



Sound of Vox, 2013, 70 x 90, oil on canvas

Being Human

Tampere-born Kaj Stenvall, who is known as one of Finland's most beloved and successful contemporary artists, has made a career out of his distinctive figurative art; one figure in particular is what has brought his work to the attention of the masses – the slightly familiar-looking duck. Using the animal as a link to what lies beneath the surface of each painting, Stenvall tells Scan Magazine that his hope is for viewers to see through the bird and perhaps recognise something essential about the nature of being human.

By Nia Kajastie | Photos: Kaj Stenvall

Visual art, and especially classic paintings, is something that entered Kaj Stenvall's life at an early age. He was particularly taken by Akseli Gallen-Kallela's and Victor Westerholm's impressive works shown at the Turku Art Museum, which he visited as a child on trips to his grandmother's on mother's day.

"Naturally I'd been drawing a lot as a child, but after I'd turned 10 or so, I slowly started to discover art as a form of expression. The traditional and classic way of painting has influenced me from early on. I've been very loyal to that medium as

well, and I haven't really strayed into other forms, bar some photography," Stenvall



Kaj Stenvall

explains. "While I've previously played with the idea of being an architect or furniture designer, when I was about 17, I was fully concentrated on visual art, and the other options just fell away. I felt a strong calling for painting, and even if I wouldn't have made it to art school, I would still have tried my hand at a career as an artist."

Freedom and discipline

Stenvall attended art school in Turku in the 70s and has since made the city his home. Nowadays, 40 years into his career, Stenvall has found a comfortable daily routine of painting at the atelier in his

home. "Funnily, one of the reasons I liked the idea of being an artist was that I wouldn't have to wake up at 7am every morning, and that I could freely decide on my own working hours and the rhythm of my days. Of course now that I have a 7-year-old daughter, I take her to school every morning, and by around 9am, I will be in my studio, fully awake and ready to work.

"I have also adopted a very Lutheran work ethic from a young age. Discipline is what keeps me moving, and I'd get a guilty conscience if I didn't put in a full day's work. While it is still very much creative work, and you have to have plenty of imagination and fresh views on how to express things and find something essential at the heart of it all, there is still no room for spontaneity once the original idea is set."

Psychological studies on human nature

Stenvall feels that his style and the subjects he tackles have stayed more or less consistent over the last 40 years. He still continues to create figurative paintings, while drawing inspiration from classic, traditional art. "At the core of it all, I'm creating certain kinds of psychological studies on human nature. It's always about portraying humans, so the themes have not changed, and I aim to paint something that offers room for both heart

and intellect, with its own kind of mystery added to it. I don't want everything to be evident with one viewing; I want the effect to last a bit longer."

The duck figure itself entered Stenvall's work in the 80s when he decided to add modern imagery to a more traditional background. He wanted to see how a comic figure would fit into a more classical environment, and what effect the dynamic conflict between the two elements and a clash between two worlds would have on the viewer.

"While comics were widely used in pop art, I wanted to do it in a slightly different way, by causing a bit of confusion among the viewers. Through this I found my own method and way of expressing things. The essential aspect is that I have used the figure as an alienating element, so the viewer cannot identify with it directly. Accordingly, it's easier to express certain things, and in the best case scenario reach underneath someone's skin, on an emotional level. The most important thing is to reach people, affect and touch them in some way."

Beyond the duck and Finnish identity

The duck figure is undeniably part of the reason why Stenvall has received a lot of attention and was also introduced to a

broader audience. He has been voted one of the best-loved contemporary artists in Finland and continues to draw large audiences to his exhibitions.

"What's important for me is that I coincidentally found something that works in so many ways. I use the figure as a kind of link, something you should not really pay that much attention to; and there are plenty of people who, like me, just look right through it."

Kaj Stenvall's work has been in demand outside Finland's borders as well, with 18 exhibitions shown abroad to date, with a recent one presented in Stockholm and another taking place between 28.6-21.7 in Genova, Italy. Stenvall has never attempted to create art characterised by his origins or by using Finnish clichés; instead he employs a more universal language in his work.

"I've never used my national identity as a starting point; instead it's more about reflection on human existence and all the things that affect and move us," Stenvall adds.

For more information, please visit:
www.kajstenvall.com



Strong Women, 2013, 65 x 50, oil on panel



The Savior, 90 x 120, oil on canvas, 2012