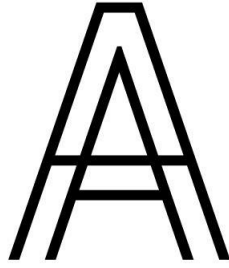


THE STABLE

The Stable in English language has various meanings, one of them being also steady, durable and resistant. The Slovenian artist Enej Gala confronts rural culture of his country of origin and the traditions of a nation in his solo exhibition in A plus A Gallery. However, taking into account strong and universal interest of art regarding the relationship between the old world of traditions and the contemporaneity, Gala does not stop at the point of the dialog with rural environment that has been the basis of Slovenian culture for centuries, but develops the comparison between art and agriculture up to a very contemporary world of hunting; in *The Stable* there is represented the hunt for the depiction of history, the hunt for the way that we use to represent economic and cultural processes, in the manner in which - on a personal level and on a national scale - we represent ourselves.

The concept of the exhibition develops along a path that confronts poems taken from *The Book of Things (Knjiga reči)* of Aleš Šteger, a contemporary Slovenian writer. Enej Gala is fascinated by the poetry of this Slovenian author and by the dialectical relationship between writing and painting, between word and image, thus wanting to emphasize the importance of the process by which knowledge and wisdom, irony and cunning, but also superstitions and ingenuity of the folk-tale were transmitted through writing and oral traditions, in synchronism with the history of the visual arts.

In this context it is impossible not to think of the prose of Franz Kafka: the idea of hunting, such as for example the one from the fragments of novels *Amerika*, *The Castle* or *The Trial*, are reflected in the works of Enej Gala in a whole series of sculptures and paintings that are indeed the traps, seductive baits and real dens built by the artist. The rural scenery, the passion for gardening and the theme of colonization that attracted Kafka, the charm that the Slavic world exerted on him, the insects and the wisdom of animals are the same dynamics as those configured in sculpture and painting of the young artist who - like the Austro-Hungarian writer - uses great irony but also extreme

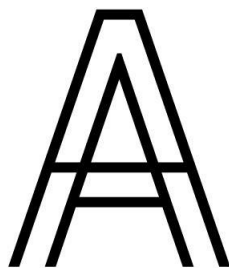


seriousness regarding the relationship that the old traditions of Judaism and ancient myths have with the contemporary world; likewise, the works of Gala are questioning the function of the Slovenian rural culture and of national and popular identities in a global scenario. In both cases the focus of the question is always the same: dialectic between the individual and the community, the relationship that ancient forms of collectivity and individuality have with the same manifestations nowadays. The inspiration that Kafka drew, for example, from the cultural Zionism of his era, irony and humor but also the seriousness with which he uses it in his novels and short stories is therefore related to the one that Gala uses for the realization of his works, in which there are elements of tradition and of Italian, German, Austrian, Slovenian, Hungarian and Slavic history with references to European culture.

The first work that catches the eye in the showcase of A plus A Gallery is *Hayrack*, which is directly inspired by the homonymic poems written by Aleš Šteger and which is also one of the most characteristic symbols belonging to Slovenian culture. A hayrack is a permanent structure normally made of wood and used to dry grass and other fodder. Although originally Slovenian, similar structures can also be found in Northern Italy, Austria and Southern Germany. Gala has turned this national symbol in an abacus - with unparallel bars and tumors instead of coins or beads used for the calculations.

The Hayrack in the showcase is afflicted with beautiful carcinomas that stretch with vivid colors over the entire structure like a real illness caused by economic as well as cultural calculations and forecasts that are misguided for an entire nation. Obviously the *Hayrack* work is not intended to be only a symbol of Slovenia, just like the work of Kafka does not tell a story only of Jewish people, Germany or the Austro-Hungarian world; Gala's installation tells a story of a universal historical consciousness. The sculpture is a guard that would like to protect us from a "disease of tradition" and from an enemy that constantly threatens us all. This enemy is the rival that the reader meets also in the *VI. Thesis On the Concept of History* of Walter Benjamin, or rather the difficulty "to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the subject in a moment of danger". A danger that "threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it".¹ Overall, the

¹ Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, Selected Writings vol. 4 1938 -1940, Translated by Edmund Jephcott, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, p. 391.



poetry of Aleš Šteger, the works of Enej Gala, the exhibition *The Stable* are to be read as an attempt to set a “genuine historical image”.

