Sirje Runge’s ‘On Fragile Grounds’ Through the Eyes of a Lithuanian

February 3, 2026
Author Paulius Andriuškevičius
Published in Review from Estonia



Sirje Runge, On Fragile Grounds. Sirje Runge and Light, Kai Art Center, 2025. Photo: Roman-Sten Tõnissoo

Listen to this article:

0:00 9:50

There is a dotted line that runs along the walls of the exhibition ‘On Fragile Grounds. Sirje Runge and Light’ at the Kai Art Centre. Composed of small pixel-like squares and rectangles, it makes for fragile ground which cuts through the abstract artworks of the Estonian artist. Why is it here? What is its purpose? For one, it activates the space in which the artworks are presented, dividing it in two, the top and the bottom. It is similar to the tenuous horizons we see in Runge’s work, not quite solid enough to hold the weight of the world, but a foundation nonetheless. It can also be likened to a broken voice line, barely audible yet weaving through the exhibition. I was told that the introduction of this stylistic motif was the idea of the exhibition designer. It is one of the few elements that adds to the enveloping atmosphere of the exhibition, which is a win in my book, as I am a fan of curatorial devices that match the space to the works presented and create a harmonious dialogue.



Sirje Runge and Mėta Valiušaitytė. Photo: Aron Urb

I am Lithuanian, just like the exhibition's curator Mėta Valiušaitytė. Before seeing this near-retrospective show by the Estonian master, I had never heard of Runge before, or seen her artworks. I am also largely unfamiliar with the Estonian art scene, except for a few names, and the nation's art history. What am I doing writing this article, you might ask? Well, I suppose it is the fact that the eyes of a critic from a different Baltic country can focus on this project that makes it viable. An outsider's gaze, if you wish.

Naturally, what comes to mind when I behold, take in and bask in the light of Runge's works are her Lithuanian counterparts who worked in a similar style. Two Lithuanian artists in particular are Linas Jusionis (b. 1986) and Kazimiera Zimblytė (1933–1999). All three make abstract artworks with an ingenious use of colour to convey the emotional spectrum, showing traces of the sublime. Runge's subtle works are connected by an invisible umbilical cord to the ones by Zimblytė and Jusionis. We can argue that they are moulded from the same matter.

Linas Jusionis, Approaching, 2014

On the surface, Runge's work is closer to Jusionis'. Both artists employ geometric shapes and gradually changing colours to create a sense of a vast space. It is in this cosmos of colour that we see shapes appear, which are then dwarfed by their surroundings. We might argue that Jusionis is not entirely an abstract painter, as his objects often remind us of something life-like. Runge is more radical in this sense: her ethereal landscapes are constructed from bold geometric shapes and fields of colour.

What is more important than the structure of the work by the two artists is the effect it has on us. We might say that both Runge's and Jusionis' artworks make for great interior pieces, after all, they are so lightweight and unassuming. But a great power lies within them, enabling the viewer to enter into their deserted worlds and get lost in them.

If we now think of Zimblytė's works in relation to Runge's, they both capture and emanate that transcendental light that colours the world within and around them. Zimblytė's works are much shallower in terms of space in comparison to Runge's, but both manage to transport us to the spiritual domain. In Zimblytė's case, it stems from her use of collage elements, often tinted in gold, as in holy icons. In Runge's, it emanates from the cosmic droning that echoes through her spatial compositions. It is not unthinkable that the two artists met or have known about each other's work, since there were not so many prominent abstract painters in the Baltic countries in the Soviet era.

Kazimiera Zimblytė, from the series In memoriam, 1980-1988

Kazimiera Zimblytė, from the series In memoriam, 1980-1988

Assuming that there was a small market for this type of work and that she must have had another job, and that she could not make it very easily into many exhibitions due to the negative view towards abstract art taken by Soviet officials, which to my knowledge prevailed in the Soviet era, I asked one of the gallery employees: ‘How did she [Runge] support herself in Soviet times?’ However, the Eighties were in fact much more liberal in terms of what was allowed, and artists could get away with all sorts of things, including making abstract work and showing it in public exhibitions.

