

FOREWORD

It is perhaps not unusual that the *Kalevala*, Finland's epic national poem, has so many echoes in artist Arja Välimäki's life and work. The poem, which in many ways became a focus and driving force of Finnish national pride and identity, is about heroic journeys and the quest for a magical object that can grant one's dearest desire.

Arja's own epic journey has taken her from the austere northern wintery beauty of her native Finland to the warm southern climes of Illawarra. Arja faced the uncertainty and even fear of the new and unknown, and had to break through the often difficult obstacles of language and culture that confront new migrants. Desire and longing are two powerful and conflicting themes which underpin much of Arja's work, an anxious need to fit in and belong to this new strange land and an aching yearning for a homeland far away.

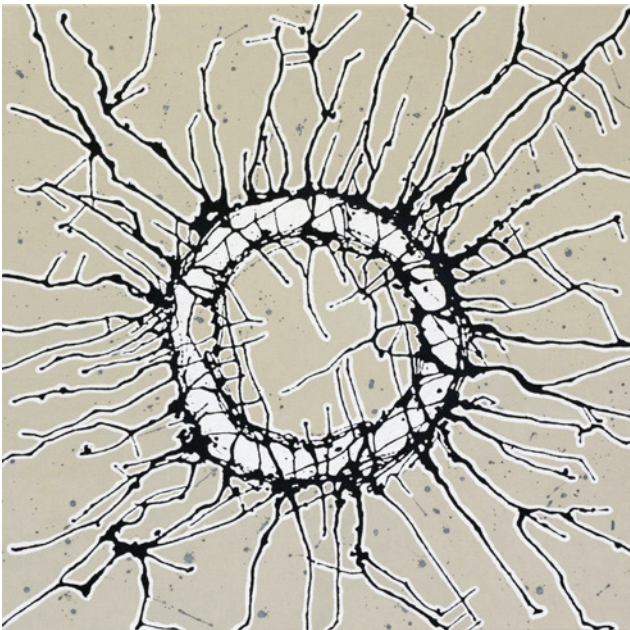
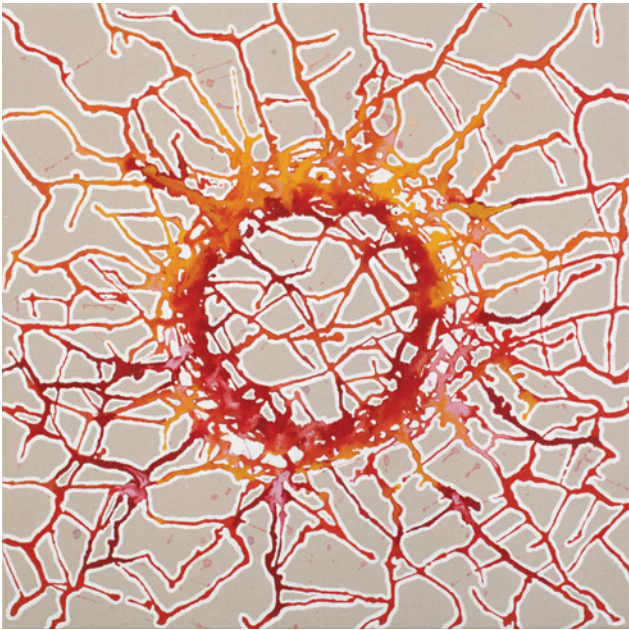
Early works by Arja often explored notions of journeys, identity and belonging, and spoke of the fears and uncertainties that the unknown can bring. Aspects of

water, the sea and nature figured strongly in many of these works and continue to inform her practice.

After over twenty years Arja's quest to make a new home in Australia is all but complete. The strangeness of language and culture has been salved by both familiarity and time, and the landscape which was once so alien to her has become an inspiration and haven. Her current exhibition *Natural Rhythms* is an exploration of the ebbs and flows of nature, a series of paintings where sinuous, circuitous marks wind sensuously across lusciously coloured canvases. It is both a signal of a new stage in Arja's evolving practice and the culmination of her journey to make a new home.

