs and traditions are transferred across generations. The piece is a part of a larger installation titled *Tietysti, varmasti, jo ainaki*. These are words of affirmation that can be heard in a Meänkieli conversation. The installation was originally a display of café furniture, where suggestions for conversation topics were depicted in the tables. Here, it was possible to converse and, above all, affirm one another over a cup of coffee. To the artist, these words are associated with conversations she's heard spoken in Meänkieli where she could not understand the details but could understand that there was affirmation between the speakers.

Request/Förfrågan

2002

The work consists of a pair of knitted socks for men, where the artist has knitted her own hair into the sole. The written text in the work is written like a personal ad. The piece was made for an exhibition at ACAC in Aomori, Japan where she placed it outside the men's bathroom so no male visitors could miss her request. It belongs to a series of works she has created on the theme of single culture in the north. When the piece was created, she was also single in Torne Valley, though not anymore.

Blueberries
2020

Blueberries are also a part of the “Heritage” project, which is about what we leave behind. Photography and drawing are combined in this work, which today exists digitally and can be found on a database somewhere in cyberspace. The title of the entire work is *Heritage: What We Pass On*. The project was called “Exploration into Possible Futures” and was created during the pandemic. It was initiated and run by Taike, Arts Promotion Centre Finland.

Tools 1, 2
2019

The work is based on meticulous observations and drawings of significant objects from the artist’s daily life in Lainio.

Pine Needles and Seeds in a Bag
2019

The drawing *Pine Needles* belongs to the first part of the project “Heritage,” where the artist methodically observes and draws different parts of a pine tree. There are ten pine seeds from Lainio in each bag that the visitor is welcome to take.

**A Particular Gaze:
On the Paintings of Aili Kangas**

Running straight through the new town center of Kiruna, past the shopping center and the supermarket, is Aili Kangas Street. It feels unfamiliar, walking the new paths that have been laid down around the former Kiruna, almost as if they have been drawn onto the ground by a giant hand. The name “Aili Kangas” suggests that the street has been named after a woman, and that this woman, with her Torne Valley-sounding name, must have a local affiliation. There must also be a reason why she deserves to be remembered by the public. And why not while darting between the supermarket and the parking lot on any normal day? It is precisely these questions that invite us into the work of Kiruna-born Aili Kangas: taking a moment to observe the mundane, and to ponder on the unassuming parts of life.

One of Aili Kangas’ most dominant motifs is the still life. In one painting from 1989 there are two objects against a flat surface: a basket with birch wood and, in the background, a log. The birch in the basket has still retained its bark, with its shiny white surface and dark spots. Barely indicated shadows suggest that the log is balancing vertically and that the wall behind is further away in the composition. The colors here are minimal: white shifting to pale yellow or a greyish-blue, and a warm brown tone. The paint itself hugs the canvas tightly and gives off the impression of being almost transparent. Her signature has been placed neatly in the bottom right-hand corner. The format, 25 × 23 centimeters, tells the viewer that the artist knew this was precisely the surface space needed to depict what she had in mind.

By taking these minute details into account, we have already come a significant way into understanding Aili Kangas's work. This image denotes a very specific place, a context in which someone with skills has crafted a birch-wood basket to place items in, and that this basket can be found in a room where there is reason to use a log to warm up a home. How the rest of the room looks is something we will never know, but it is not crucial information. We will return later to the significance of the still life as a theme in Aili Kangas's art.

When Aili Kangas was born one hundred years ago, Kiruna was already considered a modern city, its establishment around the large-scale mining industry in 1900 having jump-started its modernization. Hjalmar Lundbohm, the main authority of the city and managing director of LKAB, had recently retired. He had left a mark on the city in many ways—for better and for worse—including leaving behind an impressive collection of works by the modern artists of the day, a testament to his great love of fine arts. In Kiruna's new church, visitors can see Prince Eugen's grandiose altarpiece *The Holy Grove*. The light and colours in this work are, however, inspired by places considerably further south, such as the Västergötland plains and Tuscany. The painting exudes stillness, much like a still life.

Aili Kangas' father, Lars Isak Kangas (1880–1932) was a gamekeeper, and the family lived at the gamekeeper house in Svappavaara, also known as the Tisell House, between 1914–1917. Her mother, named Lea Selma (1880–1950), had twelve children between the years 1900 and 1927, and Aili was among the three youngest. Her name comes from the Torne Valley, and the greater family from Junosuando in Pajala Municipality. Many of the children were

educated and went onto pursuing high-status professions in law and engineering. Later in life, Aili lived on Sandstensgatan/Annie Jäderbergsgatan in Kiruna.