On top of that, as one of Runge’s contemporaries suggested, it was common knowledge in the art world that the Soviet Estonian government allowed its artists more latitude than the Soviet Lithuanian government. And when I picked up a catalogue from 1984 for a Baltic painting triennial, a pitiful collection of washed-out reproductions, sure enough, I found Runge’s work alongside Lithuania’s Silent Modernists, such as Algimantas Kuras, Vincas Kisarauskas, and others. The painting triennial, which was held in the Palace of Exhibitions in Vilnius, today the Contemporary Art Centre, was an important event on the Baltic art scene, and Runge was part of it. In ‘On Fragile Grounds’, we find the Lithuanian National Museum of Art’s *Landscape XXVII* from 1983. It was donated to the museum by Vladimir Tarasov, a prominent Lithuanian jazz musician and art collector. So the undertones of Runge’s works were heard in Lithuania in those days.

But by making these connections, I digress from what is in front of me. And that is Runge’s superb vocabulary of colour and light. The two meld together seamlessly to induce a state of deep tranquillity and concentration in the viewer. And that is true for both the ‘Landscape’

and ‘Light’ series. The ‘Light’ works might seem a little more sombre, but the emotions they elicit are still pure and lucid. It is interesting how these pieces were exhibited in comparison with the other works, at the heart of the exhibition, in a small, dimly lit space, to intensify and punctuate the dull light of the work. This adds to the curatorial dynamism of the show, which is split into these *yin* and *yang* parts, of light and dark works. And this complements nicely the horizontal division made by the dotted line.

Sirje Runge, On Fragile Grounds. Sirje Runge and Light, Kai Art Center, 2025. Photo: Roman-Sten Tõnissoo

There is another work that stands out, and that is *Dance Macabre 13*, mainly because of its visible brushstrokes. If the rest of Runge’s canvases are covered with a smooth layer of paint masking signs of the artist’s labour, this one very clearly showcases it. ‘Dance’ is an accurate name for it, as we see shades of grey connecting, superimposing and mixing on the surface of the canvas. It makes me wonder, why this, now, late in her career, when it seems she had found and settled on her artistic language and vocabulary? It seems wrong to label it as Abstract Expressionism, but it surely points in that direction. And it does have a different, more tumultuous, effect on viewers’ inner state than the ‘Landscapes’ or ‘Lights’. Paradoxically, if I could pick one work from the exhibition to take home with me, it would probably be this one.

Sirje Runge, Landscape XXV, 1983, 90x100cm, oil on canvas, Art Museum of Estonia painting collection

Lastly, I want to go back to the atmosphere that the works, as well as the curatorial decisions, evoke. While viewing the works, we are embraced by the celestial humming of the NASA satellite Voyager. We are literally propelled into outer space by the harmonious pairing of sound and vision. I spent a good half hour looking at Runge's works in a trance-like state. There is this otherworldliness in her paintings that allows us to make contact with a greater, enchanting, yet largely unknown, entity. And it is precisely this type of effect we should be looking for in a work of art, regardless of its medium. Runge's paintings speak to our emotions, but also to this longing for the eternal. And if this starts sounding too woo-woo and contrived, we should just visit the exhibition and use our own internal compass.

The only part of the exhibition I was less excited about was the small room dedicated to Runge as a teacher. I understand that it shines a light on another and significant facet of the artist figure. However, I think it fills viewers' inner states with everyday appearances and associations, and kind of breaks the spell that the exhibition was so purposely creating with the use of artworks and curatorial elements. The material in the room is sparse, and does not really expand on the monumental scholar figure that Runge is. The quotes from the students are rather lukewarm and somewhat predictable, and lack originality. Perhaps a more interesting vehicle to provide an insight into Runge's personality as a teacher was needed. Likewise with the videos in the Estonian language, which were only accessible to native speakers, even though paper copies with English translations were provided. But even then,

they hardly show what was going on in those classrooms, or speak of Runge's charisma and teaching methods. I thought those were unnecessary digressions from an otherwise perfectly balanced exhibition.

Overall, the show does an excellent job of presenting a major Estonian artist and her complex oeuvre in a subtle yet multifaceted way. Significant credit must be given to Mėta Valiušaitytė and the exhibition's curatorial team for crafting a polished aesthetic experience. I truly wish this is not my last contact with the Estonian art scene, its institutions and artists, as I hope to set my Lithuanian eyes on more projects in the future.

Sirje Runge, On Fragile Grounds. Sirje Runge and Light, Kai Art Center, 2025. Photo: Roman-Sten Tõnissoo