



Notes on the Subject of Childhood in Contemporary Art

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ABSTRACT

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In the written part of the thesis I discuss and analyse my research material on the subject of childhood, specifically through its psychological context, its history as a motif in art, and its relevance to contemporary art. I examine the works of the following artists: Deborah Hamon, Katja Tukiainen and Lauren DiCioccio. Through my research on how the topic has been approached in the art field I answer the questions of how and to what extent this specific subject can be used by artists to communicate their ideas of childhood, and how the symbolism of children and childhood has developed in art history.

This written part also includes a report of my installation work 'AINU' for the artistic part of the thesis is. It presents my take on the topic of childhood in the contemporary art context, as I explore the theory of transitional or 'comfort' objects in the form of an installation consisting of a collage of stickers and paintings.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Childhood is a vast and extensive concept that has therefore inevitably been a prominent subject in contemporary art. The symbolism associated with the word is similarly abundant: words like innocence, purity, playfulness and simplicity are commonly linked to the idea of childhood. Many artists have utilised references to childhood to convey varying complex ideas in their works, ranging from nostalgia to concerns of adulthood.

In the written part of the thesis I discuss and analyse my research material on the subject of childhood, specifically through its psychological context, its history as a motif in art, and its relevance to contemporary art. In order to do so, I explore how the ways in which children and childhood have been portrayed in art have developed over time, as perceptions and approaches towards the concept of childhood have changed. I research the psychological theory behind childhood development, and specifically the theory of transitional objects. I examine the works of the following artists: Deborah Hamon, Katja Tukiainen and Lauren DiCioccio. Each artist and their bodies of work outlines a different perspective and approach to the notion of childhood. Hamon's works portray the confusing and complex aspects of the lives of young girls, and those of Tukiainen use dominantly pink and childlike imagery to discuss issues such as feminism. The series by DiCioccio that I examine is about comfort objects, which is the topic of my own thesis artwork.

Through my research on how the topic has been approached in the art field I answer the questions of how and to what extent this specific subject can be used by artists to communicate their ideas of childhood, and how the symbolism of children and childhood has developed in art history.

The title of my work for the artistic part of the thesis is 'AINU'. The report on this process will present my take on the topic of childhood in the contemporary art context, as I explore the theory of transitional or 'comfort' objects in the form of an installation consisting of a collage of stickers, and paintings.

2 CHILDHOOD AND ITS PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Today, children are viewed as symbols of concepts such as innocence, curiosity and playfulness. Childhood is a time for learning and the shaping of one's identity.

The perception that children were 'incomplete' or 'miniature' adults only began to change in 1600s. Schools became more common as middle class families began to want their sons to receive an education. Prior to this, mainly all children worked for their families on farms during the pre-industrial period. In medieval times, learning occurred through social experience and the work the children were put to do. New ideas about childhood were encouraged by the philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), who introduced the tabula rasa or 'blank slate' theory in 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding', which claims that children are born with their mind being an empty slate, and therefore need to learn and process information in the form of experiences to gain any knowledge (Locke 1690).

Another notable occurrence from the Middle Ages is that unlike today, there was no sense of need for censorship or avoiding what would today be considered mature topics of discussion around children, such as sexual affairs or acts of violence. This is an indication of the way the light in which children are seen has changed over time, as today the societal norm is the opposite. "Adult topics" and secrets are hidden from children to maintain innocence and to avoid exposure to information that may be distressing or harmful to their development at their current age.

It is also interesting to note that in the modern day, children seem too be much more controlled in their free time in the sense that parents tend to instill more rules and are more concerned for their safety. This could be attributed to numerous factors such as the fact that the average age of parents is higher which means they are more educated and therefore careful. The smaller average number of children per family is another possible factor.

Children's daily lives today seem to be very structured and they are heavily supervised. The changes over time about how childhood has been perceived however, has not been a simple process towards what could be considered liberation. School from a specific age onwards is mandatory and many parents organize for their children to attend activities in the hopes of bettering their futures (Miller 2018).