One thing that's certain is Kiruna in those years was not a town lacking in interest for the arts. When Aili turned twenty in 1944, the Kiruna Art Association was founded, which made it possible for local artists to exhibit their work. Aili Kangas wanted to become an artist, an unusual career-choice for a gamekeeper's daughter from a large family based several hundreds, if not thousands, of kilometers from the big cities that offered an art education. Whoever dreamt of becoming an artist in Kiruna had to make a considerable journey. Aili Kangas was mentioned in the local paper already at the age of thirteen for her drawing talents. Her drawing teacher—as the position was called back then—Kirstin Welinder, was apparently very important to her. She "...pushed the sensitive young girl. Told her that she should continue along the artist's path, which would later evolve into a desire from within."¹

There is little documentation about Aili Kangas' art to be found in the archives, and still less in the art historical literature coming from the region. I received a thin envelope with around ten press cuttings from the Art Library. In it was a black-and-white brochure from an exhibition at Norrbotten County Museum in 1963, which contained presentations of seven local artists. Regarding Kangas the following was reported:

Aili Kangas is one of few female artists in Norrbotten. She is young, but in some ways her painting style is timeless. After five years at art school she returned to Kiruna, although not to convey the grandiose mountain landscapes and its burning colours, but the home environment, still life

¹ Norrländska Socialdemokraten 24.10 1961.

*paintings depicting the everyday and its almost unnatural stillness. Her paintings, in oil, watercolour and wash, are at a first glance cool, subdued, and built around static shapes. She has been labeled an intimist.*²

The first phase of her studies led her to Stockholm and Signe Barth's painting school on Södermalm. Barth (1895–1982) was educated in Paris under André Lhote (1885–1962), a cubist and avant-garde artist based in Montparnasse. On September 22, 1940, the daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* featured the following advertisement for vocational training: "Painting and drawing students are welcomed to the home of painter Signe Barth on Bellmansgatan 20 in Stockholm. Figure drawing daily 10–1."³

On October 6, 1947, Barth was interviewed in the same newspaper about her school. There she lamented the fact that she received "exasperated letters from talented artists from around the country who cannot find even the tiniest abode here in the city."⁴ The lack of housing was critical. The same article reveals that she in times of need would let students stay with her. Barth's own art is described in art historical literature as art that explored volume in the spirit of Cézanne, featuring interiors, still life paintings, and landscapes. Beyond her work as a teacher, she had a rather successful career as an artist, tending to be appreciated by critics.

In his book *The Road to the Royal Swedish Academy of Art: Preparatory Courses among Students Accepted 1938–1984*, the sociologist Andreas Melldahl studies the importance of preparatory education for the development of artists. He finds that several private schools were highly influential in this regard, among them

2 Catalogue to Spring Exhibition at Norrbotten Museum, 1963

3 *Dagens Nyheter* 22.9 1940.

4 *Dagens Nyheter* 6.10 1947.

Signe Barth's, as well as the more famous schools of Otte Sköld and Isaac Grünewald.⁵ The majority of these schools were to be found in Stockholm, which of course meant that someone with artist dreams like Aili Kangas had few alternatives but to head to the capital city. For Kangas this meant one big step, and over a thousand kilometers of traveling.

Melldahl's thesis confirms that the private schools were paramount for artists who wished to excel academically and build a network for a career in art. These schools are not often brought up in artists' biographies. He goes on to note that "The information available usually comes from descriptions in artists' biographies and anecdotal finds from the archives of different schools."⁶ In Melldahl's book there is a list of seven students who between the years 1938 and 1954 were accepted to the Academy of Art in Stockholm after having attended Barth's preparatory school: among them was Aili Kangas.

A letter from Signe Barth to Aili's older sister Laila (born 1914, née Morin) dated May 5, 1949 provides a snapshot of how things were going.

The term is over now, and I wished to send you a few lines together with [illegible] certificate, addressed to the Pensions Authority.

I have reason to believe that Miss Kangas feels at home here and that she has settled into a rhythm with her work as well as with her peers. She told me that she would very much like to come back, and she has promised to try to paint and draw as much as possible over the summer.

5 Utbildningsvägen till Kungl. Konsthögskolan. Förberedande utbildningar bland elever antagna 1938–1984 (Daidalos), 2012, p.11.

