

To say that Susanna (b.1952) is a world traveller is an understatement. Having lived on four different continents, Susanna brings her universal perspective to the everyday events of her current home in Penang, Malaysia. Born in Geraldton, Australia, to Finnish parents, she has studied under great art masters that have made her the artist she is today.

## **Susanna Hernesniemi**

### **Glocalisation in Abstract Art**

After time spent in Denmark, Germany, Canada, and Sweden, where she met her husband, Penang is where she has settled. There, Susanna found a wonderful home to develop her artistic self, a place that had also fascinated literature giants such as Somerset Maugham, Joseph Conrad, and Rudyard Kipling.

Even in her early school years, Susanna knew that she wanted to be an artist. Sadly, this was not to be until much later. In her home village in the Finnish countryside, being an artist was equalled to being a poor person doomed to beg for food their entire life. Despite that, Susanna was lucky to have had **Justus Sarisalo** as her art teacher. An established Finnish artist, he was a major influence in her early years in art. Even now she fondly remembers how Sarisalo brought his students outdoors; sitting on riverbanks and sketching the river and landscapes, a truly experimental time for them.

Susanna credits her open mindedness for being able to live in completely different places in terms of culture and lifestyle. When

asked what keeps her in Penang, she said it is the benign personalities of the Malaysian people. However, despite having lived there for years, her perspective of the world hasn't changed much. While she is inspired by her surroundings, she tends to rely more on that universal perspective her travels have inspired.

Having lived in so many places, one wonders which of her old homes Susanna misses the most. However, she says that her home is wherever she is with her husband, and while she is happy in Penang, she does miss her daughters, both studying in Denmark. This separation has no doubt crept into the reaches of her paintings.

As the years went by, Susanna had the liberty to meet many great artists and art teachers, under whose tutelage she has experimented and struggled to find her own art personality. One of her art teachers in Denmark advised her, "You have to paint something that is you." It was years later that she understood what he had meant: Sincerity and honesty in our work. >>









*Artist Susanna Hernesniemi*

And that is how she became an abstract artist. Susanna's work commonly features people and nature conservation against unidentifiable locations that give us a sense of exploring the unknown, likely something she does too when travelling to new places.

When she works, Susanna gets images from newspapers and magazines, changing their shapes or sizes before copying it unto pre-painted canvasses. This creates the look of collages. Lately, she has begun drawing and cutting out her own images, combining them with found images. In her latest works, she used this method to produce trees to go along with her human images to symbolise her important subject: conservation of nature.

One of the most rewarding aspects of her work is the satisfaction from completing a painting; especially true for works that were difficult to finish and needed to be put aside temporarily.

Susanna believes in building a relationship with her ideas and subjects. Not having the detachment that many artists favour likely stems from how passionate she is about an issue. She believes all artworks need to have a clear expression of ideas; otherwise, there is no point to it, which is why Susanna works hard to portray her messages to her viewers. Thus, her own vision and concept are the most important elements in her work.

Changing the Real (2008), Susanna's project that began in China in late 2006, has a more personal perspective to its inception. Highlighting a political issue, this interesting array of humans and animals was exhibited at Konstfrämjandet Art Gallery, Karlstad, Sweden, in April 2008.

For someone dedicated to humanity and nature, it is no surprise that Susanna is involved in philanthropic work. In October 2006, Susanna donated 34 artworks to the Chinese Red Cross Foundation in Beijing, which sponsored the *Art For Life* charity exhibition at Anni Art Gallery. Proceeds from this high-profile contribution have gone to help children with heart diseases in the Heilongjiang Province.

Susanna also teaches experimental art for children at St. Joseph's orphanage on Friday afternoons; the most important thing she has done during her stay in Penang. Seeing the children's expressions after they've created an artwork is what keeps her returning there. Being an artist who teaches has also resulted in lessons about her own self. She said that she understands herself more, and what is important to her when she works.

When asked what an artist's role in society is, Susanna says that art is the medium an artist uses to express something that cannot be expressed in words. With their talent, artists help develop values and innovative ideas in society, even shaping culture.

Susanna recently participated in the 20th anniversary exhibition at The House of Artist in Silkeborg, Denmark. Her two featured works revolve around the relationship between people and the complexities of society, with which we are very familiar with in Malaysia.