On the other hand the phrase, "let children be children" is commonly used to highlight the importance of play and to not project premature responsibilities onto children. "Coming of age", a term commonly used in popular culture refers to a person transitioning from being a child to an adult that takes place during the teenage years (the specific point in time is often determined by one's society). It is often related to the idea of losing innocence, and becoming aware of the world and its negative aspects. This suggests that the modern ideology regarding the concept of childhood is strongly based on the belief that the state of being a child should be focused on development of identity and preparation for adulthood, without being responsible to the same extent as an adult.

Primary school in Finland is internationally recognized for its lenient and warm approach to educating children. In an article about the subject, scholar William Doyle stated, "Finland's historic achievements in delivering educational excellence and equity to its children are the result of a national love of childhood..." (Doyle 2016). Although this is not the norm in most countries when it comes to education, it is a good example of the extent to which children are valued in today's society.

2.1 Developmental psychology

Although developmental psychology refers to the study of the changes that occur during a person's lifetime, it was originally focused on the development that occurs during one's childhood, which is the time period that shapes

a person the most. In the study of development, childhood is categorized into three stages: early, middle and adolescence.

A common point of discussion about early childhood development is nature versus nurture: determining how and to what extent one's development is shaped by their genetics and their environment. The nurture a child receives consists the ways in which the child is raised and cared for in their surroundings, which have a significant effect on essentially, who the child becomes.

2.1.1 Transitional objects

The term, 'transitional object' was introduced by Donald Winnicott (1896-1971) in the year 1951 to describe the physical objects to which young children form strong attachments that last for a long time. The word 'transitional' is used because often the object is used to transition from constantly being with the mother to being independent. Until a certain age, young children view themselves and their mother as one whole unit (Winnicott 1960, 44).

More commonly referred to as a comfort object, they usually come in the form of blankets, stuffed animals or other kinds of toys. Winnicott observed that young children between the ages of four months to a year had a tendency to grow attached to a specific object, which is then often present when the mother is nurturing them. As a result, the child associates the object with their mother, and it becomes a source of comfort during the moments when the mother is not present. At this point in development, the child is unable to understand that the mother will be returning soon, which causes a state of distress that is alleviated by the presence of the object.

Winnicott's texts in the early 1950's resulted in a change in approaches towards children's bonds with objects. Prior to this, the state of being attached to an inanimate object was viewed as an indicator of inadequate growth or even a type of fetish (Wulff 1946). Winnicott credits his transitional object theory as being developed from that of Wulff.

Studies have been carried out to research the effect of the presence of an attachment object on children during a time of moderate distress (Passman and Weisberg 1975). The results were that children who had their attachment object (blanket) present in the room with them explored and played without exhibiting signs of distress for the same recorded time period as children who had their mothers present. The third experimental group consisted of children who were not attached to the blankets present in the room, and they were perceived to experience negative arousal in less time than the other two groups. These results support the hypothesis that the presence of a transitional object has a stress reducing effect whilst also encouraging exploration in a moderately stress-inducing situation or environment.

A famous representation of comfort objects in popular culture is the security blanket of Linus, one of the main characters from the Peanuts comics by Charles M. Schulz. Its first appearance in the comics occurred in 1954, shortly after Winnicott's paper was published. Linus is often depicted carrying the blanket with him, which he calls his 'security and happiness blanket', while facing disapproval towards the habit from other the other characters. He is severely attached to it and is even distressed by the thought of the blanket being washed. This storyline in the comic quite accurately reflects the reality of the bond between a young child and their comfort object.



FIGURE 1. Robert Pope, Lose the Blanket, Linus! (Peanuts), 2015

Many adults tend to keep their comfort objects from their childhood, which shows how strong the connections that are formed at a young age can be. These objects also often carry vivid memories which make them so hard to get rid of. Especially, soft toys with their eyes, facial expressions and cuddliness tend to feel like they are living instead of inanimate. For many, the objects still have the same calming and anxiety-reducing effect in adulthood.