Wollongong Art Gallery would like to thank Arja for sharing her unique perspectives and for her ability to articulate her ideas in interesting and engaging ways. We hope you enjoy the exhibition.

John Monteleone
Program Director



ARJA VÄLIMÄKI

In Finland's great national poem, the *Kalevala*, Ilmatar, the daughter of the air, descends to the sea and is fertilised, becoming the water-mother.

Twenty one years ago Arja Välimäki, a keen student of the epic verse cycle, travelled through the air from her native Finland, to land on the coast of the northern Illawarra, where the ever-changing landscape fertilised her imagination.

When you pack a suitcase to move to the other side of the world, some things sneak in between the folded clothes and cherished mementos that help you settle and make a new life. Weightless treasures: awareness of light and how it changes, especially when it interacts with that liquid element, water...

The water you grew up surrounded by comes with you too. You do not bring it with you in a container, along with your necessary everyday potions in a bag with wheels. It comes in the vessel of your own body, in tears of longing, in your consciousness and memory.

Your sense of colour travels along too, a secondary vocabulary in a language you may not yet even be aware you speak. You are still struggling to make yourself understood in a foreign tongue.

To combat the long months of darkness and the more subdued hues of the natural world, the forests of silvery birch trees, the ice and snow that blanketed the land in silence and whiteness, your mother decorated the family home with colour to radiate warmth, dispelling the chill and frost of winter. She wove and collected fabrics blazing with primary brightness and bold geometry, created by a name that could belong to a warrior princess: Marimekko. A woman who came to define Finnish style at its most exuberant, splashing it across the body and the home.

To retain her connection to place, Välimäki sometimes wears the embroidered smocks and skirts of traditional Finnish costume. A reminder of her Romani blood and heritage, (fine garments and jewels play a prominent role in the destiny of several young women in the *Kalevala*). Perhaps also an echo of the defiant streak of independence which eventually shook off Finland's submission to mightier nations. Proud of her identity, like her native country, Välimäki dances to her own drum.

Välimäki challenges the clichéd ignorance in which we lump all Scandinavian countries together in one neutral, timbered illusion, our impressions based on nothing more than a collage of images from sixties furniture catalogues.

She hides the veneer surfaces of her suburban bungalow, transforming it into a Nordic playroom, painting the cupboards so they almost glow in the dark. It's as if she is still a child, her kitchen painted in shades of her first box of crayons: the lime green cupboards an echo of the telephone in her Finnish home - as fresh and crisp as a Granny Smith.

At first the Australian light seems blinding, but then, when she walks on her local beach, wide, flat, shape-shifting with the tides and the markings made as the sand tugs and pulls, shaped by the swell, she begins to recognise eternal curves, spirals, undulations and lines. Gradually some of her canvasses demonstrate a fearless exuberance as colours collide and clash in ripples.

Eventually she sheds the invisible weight of homesickness. (She sometimes goes to Ikea to ease the ache.) It takes years of comings and goings, swapping hemispheres and time zones, until she feels that this is truly where she belongs. She puts down roots, starts a family, gets a job, establishes routines. At art school in Sydney, the ice in her heart starts to crack and melt. She learns to love the warm air on her face instead of the pricking tingle of cold.

Always your hands are busy, weaving and making, taking humble elements of every day domestic life - plastic clothes pegs, sweet wrappers, road maps - and transforming them into sculptures, repeating the pattern of a circle as a motif that returns in your paintings, a private symbol of inner resolution.

Painting is your meditation, a way of synthesizing the two worlds you belong in. Abstraction transforms your love of nature. The patterns on the sand at low tide, the contours of the land, the shapes of leaves, feathers, shells and stones, the sliver of silver of tree bark and the green shoots of the leaves you once used to beat your blood in the sauna (yes, you have built one of those too, and made the steam heady with the aroma of gum leaves, bringing your two worlds together in a healing vapour).

Swapping the still mirror water of her birthplace for the swell of the surf, the water-mother has come home.

Caroline Baum, 2014

Caroline Baum is a respected arts journalist and broadcaster. She has curated and presented talks for Sherman Contemporary Art and interviewed major Australian and overseas artists at events including the Sydney Festival, Art Month and the Sydney Biennale.