

## Short Messages From Life

Marko Mäetamm makes work that plumbs the very depths of his heart and mind, revealing innermost thoughts, fears and doubts, with an imagination sometimes a little too personal to be easy on the eye. **Rhiannon Lowe** caught up with the Estonian artist, just before he left for a six-month residency in the US.

**Rhiannon Lowe:** Are you still living in Tallinn? You've mentioned you have some new projects and a residency in the US.

**Marko Mäetamm:** I'm going to America in August – I've been invited to be the Christian A. Johnson Artist-in-Residence at Colgate University [in New York]. I have two large solo shows there – an interdisciplinary installation, *I Want To Tell You Something*, in the Picker Art Gallery and a video installation, *Something Moving*, in the Clifford Gallery; and I have a show in Tallinn City Gallery, next spring.

I am currently working on two new projects – one is a kind of blog-like thing. I do acrylic paintings or drawings on 70 x 100cm paper, which comment on what is going on inside me and outside me. Just mapping things down without positioning myself. Short comments – like we make on social media – about everything that touches me somehow. Anything goes, even what I see in my dreams, or what pops up in my head when I meditate. It's a blog, or a diary, made up of short notes. I do comic-like works too that don't have any images, just simple texts.

I also have a collaboration on the go with two Canadian artists, Rita Bozi and Ken Cameron. The story we are developing is about my grandfather, who escaped from Estonia during the Second World War and ended up living in Toronto. My father managed to visit him two months before my grandfather's death, in 1978, spending one month in Canada with him. The project I am working on with Rita and Ken focusses on this short month.

**RL:** Have you worked collaboratively before?

**MM:** I worked with another artist, Kaido Ole, for some years, but that was more than a decade ago. We created a fake personality, John Smith, and were using this name as the alter ego of our collaboration, which was how we also represented Estonia at the Venice Biennale in 2003. Then, at one point, we both started to work more on our own stuff again and I haven't been working with anyone else since then. This new collaboration happened

in a very natural way. I had a show in the Estonian Art Museum, last summer, with US artist Raymond Pettibon, and Rita and Ken just happened to see it. They got in touch with me; it was obvious that we had quite a lot in common. I was just starting to think about my new project about my grandfather, and they really hooked onto it. I took it as a sign. I liked the projects Rita and Ken had been doing before, and I liked that they were from a slightly different field – they are both playwrights – and their practices are even more multidisciplinary than mine.

**RL:** When I saw their websites, I was very surprised; they appear very... confident and self-assured. I liked the thought of your work up in contrast to theirs. Perhaps it is just different worlds, the visual artist versus the writer/theatre person, and/or perhaps a European thing?

