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Korolainen, Hanna-Kaisa

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Monet and me – The story of an inspiration

Hanna-Kaisa Korolainen

hannakaisakorolainen@gmail.com

Aalto University, School of Art, Design and Architecture, Finland

Bio

Hanna-Kaisa Korolainen is a textile designer and a visual artist. She has been living and working in Paris, Brussels and lately in Helsinki. She is currently a doctoral student in Aalto University of Arts, Design and Architecture, where she also teaches. Her research investigates the role of inspiration sources in the creative process.



Figure 1. Inspiration board with Claude Monet, his home in Giverny and *Orangerie* museum in Paris

Abstract

In this paper, I present a practice-led project that is at the crossroads of art, design and research. The aim is to explore the role of inspiration sources in the creative textile design process. This case, *Monet and me*, is one of the six projects that form the artistic practice of my doctoral studies. Each project is a separate case study that consists of selected inspiration sources in relation to my own practice. I choose well-known artists as my sources of inspiration, as their visual impact is more unambiguous to evaluate than, for example, inspiration from music or literature. As a result of this case study, I have produced hand-tufted rugs, woven jacquards and other textile works that are presented in the form of an exhibition. Various materials generated during the design process; the inspiration boards (Figure 1)¹, diaries, sketchbooks, and photographs are provided, along with ready artworks. In addition to revealing the information about the sources of inspiration, they illustrate the uncompleted phases of the creative process.

KEYWORDS: Practice-led research, sources of inspiration, creative process, textile design, textile art

¹An inspiration board is somewhat similar to a mood board. It shows the various visual researches that I have collected as the starting point of my creative practice. By the term 'visual research', I refer to the way in which fashion and textile designers often seek various inspirational images before starting a new project.

Introduction

My research combines artistic practice and theory. It follows the practice-led research tradition of Aalto University School of Art, Design and Architecture (Mäkelä, 2003; Turpeinen, 2005; Summatavet, 2005; Nimkulrat, 2009). Theoretical research helps me to generate ideas for my practice and vice versa. One can barely exist without another.

For many years, I have used artists and their artworks as my sources of inspiration, and this has raised many questions. In this paper, I concentrate on a few of these. First, how do the inspiration sources affect my creative process and second, do they have a visible impact on the outcome, the artefacts produced by me? Often these influences are not evident, for example sometimes the artists' era or cultural background has a greater impact than the visual features of their artworks. Nevertheless, every starting point of the creative process is significant; therefore, I find it worth studying by applying the practice-led approach to one's own creative process.

I find the artefacts produced during the practice-led research equally important as the process itself. Finnish ceramic artist and researcher Maarit Mäkelä notes that an artefact created during artistic research can be regarded as a database that collects and stores both information and understanding of the process (Mäkelä, 2007, p. 158). In my research this signifies that the artefacts conceived during my research process reserve the information about their starting point (the sources of inspiration) as well as themselves (as ready artworks) and their own making processes. While contemplating and examining my own artworks, I am reminded of their making processes and the original ideas that lead to their creation. By sourcing my inspiration from art history, I reach purposely to the past. Once these influences are internalized, I attempt to attach them to my own practice and the present time.

Why do I find an endless source of inspiration in the fine arts? I was an artist before becoming a designer and my ardent admiration might spring from that. For me certain artists represent the brightest suns in the sky, comparable to a huge melting mass of scorching gold. French sociologist Nathalie Heinich deconstructs the creation of the cult of the artist in *The Glory of van Gogh – An Anthropology of*

Admiration. She notes that objects of admiration, in my case the sources of inspiration, cannot be discussed neutrally. One is either positioned too close and is affected by the glorification of the subjects, or one is purposely distanced and becomes overly critical. (Heinich, 1996, p. xiii.) As a researcher, I ought to be critical towards my subjects, but as a practitioner sources of inspiration are solely useful if some air of infatuation is maintained. This state could grow into a more mature relationship once I get to know my subjects better –sometimes I might even end up disliking them. However, my relationship will never be neutral. In the case study discussed in this paper, I have chosen to maintain a romantic and a somewhat naïve relationship with my source of inspiration, the French painter Claude Monet and his artworks. It has been feeding my creative process as I desired, with a rosy tint.