6 Utbildningsvägen till Kungl. Konsthögskolan. Förberedande utbildningar bland elever antagna 1938–1984 (Daidalos), 2012, p.8.

[...] Oil paint is a new medium to her, and she is yet to use it in the correct manner. She applies it as if it were watercolour, but this is something I have told her, and I think she knows what I mean. It would be good if she could continue practicing her oil painting over the summer while keeping in mind what I have told her. I sincerely hope that it will be possible for her to return to Stockholm next winter.

*I expect Mrs Morin to reply and let me know how things will turn out.
Warm wishes to you both
Your sincerely,
Signe Barth*

The sender's address on letters home from Aili Kangas is that of Birger Jarlsgatan 20.⁷ This was at least one of the addresses she had occupied during her years in Stockholm.

The Pensions Authority, mentioned by Signe Barth in the letter, functioned as a supervisory authority over recognized health insurance funds and other associations that administered pensions, including special support for people with disabilities. Aili Kangas was born without her right hand, something she never spoke about. She painted with her left hand, which is not mentioned in publications about her either.

How does one best describe the art on display in Stockholm in the early 1950s? Moderna Museet had not yet opened its doors. A department for modern art had been installed at the National Museum in 1952, but art enthusiasts would not go there to look at good contemporary art. Instead, they frequented the many lively galleries. The most renowned of these were Gummessons, Svensk-Franska, Färg & Form, Galerie Bleue, Galeria Blanche, and Agnes

⁷ Letter belonging to Rita Kangas.

Widlund's Samlaren, which were some of the first to exhibit works from the French avant-garde. As the art historian Ulf Linde once wrote, "The watering holes were few, but nobody could complain about the water."⁸ It was during the exhibition "Ung konst 1947" (Young Art 1947) that the term "The men of 1947" (which in fact included one woman, Randi Fischer) was coined. These artists wanted to put non-figurative art in the spotlight, a movement that until then had not really found a place for itself in Sweden. They experimented with monumental art, which suited the public art boom of the post-war era. The early 1950s can be characterised as a thawing period following the depression and isolation of the Second World War. Sweden's neutral stance during the war meant that it had taken in many refugees, some of them artists like Enno Hallek, Lenke Rothman, and Endre Nemes.

In 1952, Aili Kangas was accepted to study at the Royal Academy of Art, back then situated on Fredsgatan. The Concrete Art wave had died down and been replaced by a preference for more mellow and figurative styles, which often included nature as a central and poetic theme. The trend suited Kangas well. When she started at the school, the naïvist expressionist Sven Xet Erixson was in his final year as a professor. During the 1930s and 40s, Erixson travelled around Norrbotten and Northern Norway and on this journey had become deeply moved by what he experienced. This resulted in several works that held the region as a central theme. It is likely that he met Kangas in Kiruna, where Sven and his son Sverre were involved in designing the interior of the new city hall, which was inaugurated in 1962 but has since been torn down. Other professors at the school included Olle Nyman, Bror Marklund, and Bror Hjorth. Among Aili Kangas' cohort were Carl-Fredrik Reuterswärd

⁸ Ulf Linde, donated by Gerard Bonnier, written note to Gerard Bonnier, The State Museum of Art, 1989, p.11.

(1934–2016) Philip von Schantz (1928–1998), Thage Nordholm (1927–1990), and Birgit Ståhl (Nyberg) (1928–1982). In 1954, Kangas and a few of her fellow students were praised for their work during an event held at the academy on May 30.⁹ Ann-Marie Enlund (1925–2021), who attended the academy 1949–1955, became a close friend. Out of the professors, the sisters Aili and Laila upheld a lifelong relationship with Olle Nyman (1909–1999), visiting him in his studio in Saltsjö-Duvnäs on several occasions.

A coincidence that may or may not be of significance to Aili Kangas' artistry is that a foreign member was elected to join the board of the Academy the same year that she started: the Italian artist Giorgio Morandi (1890–1964). There are visual links between the artists' approach to color, their canvas and their chosen subject matter. Despite there being a geographical, cultural and generational distance between the two, their commonality lies in a focus on minimal still life paintings with an atmosphere of an elevated, almost ethereal, matter-of-factness. Shadowless volumes, prosaic everyday objects presented against a neutral background and with a muted and constrained colour palette. It is not clear if he had any impact on Aili Kangas, or whether she or anyone else in Sweden was exposed to his art for that matter.