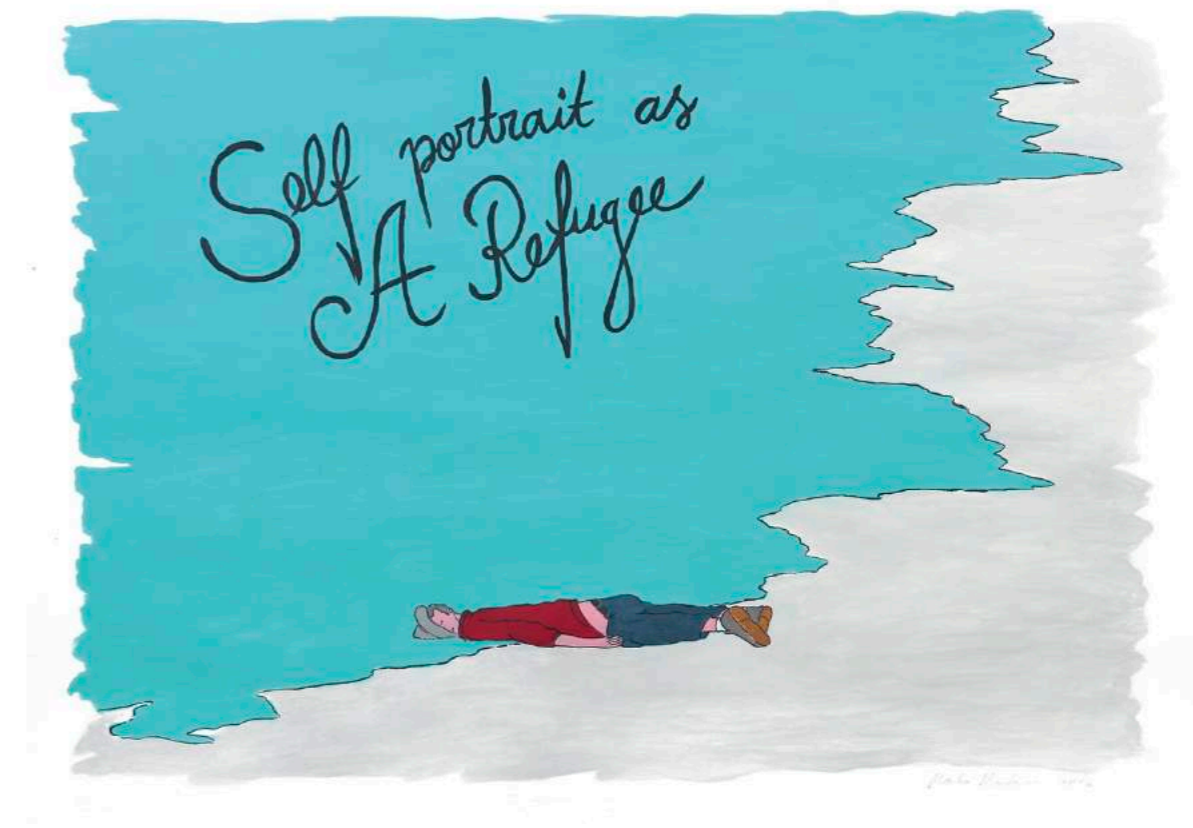
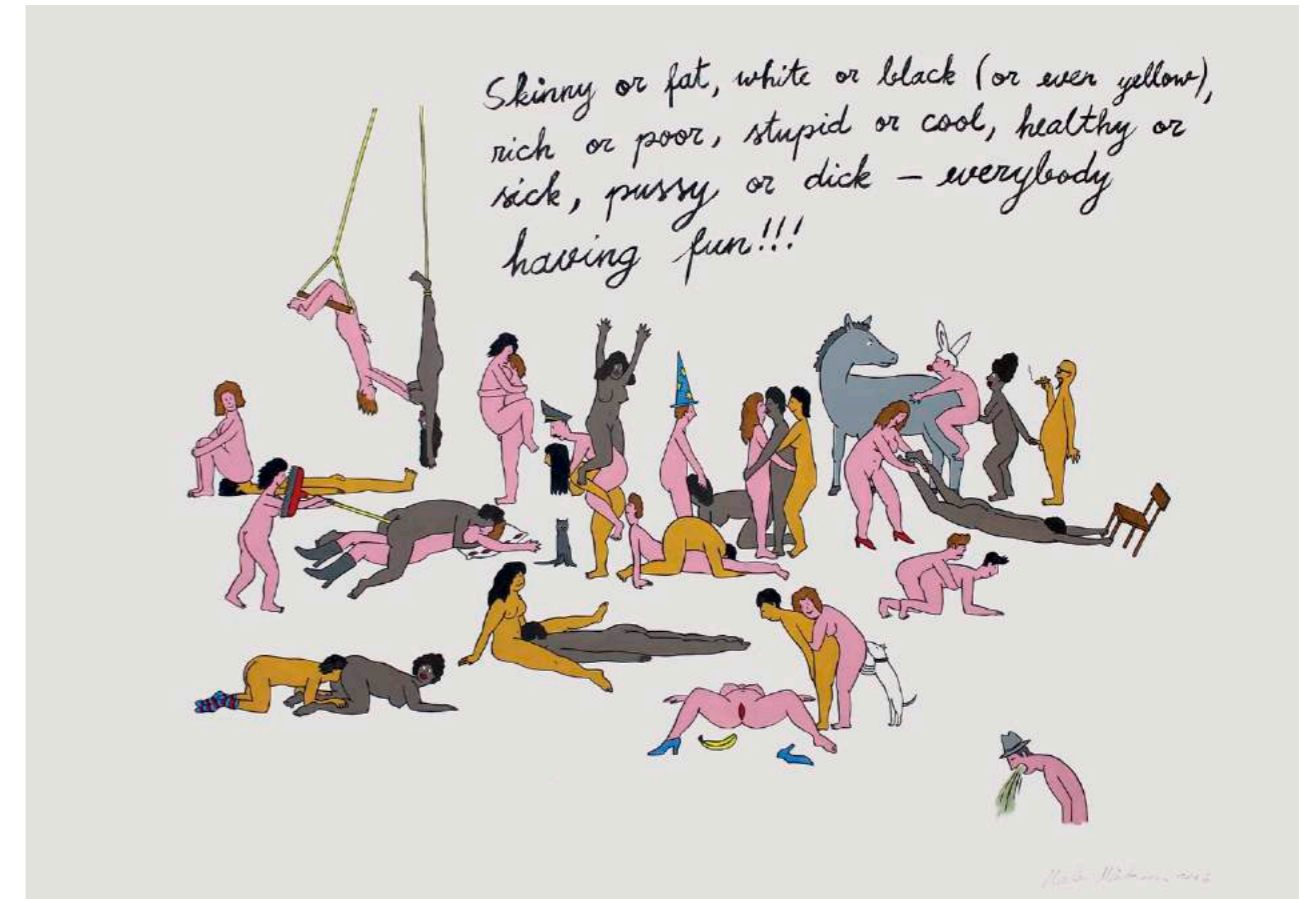
**MM:** I agree, it is a totally different world that Rita and Ken live in; their working methods are more rational and methodical – they seem even almost mathematical to me. I am taking it on as an experiment. I don't always feel comfortable with their approach, but I am curious.