Monet and me –looking for inspiration



Figure 2. Detail of Monet's painting of water lilies placed in the first hall of the *Orangerie* Museum in Paris, France. Photo by Hanna-Kaisa Korolainen, 2017.

SHHH silence!, orders the guard of the museum. Tired and hungry travellers are expressing their enthusiasm too loudly in the oval halls of the Orangerie museum. The guard makes sure, that all the visitors can enjoy the experience of Monet's water lilies without interruption. With embarrassment, we sit down on

the bench in the middle of the room. Fatigue and hunger have disappeared. We stay there for a long while in perfect silence and absorb ourselves in beauty.
(Extract from my diary, November 2012).

When I am looking for new sources of inspiration, I often visit museums and exhibitions (Figure 2). In these physical and authentic spaces, I can experience the artworks fully. The experience is totally different from seeing the images in the books or on the internet (Figure 3). Being in the same space as the artworks is a very personal and rather unplanned experience. As a visitor, I define the duration of the experience, but I cannot stay passive; I must approach the artworks to be able to encounter them. I reach towards the artwork and the artwork reaches towards me. There is an unspoken, visual conversation that is created between me and the artwork. Something in the artwork, in general difficult to describe with words, reminds me of things that I appreciate or dislike and that make me troubled or thrilled. This meeting enables me to re-identify myself as an artist. Before a powerful artwork I reinvent what kind of artworks I want to create myself. At its best, the artwork and the artist behind it become a new source of inspiration that nourishes my creative practice.

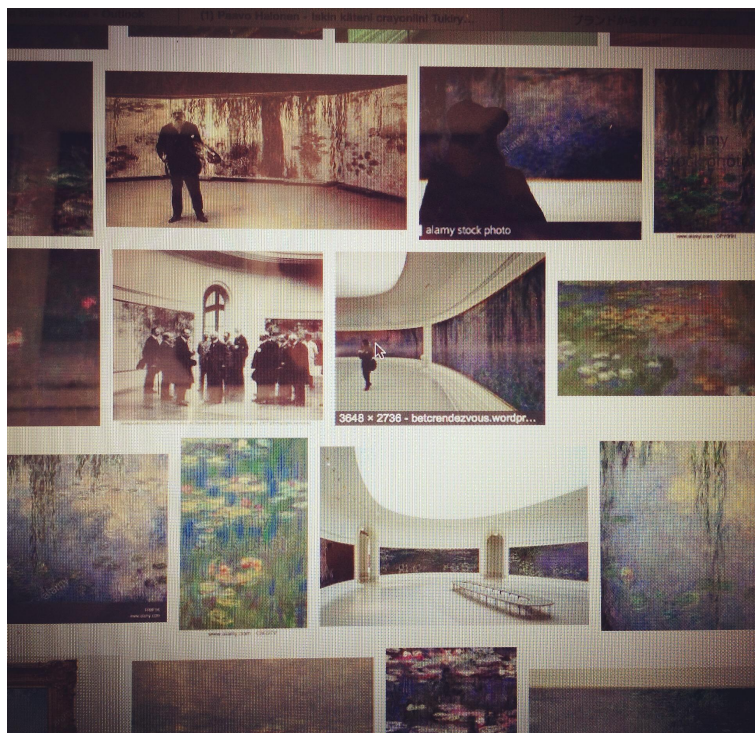


Figure 3. Searching keywords *Orangerie+Monet* in google images (accessed 27.04.2017).
Photo by Hanna-Kaisa Korolainen, 2017.

Dutch fashion designer Dries Van Noten described similar experience when he visited the exhibition of British painter Francis Bacon (1909–1992). He had previously seen Bacon’s paintings one by one at a small scale on the pages of the books. When he saw the actual large, regrouped works, he felt almost terrified by the intensity of the experience. Due to his busy schedule, Van Noten rarely has time to digest his sources of inspiration, but this time he had to slow down and, in his words, become fully saturated by Bacon’s works. He identified this exhibition as one of the most impressive experiences in his life so far. (Golbin, 2014, p. 40.)