3 A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHILDREN IN ART

Until the end of the 18th century in Europe, portrait paintings of children seemed to display them as small men and women. Especially during the Middle Ages, child portraits were often commissioned by churches, and the dominant portrayal of them in art was Jesus. However, during the Renaissance as non-religious art became more widespread and families could obtain portraits of their children, facial features that were more child-like were preferred. The arrival of the Enlightenment movement - or the “age of reason” - which placed emphasis on ideas of rationalism and sensory experiences as a source of knowledge, caused more realistic child portraiture to become common, which presented the child in their quotidian state. The previously established artistic style, Rococo, was replaced by Neoclassicism, characterized by clarity and logic.



FIGURE 2. Jacopo Bellini, Madonna and Child, Tempera, 15th century

As stated by Mary Merrifield, an art historian, ‘It is not until we come to the pictures of Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) that we really find representations of children, and, in fact, it is not always the case in his’ (1856, 313). Reynolds, a

distinguished European portrait artist in the 18th century inarguably has examples of both true depictions of children and ones that are less so in his body of paintings.



FIGURE 3. Joshua Reynolds, Boy Holding a Bunch of Grapes, Oil on canvas, c.1770
77.7cm x 64.5cm



FIGURE 4. Joshua Reynolds, The Age of Innocence, Oil on canvas, c.1770
76.6cm x 63.8cm

Reynolds' 'Boy Holding a Bunch of Grapes' is an example of child portraiture where the subject resembles an awkward mixture of an adult and a child. 'The

'Age of Innocence', however, with its highly relevant title is the opposite: it portrays a young girl embodying the curiosity, purity and innocence that had become the new, re-evaluated significance of childhood at the time. Until then, the belief that humans are born as sinners had caused the concept of childhood to be seen as more negative and problematic. The status of children began to be seen in a much more positive light: they were seen as those that had not yet been corrupted by society and to represent values such as creativity, freedom and innocence.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712-1778) publication of 'Emile, or on Education', a treatise that presented the idea that children should be entitled to grow by naturally and autonomously experiencing life (1762), contributed greatly to the developments in how childhood was perceived. Jean Baptiste-Simeon Chardin (1699-1719) led the way for artists to view young children, who were the subjects of their paintings, as individual beings. The era of Enlightenment saw an ascent in the bourgeois, which led to the rise in demand for family portraits that portrayed the bond between the children and their parents. Chardin's 'Saying Grace' does exactly this: the painting depicts a mother and two young girls preparing to have lunch, in what seems to be a very warm and caring atmosphere.



FIGURE 5. Jean Baptiste-Simeon Chardin, Saying Grace, Oil on canvas, 1744

49.5 cm x 38.4 cm

The 19th century brought around what is often referred to as the 'Cult of Childhood': children were being celebrated through literature and visual art, and childhood was no longer considered a period of life to quickly rush through to reach adulthood. In addition to their well-known landscape works, impressionist artists such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) and Claude Monet (1840-1926) often painted portraits of children in their style. 'A Girl with a Watering Can' by Renoir captures the purity and charm of a young girl posing in a garden. The colours and painting style of the work effectively demonstrates the appreciation for the subject and the captured moment.



FIGURE 6. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, A Girl with a Watering Can, Oil on canvas, 1876
100 cm x 73 cm

Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) were among the avant-garde artists in the 20th century that became engrossed with the drawing style of actual children's artworks. This interest inspired a works such as Picasso's 'The Painter and the Child'. Much like the work of a child, the painting appears to have been made rapidly with thick brush strokes that contributed to a flat yet free and playful outcome.



FIGURE 7. Pablo Picasso, *Le Peintre et l'Enfant*, 1969

As societal values and art styles have changed across time, it is only understandable that there have been developments in the ways in which children are portrayed in art. What is clear is that childhood has slowly become a topic to be celebrated and to be inspired by when it comes to art.

4 DEBORAH HAMON – Truly Girls

Deborah Hamon's (b. 1968) series of paintings, 'Truly Girls' (2011) as well as her photography series 'Girls: Fact and Fiction' (2009) where she has photoshopped the girls from her paintings into new surroundings are both about the ways in which girls build their identities. She is 'fascinated by the way girls act and consciously present themselves as they try to figure out who they are and who they ultimately become' (Hamon 2011). As difficult as growing up can be for anyone regardless of gender, it is irrefutable that young girls have to face certain societal pressures that can heavily impact the process of development.