**RL:** Is putting yourself in the position of someone else, for instance, your father, a new thing for you?

**MM:** This is the first time, after many years working with myself and with my own close family, and completely the first time to involve my father and grandfather into my art practice. I think it comes with age. I have also made a video about my mother, who died a couple of years back.

**RL:** I like the idea that age changes how you might approach your work. Do you also think it might be about wanting to know people better, perhaps even after they're gone, and building your own projected hopes and fears onto their lives?

**MM:** When you are young, you need to get to know yourself and there is no time →



above:  
*Everybody having fun*, Marko Mäetamm, 2016, acrylic on paper, size 70 x 100cm. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Tennikova & Kasela

left:  
*Self portrate as a refugee*, Marko Mäetamm, 2016, acrylic on paper, 70 x 100cm. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Tennikova & Kasela

Talking about the alphabet...



There are no many letters you can form with your asshole.

"O" is definitely one of them and probably the easiest to form.

for others. When you're older, you still want to get to know yourself, but you are looking for some additional information, and that comes through other people around you. The more you live, the more complex you become, I think. You understand that it is not only you in the picture, but you are just one piece of the puzzle.

**RL:** I'm interested in the mix of truth and fiction in your work, and where the lines lie. Are you trying to be more honest and truthful than, say, I might be, in a relationship? The thoughts of slaying your family for example [in *My Family*]; the very blunt, sometimes brutal, things you depict in your drawings and your stories. These things might cross other people's minds, but most people are not open about them.

**MM:** I always think that making art is too complicated and it's hard work just to make things up. Not trying to be honest in what you do seems a complete waste of time and energy. Making art has a strong therapeutic effect on me. I work with my fears and doubts

and worries, and moments that haunt me. I want my work to communicate, which means that I must be careful not to talk about things that make sense only to me.

**RL:** The universality of artwork – the hope and need to work with the personal, yet to bridge the gap to others' knowledge and understanding and experience – is that always a purposeful framework for how you approach your work? Do you mean that fiction and dishonesty break any connection?

**MM:** Fiction is not the same as dishonesty for me. I use fiction too, sometimes; I am not interested in pure documentation. Anything you do as an artist must first of all be interesting to others. If it is not then you are alone with your work. So, when I work, it is kind of like making a cocktail with these things so that it's strong enough, tastes good; and it must also look good, it must be inviting. Documentary mixed with a bit of fiction, plus a little bit of dishonesty if really necessary: on the rocks, stirred, —>



"I" is also quite simple. And that's pretty much it.

All the other letters in the alphabet are far too complicated.

Tales of Messenger

BOWIE

Marko Mäetamm

2016

I wrote you almost five minutes ago but you never replied.

