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Small Finnish gallery in Berlin sells contemporary art as far as Asia - The secret is "feminine energy"

Intuition, empathy and peace are the values that Susanne Johansson wants the art exhibitions she curates to reinforce in the world.

A sturdy, white stone house on a leafy street in Berlin's Mitte district. A vaulted corridor leads inside the sturdy stone walls. Once, at the beginning of the last century, this was a paint shop. An old advertisement on the wall still reminds us of it: Lacke, Farben. Paint has returned to the space, which now houses the art gallery of Susanne Johansson, 47, a Finn.

Galleria Snow is still a newcomer among Berlin's art galleries, in a highly competitive field. There are around 700 art galleries in Germany, of which around 300 are in Berlin.

The opening of Galleria Snow was a lucky coincidence, but also, according to Johansson, a persistent following of intuition. "Where I come from, intuition is an underrated tool," says Johansson. She refers to her career in technology, which is why she moved to Berlin 14 years ago. Johansson had only thought she would come for a couple of years. She didn't speak German.

"I thought that my daughter, who was less than four years old at the time, would hardly go to school here. But we stayed. She just finished high school."

Johansson talks a lot about intuition. She decided to follow it and left her career in business a few years ago. Successive burn-outs were a sign that something had to change. Johansson has a degree in marketing communications from London and has also trained as a photographer. She has always followed contemporary art closely.

In 2020, a pandemic emptied art galleries, including the space on the street level of Johansson's home building. The space is owned by her neighbour from the same house. It was suggested to her to hold her own photography exhibition there. Johansson did not dare to put up the exhibition alone, but invited Finnish artists Marika Maijala and Niina Lehtonen Braun, whom she knew from previous work, to participate. The new lock-downs soon closed all exhibitions, but the couple of months the pop-up gallery was open between the lock-downs was a meaningful time. It confirmed Johansson's intuition: more of this.

So Johansson set up her own gallery, Galleria Snow, two years ago. At first it operated in a small and secluded space on Alexanderplatz, until she managed to secure a lease with a neighbour for the space in her own building. Johansson says she was lucky with the space. Not just anyone can find an empty gallery to rent.

It is common practice for a gallerist to take 40-50% of the price of the artwork sold. Working hard, Johansson tries to take one day off a week. The gallery does not yet support her fully. "But I'm happy with the sales figures at this stage." On the side, she still does some gig work in photography and marketing. "It takes a long time to establish a gallery. It's not a one- or two-year thing," says Johansson.

Gallerists come from different backgrounds: there are collectors, artists and, as in Johansson's case, a very different career background. Johansson has studied the field by reading a lot.

Galleria Snow's emphasis is "North", and many of the exhibitions have been by Finnish artists. Currently on display are works by Aura Hakuri, the exhibition is called Love Letters. The watercolour works, painted on handmade paper, were partly created in Paris, where Hakuri spends much of her time. Indeed, according to Hakuri, they are like letters from her, to specific recipients.

Snow's selection includes works by many Finnish contemporary artists, such as Maisa Majakka, who recently gained fame in the Helsinki's Kunsthalle's Young Artists 2023 exhibition, Camilla Mihkelsoo, Marika Maijala and many others. Many of them have already had an exhibition at Snow.

Snow is not just a women's gallery, although most of the artists have been women. Johansson says that her artistic lineage is based on "feminine energy". According to Johansson, that means intuition and empathy, peace, imagination and "safe ways to deal with anger and rage as well". According to Johansson, there was little room for these values in the business world.

"I think the world needs more feminine energy, and that's why I want to bring these values to the gallery in the form of art."

"Success is not just about pursuing time based goals," she says. Still, she has plenty of goals. For example, she would like to increase collaboration between Finnish and German artists.

Johansson has started a collaboration with She BAM! gallery in Leipzig, which is her favourite gallery. She says that it is the smaller galleries that benefit from the joint exhibitions.

In her own gallery, she handles everything from sending works to marketing the exhibitions. She hopes to one day be able to hire staff so that she can focus on curating and client relations. Another dream is to one day open a branch gallery in Finland.

"The physical gallery is the heart where you can see the works," says Johansson. But for her, it's not just part of the whole. Before finding a gallery space, she even considered opening a purely online gallery.

Online, she sells the works through Artsy. Art buyers from all over the world have registered on the site, where an algorithm makes suggestions for art purchases. Johansson says her gallery has been well discovered in the US, South Korea and Japan.

"European contemporary art has a good aura in Asia," she says. "What has also surprised me is how many buyers have come from Finland."

Galleria Snow, Brunnenstrasse 170, Berlin.