

Kaija Mäenpää
Alienated familiarity in portraits of aquatic plants

Ulla-Maija Alanen
Blossoming Waters
1–30 September 2019
Temporary exhibitions hall, Maretarium, Kotka

Ulla-Maija Alanen photographs aquatic plants as they occur in nature. She neither cuts, picks nor arranges the plants to follow her design, except for framing the subject and choosing the camera angle. Alanen sees her project as belonging to the traditions of both documentary photography and plant portraiture. In her photography, however, “documenting” and “portraiture” do not mean there is an investigative distance between the photographer and her subject. Working in the aquatic space beneath the surface of the water creates a special sense of intimacy. Their sensual features and the sense of being embraced by water subtly set these photographs apart from those traditions of botanical depiction that show plants in the air or in relation to solid materials.

Blossoming Waters is the result of Alanen’s multi-sensory work in the wilderness of the Pohja-Kisko Lake Upland. Alongside the camera and the sense of vision, she also uses her skin as an instrument. In the exhibition text, she describes how she feels the connection between the internal and external aquatic space. The pressure and movement of the water push against the water within her body and vice versa. In fact, the works in her earlier series *The Skin of Water* are basically self-portraits that highlight the relationship between the photographer and her subject, with a grid-like pattern of light blending the fragments of her body into an organic part of the lake floor.

The works capture the corporeality of being in the water. The viewer encounters the other side of the “the skin of the water”, the mass of the water, the wet density of which creates a light space consisting of two kinds of light in these black-and-white photographs. On the one hand, the light coming from above, through the surface of the water, outlines the shapes of the plants, and on the other hand, the water itself is a source of light. Light seems to materialise everywhere, even in the darkness at the bottom. This experience draws the viewer into the world of grasses and water lilies in the sub-aquatic water space. The velvety feel of the shapes and surfaces of the plants that evokes the senses is also due to the impression of light being everywhere and coming from everywhere.

Alanen's background as an architect makes me think about the more general implications of working in the water as it concerns our relation to space. Indeed, architectural theorist and architect Christian Norberg-Schulz sees the boundary between the interior and exterior of the dwelling as unifying rather than separating in nature: at the boundary, the inner and the outer come together. Another function of the boundary is that of the building taking shape against its surroundings. A building that relates organically to its surrounding landscape interprets and reveals the nature of its surroundings as a concrete, meaningful place rather than an abstract space. Similarly, in relation to the mass of water, human skin is reminiscent of the walls of a building, merged with the water space, which in turn merges with human skin. In this way, working underwater adds concrete substance to spatial interaction and the process of localisation in space, whereby (abstract) space is transformed into a (lived) place.

The exhibition also discusses the boundary between being on the water and being in the water, which takes on a metaphorical meaning as the boundary between the conscious and the unconscious. In his *Water and Dreams (L'eau et les rêves, 1942)*, philosopher Gaston Bachelard describes this boundary as the difference and exchange between formal imagination and material imagination. Formal imagination emphasises surfaces and articulated forms, while material imagination works with elements of nature, their dynamics and amalgamation. Rather than images focusing on the infinity of the ocean or the surface of the water, for Bachelard, water is poetic reality itself. In the small ordinary waters, the human being encounters the "familiar mysteries" of life, which the element of water holds in its uninterrupted changeability. We are reminded of these early experiences of personal life, as well as the dimensions of death, birth, and sleep, in a multi-sensory experience. Alanen creates this paradoxical alienated familiarity – the presence of non-articulable being – by working with water and light, water space and aquatic plants.

Two different directions of life emerge from her works. Flooded with a silver light, the triptych *Direction 1–3 (The Ascent of a Water Lily Leaf)* represents the process of ascension; and as if arranged into a grotesque pattern, *Water Lilies Descending to the Bottom* portrays descent. Together these works form a cycle of growth and death, birth and dissolution, desire and resignation, fertility and decay. The twisting motion of the stalks pulling down the seed cases in *Water Lilies Descending to the Bottom*, appears purposeful according to Alanen: "Instead of the brittleness of plants that dry up in the air, aquatic plants teach us to see the beauty of rotting." Imperfection is more meaningful than formal (apparent) perfection. While in the psychophysical

existence of a human being passing through illness or loss – darkness (which contains the seed of light) – is a transformation that precludes the return to an earlier life, the image of a sinking plant raises the question of the significance of transformation in the life of a plant. Is the apparently cyclical time of a plant ultimately a temporality in which return does not mean recurrence but a new beginning? We cannot answer this question for the plant, although changes in nature affect the quality of life for an individual plant. Through the life cycle of plants and the glow of water, then, the exhibition not only poses questions about human life, but also expresses concern about the preservation of natural processes and the purity of water.

Blossoming Waters is part of Alanen's long-running *Sense of Water* project, which alongside exhibitions also comprises pedagogical work with groups of children – for example, at the art workshop, *Plankton*, on Harakka Island, Helsinki in summer 2019 and 2020. The workshop highlights the impact of changes in water and plankton on the survival of life on our planet. In this way, the *Sense of Water* project, which begins in the upland lakes and extends to the exhibitions and experiences of the artworks in people's minds, is also a place of art pedagogical interaction, which promotes our understanding of aquatic ecology and the importance of biodiversity.

In fact, one of the places where the exhibition comes into its own is between art and science. Alanen's attitude to natural science reminds me of philosopher Edmund Husserl's criticism of Western science. According to Husserl, science based on quantitative data has lost its vital connection to the meaning of the phenomena it studies. Instead of looking from the perspective of abstract theory, science should return to the level of phenomena, the living world and experience. Correspondingly, the portraits of aquatic plants serve as a possible forgotten foundation for science, knowledge created through lived experience.

The abnormality of the water space in relation to our everyday experience removes the viewer from the noisy and indifferent relationship to their environment. The works create a path towards a different attitude, attuned to both the environment and oneself, including the desire to leave nature alone. Moreover, the unusual, weightless and peaceful underwater views become a metaphor for an existence in which we have already come to see our oneness with deep, drowning waters.

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