

Tree Time

Your current focus is on forests and I wonder what brought you to that target?

A really long winter in our typical slavic grey block of flats. It was my first year at the Academy of Fine Arts and I occupied myself with indoor plants because I missed the green colour, the smell of the trees and nature in general. At that time I was working on my second big theme – the Albino Doll, which was my doll from childhood, sprayed grey and naked, wandering in nature and searching for some purpose, theme, relief, fire and peace of mind.

So, on that long cold sombre day, I put that doll into a flowerpot and that was the moment when I started to construct my own forests, from indoor plants, from my imagination and later from my photos and drawings. Slowly I deleted the doll from the paintings, because nature itself was more than enough.

Do you spend a lot of time in nature to gather the images you want to create?

I'm trying as much as I can, but that's the paradox: I always lived in the city and I was wondering, what's it like to live in the middle of mountains and forests where the air smells like bonfire with a little spicy spruce. So every time when I have a little money, I'll go to meet and see the trees, also with my analogue camera – now I have a pretty large collection of photos/pictures.

There are no people and no context in a landscape for the trees you paint since they are mostly quite close up. It is almost as if you are painting portraits of the trees. Are they somehow a replacement for or more interesting than people?

Yes, that's an important attribute of my work. I left out all of the figurative elements, like

Slovakian artist **Helen Tóth** is a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava. Born in 1992 in Dunajská Streda, her work focuses on showing the power and character of the forest and the individual nature of trees. She talked to **Alex Mayhew-Smith** about her work and the pressures on modern artists in the Internet age. A longer version of the article will appear on the BCSCA's website.

Main image: *The Giant Trunk*, 450x270cm, 2018, graphite on paper.

Right: *Trees with a Trunk Defect*, drawing and painting on canvas.

dolls and people, on purpose, because I wanted to create a safe space, where no one can cut down trees, kill animals, hurt each other, damage the environment; a place where I can hide myself and also where I can face my insecurities.

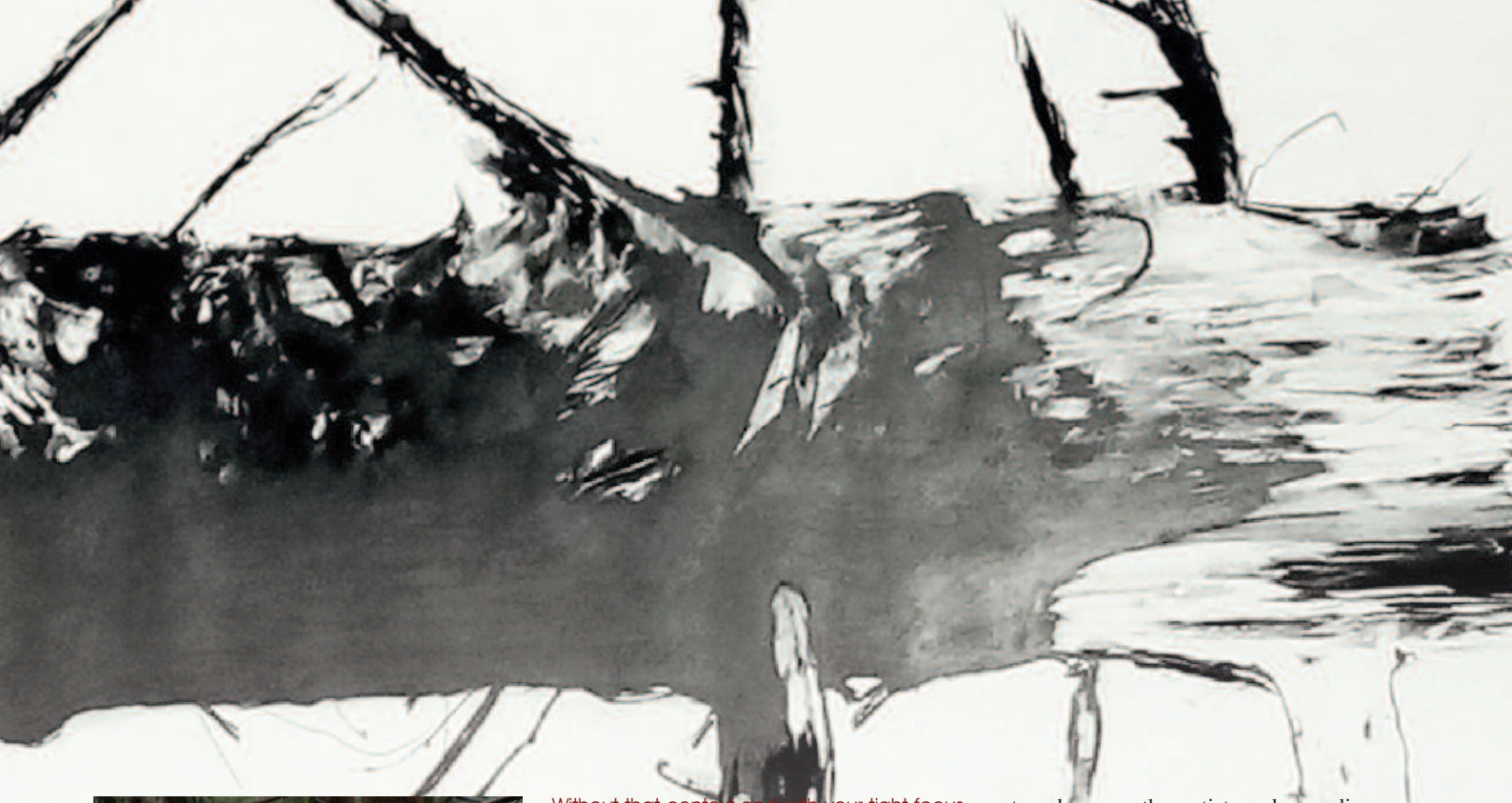
I think trees deserve to be portrayed too. Trees in my works do not create scenery or illusion of space. They do not fill in an empty spot in the background and it is not their aim to accompany, weaken, soften or provide balance. The opposite is true. They are supposed to be sharp, to disrupt, as they do in the forest. But there we tend to ignore them. They often remain on the periphery of our perception. They are leaked into colour stains, while every single one of them is unique.