HAYRACK

Guardian of the land.
Guardian of the land's inhabitants.
Guardian of their consciences.
When everyone sleeps, the hayrack pays attention
So that no one slips away from the game,
Misses the return of King Matjaž.

Slovenian heroes sacrificed their lives
So their sons could freely dry
The contents of their skulls
In the Alpine breeze of the hayrack's rungs.
The vast meadows are their souls.
Cows chew and shit them
And out of cow shit their souls grow
Still more beautiful and succulent.

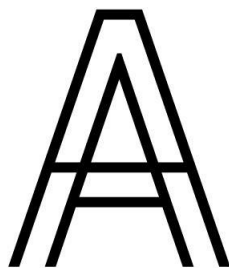
Oh, hayrack, yes, hayrack.

No one knows who was the first to build bridges,
Who knitted the first walkways,
Raised the first carrier pigeon,
Invented the doorknob and opened a neighbor's door.
But only a Slovene could construct
A prison in the middle of open country,
A cage that divides the world:
On one side hypocrisy,
On the other a chronically inflamed prostate.

Hayrack. Hayyyyrack. Hay-raaaa-ck.

Your mother, insanity,
Squeezes you to herself when you are sad and yearn.
She lets you eat edges and drink morphield.
Because it is nothing. Don't be afraid. Don't cry, she tells you.

The enemy is constantly everywhere,
But he cannot get to you as long as
Brigadiere Hayrackino, Hauptmann Hayracker,



Ezredes Häyräček and Pukovnik Hayrakić protect you.

You sigh.

In the distance, mountains.

In overcoats, moths.

In the poem, gold.

You sneeze.

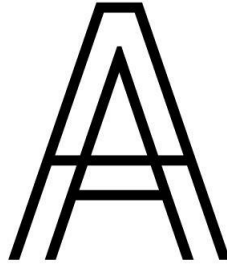
You scratch under your navel and know:

Together you will make it.

(Aleš Šteger, *The Book of Things*, English translation by Brian Henry)

The omnipresent connection with nature, along with the expressiveness of the language and art, is probably the only real stroke of Slovenian identity whose borders and political systems changed over the centuries. Trying not to disregard the reflection of the connection with nature, which is often present in Gala's works, also the pagan aspect of the cultural heritage can be retraced; therefore carnival masks appear, with their horns and tails, skins and evil, fantastic, grotesque kits linking the historical consciousness to the corporeal, material world. This evaluation may be the strategy of every human being for dealing with the present-day *impasse* demanding humans to be both - hunter and prey, producer and consumer of images, as well as for addressing the dialectic between community and individuality in a world in which new forms of capitalism and economics have emerged.

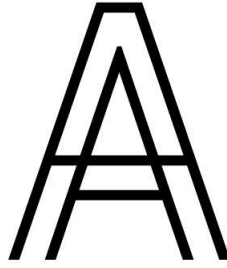
In the history of art there have been many examples of artists who tried to understand reality through the world of agriculture or through the metaphor of the animal: from the most prestigious exponents, like Pieter Bruegel, who revived a world made up of grotesque figures that give life to compositions of simple peasants in a delirious orchestration of elements addressed to create an empathy with the entire universe, to the genuine spontaneity that specifically characterizes creative processes of the French *Art Brut* movement.