I was in the toilet, sry...  
Having a shit

Ha ha!  
How's your stomach btw?

My stomach!

Yes, your stomach. How is it?

Stomach is good. Almost.

Almost...?

Yeah, I mean good colour;

Nice shape too

Pervert!

Ha ha! Shit is important you know

No, seriously. You had some shitting problems recently.

I mean stomach problems.

Yeah, I'm ok now. Takin these small white things you know

Small white things?

Sounds like thin white duke ;):)

David Bowie

Dead.

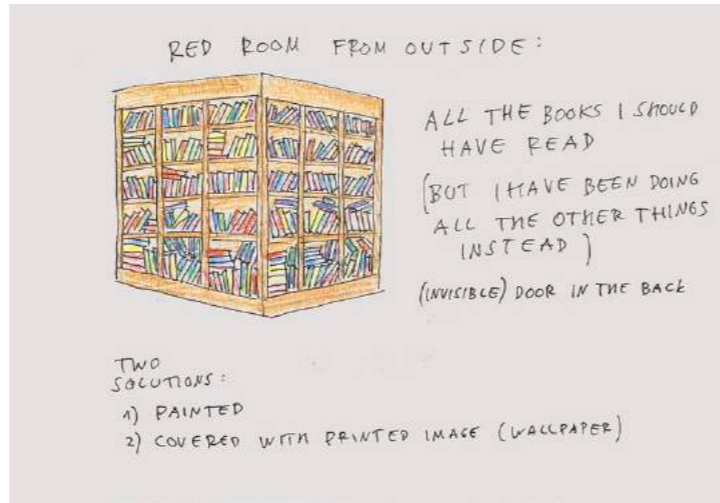
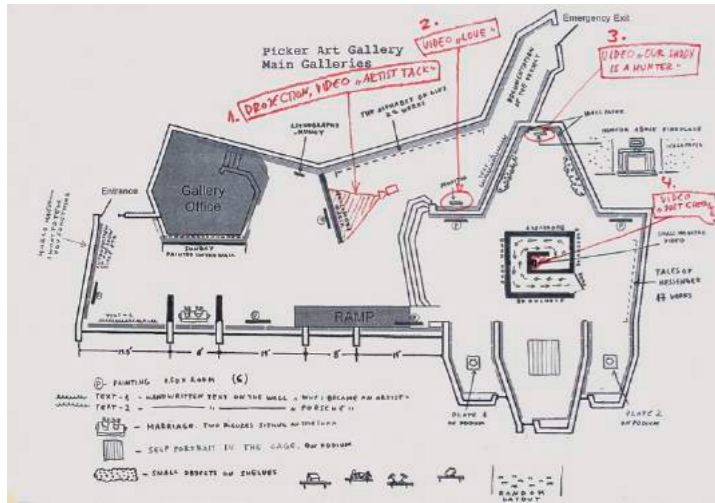
Yes. Dead

Sry  
Phone call

Ok!

above: *Talking about the alphabet*, Marko Mäetamm. 2016, acrylic on paper, two panels 70 x 100cm each. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Temnikova & Kasela