In the project discussed in this paper, my source of inspiration was Claude Monet² and his absolute masterpiece, the *Orangerie* museum’s oval halls filled with a series of painted water lilies. After selecting a new source of inspiration, an artist or an artwork, I feel an urge to discover as much information as possible. In addition to visiting museums, Monet’s atelier and garden, I sourced many art history books, searched the internet and plunged deep into his world. I returned to the *Orangerie* museum countless times. I could not become tired of those water lilies, reflections and weeping willows. Monet’s passion for light seemed intensely present in this series. In some areas of the large, many-metre-long canvases the subjects – water, sky and vegetation – gave the impression they had lost their individual shapes and melted together as an abstract composition. The entirety of the landscape remained recognizable through the skilful notion of space and distance created by a meticulous study of light.

²Claude Monet (1840-1926), was the central figure of the impressionist art movement. Impressionists painted real subjects outside, and tried to catch the brief moments of everyday life as freshly as possible. Their painting delivered the feeling of lightness, joy and love of life. For this reason, some critics found their art to lack deepness and inner meaning as they only concentrated on the impression of the surface. (Crespelle, 1988, 5; Pasanen, 2004, 41; Joyes, 1985,17.)



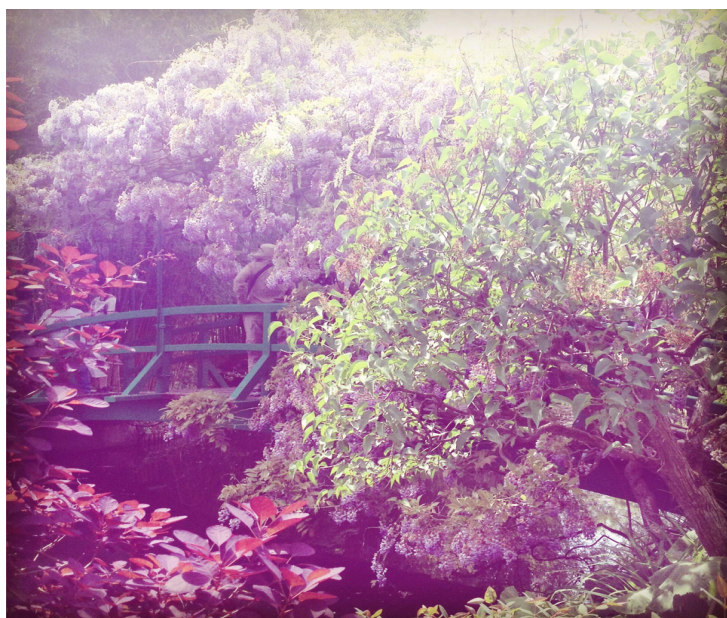
Figure

4. Monet in his garden at the beginning of 20th century. Photo by Patricia Schmidt © Musée d'Orsay, 2012.

Even though Monet's works in *Orangerie* acted as my main source of inspiration, visiting the garden of Monet in Giverny, France, also became a significant experience. I felt as if I had stepped into a painting by Monet. One of his favourite subjects was his garden, which he had designed himself (Figure 4). The scenery immortalized in the *Orangerie* can also be discovered in his garden (Figure 5). Monet had planted the water lilies without thinking of painting them, but later understood their magical beauty. For the last decade of his life, he concentrated on the gigantic project of filling the oval halls of the *Orangerie* museum solely with water lilies³. His fervent creation was interrupted by problems with his vision and he had to go through cataract surgeries. Both his long vision and his colour vision were affected. Monet could distinguish blue well, but not red, yellow, certain greens or violets. He had to trust in his own memory of colours. (Denizeau, 2012, pp. 28-

³ In 1909 Monet wrote a letter to his friend Gustave Geffroy where he discussed the idea behind the Orangerie museum: "I was tempted to use the theme of the Nymphéas for the decoration of salon: carried along the walls, its unity enfolding all the panels, it was to produce the illusion of an endless whole, a wave without horizon and without shore; nerves strained by work would relax in its presence, following the reposing example of its stagnant waters, and for him who would live in it, this room would offer an asylum of peaceful meditation in the midst of a flowering aquarium." (Monet, 1945, 313.)