Like Bruegel, Gala presents absurd world surrounding him, a babel of a teeming multitude of strange figures, objects and forms sarcastically transfigured in order to create a vision that can capture even the most bizarre aspects of reality. While in Italy various schools of painting were emphasizing the divine and universal concealed in human perfection, Pieter Bruegel focused on details that make up the teeming and active world of everyday reality, not considering as subjects of history the princes or potentates, but rather the multitude that comes from popular culture. The attention of Bruegel towards the minuscule detail is part of a more pragmatic tradition in which universality is manifested especially through the ability of bringing together the multiplicity of particular. This is not a characteristic that is exclusive to Northern and/or painting tradition, but also one of the characteristics of texts, treaties and schools of Jewish, Arabic or Indian thought. With Gala, this same approach can be found, one that sees him recover aspects of Slovenian tradition and that rises up to transform them into humorous caricatures of themselves.

This auto irony applies also to the animal that is the symbol of the entire exhibition - *Proteus anguinis*, also called "human fish" or "*človeška ribica*" in Slovenian language. It is a white salamander living in large complexes of underground karst caves. In the painting entitled *Every hero needs its dragons* (2015) set in the showcase, two proteuses are impaled on the hook of a spear held by a huge scarecrow that rides a sheep dressed as a wolf and act as bait. The interpretation of this work should, above all, take into account the consideration that in the Slovenian mythology the "human fish" is mistakenly considered a baby dragon. The scarecrow, which is compared to a quixotic hero that is dragging, accompanied by his spear, in the world of Slovenian traditions, legends, fairy tales and myths, is struck into the heart by his own spear which becomes the cause of death as well as defense, springing from the chest of the anthropomorphic figure in the center of the canvas.

The exhibition journey continues with the diptych *If there is land... There is home* (2015). The technique used for these two paintings, inspired by the poem of Aleš Šteger entitled *Ant*, is of meticulous detail and it reflects various and often unsatisfactory definitions of home, nation or people; the lines on canvas remind of a forest or a marsh, but at the same time they are also the boundary lines in constant motion, which rob us and free us (depending on one's point of view) from the traditional definitions of identity and the old concept of home. The artist expresses this reality in a way that requires from the viewer or visitor to search for details present on the canvas. The inhabitants of the diptych,



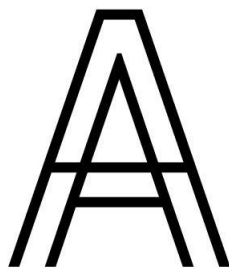
tiny wild strawberries and a dung beetle will reveal to the observer only after his careful investigation.

Behind the installation *The Milkmaid* (2015) the visitor will find a work called *Some knots only flies can solve* (2015). With this work Gala addresses the secret of death, if not the secret of *tout court* human history. The poem *Knots* by Aleš Šteger, by which the painting is inspired, uses the concreteness of a knot to metaphorically refer to the complexity of the human soul and the complexity of the history:

"Be patient with your knots./ Let them grow, let them tighten in peace./ The day comes when the rope rises up in drowsy silence./ Like a fakir you climb out of your self."

The poem implies that some personal difficulties, family or national conflicts, cannot be dissolved during the life of the individual, perhaps not even within two or three generations. There are knots for which there is no immediate or violent solution, such as the one proposed by Alexander the Great for the Gordian knot, precisely because this is not about puzzles, but about real secrets of the individual soul and sides of history that are necessarily opaque. *Some knots only flies can solve* thus points to this fact: some constellations and controversies can be readable, understandable and therefore dissolved only after a long wait. Some knots must locate themselves in secret, remain opaque for an entire era, because only death or a long wait can reveal their secret. The knot therefore does not represent only the rupture and difficulties inherent to each individual and between individuals, societies, communities and nations, but becomes also a symbol of connection and relations.