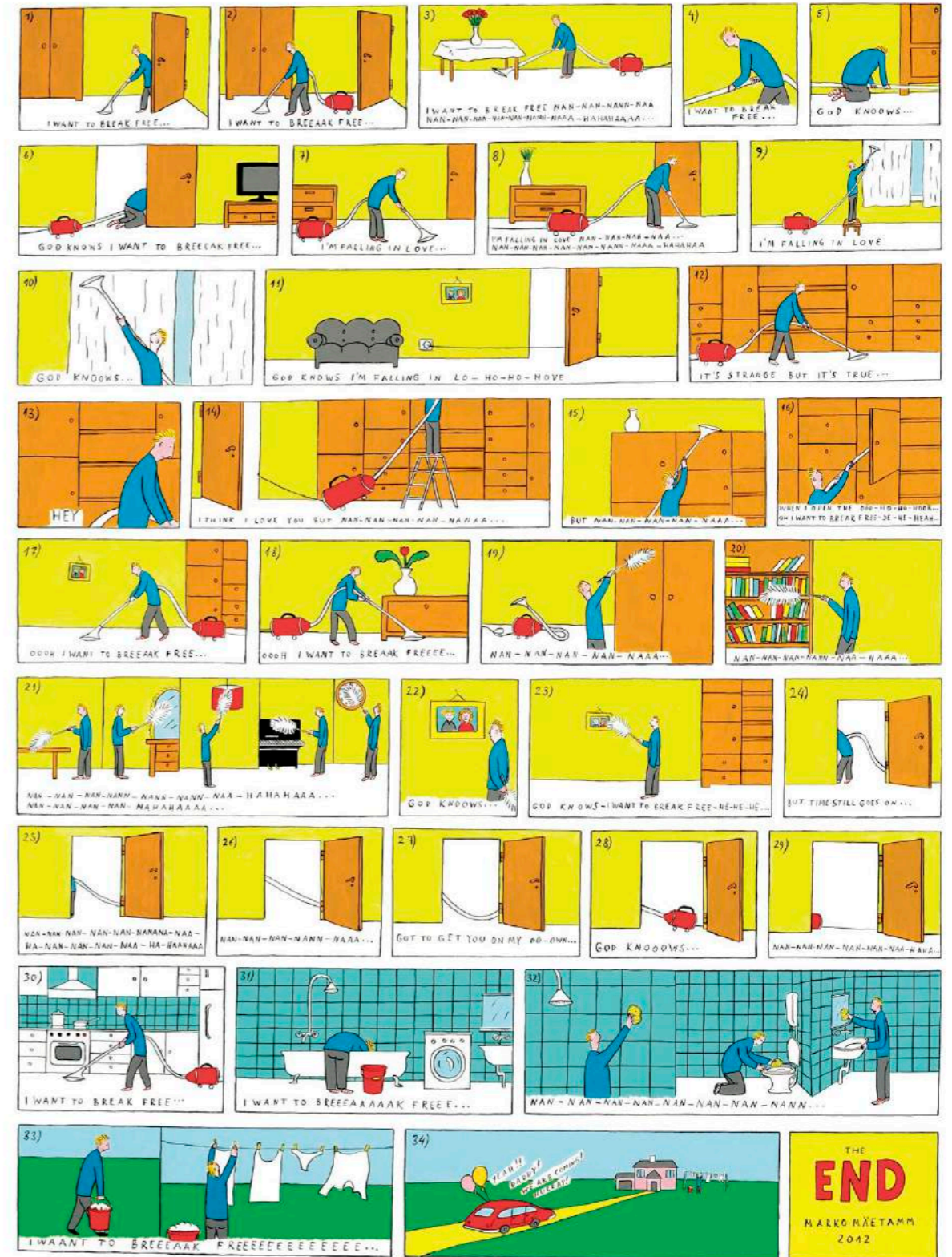
left: *Tales of Messenger. Bowie*, Marko Mäetamm. 2016, acrylic on paper, seven panels 29.7 x 21cm each. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Temnikova & Kasela



this page:  
proposed layout plans by Marko Mäetamm for his forthcoming exhibitions at Colgate University. Courtesy Marko Mäetamm

opposite:  
*I want to break free*, Marko Mäetamm, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 300 x 200cm. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Temnikova & Kasla

# I WANT TO BREAK FREE



not shaken. But the main ingredient is still documentary and autobiography.

**RL:** I am thinking of Steph Goodger and Julian Rowe and their project [elsewhere in this issue] based on a staged photo they found of the slaughter of the French Communards; and of Christian Boltanski's 1996 project in Halifax, creating an archive housing information about (and belongings of) former mill-workers at an old carpet factory. Early on he was obviously thinking about adding made-up information and spurious objects for effect. Previously, he recreated his own (idealised) childhood memories and activities... and he also wrote a suicide note and posted it to some people.

**MM:** Being honest is more like a moral thing to me. I don't want to cheat people, although I could do it. I could make things up, pretending I am telling the truth, but not doing it – I don't see why I should do it. Making art, or music, or writing books is taking responsibility for what you do, offering fair trade, not just playing with your audience. But bringing in elements of fiction is important, sometimes, for me just to make my originally true stories more powerful.

**RL:** I wonder if you're usually able to bring in artistic licence to your work as it is so very

personal. Will you feel as free to build on stories about your father and grandfather?

