

Chris Sheridan back in Korpo "Luonnon Lumoa"

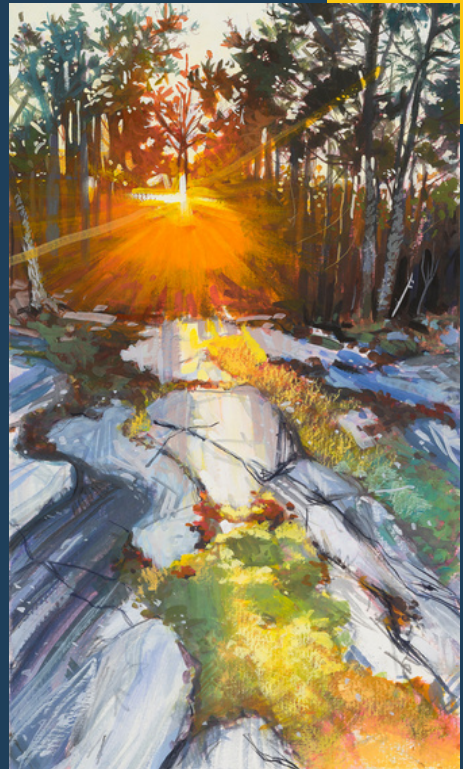
// Hello Chris, and welcome back to Korpo. You were AARK between October and November 2019. You wrote an article for Korpo Bladet in issue 32 (January 2020) and a follow-up in issue 36 (May 2020). Can you tell us a bit about your first contact with Korpo, and what happened after you left?

As I said back in 2019, "I wasn't ready for you, Korpo...I've never experienced the type of welcome you provided. Your charm, generosity, eagerness to help, and genuine curiosity in what I do, quickly changed my perception from Korpo as an unknown place to one that felt like a home among friends." That sentiment has not changed in the least, although it seems like everything else in the world has.

When I left Finland in mid-December of 2019, fresh from the monumental experience I had at AARK, my eyes were laser focused on the future. What I could do with all of the inspiration I had gathered, and the solid body of 21 paintings that I had created at AARK? I submitted the work to a call-for-entry from the Royal Nebeker Art Gallery in Astoria, OR (USA), and in February 2020 I was awarded a solo show that would feature new paintings chronicling my time in the Finnish Archipelago. By March 2020, everything

67 went entirely sideways: our nation changed with violent social and political unrest, and the world changed with Covid. I found myself mired in emotional and psychological illness, and spent the next five months sequestered in my basement studio focused on creating 40 oil paintings of the archipelago (mostly Korpo, with a bit of Jurmo and Utö in the mix). This proved to be enough paintings to fill the entire 2200 ft² (205 m²) gallery for my show "Rediscovering Silence", and a few extras for a group show at The Seattle Art Museum Gallery.

In the end, Covid restrictions eliminated any possibility of anyone ever seeing the entire collection of paintings together, as they all hung on the walls of empty galleries with doors locked to the public. In the years since, nearly all of those 61 paintings (from AARK and afterwards combined), each titled with the names and locations of the various places throughout the Archipelago, have moved on to new homes and continue to tell the story of my magical time living in Korpo.



/ Two and a half years later, you are back in Korpo with your wife (who is also a painter), and this time you have spent two entire months here. What made you come back to AARK?

In the May 2020 issue of the *Bladet*, I had this to say: “With all of this external and internal chaos, the act of painting this body of work has taken on a fundamentally new role. Before, it was an exercise in effectively recreating a cherished experience, and a beautiful, story-rich landscape. Now, with the cloud of the virus hovering overhead, and within the confines of my dreary, small basement studio, the act of painting these places is somehow transporting me back to my residency in Finland. As if in a vivid dream, as the paintings progress, I remember exactly where I was: the chilly nip of cold upon my face, the delicate sound of frost melting in the early light of day, the warmth of the hearty fish soup from my thermos, and the alluring yet haunting smell of the endless cycle of death, decay, and subsequent rebirth that only a place entirely shrouded in moss and lichen can bring. I am no longer surrounded by noise and fear; I am somehow in the potent embrace of solitude and silence that I came to love so deeply.” And this was certainly true.