At the beginning of this text, I mentioned that Kangas had been labelled an "intimist." This was noted by the editor of a catalogue from the Norrbotten Museum,¹⁰ which suggested that someone else must have used the term in an earlier instance.¹¹ The term intimist most likely refers to the subject matter itself, with its focus on the subdued and the informal, in other words the opposite

⁹ Stadsplanerare fick medalj på Konstakademiens fest, *Dagens Nyheter* 30.5, 1954.

¹⁰ Catalogue for the Spring Salon at Norrbotten Museum in 1963.

¹¹ Ibid.

to grandiose or expressive art. Even Kangas's choice of scale seems to play a role here, ranging from 24 × 16 centimetres to—at the very most and rarely—75 × 82 cm. The smallest painting in this exhibition, *Two Small Jugs*, is only 14 × 14 cm. The frames are often thin and discreet, without a passepartout. A few years later in 1968, the label "intimist" was used once more in a review authored by Teddy Brunius in *Upsala Nya Tidning* in conjunction with an exhibition at the gallery Nutida konst,¹² as well as by Stig Carlsson in the paper *Norrländska Social Demokraten* when he refers to an exhibition at Telanders gallery.¹³ The latter expands on the label in relation to Kangas' art. He writes that the art critic and author August Brunius (father of Teddy) was first to coin the expression in 1917, in order to define what he considered to be uniquely Swedish, that is, a depiction of the subdued every day.

Before this, however, came the artist's debut on October 17, 1959. The location was fitting for Aili Kangas: Lilla Paviljongen, situated at the crossing of Högbergsgatan and Östgötagatan in Stockholm. The gallery was founded in 1939 and was run by the popular and respected Ebba K. Pettersson (1903–1986), known as Petra. During its four decades of activity, around two hundred artists debuted there, among them Erland Cullberg (1961),¹⁴ Päivi Ernkqvist (1973),¹⁵ Madeleine Pyk (1956),¹⁶ Mette Prawitz (1957),¹⁷ and Lars Englund (1953).¹⁸ By those who knew her, Petra was described as humble, ethereal, and somewhat eccentric. As she primarily took on young artists and authors, many of whom tended to move on to other more

¹² Teddy Brunius, *Upsala Nya Tidning*, 16.3 1968.

¹³ Stig Carlsson, *Norrländska Social Demokraten* 15.12 1980.

¹⁴ Kerstin Vinterhed: STOCKHOLMSLIV: Petra - en minnesvärd gallerist, *Dagens Nyheter* 27.3 2001.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Svenska Dagbladet* 18.1 2004

¹⁷ https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hos_Petra

¹⁸ Ibid.

commercial galleries after collaborating with her. Many have spoken of her fascination for spirituality and her seeking nature, as well as her instinct for authenticity and talent. In her obituary in *Dagens Nyheter* on July 29, 1986, the poet Werner Aspenström writes that she would, “scrub the floors on all fours before every exhibition opening. It was her way to liberate the room and hand it over to the new talents for them to sow their seeds.”¹⁹

What exactly Aili Kangas presented at her debut exhibition is unclear, but when one reads the many positive mentions of her in the press, it is evident that she had already found her visual language. A still life with a green ceramic vase and a bent-wood box made in 1958 may have exhibited here. Already present were the washed-out colours and the sense of a sort of a condensed existence, which trembles between emotion and reality. In an instant, it could all be gone, or it could have been a dream. In one daily newspaper it emerges that the Swedish General Art Association (SAK) acquired the works *Scoop with berries 1* and *Scoop 7*, a motif that would return throughout the years.²⁰

In *Stockholms-Tidningen* on October 22, Gerd Reimers wrote: “Petra’s debutant /.../ sings with a highly restrained voice in the noisy orchestra of modernism. Kangas is drawn to elements of the naïve, with an addition of peaceful intimacy that verges on melancholia. In terms of subject matter, she tends to focus on only one object or person, capturing their character with small means using both oil and watercolour. Her pencil drawings also command respect.”²¹ In *Svenska Dagbladet*, Stig Johansson notes a few days later (28.10) that, “when at her best, she weaves a fine poetic veil.” In *Dagens Nyheter*, Torsten Bergmark writes (22.10): “It is pale, but honest.”

¹⁹ *Dagens Nyheter* 29.7 1986.

²⁰ *Dagens Nyheter* 23.10, 1959.

²¹ Gerd Reimers, *Stockholms Tidningen* 22.10 1959.

