

Human Destinies in the Wasteland

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At the heart of Viljami Heinonen's exhibition *Somewhere in Between* are people and their encounters. His new paintings draw directly on the artist's lived experience. Since 2023, a recurring figure has haunted Heinonen's canvases: a hooded wanderer in a raincoat, often absorbed in silent contemplation of his existence. In the works he also meets others like himself. Who is this yellow-clad wanderer, and whom does he encounter?

Deserted Townscapes

Heinonen's paintings are often set in landscapes emptied of human presence. His early works depicted dystopian wastelands, while his more recent canvases show abandoned dwellings now overgrown with vegetation and reclaimed by animals. The artistic terrain in which he seems most at home is a deserted urban environment—less a specific, identifiable place than a composite of influences.

The artist studied in Kankaanpää, a small town that played a decisive role in shaping his fascination with fading urban landscapes. His 2012 graduate project already reflects how, during his early student years, he was drawn to the city's hushed, stagnant atmosphere. Finding inspiration in the austere small-town anti-idyll, he painted numerous townscapes of Kankaanpää: "I hunted for grey, austere landscapes and façades that evoked a sense of revulsion in me. I did this not with negative motives, but out of a desire to adapt, to learn to appreciate and come to terms with my living environment." ¹

In his youth, Heinonen briefly worked for a house-moving company, where he encountered all kinds of homes. Yet it was the tobacco-stained interiors with tattered wallpaper that left the deepest impression on him—images that would later resurface in his art. His work draws on everything grey, desolate, and abandoned: bleak November landscapes glimpsed from a bus window, or the melancholy tones of Finnish rock music from the 1980s and 1990s. Among his touchstones is Jussi Hakulinen's *Syvä joki* (Deep River, 1998), a song that tells a sorrowful story of fading village streets and an emptying countryside.

Heinonen draws inspiration from films, video games, and books—but not necessarily from their plots. What lingers with him are fleeting images, character portrayals, or the mood of a scene. One example he shares is a film set in Detroit, whose evocative vision of urban desolation has stayed with him. It is hardly surprising that Detroit should resonate with Heinonen, given its reputation as one of the world's most famous deserted cities. Johanna Vehkoo's description of Detroit captures an atmosphere strikingly close to Heinonen's visual world: "Empty office buildings, burned-out houses, smashed windows. [...] Clumps of grass protrude from cracks in the pavement." ²

Heinonen has been playing video games since childhood. Titles such as *Resident Evil* (1996) and *Silent Hill* (1999), with their dark, oppressive worlds filled with monsters, hanging corpses, and bloodthirsty creatures, stood out as especially frightening to him as a boy. Imagery from these games—and similarly nightmarish beings—now reappears in his paintings.

Heinonen has never felt at home in big cities, finding more inspiration in small towns, where he feels a stronger sense of belonging. By his own account, it took him many years before he dared to address personal themes or to use his immediate surroundings in his work. Even then, his paintings never recount real-life events literally; instead, he enriches them with invented subplots.

Liminal Spaces

The title of the exhibition, *Somewhere in Between*, refers both to a place and a mental state. An in-between space can be a wasteland or a site of urban ruins, but it can also describe the liminal state of the raincoat-clad character, navigating the transition from young adulthood to middle age. The protagonist appears unfinished, straddling a space between the old and the new, while the ruined landscapes behind him echo this sense of incompleteness. As Johanna Vehkoo observes, "Wastelands and urban ruins defy definition. They exist in a state of limbo: though no longer used for their original purpose, they have not yet found a new one either." ³

In some works, the raincoat-clad figure appears to be reflecting on whether his life has been well-lived—or whether the story might have unfolded differently. This is especially evident in *Other Side* (2024), which depicts a person literally staring into a mirror. Does the figure feel alienated or lonely? How does he perceive the lives of others?

Sheltered beneath his hood, the raincoat-clad figure is sometimes shown from the front, at other times from the back or in profile. His face is never fully revealed; it remains blurred, as if masked—perhaps to avoid recognition, or to shield himself from view. The character's identity is undefined, but this very ambiguity opens the work to multiple interpretations.

In some paintings, the raincoat recalls a monk's robe, evoking the reclusive life of a hermit. Heinonen himself may have shared that sense of solitude, living in small towns far removed from the bustle of the big smoke. *Paper Tiger* (2024) depicts a raincoat-clad figure staring into the distance, his gaze turned away from the group. Though among his peers, he longs to be elsewhere—an outsider in the midst of others.

The raincoat also functions as a protective layer. Environmental crisis is a central concern for Heinonen, whose work reflects his anxiety over global warming, the destruction of nature, and the precarious state of global politics. The figure in the raincoat thus becomes an observer, quietly contemplating the threats facing the world. In *Trace* (2024), he appears weighed down, as if struggling under the burden of this awareness.

Raw Humanity

As a young man, Heinonen was drawn to Akseli Gallen-Kallela's (1865–1931) portraits of rural folk and Rembrandt's (1606–1669) depictions of beggars, admiring their raw realism. As Soili Sinisalo has observed, Gallen-Kallela sought to reveal the very essence of his subjects in these vernacular portraits, drawing out the distinctive traits of ordinary people—from obstinacy and ferocity to primitiveness and sensitivity.⁴

In many of the paintings featured in this exhibition, gritty, life-worn figures gather to celebrate. The signature austerity of Heinonen's landscapes extends equally to his depiction of people. At his twisted garden parties, events intended to be idyllic are rendered in quite the opposite light. Yet, his colour-drenched, expressive canvases convey the unvarnished reality of human life—people arrive to celebrate exactly as they are, without disguising the hardships they have endured.