The duck with title *Envy* (2014) is a seducer that attracts the visitor in the most "aquatic", "dangerous" and marshy part of the exhibition. In the pre-staircase area of the gallery, the sculpture *Ascent of Prevention* (2015) is located: a trap that glorifies prevention. On a tree trunk dwarfs are mounted, a symbol taken from agriculture that usually connotes the concept of provincialism, but at the same time also a very contemporary emblem of Walt Disney and Hollywood world. From top to bottom of the sculpture wires

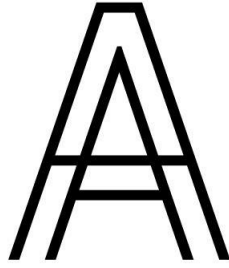


are stretched and on them there are sacrificed insects representing prohibited dreams in ascent, beings, individuals captured on several layers of a prevention mechanism, a trap which acts as a deceitful trap machine.

The visitor is invited to continue the journey on the second floor of the gallery where he will find the installation *The stable neighbors* (2015) in the center of the room. The walls have been smeared with earth as if they were the walls of a stable; soil used on the walls instead of synthetic colors has a conceptual function and illustrates, together with the installation, the whole idea of the exhibition. *The stable neighbors* reminds - in its stable instability, in its dynamism and processuality - of the proteus, human fish or "človeška ribica" in Slovenian. Two proteuses, symbols of Slovenia, inhabit the installation. This could be interpreted as Slovenia in transition, as well as the image of mankind and its history in constant motion. The installation is anthropomorphic, but it is also inanimate since it is a table and also an agricultural tool or equipment, an industrial machine from which chimneys are sprouting. It recalls an infernal device of Hieronymus Bosch and makes reference to the animate and at the same time inanimate "Odradek" from the story *The cares of a family man* by Franz Kafka. *The stable neighbors* seems to be related to the writing device, torture and pleasure of the short story *In the Penal Colony*. The title of the installation in fact also refers to a number of Slovenian proverbs that became internationally well-known also thanks to the writings of Slavoj Žižek, in which envy and strife between neighbors have the most important role.

Gala has intervened in various parts of the room with drawings on the wall and on paper that represent animals, thus summing up the dialectic between the hunter and the prey and the world of farming culture. The artist has also placed several sculptures, equipment and objects of worship and superstition inside the room that, with a more lively and playful touch might make the visitor think of *Animal Farm* written by George Orwell.

The exhibition journey ends with a real barn set in the last room that houses the painting *The Intruder* (2015). In the picture there is a gigantic figure, half sheep and half wolf, which seems to want to enter a room through a window, while it is actually already in the house. Its essence and nature, represented by a black bag filled with filth and obscenity, hangs also from the ceiling of the room. The irony of this work lies in its dialectic between the inside and the outside as well as between house and human being. The wolf / sheep chimaera of *The Intruder*, this Proteus depicting an ancient messianic symbolism that is present in many folk-tales and legends, also establishes eye contact with the ground floor where the sheep dressed as a wolf in work *Every hero needs its dragons* pursues the



ancient Slovenian mythology and where its rider is pierced, but also armed with a spear that grows from his chest.

In Gala's paintings, constant dialogue between hyper-realistic, almost photographic elements and objects and scenarios with very abstract and opaque foregrounds and backgrounds force the observer to constantly change the point of view, and to adjust their perception to the content. The strategies with which the artist confronts the mythological narrative, the various concepts of history and the relationship between tradition and contemporaneity, are on the other hand characterized by a great capacity for mediation and reflection. With this exceptional technique of his own, Gala follows a short circuit in human perception to reveal the ideological viewpoints within the image. In Enej Gala's art, a particular symbolism - the Slovenian - is capable to elevate itself into the universal human symbolism. The distinctive stroke of his work lies in the methods that he uses to constantly make fun of cultural, economic and ideological myths of the past and the present; and it is in the latest that we find common points with the concept of history of Walter Benjamin and Franz Kafka. In *The Stable* this concept can be found precisely in the dialectical method that is established between the Slovene poetry of Aleš Šteger and the works of Enej Gala, a dialectic between word and image.

Aurora Fonda and Sandro Pignotti