

Sabine Kuehnle, *Female Metamorphosis*, 2011

„The tectonic layers of our lives rest so tightly on top of another  
... present and alive.“<sup>1</sup>

Using installations and works on video and paper, artist Sabine Kuehnle (born 1968) questions the process-like, the fundamental, the perception of human conditions, both with regard to the individual and to society. She never asserts anything unequivocally, but always allows room for the viewer's own personal feelings and thoughts. This freedom is in tune with Sabine Kuehnle's general working style. She opens up her senses and collects impressions, thoughts and objects, going on the trail of moods and feelings. Often, things that were originally merely incidental get caught up in the whole, associatively linked with other fragments and then assimilated into her pictures. On numerous occasions, these fragmented elements then become integrated into new compositional relationships, becoming part of new contexts. Her artistic works often directly or indirectly reference literature, traditional contexts within the history of art and the everyday world we live in. The symbolic power of the individual elements plays a major role in this and every single one of her works is permeated by symbolic references.

## Female Metamorphosis

Transformations in general and in particular those undergone by womankind under the pressure of social expectations are closely investigated by Sabine Kuehnle in *Female Metamorphosis*.<sup>2</sup> Inspired by a prolonged stay in Finland in fall 2010, the artist became preoccupied with what it is that bestows a sense of identity on the Finns, their mythology and their closeness to nature. What particularly evoked Kuehnle's interest were the songs about the beautiful Aino in the Finnish epic *Kalevala*. After losing a singing contest, Joukahainen forces his young sister Aino to wed the aged Väinämöinen. Aino avoids this fate imposed by her brother by plunging into the water, where she is transformed into a fish with the aid of the goddess of the sea, Vellamo. Because Aino cannot stay in her old world but cannot bear the new one she chooses for herself a way out, a metamorphosis into a different, unattractive form.<sup>3</sup> In Graeco-Roman mythology metamorphosis into a laurel tree also offers the fleeing nymph Daphne a last escape from the love-crazed god Apollo. In both cases, mighty nature affords these fleeing women the refuge they desire.

In her installation *Female Metamorphosis* the artist takes up motifs from the above-mentioned myths and from everyday life in order to investigate the relationships between social pressure, femininity, the experience of boundaries and self-determination. Almost all the components of this work have undergone a metamorphosis. The plasterboards painted with black gloss paint have had force applied to them from the outside and have fragmented whilst the leaves of the laurel trees separated from the roots so vital to their survival are slowly wilting away. Both changes of form are, in a metaphorical sense, illustrations of the destructive power that outside cultural standards can wield. But that, despite this, resistance can be lurking, inconspicuous, but not completely defenceless, is evident from the *Sisu* packets. A difficult term to translate, the Finnish word „sisu“ can be interpreted as „endurance“ or „fighting spirit in a hopeless situation“. The glossiness of the photograph and the black wall stands for womankind's reflections on itself, embodied by the blonde hair, the material clay as a symbol of Mother Earth and the subject of high-gloss photography. The motif of photography is reflected in the wallpaper from a Finnish girl's room (children's room by Pipsan Saarinen in the *Hvitträsk* residential building near Kirkkonummi, 1901–1903) that has also undergone a metamorphosis. The forcefulness has drained away from these vibrant shades, which now shimmer in the colour of skin, seeming almost to dissolve away into nothingness. And while the colouring is reminiscent of human skin, and thus, simultaneously, of the boundaries of the body, the increasing disintegration of colour,

a nascent shade of white, allows for something completely new to come into being. The element of water as „something self-contained and intact“<sup>4</sup> and as a symbol of life and renewal represents an ideal place of refuge and change. In *Female Metamorphosis* the implementation of this takes the form of the vases, produced by Finnish designer Tapio Wirkkala (1915–1985) and formally reminiscent of flowing water and of the sounds emanating from the two loudspeakers in the vases. This rushing noise comes from the movements directly under the surface of tranquil waters. The entire installation *Female Metamorphosis* has been set up on a europallet suitable for multiple use. In real life, as in this work of art, this is a means of conveyance. During the metaphorical process, a part of what is undergoing transformation dies off. These days, this moment may initially seem like a death, a final point. However, the metamorphosis can also be seen as a turning point, the start of something completely different.

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<sup>1</sup> Bernhard Schlink, *Der Vorleser*, Zürich 1997, p. 206.

<sup>2</sup> *Female Metamorphosis*, 2011, EURO pallet, high-gloss photograph, two loudspeakers, two sawn-off laurel trees, blonde wig hair, plasterboard, empty Sisu packets (liquorice pastels), clay, two vases and black gloss wall paint.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Christiane Schiemann, *Auf der Flucht vor der Welt. Zum Eskapismus in Richard Strauss' „Daphne“*, in: *Opernführer Daphne*, ed. by Oper Frankfurt, Frankfurt 2010, pp. 58–61, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> See note 3, p. 60.