

A Finnish Artist Plays With Fire And Sets the Biennale Aglow

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VENICE -- *Fourth in a series of articles on the 53rd Venice Biennale*

For years, Finnish artist Jussi Kivi led a double life. In public, he was a respectable maker of radical contemporary art -- ironic "landscapes," for instance, realized in video and photo. In private, he was that most shameful of things, a nerd with a hobby. Since earliest childhood, Kivi has been amassing a collection of anything and everything to do with firefighters: vintage helmets and gear, toys, scale models, postcards and souvenirs.

When Kivi the artist was chosen to fill his nation's pavilion at this latest [Venice Biennale](#), he made a brilliant career move. He came out as Kivi the collector.

His show, titled "Fire & Rescue Museum," fills the pavilion top to bottom, edge to edge, with cases full of Kivi's firefighting collection. Its walls are papered in firefighting posters and pictures.

Part of the installation's appeal is straightforward: Firefighting's neat. It's hard to pretend you're not intrigued by a black fire helmet with a leather neck protector worn in Finland in the 1950s. (There's a lovely self-portrait that Kivi drew in 1966, when he was 7, in which he wears a helmet like it.) And that you don't want to compare it with a descendant, manufactured in Britain in the 1980s, that by then had moved on to a smartly visible yellow.

No point, either, claiming you have no yen to try out that vintage red extinguisher, or to play that 1950s fire-themed board game.

Here in Washington, we pretend that the masterpieces at the National Gallery and the accumulated *things* at American History or Air and Space have a fundamentally different appeal. But we're kidding ourselves: Neat stuff is neat stuff, and art's just one special version of it. The greatest art, you could say, is simply neat stuff, cubed -- the Apotheosis of Neat.

As Kivi found out early on, and has now confirmed for anyone who visits his pavilion, one of art's few rivals may be firefighting gear.

The distinctive thing about art, however, is that it's never just itself, for itself, the way a firefighter's ax can be. Art always makes us use it as a metaphor for other things. Present a firefighter's ax as art, and it stops being just for breaking windows.

An excellent catalogue essay by a Finnish art historian named Jonni Roos unpacks some of the metaphors in Kivi's pavilion. Roos talks about the role of the artist as both outsider rebel and as its opposite, a guardian of society. And he discusses how the rebel artist (someone, say, who dares to present a hobby collection as art) might easily feel in conflict with the ultra-establishment figure of the fireman on view in Kivi's museum. (The collection includes a picture of Richard Nixon posing with the assistant fire chief of Warren, Ohio -- an American relative the 11-year-old Kivi spent a year with, and stayed in contact with through adulthood.) But Roos also speaks of how the fireman could represent a model of the artist as engaged citizen. If contemporary art really aims to change the world, Roos points out, it may want to talk less and do more, in true firefighter fashion.

Roos deals especially smartly with one major body of material in Kivi's show: A series of civil-defense posters, dating to the height of the Cold War, which the artist recently discovered in an abandoned fallout shelter in Estonia. The posters show firefighters doing improbably heroic deeds in the aftermath of a nuclear explosion. Although clearly functioning as propaganda, the pictures were drawn and painted by skilled designers happy to be cast "as pillars of society, like firefighters," as Roos puts it. "They have been realizing the secret dream of Western artists to be in a socially significant role."

Or at least those are the kinds of interpretations that come up when a Western artist presents those designers' posters as art, in the Venice Biennale.

In Venice, one of the most notable aspects of Kivi's "museum" is its striking Finnish-ness, at least for the non-Finns who look at it. The modesty of Kivi's art seems to match the modest ambitions of one of the world's smaller, more overshadowed nations. The civic order every firefighter contributes to seems to be a model for Finland's well-ordered society. Even the eccentricity of Kivi's show seems right, given the famous eccentricity of Finland's people.

Kivi's little museum feels especially well suited to the very smallest pavilion in the Biennale gardens. Not much bigger than a [shipping container](#), and looking rather like one, the building was built in 1956 by the world-class Finnish architect Alvar Aalto. It was intended as a temporary wooden structure to be packed up after each Biennale, but the wrong bolts were shipped with it and it couldn't be disassembled. Since the city bans buildings made of wood, the Venetian fire marshals -- the everpresent, ever-watchful Vigili del Fuoco -- had to bend their normal rules. Which, all these years later, has allowed Kivi to show art that does them honor.

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