Here, both the physical and thematic subject of each artwork is an adolescent girl. As experiencing social relationships is a key part in anyone's development, the works automatically form a connection between the viewer and the girl(s) in the paintings, in addition to the interpretable relationships between the different girls within each painting.



FIGURE 8. Deborah Hamon, Round Up, Acrylic on canvas, 2010, 102 cm x 127 cm



FIGURE 9. Deborah Hamon, High Achiever
Acrylic on canvas, 2007
168 x 127cm



FIGURE 10. Deborah Hamon, Haven, Acrylic on canvas, 2008
102 x 86cm



FIGURE 11. Deborah Hamon, American Portrait (Hope), Acrylic on canvas, 2011
127 x 102cm

In my opinion, the works capture the concept of being a young girl incredibly well. From the bright, clean colours to the postures and positions of the subjects, everything about the paintings embodies the being of a slightly awkward, curious and conscious developing child. I specifically identify with two of the works, them being 'Haven' and 'American Portrait (Hope)'. In 'Haven', I was immediately able to see my best friend who I met in kindergarten and myself lying around during a sleepover and catching up. In the second, the imperfectly fitting and uncomfortable-looking school uniform is almost identical to the one I had to wear between the ages of 8 and 14, the memory of which instantly made me remember the feeling of being a tween or teenage girl and facing the many obstacles of growing older. It is important to note, however, that the interpretation and emotional reaction will most definitely depend on the experiences of the viewer.

5 KATJA TUKIAINEN – Play the field GIRL

The works of Katja Tukianen (b. 1969), a Finnish visual artist are very recognizable for their dominantly pink colour schemes and the doll-like characters. The cartoon-like figures and other child related imagery such as toys, cute animals and candy often juxtapose with the underlying themes such as politics, propaganda and feminism. In addition to paintings, Tukianen has made works in the form of installations, videos, drawings and action art.

Tukianen's works served as inspiration for my works in terms of the painting technique, bright and clean colours and the concept that on the surface level, the artwork appears to be light and innocent but there is a much deeper and complex context. She also often works at a large scale which is what I wanted to do with my own project.



FIGURE 12. Katja Tukianen, Your Mother was a GIRL, oil and spray paint on linen, 2017-2018, 200 cm x 200 cm

The above painting, 'Your Mother was a GIRL' is a prime example of Tukiainen's works with 'cute' and bright pink imagery of girls that begin to appear more powerful and bold as the viewer spends more time looking at them. The spray-painted words, 'Your Mother was a GIRL' further emphasize the boldness of the piece and its feminist statement, with a sense of the rebelliousness associated with spray-painting.

Tukiainen's works exhibit a playful approach to stereotypes such as that pink is a colour for girls and that girls are expected to be soft-spoken and look pretty and presentable. Although at this day and age these negative societal views are less prevalent than before, they are still an issue and art is a great way to approach the subject with methods that have a good potential to change people's views.

6 LAUREN DICIOCCIO – Comfort Objects

Directly relating to the theory of transitional objects, Lauren DiCioccio explores the topic in her straightforwardly titled installation, “Comfort Objects” (2017) through her sculptures, each unique in shape and colour. The foundation of each sculpture is a found object or a simple hand-built wooden structure, to which materials such as felt, linen, thread and stuffing have been added to create an extraordinary figure. The installation transforms the surrounding environment, “creating a space where we can enter a suspended reality for comfort, connection, questioning and reflection” (Minnesota Street Project 2016).



FIGURE 13. Lauren Dicioccio, Comfort Objects, installation with Loveseat, 2017

The material, colours and organic shapes of the sculptures all contribute to the resemblance of soft toys and the concept of childhood. Each sculpture made up of fabric has been carefully sewn by the artist, further guaranteeing their one-of-a-kind status, like that of a teddy bear sewn by a grandmother for their grandchild. The pure and bright colours are as if picked according to the colours in a child’s box of crayons.