Even the newspaper for the Pentecostal movement, *Dagen* (22.10), which back then had its own art critic, was positively inclined. The critic interpreted her work as an “inner need to talk about the often-forgotten objects of the everyday, about simple but honest people, old work tools, and the safety within the walls of a home.”

How does Aili Kangas make a living after her debut? Regardless of the times, if one is not financially independent, it is always somewhat of a skill to make a living as an artist. In her case, she received money from different sources. The newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* offered her and other artists of the same generation stipends throughout the years, up until the 1980s. These were considerable sums of money in today’s terms, particularly for Aili, who lived cheaply in Kiruna and who at times received support from her younger brother Erik. Her work was frequently advertised in the daily press and was assimilated regularly into various public collections as well as LKAB. Family members and friends would buy her works and give them to one another on holidays and special occasions. The National Museum and Moderna Museet purchased works to add to their collections. Due to her disability, she also received a small allowance from the Pension’s Authority.

She was the only female artist to exhibit her work at the Spring Salon at the Norrbotten Museum in 1963, among six others: Erling Johansson (1934—2023), Einar Larsson (b. 1931), Berto Marklund (1931—2020), Olov Nilson (1933—2021), Stig Pettersson (1933—2021), and Mats Risberg (b.1937). As cited above, Aili Kangas returned to Kiruna after her studies, “although not to the grandiose mountain landscapes and its burning colours, but to the home environment, to still lifes depicting the everyday and its almost unnatural stillness.”²²

²² Catalogue for the Spring Salon at Norrbotten Museum in 1963.

Aili Kangas' still life paintings bring people together with their matter-of-factness. Their shallow, zoomed-in perspectives provide something that is simultaneously universal and specific. A glowing yellow lemon against a blue matte-glazed plate is a visual theme that can be seen in many places around the world, but there are few examples of these kinds of universal motifs. More often, regional plants like angelica, polypore mushrooms, lingonberries, and yarrow are in focus. There are also artefacts in these paintings that relate to a unique context with a geographically specific terminology. For example, the *svepask*, a bent-wood box made of birch, uses a specific technique that requires a great level of patience and knowledge about the elasticity of the material. Bent-wood boxes were an essential appliance among the nomadic Sámi, as well as for Torne Valley locals, although in a larger format.²³ Other artefacts include drinking cups (*kåsa*), fermented milk bowls (*filbunke*) and birch-wood baskets, all of which have a link to handicrafts and utility objects that are used daily and passed through the generations in Sámi and Torne Valley cultures.

The bowls and cups sometimes appear filled with lingonberries or blueberries. In 1980, the art critic Lars Nittve writes aptly and tenderly about Aili Kangas exhibition at Telanders in *Svenska Dagbladet*: "Scents and tastes are set free in these exceptionally atmospheric still lifes. The lingonberries in the birch-wood basket turn into poetry that speaks for the entire zone that Aili Kangas has made her own: a slice of nature in the Kiruna-region."²⁴ Beyond the practical objects are things associated with affection and tenderness. An old-fashioned doll's pram with large wheels is given a particular amount of attention. In one painting, it is placed next to an oriental Tabriz rug, on which there is a piano stool in

²³ Conversation with Lennart Lantto, cultural worker in Kiruna, May 2024.

²⁴ Vi måste begripa! Lars Nittve, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 5.3 1980.

some kind of exotic wood. Both the stool and the rug must have traveled far before reaching their destination. More common for Aili Kangas' interiors is the presence of rag carpets and chairs designed in a traditional Swedish way, such as the square *tolvlåstol* or peg chairs. A porcelain doll with an accompanying pram were inherited by a cousin in the early 1900s and can be seen in a series of paintings. These were evidently also beloved objects.

Not only are there still life paintings but also portraits, for example of her brother Signar wearing a blue jacket, or by an outhouse with a green door. There is also Angelika, an older woman who used to come and help the artist's mother with the cleaning. Angelika is well-known in hand-crafting circles in Kiruna. She was written about and even had a knitting pattern named after her, which is possible to buy in the craft shop Stoorstålka in Jokkmokk.²⁵ Angelika (Angeliika) Adamsdotter Holma (1890–1961) was known for her beautiful, colorful mittens. Many people in the Torne Valley knit her "Angeliikan kuoppavanthuut", and it has been said that she was so skilled that she was able to walk and knit simultaneously.

