

Pictures at an exhibition. A walk around Mauri Gross' studio

By Triinu Soikmets

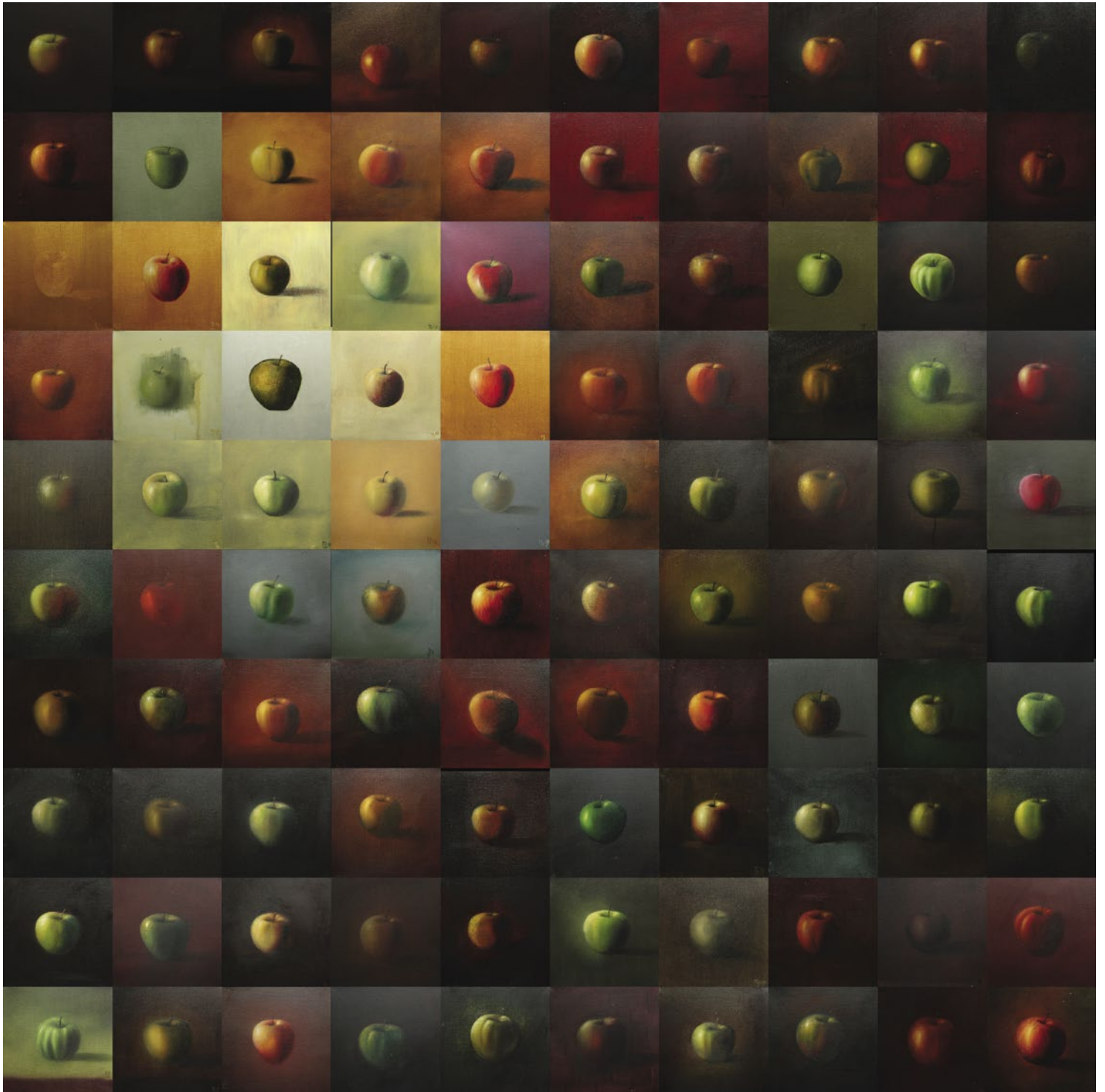


Photo by Stanislav Stepashko

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Portfolio

Mauri Gross



Work Field, 2014
Oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm



Family, 2022
Oil on canvas, 124 x 124 cm



Solstice, 2022
Oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm



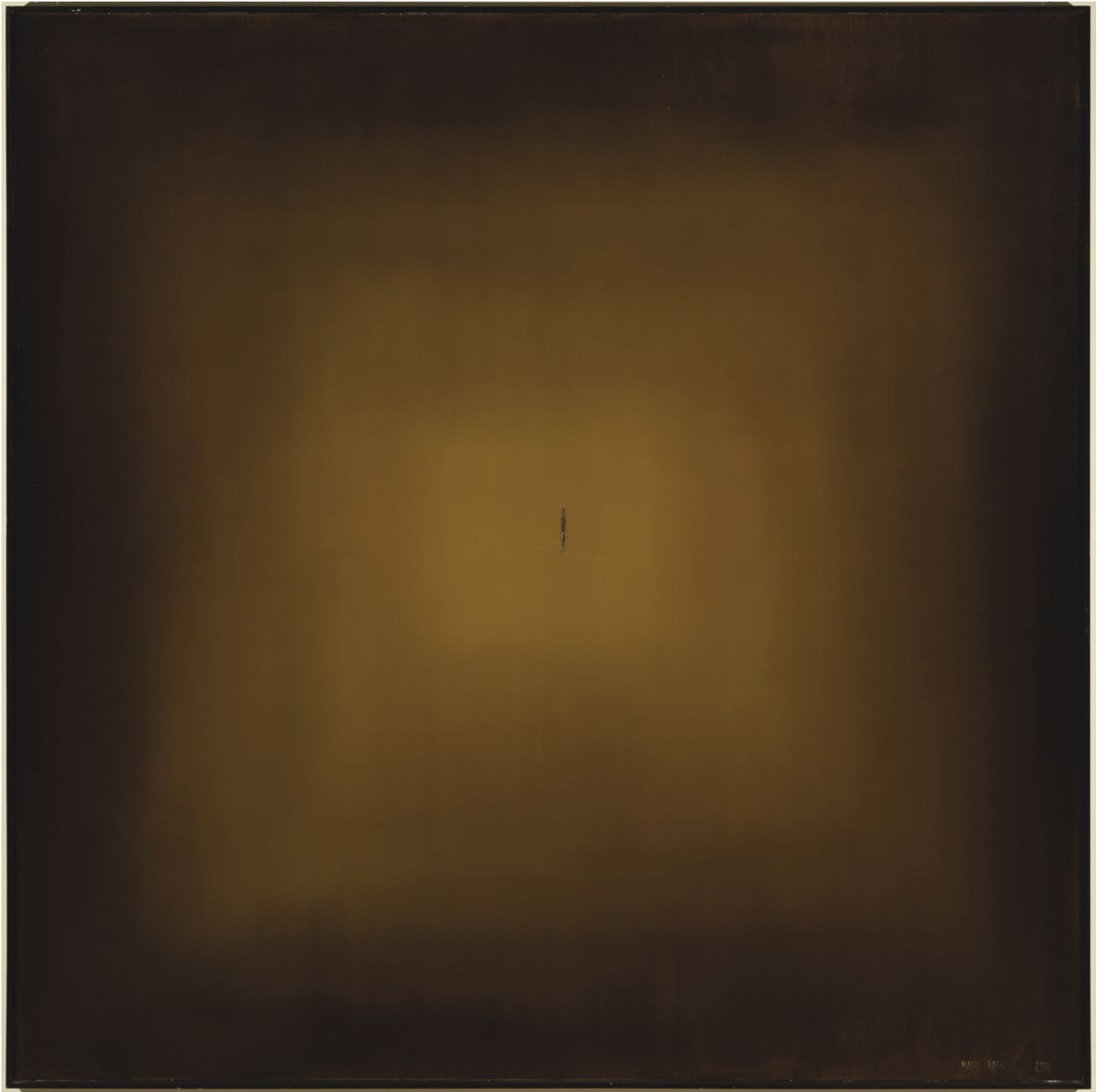
Confirmation Flowers, 2019
Oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm



Camp Flowers, 2015
Oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm



Fine Tuning, 2018
Oil on canvas, 88 x 88 cm



Gold is Fine in Any Weather, 2015
Oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm



Belarus-blue, 2017
Oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm



Modest Mussorgsky's suite of piano pieces "Pictures at an Exhibition" from 1874 is a walk amidst images painted with sounds. Today, 150 years later, it becomes a framework in the studio of artist Mauri Gross, amidst brushstrokes and the smell of turpentine. While Mussorgsky played with high and low registers to present opposing ideas, Gross has his own means of doing so.

Abstract from afar, filigree from up close, this is one of the contradictory keys to approaching the paintings of Mauri Gross. His trademark is the large format, which must be handled with the same skill as a miniature, but with the added consideration that any flaws are more visible. Combining a masterful technique, the philosophy behind it, and uncompromising craftsmanship, the result is a multi-faceted painting that, when viewed from different perspectives, creates a coherent whole.

"Format is like social order," says Gross, citing the 1990s as an example of when this order also changed in art. Socialist realism was a thing of

the past, and performance, video, and digital print were on the rise. "But if you don't master the format, it doesn't speak," he says, pointing out that change for change's sake is hollow if it has no substance or aesthetic quality.

Indeed, Gross has remained faithful to a tradition of painting that goes back to the "Pallas style" of the 1920s, where the emphasis was on disciplined work, on finding a balance between warm and cold tonality, but also on light. Having worked as a scenographer, among other things, he is well aware of the importance of light and lighting.

"Daylight, general light, floodlighting," he says in his studio, which is bathed in evening darkness, listing the factors that influence both the experience of a work of art in the exhibition hall and its creation. "You can tell with 99% accuracy whether an artist was right- or left-handed by the ratio of light to shadow in a picture," he says. Some of his paintings also encapsulate the spotlight itself, as if composed of it alone. In contrast to this magical minimalism, which demands concentration, there is the exuberance of his "**Confirmation Flowers**" series, which brings us back to the theatricality of the stage.