29.) Even though painting outside, in front of the real living subjects, Monet did not try to repeat the reality but his own impressions of it. The way he saw the world also transformed during his long career. His first romantic and soft, pastel shaded impressionist paintings were later replaced by strong brush strokes, brisk simplification of the subjects and fierce, distinctive use of colours (Joyes, 1985, p.



146-147).

Figure 5. Bridge over a pond of water lilies in the garden of Monet. Photo by Hanna-Kaisa Korolainen, 2015.

Light was at the centre of Monet's artistic interests and he only painted in the natural lightning. When Monet was looking for new subjects to paint, he wandered around in his garden, nearby hills or explored the surroundings from his boat. He examined the nature and changes of the light almost like a hunter. When Monet found the perfect spot, he set up his easel –sometimes even in the boat, if that was the best angle and started to paint. When the light altered, he rotated his easel and started a new painting. An artist could not define how long a certain light would endure on one a single leaf or other detail. Therefore, he painted with a fervent rhythm in an attempt to repeat what he witnessed with his own eyes faithfully. He ended up working in series. In his exhibitions, he wanted to present a large quantity of variations of his favourite themes such as water lilies. (Joyes, 1985, p. 41-43).

Me and Monet – the Practice

Monet hunted for light but I hunted for Monet. Metaphorically I drank the inspiration his works gave me and threw myself into my own creative process. Monet's interest in light guided me to choose grattage, a scratching technique, as

my medium. Many remember scratching with oil pastels from elementary school. There was this strange looking metallic tool included in the colour box. I still have a vivid memory of how that halfway–fork– halfway–knife device hurt the fingers in diligent work. Acrylics and oil paints also work well for this technique, but I decided to remain with the oil pastels of my childhood memories. The grattage technique plays with light; first I compose an image, just to cover it with a darker layer of colour that resembles a shadow. Afterwards the dark layer is scratched with a sharp tool, for example a needle or knife, to partly uncover the image underneath. Scratching can be done only in a few areas in order to create new figurative elements or it can be done thoroughly to reveal as much of the original image as possible. I mostly use the latter option. The end result looks different to the original, uncovered image; it gains an instant patina, as of it has undergone a form of ageing surgery. I find similarities between the scratching technique and developing photographs in a dark room. When you scratch the dark surface, the image seems to (re) appear as if it were magic.