The vast expanses of Norrbotten County and its mountains were not what interested Aili Kangas, even if some of her canvases include snowy landscapes. In the painting *Red outhouse*, the red wooden façade glows with the same shade as the fence in the foreground, set against snowdrifts that let in a sudden moment of warmth in the cool of early spring. What she really preferred was the warmth of the Mediterranean, and she traveled as often as possible to Italy, Greece, and Spain, although there are only traces of this in her artistry. In Kiruna she lived like a widow, as is evident in a still life together with her sister Laila who was a textile artist.²⁶

²⁵ Erika Nordvall Falck, *Stickbeskrivning vante Angeliika hålkrukmönster*, 2022.

²⁶ Samtal med Gunilla Kangas 10.4 2024.

There is something to be said about entering the art world as a woman from Norrbotten at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s. There was no shortage of female artists active at this time, though it was rare to be exhibited at a gallery, to be promoted, or to have works acquired into museum collections. The same went for public commissions, where concrete artists like Lars Englund (b. 1933), Lage Lindell (1920–1980), and Lennart Rhode (1916–2005) set the tone. It was very unusual for someone who did not come from the capital city, who had no family members that were active artistically or culturally, and to have grown up in an industrial town, to then go onto choosing to embark on an artistic path. This makes Aili Kangas' story unique.

Throughout her life as a painter, Aili Kangas viewed her world with a very particular gaze, which was defined by her approaches. One of these approaches was the portrayal of the room and its objects at the viewer's eye level, or a glimpse of an interior or forest. Never monumental nor boundless, but restful and concentrated. A painting has no sound, but her worlds seem to exude silence, patiently waiting. Another recurring element is the sense of objects being veiled, and the washed-out paint used only to express the most necessary details: the irregularity of the birch trees, the freshness of the angelica, or the softness of a quilt. Among the artists of her generation, Aili Kangas succeeded in having an independent career. It was not only influenced by her background and upbringing in a recently founded mining town, far away from "everything," but above all by the meetings and conversations whose was about art and the opportunities to see what was going on in the world, whether this was in the capital city of Stockholm or somewhere else in Europe.

Like so many female artists before her, she turned her attention to the most intimate contexts: her own. The small circle of her

family, the long winters in the north, trips to the south, the people and the objects around her. The 1950s seemed to have been a good time to be an art student, a time when students' ideas were met with openness and enthusiasm. Many original and significant artists developed in parallel to Aili Kangas, among them Enno Hallek (b. 1931) (who started one year later) and Birgit Ståhl Nyberg (1928–1982). These three artists are proof that the spirit of the times was open and permissive.

Aili Kangas lived a full life as an artist who undertook many exhibitions, both in solo and group exhibition formats, taking place in Stockholm, at galleries, and at the National Museum. She exhibited in Kiruna as well as outside Sweden, for example in Rostock and Moscow. In 2014, four years after Aili Kangas' passing, Kiruna Art Association organized a memorial exhibition in the old City Hall. The majority of her rich body of work as well as her private archives belong to the artist's relatives.

Paulina Sokolow, art historian, writer, and communicator at Kin

Mediation

Thursday June 13

16:00-18:00 Exhibition opening. Kin's director Maria Lind welcomes the guests and Lena Ylipää introduces the exhibition

Friday June 14

12:30 Lunch tour with Lena Ylipää and conversation with Anca Rujoiu, curator at Bilduseet in Umeå. Held in English

Self-presentation Anca Rujoiu

Anca Rujoio (born 1984 in Bucharest) has more than fifteen years of experience working as a curator and editor in Western and Eastern Europe as well as in the Asia-Pacific Region. Since 2024, she is a curator at Bildmuseet in Umeå. She was recently part of the curatorial team of the second edition of the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale. Rujoiu is one of the founders of NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore (2013–18), where she first worked as an exhibition curator and later as director of publications. In 2019, she was co-curator of the third edition of Art Encounters Biennial in Timișoara. She was a member of the curatorial initiative FormContent (2011–13) in London, where she was among the initiators of the nomadic programme *It's Moving from I to It*. Among her latest curatorial projects are "Inventory of the Week" (2023) at National Center for Dance Bucharest, and "Solidarity is a Verb" (2022) at Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart. Rujoiu is pursuing a doctorate at Monash University, Melbourne, where her research is focused on how institutions are created, their self-organization, and alternative historical narratives.