Although upon glance, the sculptures seem innocent and perhaps like simply decorative, abstract structures, they soon begin to resemble malformed or

broken soft toys that perhaps were supposed to look different. The confusing shapes still appear to have immense amounts of character, and the viewer is left to interpret and recognize an arm or a leg to their best ability. The mood of the artwork installation soon begins to develop from the purity and cheerfulness of childhood to something possibly ominous. This is accentuated by the completely black sculptures which lack the same kind of openness and charm as the others, placed towards the back of the room. In addition to the hand-sewn sculptures, the series also includes ones made of cast bronze, which stray away from the common conception of a comfort object that tends to be soft and light. The fabric sculptures with wood sticking out also have a disturbing effect as they appear as if the “skeleton” or support that is meant to be inside a living thing is extended to the outside.

With this series, Dicioccio approaches the topic of comfort objects rather directly, yet simultaneously with a very abstract outcome. The works interact with the viewers and the space as the viewer projects their own interpretations of the sculptures' characters and personifies them. The organic shapes make the structures seem very much alive and as if they might possibly move when the viewer looks away.

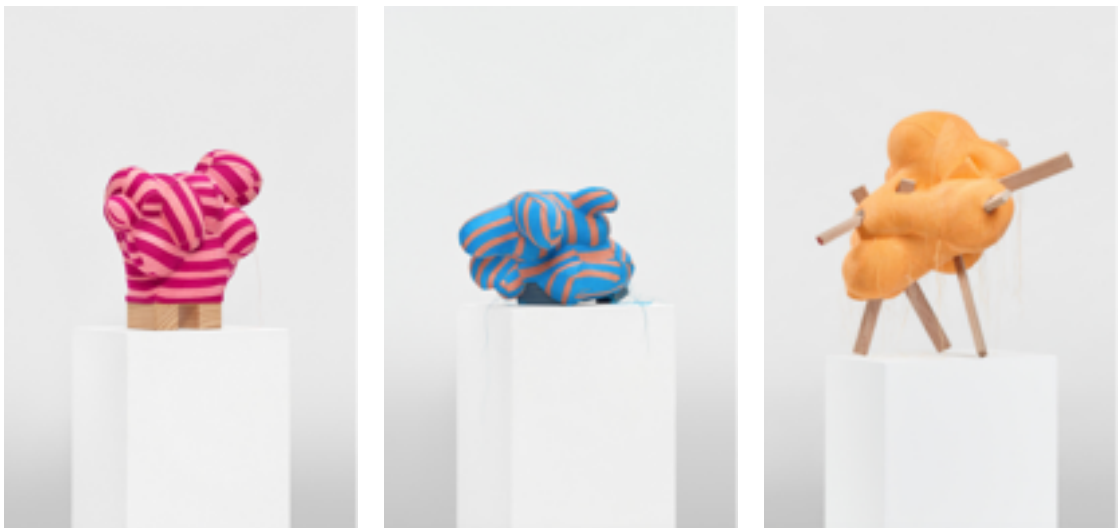


FIGURE 14. Lauren Dicioccio, Fisticuffs, Wood, stuffing, felt, hand-dyed linen, 2018

FIGURE 15. Lauren Dicioccio, All Thumbs, Wood, stuffing, felt, hand-dyed linen, 2018

FIGURE 16. Lauren Dicioccio, Creamcyclical, Found wood, stuffing, felt, hand-dyed linen, 2016

7 ABOUT MY ARTISTIC PROJECT, 'AINU'

I gave the title "AINU" to the artistic part of my thesis, which is an installation that consists of a sticker collage on foamcore, and x acrylic paintings on MDF-board. "Ainu" refers to the name of a soft toy bunny sold in Finland that is commonly given to newborns, and therefore is very well-known and recognizable. It is depicted in the main piece of my installation, which is the collage.

I have always been interested in psychology in general, and while studying the subject in high school I learned more about developmental psychology specifically. I am fascinated by the process of how the identity of a person begins to form from a young age, and the factors that impact it.

It is a common and natural habit for humans to seek comfort, especially in times of stress. The need for comfort objects is often not limited to early childhood, and many prefer to keep their beloved teddy bears or blankets even as adults. During adulthood, we sometimes come to find other things that provide a similar kind of comfort. These can be a pet, a specific food that maybe brings back memories from your childhood or perhaps an item of clothing that once belonged to someone important to you.