My experience in Finland not only became the inspiration for arguably the best body of work I have ever created, but also an essential mechanism for healing my wounds, a balm that soothed the experience of isolation and fear that was Covid in the US.

But I think there is another reason for returning as well. There is something, a presence of some sort, that speaks to me from within the trees, especially in Korpo. I found it peculiar and mysterious in 2019, but it was unmistakable this time. Each time the door to AARK closed behind me and I set out into the trees, or along a shore, my free will ended roughly around where I was headed, and I relinquished control to the whispers on the wind that always seemed to guide me where I inevitably needed, albeit without always knowing that I needed, to be. I don’t believe it was chance; it was more of a guiding hand, that of a wise, incomprehensibly old being, or knowledge with clear expectations that I listen, and learn. I would find myself perfectly

situated to witness fleeting spectacles of nature, which so often in my haste to get from one place to the next, are completely missed. This entity taught me to slow down, to allow the energies surrounding me to be absorbed, and actually, and fully, experience the connection to everything. Perhaps it was remaining still enough to hear the tinkling sound of snowflakes upon the brittle dead leaves of the birches, observing the almost imperceptible touches upon the glassy sea by the wingtips of a passing swan leaving a trail of delicate ringlets in its path, or the recent evening I was sitting at the shore of Retais Träsk and the perceived nudge at my shoulder causing me to stand and witness the partially eclipsed full moon rising above the trees as I turned. There is something out there, quietly calling for those who will listen, and its sole intent is to reconnect us to the wonder of the nature we have long neglected. It has had a profound affect upon my art, causing me to paint the essence and experiential quality of a particular spot in nature, as opposed to simply the representation of an interesting place.

Either way I look at it, I am certain I will be back once again.



"Luonnon Lumoa" series by Chris Sheridan - gouache on watercolor board

/ Can you tell us how you have spent your time here? How did you spend your time? What was different from the last time? Were there any similarities?

Many things were the same, and yet entirely different. As with last time, I spent many days exploring the island by foot. I spent countless hours trudging through the trees with a backpack full of camera gear, extra layers, a good number of snacks, and GPS in my hand to assure I didn't get too close to anyone's house. I would wander until a particular spot requested that I stay, observe, and learn from it.

In my first trip, from late September to Mid-December, it was wonderfully cold, the leaves were briefly ablaze with reds and yellows, the moss and lichen was unbelievably thick and damp, and foraging mushrooms was a must. Then everything slipped into an eerie gray, the silence was dense, death was everywhere, and all was shrouded in a thick darkness. Rain, shine, snow, or darkness, it didn't matter, my heart and curiosity needed to be outside.

This time around everything was alive, sound filled the air, the leaves absolutely glowed with vivid green, everything was touched by an abundance of crisp light...and there were so many ticks. A shocking amount really, and this definitely played a role in where and how far I explored. But just as before, I yearned to be within the embrace of nature (ticks be damned, sometimes), and I ventured on.

Both times around, there were a number of days spent drawing and painting (and then slipping outside again). In my first stay I created 21 paintings in 20 days, my second saw 19 paintings in about 17.

And what good is traveling half way around the world to another country if you don't engage with the locals? I can say wholeheartedly, that I have made great friends on these trips, and it has been due to the social engagement. The first time around in the fall and early winter, it was dinners, so many of them. Dinners at what would prove to be friends' houses, a number of the community potlucks at Skägårdcentrum, and Nestor (whoever made that

moose stew, I still talk about it to this day), and the many at AARK with the other artists. This time in the spring, it was all activities. I participated in the auction raising money for Doctors Without Borders in Ukraine at the Kulturkrock I Korpoström, I helped Aaron and Ida-Kajsa set up their garden beds, did a workshop with children at Jan's art classes, took part in the talko with Sara at Naawa, went to Renja and Benkku's place to row a boat on the lake, have fires on the shore, and sing and dance well into the rather sunny night, watched my beloved Benkku during the local revy, had a great potluck with Sandra, Tuuli, and the visiting artists of the Barefoot Path, and a great artist talk with Pia and Anna.