Saturday June 15

12:00 "What's a tornedaling?—On the multicultural history of the region where Meänkieli is spoken," by Lars Elenius

Lars Elenius has a deep connection to the Torne Valley since both his parents are from Lainio. Early in life, he moved with his family to Övertorneå, which led to questions about identity and belonging. The lifelong journey between two different cultures, the Finnish and the Swedish, is something shared by many from the Torne river valley. The history of the Torne Valley residents is linked to that of Finnish-speaking people. At the end of the 1800s, however, a "Swedification" process was thrust upon the region. Finnish was banned in schools and Finnish cultural heritage was ignored. Based on the findings of the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, Lars speaks about the effects that this had on the people living there. The lecture also explores the historical meeting between Swedish, Finnish, and Sámi-speaking groups in the area that today is known as Kiruna municipality.

The presentation is part of *Sitkeä: Conversations on Meänkieli-speaking Cultures*, initiated by Emma Pettersson Juntti, mediator and producer at Kin, in collaboration with Lena Ylipää.

Self-presentation Lars Elenius

Lars Elenius, born in Vittangi, is Professor Emeritus in history at Luleå Technical University. His research ranges across topics like ethnicity, nationalism, cultural heritage, and regional change in Northern Europe, with a particular focus on minority politics and ethnopolitics in relation to the Torne Valley and the northern countries. At the beginning of the 2000s he led the transnational project "To Write a History Book and Encyclopaedia over the Barents Region." He has been researching the cultural heritage

of the Gammelstad Church Town as a world heritage site, with a focus on multiculturalism, the consequences of land elevation as well as the social function of buildings and clothes. He was a member of the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation for members of the Torne Valley, Lantalaïs, and Kven people between 2020–23. Recently, he co-authored a report about the use of land in the Sámi village Talma and Torne Lappmark.

14:00 Remembering Aili Kangas and her art—we welcome you to share your memories of her and her art

How did you encounter her art for the first time? Have you lived with a painting by her? Do you remember her as a person? We will meet in the exhibition space, hold our conversation there, and finish off with tea and coffee. No pre-registration required. In collaboration with the Kiruna Art Association.

Sunday June 16

13:00 Lena Ylipää presents the exhibition

June 17–20

11:00–15:00 Art camp—Painting with Watercolours

Learn the basics of painting with watercolours over the course of four days. You can also use this opportunity to develop existing skills or test out new techniques. Each day will begin with a visit to the exhibitions at Kin Museum of Contemporary Art, where we will look at, and be inspired by the works. Afterwards we will paint in the Art Workshop. Each day will conclude with a joint

review and on the final day, June 20, the paintings will be displayed in the Workshop. Fruit will be available, but please bring your own lunch!

The Kiruna Festival, June 27–29:

12:00–16:00 Paint at the Kiruna Festival

During the Kiruna Festival, Kin's Art Workshop will be moved out onto Stadshustorget in the new town centre. Come and try out watercolour painting together with Kin's art mediator. The activity is free and suitable for all ages, no prior knowledge is required.

Thursday June 27

17:00 Lena Ylipää presents the exhibition

Friday June 28

12:30 Conversation in the exhibition space between Lena Ylipää and Kin's head of communications, Paulina Sokolow

Saturday June 28

13:00 Lena Ylipää presents the exhibition

July 1–August 18

Introductions with Kin's staff on Tuesdays at 12:30 and Thursdays at 17:00

Wednesday July 17

15:00–16:30 Conversation with Lena Ylipää and Judith Schwarzbart, Acting Director of Kin, to be held at Marrtigården in Lainio, as a part of the Homestead Days and Week of Culture. In collaboration with the Lainio Association of Homesteads

Stories about Women in the North: A Conversation with Lena Ylipää and Judith Schwarzbart

The history of women in the north and their daily lives remains overlooked. Yet there are stories to be found in the countless objects, images, and documents that have been left behind, and that are waiting to be noticed and talked about. This conversation uses objects from Marrtigården as a point of departure, as well as work by the artists Aili Kangas (1924–2000) and Lena Ylipää. The artists share a connection to Norrbotten County as a place, as well as in terms of their artistic focus on places where women have been and are active. Visitors are welcomed and encouraged to share their own stories and objects. Which stories and histories can be found in one of your drawers at home, in a book of recipes, in notebooks or kitchen tools? The café will remain open during the event.

August 13–16

11:00–15:00 Art Camp—Drawing.

