

LANDSCAPES FOR INSIDERS

In his *Manifeste de l'Hôtel Chelsea* (1961), Yves Klein argued that the artist – prophet of the new age – seeks and finds the future of painting in the abstract, unlike the painters of the previous century, who found their inspiration and motifs in nature. More than half a century later, artists are returning to the open air with enthusiasm, but their portable paint boxes and folding easels have been replaced by a medium format camera and tripod. It turns out that much of what is frowned upon in contemporary painting is allowed and even welcomed in contemporary photography.

This analogy is even more applicable to the Latvian art scene – at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, a new generation of photographers had to define themselves and once again prove the artistic potential of photography in a cultural context that has always prioritized painting. During this process, many artists – whether consciously or unconsciously – started combining the principles of anti-bourgeois realism popular in 19th century French art with elements of the Russian idealism and eagerness for reform of the same era, as well as a specific local aesthetic tradition. Thus the work of several Latvian contemporary photography artists has more in common with painting than with the local history of photography. Three artists from Latvia – Arnis Balčus, Reinis Hofmanis and

Alnis Stakle, although undeniably contemporary and photography-focused in their chosen means of expression, are at the same time taking part in a fascinating dialogue with the history of painting – 19th century landscape artists of the Barbizon School, the legendary Russian *Peredvizhniki*, as well as the work of the founders of professional art in Latvia in the 1920s.

The exhibition includes landscapes, and the landscape genre is one that has traditionally been considered a key expression of national identity. When one of the first Latvian professional artists, Vilhelms Purvītis, founded the Academy of Art in 1921 (the first art university in Latvia), his Landscape painting masterclass quickly became one of the most popular and productive. It could be said that Purvītis was instrumental in establishing an understanding of what is a truly Latvian landscape – based in studies of local scenery and often in the grey-brown tonality of Latvia's cool springs, rainy autumns and freezing winters (keep in mind that Latvia is one of the European Union's coldest countries).

The interpretation of the Latvian landscape by today's photographers can sometimes appear surprisingly similar to the Purvītis tradition, especially the work of Reinis Hofmanis and Alnis Stakle – mostly shot

in winter and making successful use of the potential of grey-brown and white tones. In the search for a unique sense of place in the Latvian landscape, the understanding of national identity in the modern world is again being questioned. However, instead of the untouched landscape favoured by Purvītis and his contemporaries, today's photographers focus on the man-made environment. In addition, these three authors share a desire to protest unified non-places – international networks of supermarkets, fast food takeaways, petrol stations and banks – and look for something more authentic. Most often, this authenticity is found in the corners of Latvia's cities, towns and countryside least affected by the conveniences of globalized consumer culture. Commenting on this choice, Arnis Balčus compares landscape to language, and refers to the difference between the representative, official landscape and the unofficial one. Although they exist in the same time and space, the latter is known and understood only by insiders – it does not have a place in travel guides and municipal newsletters, and is not proudly shown off to visitors (it may even be hidden from them). However, artists strive to discover and present their own, local landscape, adding an ethical aspect to the aesthetic conditions in their attempts at a diverse reflection of the truth.

These landscapes inevitably involve some extent of contact with social reality, which in turn recalls similar trends in the progressive movements of French and Russian 19th century art. We are, of course, living in another era and speaking of a different medium, so there are no counterparts to Gustave Courbet's *The Stone Breakers* (1849) or Ilya Repin's *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1870) in the photography of Balčus, Hofmanis and Stakle. And this is not surprising – in this respect they also continue the 20th century tradition of Latvian art by speaking to viewers indirectly and through subtext. Even if there is reason to assume that the work of each of these authors focuses on ordinary people and their problems in some way, the viewer is only offered the imprint of these issues on the landscape, while the people involved are mostly left out of the picture. Their work shows that these artists most often choose a practice of non-intervention, not seeking confrontation

and acting as an attentive and interested but simultaneously slightly distant observer.

The question remains – why does contemporary Latvian photography lack almost any relationship with the local history of photographic art? To a large extent, this is due to the prolonged influence of the Soviet period. Firstly, in Soviet Latvia photography only officially existed as an art in the limited and specific context of the photo-amateur movement. The way these photo-amateur activities were organized and supervised says nothing about the quality or value of work created during this period. It should also be noted that during the Soviet period, photography was not treated as an official or genuine art. Any worker or collective farmer could become a photo-amateur, and this hobby had nothing to do with professional art in official discourse. Yet, in spite of all these discourses, ever since the 1960s a succession of young artists and photographers started creating a multitude of unusual and undeniably valuable photographic work. Many of the most important works of this period are characterized by the desire to express individual emotional experience, using photography's means of expression to create an intimate world, and turning away from the politicized and often visually degraded public space. This was a kind of aesthetic, and often symbolic escapism.