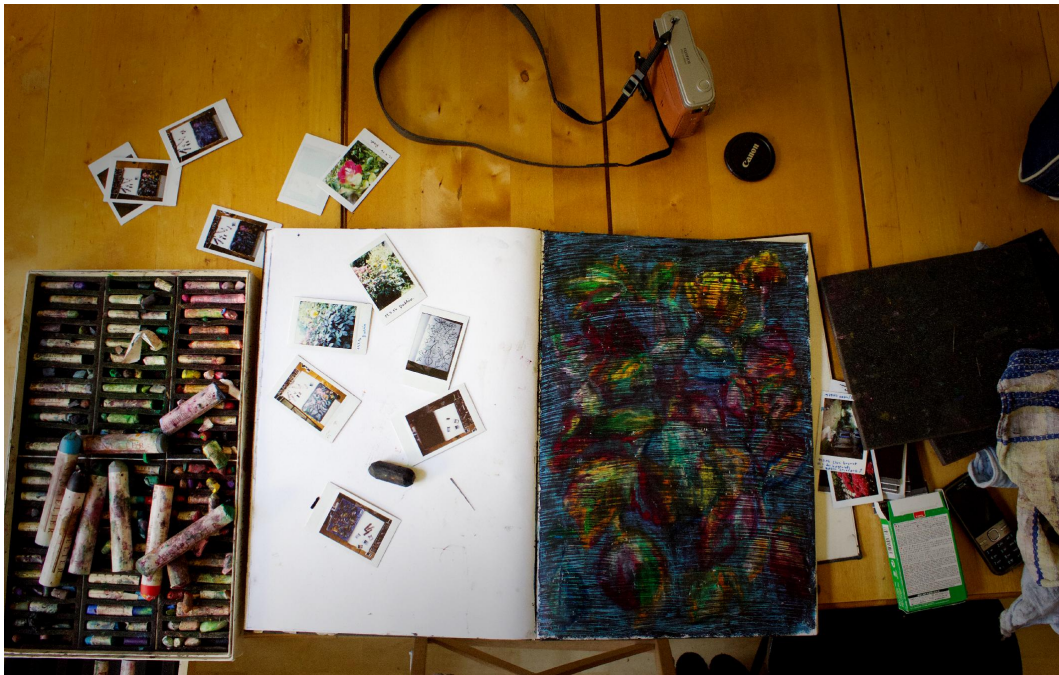


Figure 6. Sketching the *Dahlia* jacquard with the help of photographs. Photo by Hanna-Kaisa Korolainen, 2017.

Grattage is a technique that I have practiced for several years. It felt as if I had found my identity as a designer when I discovered this technique, maybe because the outcome of the process is different every time and that prevents me from getting

bored. The technique is also rather fast-paced, as you cannot let the colour dry. As far as I can remember, my first trials were not all successful, but the more I continued practising, the more rewarding the overall process became and each success gave me more enthusiasm to go on.

As I could not draw outside all year long, I ended up by abandoning the basic principle of impressionism that Monet was so fond of. When I worked inside, I used photos of flowers and scenery, which I had taken previously, as the basis of my creations (Figure 6). My main subjects were the stereotypical imaginary of Giverny: flowers, trees and such. Parts of the sketching work were done in another French garden near Poitiers (Figure 7). There I drew everything available such as raspberries and dahlias. My drawings were infused by the abundant growth of those two gardens and the scorching sun.



Figure

7. Scratching raspberries in France during the summer of 2016. Photo by Benjamin Goursot, 2016.

After the original figurative image was created it had to be covered with a darker colour. This was technically speaking the simplest phase of the process. The challenging part was to let go of the first image that had required my time and devotion. On several occasions I had a keen desire to preserve my original image instead of ruining it with a thick, suffocating layer of dark colour. Covering it felt as if I had lost something valuable, even though there was an even more interesting outcome on the horizon. I just had to metaphorically close my eyes and add some speed to my hand.

I tried various scratching methods. At the beginning, I directed the movement in a neutral way; horizontally or vertically. As a tool, I used either a fine and sharp or a thick and blunt needle. I scratched in the shapes of arcs or fans, creating new patterns on top of my flowery subjects (Figure 8). Sometimes I scraped the same image twice, crossing my own markings. This created a very structural effect, almost resembling a woven fabric. The more I scratched and scraped the more the image underneath became visible. Scratching as an act felt almost violent; there was a feeling of breaking something. The process proved to be physically exhausting, and it was difficult to compose more than 2–3 sketches during the same session.



Figure

8. Detail of a sketch made with scratching during the summer of 2016. Photo by Hanna-Kaisa Korolainen, 2016.

Luck played a great role in the process. Each shade of colour absorbed other colours and was affected by the surface differently and the ambient temperature altered the drying time. The covering layer left its own shadows, darker areas on the final image, almost like some wandering souls in Asian horror movies. After execution, the drawings needed to dry properly. I used especially greasy oil pastels from the French brand *Sennelier*. The reason behind choosing them was that I wanted to evoke the authentic oils of Monet's paintings. Material choices have a decisive role in my sketching process and sometimes I need to test various possibilities before I find the best solution.

The scratching technique creates a strong impression of light and shadow. The original image seems to be deeply embedded in dark light, where colours seem more vivid and luminous, and this creates an almost three-dimensional effect. There

is an illusion of space between the image and the surface, as if the subjects for example flowers, trees or scenery, were contemplated through a glass window. During the sketching process, I fell once again under the spell of this unusual technique. The result was either good or bad, nothing in between.

From sketches to final forms

After completion of the sketching phase, the drawings had to be digitalized for further development. To be able to do this, I photographed them in flat light. Scanning was no option as the machine could not recognize the deep 2-layered aspect, but flattened the whole appearance: a scanner would only focus on the top scratched surface and make the more significant figurative image, underneath the dark layer, secondary. Only after properly photographing the sketches, could I further develop my ideas into textiles. This kind of excessively detailed visual material proved to be challenging to work with. The final choices were made after many trials and failures. Every now and then these failures were welcomed with open arms, as they gave space for new beginnings.