Heinonen's dystopian gatherings unfold in the unidyllic environs of a fictional small town. The artist invents characters inspired by real-life experiences, yet transforms them with imaginative twists. Horror romanticism lies at the heart of his narrative strategy, allowing him to construct backstories for his figures while drawing on his fascination with the visual language of horror cinema. For Heinonen, the horror genre becomes a means of articulating the fears, uncertainties, and sorrows of everyday life.

Desolation, barrenness, and abandonment are also reflected in Heinonen's recurring depictions of swimming pools. While private pools are typically associated with the luxurious lifestyle of affluent Americans, Heinonen's are far from symbols of the golden age of modernity—they are clearly abandoned, evoking the de-

cay of a once-beautiful dream. And yet, the figures in his paintings celebrate undaunted upon the ruins, as if rising from the muddy bottom to reach for a new dream.

From Horror to Everyday Dystopia

Heinonen has frequently been described as a painter of dystopias. His early works, in particular, presented stark, violent visions of the future, yet in his more recent paintings he has tempered this intensity, turning instead to the conflicted emotions that define our daily dystopian existence. Even when he depicts scenes of violent intensity, there remains something profoundly human and unexpectedly beautiful within them.

In her article on dystopian literature, *Orwellin Pa-peripaino* (Orwell's *Paperweight*), Sari Kivistö observes: "In a post-catastrophic world, even everyday objects and mass-produced goods become aesthetic objects, charged with symbolic power through their articulation of transience." Kivistö suggests that one reading strategy is to approach dystopian literature through the lens of beauty.⁵ Might we not also apply the same approach to the fine arts?

In *Nothing Behind, Nothing Ahead* (2024), a hooded figure wades through "deep waters," evoking the challenges of human life—moments that leave us feeling stymied, as if forward movement were impossible. Heinonen frequently treads a fine line between beauty and brokenness. At first glance, a painting may present rippling water and a foreground awash with flowers; on closer inspection, however, darkness emerges—the blossoms revealed as oozing blood, the figure's face reduced to a black void.

The Waters Did Not Part (2024) and *Crimson* (2024) evoke the serene atmosphere of a balmy summer's day, yet the artist has revealed that the scenes are set on the shores of Lake Karachay in Russia—dubbed the most polluted place on Earth. Once used as a dumping site for radioactive waste, even a single hour on its shores can deliver a lethal dose of radiation. Here, humans have transformed what might seem an idyllic holiday destination into a landscape from a horror story, with the contaminated lake standing as a chilling testament to the destruction wrought on nature by human hands.

Some of Heinonen's paintings reflect on pollution, the destruction of nature, and the despair that comes with awareness of environmental calamity. *Into the Quiet* (2024) depicts a figure shielded not only by a raincoat but also by long rubber gloves, suggesting an attempt to clean contaminated terrain. In *Incubation* (2024), the magnificent hues of sunset unfold across the canvas, yet amidst this beauty a lone figure reaches out to touch the last surviving body of clean water on Earth.

Fragmented Lives

In Heinonen's interiors, monkeys, birds, and vegetation creep along the walls, as human dwellings are gradually claimed by plants and animals. The rooms evoke a world in transition—as if something alien were intruding upon the familiar sanctuary of home.

In *Laid Among Thorns and Fig* (2025) and *On My Back* (2024), conflicted emotions and disappointments come to the fore, with the central figure seeming crushed under the gaze of others. Heinonen's

painted narratives vividly convey feelings of alienation, indifference, and failure.

Heinonen acknowledges that he bears the burden of his generation—a fragmented existence that pulls our attention in countless directions, our concentration constantly disrupted by social media and the myriad stimuli at our fingertips. He describes his paintings as reflections of a personal dystopian mental landscape, observing that many people today yearn for the certainties of the old world. Amid a glut of new trends and rapid change, feelings of insecurity are becoming increasingly prevalent.

In *Where Wishes Fly* (2023) and *Jungle at Home* (2023), two deserted rooms have been overtaken by birds. The paintings evoke a longing for the old, safe times when these spaces were filled with human life. Now, all that remains is emptiness, crumbling hopes, and an undercurrent of despair, embodied in the figure seated on the sofa. As the world falls apart around her, she clings to the sofa—the only familiar object within reach. In *The Trees Did Not Listen* (2025), a woman releases her pent-up emotions, unleashing a climactic torrent of inner fire, rage, and anxiety.

Painting as Venting

Painting is a technique that suits Heinonen's temperament, offering a medium through which he can swiftly translate ideas onto canvas. For him, the act is both

physical and performative. He often begins by browsing the internet or his phone's photo gallery, assembling collages from selected images. During the painting process itself, he applies colour with brush, palette knife, rag, or even his bare hands. Music always plays in the background, setting the rhythm of his gestures and guiding his choice of palette.

Even when the subject is dark, Heinonen's exuberant palette introduces an element of joy and playfulness into his paintings. This creates a built-in contradiction: Why convey darkness through joy? In the early stages of painting, a composition may appear too contrived; when this happens, the artist knows it must be broken apart and intensified with colour. In his own words, the work "needs to be given a kick-start." Heinonen throws caution to the wind, diving headfirst into the process without overthinking. In doing so, he significantly alters the mood of the work, transforming it from a mere image into a fully-fledged artwork.

Depicting dark subjects with a violent painterly style comes naturally to Heinonen. He describes his works as carrying a powerful emotional intensity that he seeks to transmit to the viewer—ideally offering comfort and strength amid the emotional turmoil of daily life. At the same time, his paintings serve as points of identification for all who find themselves navigating their own everyday dystopias.

Translation in English by Silja Kudel

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