I have always had a habit of storing and surrounding myself with objects that in a way, provide me with comfort, and make the space around me feel cosy and familiar. Since childhood, I have collected stickers and regularly put them on almost everything I own. This is the reason why I turned them into a collage in the form of a soft toy bunny that I had as a child in which still sits on the shelf of my storage closet. The collage measures 175cm in height, which is exactly how tall I am myself. The whole installation is, in a way, a self-portrait which was my idea behind determining the exact size of the collage. Ever since I can remember, I've had a box where I keep all my stickers that I have accumulated throughout my life. I still enjoy putting them on the objects I own to in a way, mark territory and to decorate my belongings in a way that provides me with joy. I thought it would be an interesting technique to use in my series, and it fits

the topic so incredibly well.

I originally anticipated that the process of creating the collage would be relatively easy and rapid but the process unexpectedly took quite a bit of time. In order to end up with a visually appealing outcome, the placement of each sticker as well as the shade had to be put into consideration.

After completing the collage, I began working on the two 80 cm x 60 cm acrylic paintings. Right from the starting point, I knew that I wanted to include portrait paintings in my series, whilst also not having them be the main focus of each artwork. I used a reference photograph of myself when I was a young child for the first painting, and for the second, I took a video of myself changing poses and chose one from it to refer to as I painted. To continue the topic of comfort objects in the paintings, I wrote a list of items that have made me happy at some point in my life, and began choosing which ones I might include in the paintings. In addition to a balloon, carpets, blankets, pillows, various items of clothing and accessories as well as my cat, I also decided to include fruit and two types of beverages.

The term, “comfort food”, used to describe dishes that people like eat when they want to feel better, is something I played around with during this project. Comfort food is also often associated with childhood because often the home-cooked foods we enjoyed as children continue to have the same consoling effect later on in life, just like our beloved, inedible objects.

Since I wanted to create a series of works not only simply about childhood, I spent a lot of time considering my current identity and how my need for comfort has been shaped throughout my life. Since the process of a developing identity or a person in general is so complex and continuous, I placed the objects into each painting with careful consideration. For example, in the painting (figure x) depicting me as a child, I am holding an Oatly chocolate milk which probably did not even exist in the year the reference photo was taken. Similarly, in the second big painting there is an iced tea bottle that I used to drink in the sauna when I was a few years old.

Due to the fact that our actual exhibition was unfortunately cancelled due to the Coronavirus pandemic, I was only able to install my works in the sense that I created a mock installation image on Photoshop by editing images of my works onto a photo I had taken of my designated wall space at the Himmelblau gallery. While doing this, I realised that my body of works would have looked better with a bigger quantity of small paintings surrounding the three major works, so I am not completely satisfied with the outcome. In the physical exhibition setting I might have also painted the wall a colour other than white to tie the works together more effectively, and to add a more playful twist to the layout.

Despite working with the same topic, I think that the execution and approach is very different between my series and Lauren Dicioccio's "Comfort Objects". My project serves as more of a visualisation, mapping or documentation of my personal experience with comfort objects, whereas Dicioccio's works consist of made up structures that do not resemble existing things.