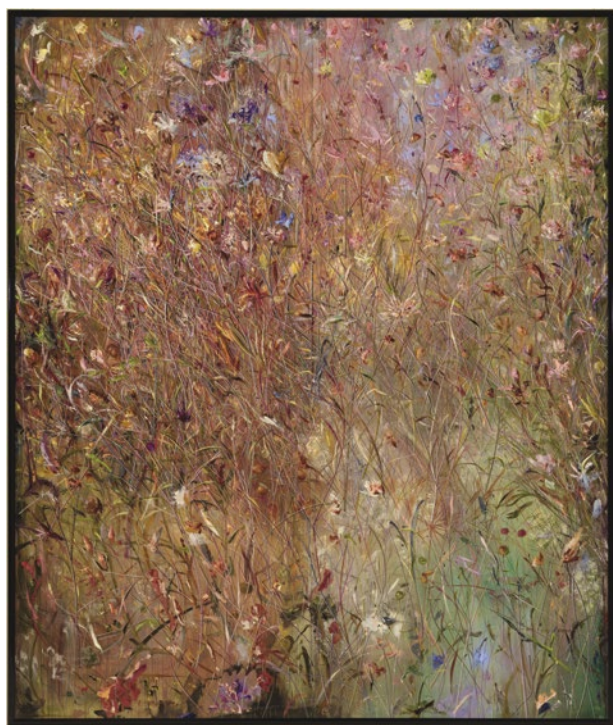
Photos by Stanislav Stepashko

The view from his attic studio to the apartment building across the garden is a work of art in its own right — not only does it disappear into the evening darkness with the studio, but its windows are lit one by one. The scene is reminiscent of Mati Unt's novel "Autumn Ball", although, in fact, at the moment of our conversation, we have just welcomed the arrival of spring, which is the best time to paint in terms of light. Gross has also captured the changing of the seasons in his series "**Solstice**", which reminds us that, in addition to the summer and winter solstices of Midsummer and Christmas, time also changes in spring and autumn. The same is true of the switch from morning to evening. Again, these are a couple of contradictions that Gross also reflects in his work. "Nature is ruthless, it is born and dies in turn," he says, explaining the inevitable cycle of time and life through these opposites, which he witnesses daily in the garden view from his studio window.

Another unavoidable prerequisite for becoming and being an artist is, in his eyes, perception of religiosity, if only because a significant part of art history has been created in a sacred context — in the form of altar and ceiling paintings, portraits, and woodcarvings of saints. Without knowing and learning about such art history, without respecting the Creator's legacy, one cannot be a creator.

"We live in a Christian cultural space without even realising it," Gross says, summing up the idea. Not that he necessarily paints saints himself, but a certain sacredness is pervasive in his work. Also pervasive in his work are tiny blood-red cherries — he can paint them as a mass scene or as a detail, tucked into the worn pair of boots that symbolise the ever-present workspace of a common man.

In Gross' eyes, painting is work that is serious and systematic in equal measure, in which discipline and order are inevitable, and there is no mystical evil or good spirit about it. He does, however, allow chance, or even fate, to intervene in his work; in other words, he does not give up when things go unplanned, but turns them to his advantage. For example, he was lifting another one of his large-format paintings with a minimalist motif through the window because he couldn't fit it through the door. The painting, however, caught the wind, turning into a sail, and flew off and landed in a tree, ripping a hole in the canvas. Gross accepted this natural intervention, dragged the painting down with its new hole, and put it on show with this new feature anyway. The large mustard-yellow painting with the tiny hole is titled "**Gold is Fine in Any Weather**", and it remains his favourite to this day. He will never sell it.



Vegan Salute, 2020
Oli in canvas, 200 x 157 cm

In addition to cherries, Gross' serial creations are inspired by plants, blades of grass, bushes, and canopies, which he also draws from his own garden and from nature in general. Although his paintings appear to be photorealistic, he does not paint directly from a photograph, as he would consider that retelling a story. And, as always, he is captivated by contrasting colours, such as the contrasting red branches on a green background. In turn, both the painter and the viewer can get caught up in the structure of the grasses, creating a kind of optical illusion and sea-sickness effect. The symbolic and formal beauty of all kinds of vegetation is also reflected in his new series "**Vegan Salute**", which speaks to the fact that even if you ban fireworks in the city, you cannot ban beauty. "A title won't save a bad piece of work, but a catchy title helps the viewer to make sense of its content," he hints.

Going straight back to the beginning, to the format of art, Gross admits that in his twenties he too had to make choices and reorient himself in changing circumstances. At that age, perhaps all a painter has to do is gather experience and baggage, search for and formulate his own principles, which he can only begin to refine later. "Art is an occupation for the second half of life", he says, beautifully concluding our walk around his studio and his thoughts on the human life cycle itself.