

Kaarina Kaikkonen
And It Was Empty

Gallery/Study Guide

The Finnish artist Kaarina Kaikkonen is a visionary sculptor who uses found objects such as second-hand clothing, toilet paper, women's shoes, and potato sacks to create moderate to large-scale installations that articulate the architectural or open space that contains her work.

For the UW Art Museum installation, Kaikkonen has constructed a wall-scaled work consisting of used and discarded men's jackets, an object for which she is most universally known. The jackets incorporate references to their previous owners - from body shape and size to persona and business - and also refer on a personal level to the artist's deceased father. The sheer number of jackets used to assemble the installation makes associations with the masses. Kaikkonen's art is transcendent. The demarcations between painting, sculpture, and architecture are blurred and the symbolic and emotive powers of her installations are profound and complex.

She has created site-specific installations indoors and outdoors in unusual places in her native country and throughout the western world. The visual impact of these large sculptural projects is extremely dramatic, almost theatrical, because of their scale, the materiality of the jackets – the softness, textures, muted colors, different styles – and the meanings conveyed by their presence in the absence of their wearers. Kaikkonen has painstakingly sewed fragments of material by hand to form a horizon line in the middle of the wall. The line creates an unexpected illusion of depth and perspective traditionally associated with classical painting and drawing . . .

- *Empty Jackets: The Presence of Absence*, Julia P. Herzberg

The work is uncompromising and original, a testimony to her accomplishment as a foremost contemporary artist.

The first step in understanding any work of art is to take the time to look closely. The large scale of *And It Was Empty* provides easy viewing while you consider the following questions.

- The artist has used hundreds of men's' suit coats to make this piece. Has she used the whole jacket, or has she used parts of the jackets?
- Does it make a difference whether she uses the whole coat or parts of the coats? Why? Describe what you see.
- What colors does she use? Does she add any color or does she use only the color of the fabrics making up the coats?

- How do the colors and the coat shapes direct our eyes when viewing the art work? Where are our eyes directed?
- How do you think she constructed this piece? Can you find any clues?

The suit coats used in this exhibit came from many sources. Kaikkonen completed a great deal of pre-exhibit work before coming to Wyoming from Finland. She shipped three pallets of jackets already attached to a wire grid. In the meantime the art museum collected suit coats from a variety of resources here in Laramie. Once the artist arrived she sorted the coats by colors, and made the determination that more lighter-colored jackets were needed. Working with the UW Theatre Department, Museum staff was able to locate additional coats to complete the piece.

Kaikkonen states that as the artist she is only part of the equation, and that the viewer completes the equation by bringing their own experiences and knowledge to understanding and interpreting the art she makes. It is only when the viewer has the opportunity to experience the work that it truly becomes art.

Sometimes, Kaikkonen uses her material like a painter does, and assembles her jackets into memory-laden, snow-covered fields and leaden skies. . . It is not possible to make a very wide variety of 'paintings' with jackets and shirts, since the spectrum of men's clothing is quite monochromatic and sober. The jackets refer directly to human absence and presence, to death and longing. . .

- Timo Valjakka, Director of the Finnish Institute in London)

- What does this work suggest to you – does it make you think of anything you might have experienced yourself, or remind you of something else?
- Does it seem as if the museum gallery is part of the installation?
- Do you feel that you are a part of the art installation?
- When you first looked at this exhibit, what was your first reaction to it and your first thought?
- After considering it longer, what are you feeling now? Are you most interested in the way Kaikkonen arranges the materials, or in the fact that so many empty coats – coats that once belonged to someone and so, in essence have their own past life – have been used to create this art work?
- Could the artist have created the same intensity of experience if she had used fewer coats?

Kaikkonen believes this piece works on two levels for her. The first is very personal and related to her father's death when she was just a young girl. Her memories of him include seeing him wearing a white shirt, tie and suit coat. The second level of experience relates to nature and landscape. She believes that nature will outlast us all and that in many ways we are insignificant and temporal when compared with nature. Her use of recycled materials and the forms her work takes underscores this and continues to be a continuing focus for her art.