Once the digitalization was ready, I reworked the sketches into textiles: woven jacquards and hand-tufted rugs. Some of the jacquard models were industrially woven in the Finnish weaving mill *Lapuan Kankurit*. I made the colour testing and finished the technical models beforehand (Figure 9), but it was still a magical experience to see the machine weaving out the phantasy I had imagined. The fleeting moments of sketching in the sunny French garden were transformed into something three-dimensional and undoubtedly permanent (Figure 10) I named the jacquard collection the *Broken Flowers* series. Once woven the scratched surface seemed to have been broken into thin horizontal lines. that resembled age-old antique tapestries.

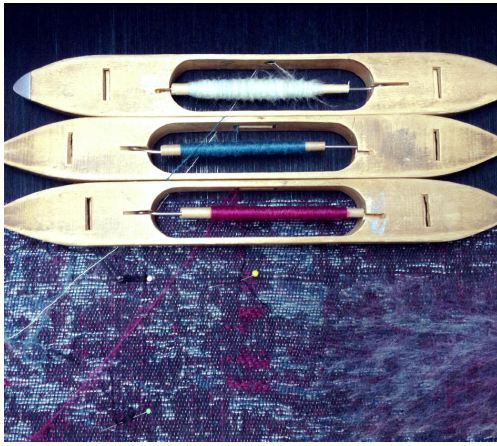


Figure 9. The technical samples were woven by hand. Photo by Hanna-Kaisa Korolainen, 2017.



Figure 10. Detail of the *Dahlia* jacquard woven in 2017 at the *Lapuan Kankurit* mill. Photo by Hanna-Kaisa Korolainen, 2017.

I also hand-tufted two rugs based on my scratching sessions. It was very time-consuming to translate these complicated sketches composed of small colour areas into rugs. The digitalized image was manipulated and transcribed into the tufting fabric by colouring (Figure 11). I made two rugs, the bigger one had to be tufted in two parts (Figure 12). As material, I used loop mohair that was tufted using long pile and later brushed open, which the resembled an organic animal-like hairy surface that even felt warm. These rugs are not passive artefacts, but their thick, three-dimensional surface reaches towards the spectator inviting to be touched.