Another major component of this trip was the engagement and bonding with the Ukrainian artists. I have an endless amount of respect for their infectious laughter, sense of humor, good-naturedness, and unbridled dedication to their craft in the face of such brutal hostility at home. In particular, so many hours were spent in the company of Olga and Nikita. They have permanently changed my life for the better, and my love for them will endure for all time.

/ Let's focus on your art. How do you feel your time here has been in terms of your art?

It has been incredible, as simple as that. As I mentioned above, I have a deep connection to the nature in the Archipelago, and it shows in the art that I've created. All of the paintings have spoken to the allure and mystery of the place, and they are alive with its being. This is my own opinion, of course, but the many people that have seen the art, the gallerists and viewers alike, have said roughly the same thing. I feel that people have enjoyed my work in the past, but can really feel emotion in this work. Between the two trips and the time between, I have created 80 paintings, and it really is the best work I have ever done.

/ What was the difference between last time's painting of an early winter Korpo and this time's painting of a late winter and early spring Korpo?

The consistent factor between the two is the remarkable light... and then there is a wonderful dichotomy of color. In the fall/winter the shadows are endlessly long as the sun is dancing in such close proximity to the horizon all

day. This light absolutely sets on fire the exquisite red and yellow of the fall leaves, and then turns the stark, leafless gray trees into haunting sentinels raking the sky with bony fingers, and setting shadows free like chilling specters of darkness. The deep greens and glowing blue of the lichen is offset by the earthy red and ochre of the dead leaves and bracken.

Whereas in the spring, it's remarkable—the shadows are still rather long, but the intensity of the light is ten-fold. The leaves have a heavenly glow of rich green, and when the wind blows, the shadows cause the highlights to look like glistening sprites in a frenzied dance piercing the eyes in a radiant blast of silver. The fields have the thickest grass I have ever seen, like massive flowing tides of rich green in the wind. The deep, striking blue of the sky offset by the whimsical streaks of cirrus clouds is spellbinding. But perhaps my favorite, the romantic chemistry between the pale earthy red of the granite above the waterline, and the vibrant red and green below it.

And of course, lest I forget, the unequivocal magnificence of the sunset, the golden and blue hours, both in the fall and spring; I don't even have the vocabulary to describe them. If you weren't paying attention in the fall, the light was gone and you were left alone in the dark. But in the spring, the sun begrudgingly and slowly saunters towards the horizon, and upon setting, the splendor continues from rich gold, to an electrifying blue until the marine twilight slowly materializes in the wee hours after midnight. You feel as though you've spent an eternity in Elysium in the process.

/ Can you tell us a bit about the red fabric you included in some of your paintings?

The red fabric which has gradually manifested itself into my work since my first time in Finland speaks to the act of storytelling and encompasses my own story. It hints at folkloric tales and legend and also represents the mental wellbeing of myself, inviting the viewer to return to a state of wonderment and enchantment while serving as a visceral symbol of personal healing.



/ What are your plans for the paintings when you come back home?

Now that I'm home the painting of the Archipelago continues. Kate and I (www.protagestudio.com) have been awarded a show at the Seattle Art Museum Gallery in Seattle, WA (USA). The show will feature all of the work we completed while at AARK this time around, as well as an entire collection of new drawings and paintings continuing that body of work. I think it is entirely possible that by year's end (2023) I will have completed over 100 paintings of the Archipelago, the lion's share being of Korpo, since 2019.



I completed my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in illustration at The Ringling College of Art and Design in 1999, followed by a Master's degree in painting at the Academy of Art University in 2003.

I'm an award-winning artist and have shown my work both nationally and internationally, including shows in Finland and Morocco. I'm currently represented by the Seattle Art Museum Gallery.

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