FIGURE 17. Hilma Nurmi, installation plan of AINU, 2020



FIGURE 18. Hilma Nurmi, AINU, 2020



FIGURE 19. Hilma Nurmi, detail of AINU, 2020

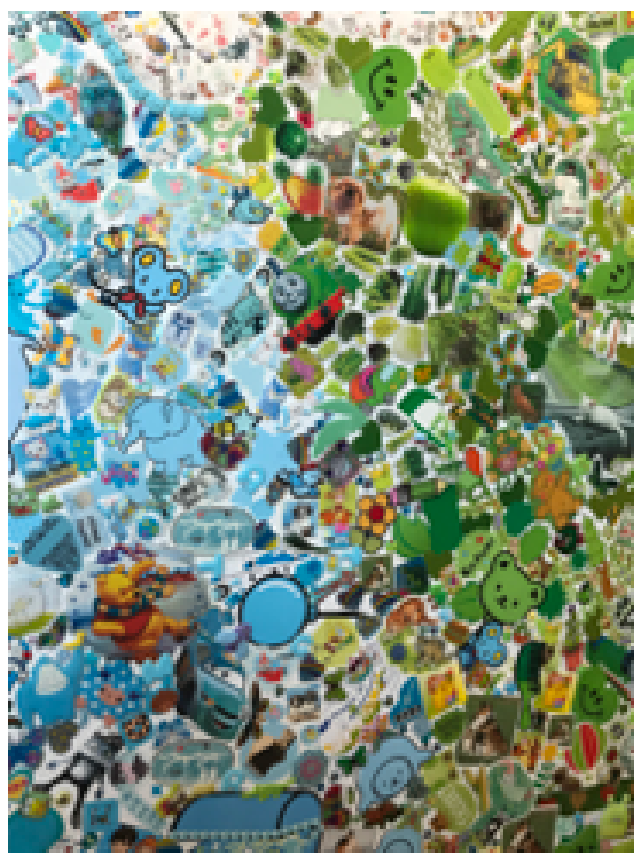


FIGURE 20. Hilma Nurmi, detail of AINU, 2020



FIGURE 21. Hilma Nurmi, detail of AINU, 2020



FIGURE 22. Hilma Nurmi, detail of AINU, 2020



FIGURE 23. Hilma Nurmi, detail of AINU, 2020



FIGURE 24. Hilma Nurmi, detail of AINU, 2020



FIGURE 25. Hilma Nurmi, detail of AINU, 2020



FIGURE 26. Hilma Nurmi, detail of AINU, 2020



FIGURE 27. Hilma Nurmi, detail of AINU, 2020

8 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, my research has shown that the concept of childhood as a subject and in the form of imagery is an effective approach in contemporary art, which evokes emotions that are important for the richness of life. The symbolism behind children has the potential to evoke a wide range of emotions and feelings in the viewer, such as curiosity, cheerfulness, nostalgia or sadness. Everybody has been a child and it is important in our development as human beings to reflect on our childhood. The emotional environment we have as a child has a huge impact on our behaviour as full-grown adults. Safe childhoods where children are allowed to be children often lead to well-balanced adults.

The subject of childhood consists of an immensely large range of connotations and implications, hence why there are so many ways to approach it in visual art. Not only is it a topic to make interesting works about, but it can be used as a tool to explore other, possibly unrelated and more mature concepts. Much like metaphors in literature, symbols or visual metaphors can be used in art to create layers to an artwork. Since children and childhood are seen as cheerful and generally positive, and represent youth, they are sometimes used in artworks to briefly mask and to communicate a deeper issue. To a large extent, this concept can be seen in the works of all three artists discussed in this thesis.

Hamon's paintings, despite portraying images of young girls, and using clean and bright colours to depict the girls in ordinary environments, delve into the difficulties of a young girl's life, which as a topic deviates from the common positive symbol that we have of childhood. Tukiainen boldly uses the colour pink, often associated with young girls and imagery of doll-like figures to exhibit ideas of the profound and intense topic that is feminism. Finally, Dicioccio, in titling her show "Comfort Objects", refers to the term relating to the development of toddlers with her series of ambiguous yet fascinating sculptures. There are endless topics and ways in which to discuss them through the idea of childhood. Childhood-related imagery with appealing bright colours in an art-

work attracts the attention of the viewer and instills in them a childlike curiosity to interpret and find out more.

The working process of my own artwork about childhood was a very rewarding experience. So far it is the largest series I have created in terms of scale as well as the quantity of works, which will make it a lot easier to start my next big art project. I learned that I greatly enjoy working with large surfaces as they are so much less limiting. I will also look for other materials to create collages with, as the process was very engaging because it required a significant amount of consideration, planning and time.

The psychological theory that I researched as a part of my thesis was incredibly interesting and in the future I would like to make more works about different psychological topics not necessarily limited to childhood. I am quite content with my series and it has been encouraging to see the outcome that came around as a result of the initial idea.

I would also definitely like to continue my 'AINU' series by making additional smaller paintings and possibly even some photography works, as there are so many more objects and ideas to present. Another direction that I could also take with the theme is to gather stories about other people's important objects and document them in some way to make another series of works about the concept of comfort objects.

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