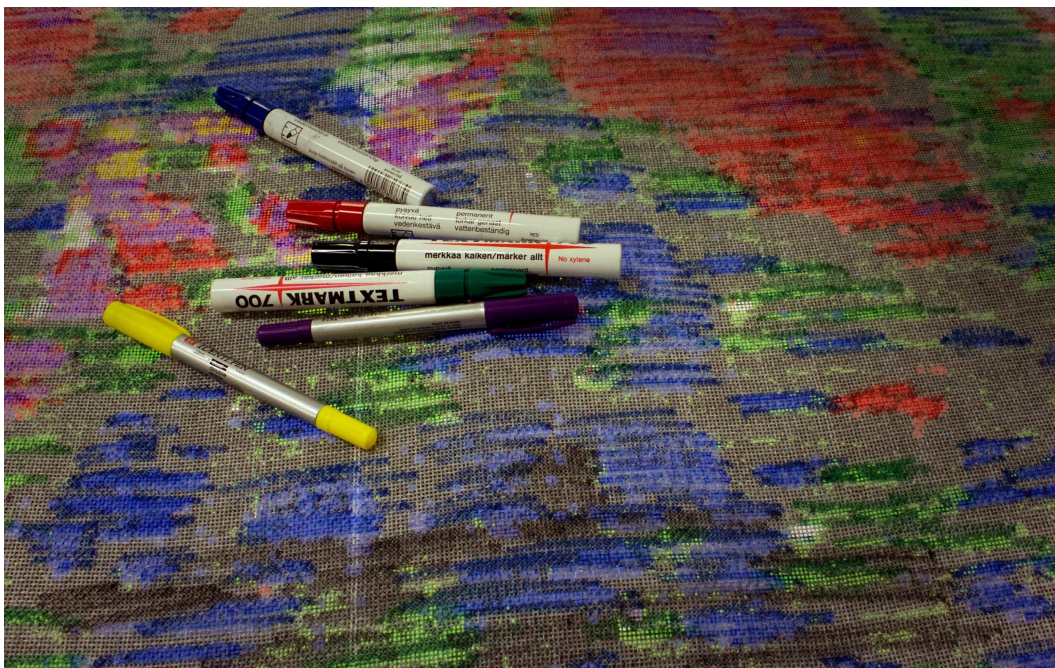


Figure 11. Transferring the original image by hand on the tufting fabric by drawing on the light table. Photo by Hanna-Kaisa Korolainen, 2017.

Once the sketches had become ready-made textiles, they took on a more decisive role in time and space. The randomness of their creation disappeared and the burning sun no longer existed outside of my imagination. Monet's influence began to seem obscure and remote. After the metamorphosis of textile making, the previously figurative compositions had become nearly abstract: I could hardly detect the flowers and other subjects myself, even though I knew they were there, because I had drawn them in.



Figure 12. This hand-tufted rug was so large that I had to work on two separate panels at the same time. Photo by Hanna-Kaisa Korolainen, 2017.

Conclusions

When the artworks were completed and the active process of practice had ceased, I needed to evaluate the meaning of the sources of the inspiration. I sat down, examined the outcomes and reflected upon what had happened during the process. Here I followed the example of Maarit Mäkelä (2016, p. 2), who points out that the documentation works as a research tool for her; when she is looking at the physical documentation; working diaries, photographs and sketches, she can re-experience

and recall her process. Textile artist and researcher Nithikul Nimkulrat (2012, pp. 5–7) also affirms that documentation is a vital part of the practice-led research: in this way the findings discovered during the process of making to be demonstrated and validated.

By scrutinizing the various documentation, the photos, diary notes, sketches and ready artefacts, I tried to define what was the imprint or essence of Monet materialised in my creative process and artworks? I had done a considerable amount of research around Monet and during my creative process, I felt literally impregnated by his spirit. I had this strange impression, that during my months-long working period, I never really left his garden at Giverny. Its blossoming flowers were alive and blooming in my imagination even in the middle of the Finnish winter. I dreamt of returning to those places, I missed seeing them again. One could conclude that the repeated experience of seeing the paintings and the memory of the garden gave me strength during my practice.

Every practitioner faces moments when the work is not advancing well and enthusiasm is lost. During these moments, merely the thought of my sources of inspiration gave me the necessary desire to go on with my work. I felt no loneliness, but instead a sense of belonging between me and my sources of inspiration. I had managed to build an entire imaginary universe of the bits and pieces that I had come across during my research, and this supported the empty moments of the process of creation. This, then, is the most powerful discovery: visiting Monet's garden gave me a site-specific memory and an imaginary home for my inspiration process. This vision was transformed further during my process while following my needs and ideals. For me, Giverny represented a place of eternal summer just like it was when I last visited it and as it was in my photographs. Some moments when I was lacking serenity, I opened the imaginary door to silent, oval halls of *Orangerie* filled with water lilies. In my imagination, the garden of Giverny and the museum of *Orangerie* were situated side by side. I had ended up by creating a miniature utopia of my own; imagination is a forceful tool. When the idea of the utopia is used as an external motivation to keep the process of creation awake it is more than a concrete model to follow, it opens various opportunities and gives a meaningful direction to the process (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 73). As result, ever since I started this project

I have been wandering around feeling uncommonly romantic and all I could think of was rosy shades of pink, sunrise yellows and stormy greens.

I must note here, that every inspiration process is different. After various case studies that I have carried out during my career as a designer and an artist, I have not identified anything one could call a recipe or a formula concerning how to use the sources of inspiration in the creative process. Instead, I have discovered countless ways that these sources of inspiration can operate and they are rarely as utopian as in the case of Monet. In contrast, inspiration processes can be revealing and produce critical thinking, in which the process and its outcome resembles a counter statement instead of a romantic attachment.