However, these works are not to be found on the pages of Latvian art history, and the following generations of Latvian artists knew nothing much about them. In Soviet times, art critics and theorists granted no artistic value to photography due to the non-artistic character of the medium. Therefore, the work was not collected in museums and is not accessible to present-day researchers. In addition, after the political turbulence of the mid 1980s – early 1990s, a new generation of photographers came to the forefront – the so-called “new wave” with its own aesthetic standpoint. Based in the means of expression of documentary photography, the art institutions of the period welcomed them with enthusiasm, denouncing all the work of the previous decades as worthless. The lack of reflection on the local photographic tradition and

history in the work of today's Latvian artists (unlike their Western counterparts) is due to a selective and wilful forgetting of this tradition and history. This is due to the specific historical context – an objective evaluation of the artistic and cultural heritage of the Soviet period is yet to occur. Art historians continue to discuss the appropriate methodology, while Latvian contemporary photography tend to define itself as a new art form, rooted in the West, which has nothing to do with the work of previous generations of Latvian photographers.

The exhibition title emphasizes place, but time is just as important in these works. All three authors share an interest in what is happening today, while the photographs of Reinis Hofmanis most directly express the search for a sense of time. In the *Sale* series, homemade signs by landowners showing their phone numbers are vivid signs of our time. They hint at long stories of the economic crisis and its consequences, of mortgaged new buildings that are more likely to turn into ruins than be purchased, and of pieces of land that have obviously already been on the market unsuccessfully for a number of years. However, it would be wrong to focus too much on the social criticism in these works, since searches within form take precedence. The entire series is compositionally sophisticated. The photographs have been taken in winter, and all feature shades of white and light grey tones – both a tastefully Latvian palette and a challenge for the photographer to achieve a nuanced image of a field of snow. The *Private* series, on the other hand, is a comment on the pride of today's Latvian landowners, now firmly established after the absence of property rights (from a capitalist perspective) during Soviet times. For many, it still seems unusual that a beach or a lake shore once welcoming to swimmers and fishers, or a forest holding the paths to familiar mushrooming and berry-picking spots, have all of a sudden become private and inaccessible. Since fencing or guarding property is either impossible or inconvenient, the ghostly "Private property" sign replaces the owner with a loaded shotgun, acting as a protective amulet against trespassers. In both of Reinis Hofmanis series, the landscape acquires the status of a commodity, its price also determined by potential aesthetic value.

Ainis Stakle's series *Not Even Something* draws attention to welltrodden paths or shortcuts crossing overgrown fields, ex-factory territories and other similar interspaces. By taking pictures at night, the author dramatizes the environment that remains unnoticed in everyday life. Non-functional and unfriendly urban settings are organically adjusted to user interests – and even spruced up a little. Although the environment in the images may look like the middle of nowhere, reminiscent of the places where dead bodies and unwanted evidence are disposed of in the movies, in reality it is probably someone's shortest route from home to the public transport stop or shop, used day-to-day and year-to-year. Following the indirect form of expression typical of Latvian art, the photographs reveal only a trace of social reality, and we do not see the walkers themselves on these unmapped paths. In his other work, Stakle has also expressed an interest in the borderlines and co-existence of civilized and uncivilized nature, as well as perfecting his night-time and twilight aesthetic. The work of a landscape photographer on Latvian winter nights is truly a cold *plein air* – a format that simultaneously shows a similarity to the early realist painters, and affirms the differences, since such a painting *plein air* would be impossible. Describing this series, the artist uses the term "beautiful", again returning us to photographic reality. The images may be beautiful, while the places in them are unlikely to be. Therefore, the form is the message, just as in the photography of Reinis Hofmanis. The source of beauty is the very pictorial surface of the photographs: the diverse pastel tones of the night or evening sky, and the play between tree and bush branches, prosaic mud tones, white snow and artificial lighting.

An interest in the 'other side' of the Latvian landscape also defines Arnis Balčus' series *Latvian Notes*. Unlike the work of Hofmanis and Stakle, the images in this series do not have a formal element in common – the author has ventured into the open air during both day and night, in cities and villages, winter and summer, and some of the frames even feature people. Commenting on the series, the author states his interest in public space in Latvia – places where people are supposed to congregate, but somehow do not. It is not

that people in Latvia do not come together – weekend markets and village fairs are well attended, as are various entertainment events. However, many places, especially small towns and rural areas, show the effects of the recent intensive emigration of the working population. Additionally, the apparent non-public nature of public space which the artist highlights is also related to the individualistic culture of the North, in which spending time collectively is an exception rather than a daily routine. A friend of mine also recently encountered this phenomenon while translating *The Weir*, a play

by contemporary Irish playwright Conor McPherson, which takes place in an Irish village pub populated by the local middle-aged community. The conclusion was that there is simply no equivalent to such an environment and sense of place in Latvia. It just doesn't happen here. In the photography of Balčus, this cultural peculiarity – a reluctant gathering – can be observed well. These sometimes comical scenes complement the official photographs of public space, which are never allowed to lack crowds, events or a sense of the social.

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