**MM:** It is kind of different, yet the same. When I talk about my father's story or my grandfather's story, or about how my father visited him in 1978, I use my point of view on it. So in the end this is still my belief. There is no wrong or right in that sense, and, again, the only frame or limit for me is ethics – what I find coherent, or correct to put in public. In that sense it is the same thing for me if I talk about my relationship with my wife, or my father's relationship with his father.

**RL:** Tell me how you started doing work about social media and the Internet? Might you use the medium itself – for example, MSN, or twitter, etc. – to make or disseminate work?

**MM:** What interests me much more than images, or the aesthetics of digital images, info streams or other things like that, is how the Internet and social media exchange alter our relationships and thinking, and what we talk about; how we can't vanish from each other because we're supposed to be available all the time, always online; and how it makes us feel more and more lonely. I also see similarities between keeping a blog and how my work develops – short messages from different moments of life, often not even

connected to each other. It creates continuity as a structure or working method.

Social media doesn't exist without people, so there is no point in talking about it as something in itself. We should focus on what it does inside us – how it breaks relationships, or creates new ones; how it occupies our minds, so that we kill hours just shuffling around online; how we'd rather chat on Messenger rather than make a call, or meet up in person. And, how it reshapes us.

**RL:** Will the pieces work on their own, do you think, or will they be more successful en masse? Are they part of a coherent whole?

**MM:** My works always function better if there is the whole installation, rather than singly, or just a few works. My ideas travel between different works and mediums.

**RL:** Are you going to be working with your friends in Canada in a similar way? I wondered if you might work on a play with them. When I first saw your pieces in Venice, I thought they seemed almost play-like.

**MM:** The way we work together is different. It needs more planning as there are three people involved, with divided tasks and shared responsibilities. The final project is going to be an installation rather than a →

play. My father's trip to visit his father lasted exactly one month. Then, two months later, my grandfather died. But this information is kind of borderless because it all comes together in my father's head – the time when my father was a kid and his father was still here, the years before his trip to Canada, and the time after that, and so on. When Rita, Ken and I work together, they can only work with what I give them. However, they have experience of living in the society my father visited in 1978, which creates a reality check for my father's stories, and my fantasy.

**RL:** Have you ever made a record? I wondered if you'd ever thought of doing your comic strip exchanges as spoken pieces.

**MM:** I write and use text in my work, but I haven't made any audio version of my text. My working language in my art practice is English, but this is not my mother tongue, so I am not that comfortable speaking it. But I am interested in sound; I have done performance and music... My band had a gig outside Tallinn Art Hall recently. Maybe one day, if I get an idea that is good only for an audio format, then I will definitely do it.

**RL:** Are you continuing with the *Bleeding Houses* series?

**MM:** I have made a lot of *Bleeding Houses* over the years; the very recent ones I made were Miami ones. The idea of the houses is constantly with me and my dream is to make a large show just of them. So far I have always mixed them with some other works to give them particular context. I keep collecting interesting houses (taking photos) for them. Here, in Estonia, *Bleeding Houses* became almost a brand for my practice, and it is not that exciting to show them here anymore. I would love to do it somewhere else though—**CCQ**

Marko Mäetamm: I Want to Tell You Something will be at *Picker Art Gallery*; Something Moving will be at *Clifford Gallery*, both located in *Colgate University, NY, USA, 15 September 2016 – 08 January 2017*

Marko Mäetamm is represented by *Gallery Temnikova & Kasela*

maetamm.net  
paranoia.ee/karamell/  
temnikova.ee  
kencameronplaywright.com  
ritabozi.com  
temnikova.ee



Knives, crashing airplanes, refugee boats, cut-throats and many more...



Bunch of suicide bombers, boys and girls, blowing themselves up at exactly the same time. (Bird's eye view.)

opposite:  
*Tales of Messenger: Serious things*, Marko Mäetamm, 2016, acrylic on paper, seventeen panels, 29.7 x 21cm each. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Temnikova & Kasela

far left:  
*Knives, crashing airplanes, refugee boats, cut-throats and many more...* Marko Mäetamm, 2016, acrylic on paper, 70 x 100cm. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Temnikova & Kasela

left:  
*Suicide bombers*, Marko Mäetamm, 2016, acrylic on paper, 70 x 100 cm. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Temnikova & Kasela