What was the impact of Monet for my artworks? His specific use of colours affected my colour palette and my subjects were somewhat comparable to his. The combination of vegetation and water, sky and reflections have been seen in other artworks countless times, but I produced landscapes directly drawn from his garden in Giverny. I incorporated these rather direct influences into my habitual grattage technique, a technique that combines a fervent rhythm with vigorous hand movements, which creates small repetitive areas of colours, comparable to small touches on the canvas. This again reminds me of Monet, whose signature impressionist repetitive and lively brushstrokes are particularly present in the waterlilies series. Regardless of Monet's impact, every gesture taken during my creative process was my own, every observation was made with my own eyes and then interpreted on the paper alone. Could somebody who does not know all this recognize Monet's impact in my works (Figure 13)? I doubt it.



Figure

13. Broken Flowers rug (2017, hand-tufted, 200cm x 135cm). Photo by Hanna-Kaisa Korolainen, 2017.

The Canadian theorists and philosophers Erin Manning and Brian Massumi discuss sources of inspiration in their book *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* in relation to Israeli-born painter Bracha Ettinger (1948–). Inspiration sources are named *friends* that shape the environment in which the artistic process happens. Examples of such friends are cited: a painting by Monet, a book by Da Vinci, a cup of iced coffee or a song by Radiohead. Sources of inspiration, here called friends, guests or intercessors, take part and act as fuel for the process. They operate at the levels of thinking and feeling; the painting of Monet is there not to be seen but to be *thought-felt*. Consequently, Ettinger claims that the overall process of artistic practice is not about seeing or being visual (Manning & Massumi, 2014, 64-65). The word ‘friend’ evokes a presence that surpasses the human; it is a force that it is conceived for the sake of the creative process. Its various roles include bringing changeable features to the process, presenting the outside world and embodying the process-to-be for the artist. Creative processes are difficult to explain with words or even sketches before they happen. Manning and Massumi deduce that there is a connection between the source of inspiration and the artist, Ettinger’s painting and the image of Monet’s *Water Lily Pond*. Nevertheless, this connection is not an obvious one; Monet’s painting is green whereas Ettinger’s is

violet. The connection seems invisible – it lies in the feeling and in the light that vibrates in both works. (Ibid, p. 66, pp. 68-69.)

I need to feel deeply attached to my sources of inspiration at the beginning of my creative process to be able to forget about them later when the process develops. The process itself is a long series of crushes and unavoidable disappointments, the more the action of creative work occupies my thinking the better I can enjoy the various phases of the process and have the feeling that it is running smoothly. Creating woven or tufted textiles often demands careful planning beforehand. Original sketches need to be simplified, yarns and other materials selected and purchased and many other decisions made. The ‘happening’ of the creative process takes place first in the imagination and only later it is directly guided by the making and the materials. I approach the process of making in a very concrete manner and plan the multiple phases carefully. This demanding thinking process is constantly enlightened by the company of my sources of inspiration. Deleuze noted that thinking is creating (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 69), and for me thinking is generated from the enlightened encounter with sources of inspiration. For me, inspiration is everything.

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12. Photo by Author, 2017
13. Photo by Author, 2017

⁴ Figure 1: Inspiration board composed by photographs of Claude Monet in person, his garden and paintings, *Orangerie* museum and my photographs of Monet's garden. From top left clock-wise towards centre: *Orangerie* museum in 1930's (<http://www.musee-orangerie.fr/fr/article/histoire-du-cycle-des-nymphes>); A photograph showing the pond over water lilies in Monet's house in Giverny, 2015 (Photo by me); Monet in his garden early 20th century (<http://art-monet.com/photo.html>); Peonies in Giverny, 2015 (Photo by me); Monet in his atelier in 1920's (<http://petitechinoise.blogspot.fi/2011/07/monet-and-his-fascination-with-japanese.html>); Monet's house and garden, 2015 (Photo by me); Tulips in Monet's garden, 2015 (Photo by me); Detail of Monet's water lilies painting in *Orangerie* museum (<https://impressionnistes.wordpress.com/tag/monet/page/2/>); Monet in his garden, early 20th century (<http://www.musee-orangerie.fr/fr/article/histoire-du-cycle-des-nymphes>).