Over the course of four days, we will gather in the Art Workshop at Kin to draw, using the ongoing exhibition *Meeting Aili—Lena Ylipää and Aili Kangas* as a point of departure. The sessions will be run by Kin's mediator Märta Öringe, and the artist Lena Ylipää will be there on the first day (Tuesday, August 13) to inspire the participants. The workshop is free and open to all. Fruit will be available, but please bring your own lunch!

Tuesday August 13

12:30 Lunch tour with Maria Lind

Thursday August 15

12:30 Lunch tour with Judith Schwarzbart

Wednesday August 21

12:30 Lunch tour with Judith Schwarzbart

August 22–September 12

17.30–20.00 Evening course—watercolor painting at Kin

Over the course of four Thursday evenings, you will learn the basics of watercolour painting. Participants may also use the course as a chance to develop existing skills or learn new techniques. Each session will begin with a visit to the exhibitions at Kin Museum of Contemporary Art, where we will look at and be inspired by the works. After this, we will paint in the Art Workshop. Every day will finish with a joint review, and on Sunday 15 September, the paintings will be displayed in the Workshop. The course is led by Kin's artistic mediator Märta Öringe. Thursday 22 August 17:30-20:00, Thursday 29 August 17:30-20:00, Thursday 5 September 17:30-20:00, Thursday 12 September 17:30-20:00.

Wednesday August 28

12:30 Lunch tour with Emma Pettersson Juntti

18:00 Movements, carvings, impressions. Female stances during the late 1900s. A lecture about female artists during the 1900s by Annika Öhrner, art historian, researcher, and curator

Artistic stances during the late 1900s, when Aili Kangas was active as an artist, are explored in this lecture through the lens of three female artistries: Siri Derkert (1988–1973), Barbro Östlihn (1930–1995), and Monica Sjöö (1938–2005). By looking at some central works and the partly overlapping artistic movements of these women, we uncover an artistic space that continues to influence the arts.

Annika Öhrner is an art historian, researcher, and curator who is pursuing a doctorate in art history at Södertörn University. Over several years, she has researched and created exhibitions with modern and contemporary art. She has also published several publications, many of which are focused on female artists. In 2010, Öhrner published her doctoral thesis from Uppsala University, *Barbro Östlin och New York: Konstens rum och möjligheter*, (Stockholm: Makadamförlag).

Saturday August 31

14:00 Conversation with Lena Ylipää and Linnea Nylund about the Night Festival in Korpilombolo and the cultural impact of the Nylund sisters in the multicultural Torne Valley area

The conversation is part of *Sitkeä: Conversations on Meänkieli-Speaking Cultures*, which has been initiated by Emma Pettersson Juntti, mediator and producer at Kin, in collaboration with Lena Ylipää.

Wednesday September 4

12:30 Lunch tour with Maria Lind

Saturday September 14

13:00 Remembering Aili Kangas and her art—we welcome you to share your memories of her and her art

How did you encounter her art for the first time? Have you lived with a painting by her? Do you remember her as a person? We will meet in the exhibition space, hold our conversation there, and finish off with tea and coffee. No pre-registration is required. In collaboration with the Kiruna Art Association.

14:00 Letting the objects speak. Bring bowls, spoons, Sámi drinking cups, and anything else you've seen in Aili Kangas's work and tell us their story

Colophon

Kin Museum of Contemporary Art,
Kristallen City Hall,
Stadshustorget 1, 98130 Kiruna

Staff

Agneta Andersson, mediation
Emma Pettersson Juntti, producer, coordinator, and mediator
Ilmur Mustafin, technician
Judith Schwarzbart, deputy director
Maija Melchakova, administration
Maria Lind, director
Märta Öringe, collection and mediation
Paulina Sokolow, communication
Museum hosts: Bohdan Havryliuk, Illia Dobychin, Lena Rydström,
Lloyd Jarlemyr, Matilda Kenttä, Milly Sundgren and Tova Söderberg
Graphic design: Johanna Lewengard and Benedetta Crippa
Graphics: Marina Sergeeva

Kin's visual language has been conceived by the artists Inga-Wiktoria Påve and Fredrik Prost in collaboration with the designers Johanna Lewengard and Benedetta Crippa.

Meeting Aili—Lena Ylipää and Aili Kangas June 13—September 15, 2024.

Kin Museum of Contemporary Art is the regional art museum of Norrbotten, founded in 2018 by the region and the municipality of Kiruna.

Many thanks to Lena Ylipää and to the lenders of Aili Kangas' work: the Rita Kangas Family, Gunilla Kangas, Victoria Kangas, Fredrik Kangas, and Roger Suup.

