

Exhibition REVIEW
BEAR – dweller of the wilderness

Vancouver artist, Kaija Rautiainen
Reviewed by Maggie Tchir, Nelson, BC, July 2018

In her new exhibition, **BEAR – dweller of the wilderness**, Finnish-born tapestry artist, Kaija Rautiainen, is crossing boundaries into mix media. The Vancouver artist has always used the ancient medium of weaving to express her ideas. Now, however, she is traveling beyond the confines of the traditional hands-on warp and weft of textile. She brings a deeper sense of context to her work, as she engages a new unique set of tools and skills. Working with both cutting-edge computer programs and returning to painting, her new work celebrates the synthesis of mediums with her passion for the natural world.

Her Finnish background constantly pulls at her in myriad ways. From the oral traditions of myths of the old northern European forests which are embedded in her psyche, to traditional techniques of national Finnish crafts, to state of the art computer technologies, Rautiainen, the artist, responds to her natural surroundings. Speaking about her Finnish roots, she explains, *“I have Finnish genes! There are lots of forests and animals in Finland, and nature is very important to people.... Nature has been important to me since my childhood. Growing up in rural Finland on a farm, surrounded by forests and animals, my family’s everyday life created a connection to the natural world and became a sounding board for my art.”* She continues, *“When I was young, women, including my mother, were weaving in every household in the countryside, so I grew up knowing textile arts”*.

She went on to study traditional textiles and art history at the University of Helsinki. Before moving to Canada in 1985 Rautiainen and her husband also lived in Brazil for three years, where painting studies and the bright colour of Brazil informed her work.

Rautiainen’s story is one of tradition being inspired with imagination and innovation. Her studio practices have evolved through a desire to help awaken people to the beauty and harmony existing in our current disconnected world. It may be surprising to find that Canada is now a fully urbanized culture with the majority of Canadians (82%) living in cities. She encourages us to look beyond the rushing human pavement of our cityscapes. She remains interested in details of these urban environments which surround her Vancouver home, but at the same time, she is deeply rooted in the wild BC west coast.

Botanist and author, Wade Davis, inspires Rautiainen, *“Having lived in Brazil I am always interested in the Amazon rainforest and her tribes and culture.”* Davis inspires many of us, but for the Vancouver artist, his work as a botanist and a ‘conservation photographer’ and an author, brings light, not only to the mysteries of sacred plants and the world’s traditional cultures, but his investigations have also nurtured Rautiainen. She believes these stories have much to teach us about honouring different ways of thinking and relating. Daily we collectively stand staring at an uncertain future, but while standing in front of her beautiful meticulously woven works the artist helps us, the audience, to take a step towards a future which respects all life. In her well-loved representations of trees, plants, forests, urban street scenes and fishing nets, floats and ropes, she now honours us, with her wild bears. When Kaija weaves her layered images of ocean estuary, rainforest, mountain, and bears, there is mystery present in her portraits of these animals. She has

captured their intelligence in their eyes, and in their stance. These are layered stories of animal lives; you feel you are there in those places, unexpected, arrived. There is an emotional response that runs deep, also unexpected. Her work calls us forth, to remind us of our relationship with the natural world.

Two artists who have deeply inspired Rautiainen's work are the Finnish painter, farmer and environmentalist, Osmo Rauhala, along with the award-winning Finnish textile artist, Dora Jung (1906 – 1980). These two artists reflect and inform Rautiainen's interests in design, technology, and her deep advocacy for nature.

Osmo Rauhala, is very interested in science and the natural world. In his American exhibition, *MIRROR SELF*, Rauhala's paintings reflect how we might share consciousness beyond the human species. With scientific and intellectual pre-occupations, he questions how humans view ourselves as a species, and whether we are a distinct entity or part of a spectrum of existence. In **BEAR – dweller of the wilderness**, Kaija Rautiainen too, reflects on these questions of shared consciousness with our wild west coast bears and seeks an emotional connection.

In old Northern European stories and songs, the bear is experienced in her native Finland as the most sacred, whose real name was never uttered out loud. The bear was seen as the embodiment of the forefathers, and for this reason was called by many beloved names such as 'browed one' (Otso), or 'old and powerful' (Kontio) or 'mead-paw', or 'the golden apple of the forest', or 'dweller of the land'. Finnish mythology survived within an oral tradition of folklore poem-singing well into the 19th century. The artist remains close to these influences. Rautiainen's use of materials and her attention to texture and colour and her 'emotional touch' transcend category and exemplify, simply, beauty and a poetic feeling of grace of these large and beautiful wild animals. Her tapestries are visual poem-songs, reminding us not only of bears and their place in our world, but as Rautiainen describes, "*We have taken on their future, which now depends on us, and I hope my woven bear images awakens positive thoughts and a willingness to protect these magnificent dwellers of the wilderness. I seek harmony in my works and attempt to awaken us to respect and protect the fragile ecosystem.*"

This old Finnish oral poem-song from *Rune 61, The Kalevala*, (translated by John Martin Crawford, 1888) mirrors the artist's own passion for the wild bear who not only dwells in the estuaries of the Kluane and other inlets of BC's coast, but also dwells in the inner reaches of Kaija Rautiainen's own psyche and soul.

"Otso, thou O Forest-apple,
Bear of honey-paws and fur-ropes,....
Mighty Otso, much beloved,
Honey-eater of the mountains,
Settle on the rocks in slumber,
On the turf and in thy caverns;
Let the aspen wave above thee,
Let the merry birch-tree rustle
O'er thy head for thy protection.
Rest in peace, thou much-loved Otso.

Dora Jung, another strong influence from Kaija's school days, is honoured in Finland for her

beautiful tapestries in which she hand-manipulated threads on her Draw loom, in order to get Jacquard-like results. Rautiainen, began to explore weaving tapestries on her loom, inspired with Jung's techniques and using this idea of manipulating floating threads, similar to a Jacquard loom. This is a painstaking process so in the early 2000's, she freed herself from the traditional loom, and purchased a large digital Jacquard loom. This allowed her to design first on the computer with her photographic images. After allocating weave structures to the image, she then transfers these images to the computer-assisted loom to weave the dynamic layered weaves for which she is well-known. Even though the loom is digital and connected to her computer, the artist still has to invest time and energy in hand-warping and hand-weaving her vision. The result is work which is rich in texture and colour. Although these works are from photographic images, due to the weaving process, they are more dream-like in their layered fluidity.

Her current work is woven now only in black and white; with cotton warp threads and thin Korean paper weft threads. Inspired by her earlier interest in painting and use of colour, she is discovering how she can add colour after the weaving process with acrylic paint and soft pastels that are then bound to the fibres with a fixative. In **BEAR – dweller of the wilderness**, Rautiainen now only uses pastels for her colour, producing a softer, more poetic view of her bears. She explains, *“The bear is often considered a symbol of masculinity and power, but I have chosen to represent it through the traditionally feminine fibre arts technique, where the structure and soft pastel colours depict a softer view.”*

In 1856, one hundred and sixty-two years ago, the American poet, Henry David Thoreau wrote in his journal,

“It is in vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. It is the bog in our brains and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us, that inspires that dream.”