It is not possible to find two identical trees as we cannot find two identical people. That is the reason why I portray them in the similar fashion as people are portrayed. In portraits an author tries to get into the nature of an individual, while I try to comprehend trees this way. It might be naive to think that once I draw them they hand a package of knowledge over to me. However, what is certainly familiar to me, is the softness of their branches, I know the feeling of paralysis, inability to move, but I also know the feeling of external toughness or the feeling of taking a breath during a wild spring storm.

I observe trees, I sense their bark, their wounds and also their structure. I'm more attracted to conifer woods, because they are more dramatic and we can always see their skeletons. I'm a huge fan of Andy Goldsworthy, who wrote into his journal: "I have worked best when there have been no leaves on the tree and the tree is reduced to its structure." I couldn't agree more.



Richard Kučera Guzmán.



Without that context and with your tight focus does colour become hugely important in conveying the feeling you have in mind? It seems that it is all you have left to convey feeling since the viewer has no recognisable human expression to examine.

At first I was afraid, is it enough to paint only trees and nature? But in my case, it's not about hyper realistic interception of reality; I find no joy in copying a photograph, it's too predictable, there is no room for angry gestures, for a moody atmosphere, for mistakes and turning those mistakes into genial surprises. For me, painting a forest is not about filling the blank space behind a human portrait – next time you see a painting like this, try to cover the figure with your finger and notice the poorly displayed nature behind.

I wanted my trees to have all the dominance they deserve. They became something like a language for me, I can communicate anything I need through them, and through the way I construct them, their shape, colour, composition and how they interact with each other. I'm often creating absurd situations, like when a giant trunk is levitating on a thin yarn, or mixing a conifer wood with a deciduous tree. I'm playing with them like in theatre, or in simulation, like in Photoshop, or with Lego or like a video game such as *The Sims*, only in my head and on canvas. That's the fun.

Their titles are also important. The clue is always in their title, the metaphor, a hidden meaning, I name them often after favourite song lyrics or a favourite sentence from my dearest books. And the colours? They're always picked and mixed according to my current mood, and because I'm quite temperamental, the colours are mostly wild and vivid. Can you tell us about some recent paintings that you have completed and the thoughts you have about them?

I had two major solo exhibitions before and during the summer, right after I needed a pause because I felt burned out and now for the first time in my life I have no other big projects ahead so I can finally take a step back and disappear to work "secretly" on my new paintings.

I already started and I'm quite happy about spending some quality time again in the studio. I'll explain. Way back exhibitions were about surprising the visitors with the artist's recent work. Nowadays, everyone has seen everything on social media. Galleries, cura-

tors, buyers, other artists and an audience from around the world moved to social media, especially Instagram. There is that pressure whispering to you to constantly upload, present yourself, to always be new and fresh in case 'what if someone finally discovers me'.

Also because of this easiness to follow [someone's work], you are frequently being attacked with thousands of artworks, exhibitions, installations every day and soon enough you'll be anxious like in hell. Deleting your [online] artistic profile is a luxury and career suicide, so I decided to reduce the number of people I follow and to stop posting new work until I have a proper exhibition again.

Constantly uploading my newest work for a long time made me doubt every painting/work I have made, because on social media, you never get proper feedback. Only a real face to face event can get you back the energy you invested in your work. And also, if someone sees your half done work, you weren't ready to show, it takes its magic away and you struggle to finish it.

So, to answer your question, I'm working on a new series, slowly, secretly, their theme is still the nature and forest and trees, but in a different, deeper and calming way.

Your drawings are also very powerful, particularly when there is little added colour. It feels like if I had one of these images I could have a tree growing in my own home, I could be outside while I was inside. I wonder if your intention has a wider message for the way we live, particularly in the city?

Wow, thank you, you are not the first person who told me that. I'm truly glad to hear that, because the main goal of painting nature for me is to bring it indoors, into mine and other people's homes. Because not many people can afford to pack their stuff and leave and move to the forest into a wooden cabin. We live in an overly technical society, in small towns and big cities and the boredom of the 90s and 00s was replaced by that anxiety and being in between trees vanishes those feelings away, completely clears your mind and shows you a completely opposite reality/everyday life, which is also very mysterious.

I'm always wondering what is happening in the forest in the dark, during a storm, how can thousands of trees breathe together, what it feels like, what would it feel like to be a part

of that system while keeping your human mind and experience of becoming the forest. So drawing and painting it brings me closer to finding out what it could mean to be a forest.

I really liked your painted pieces of branch placed in the forest (The First Twig etc...), it really looks quite powerful and extraordinary. Can you tell us about that project and if you plan to do more of that work?

I carried that concept in my mind for years, I was not sure if it was good, conceptual or “landart-ish” enough. But an important rule: if you don’t realise/finish a fresh and strong idea sooner or later someone else will come up with it and you’ll regret doubting and not finishing it. So, the pandemic happened and we developed an almost every day walking ritual in a little forest on the riverside. There was lockdown everywhere, everything closed and I told myself “now’s the time I won’t wait any longer” and I finally did it.

I liked the fact that I don’t need anything else to make this

art except that twig. It was so easy and secret and thrilling to do something without permission (like old school graffiti) – but also, the only thing allowed to us at that time: spending time in the forest. So this project was a playful game too, to lure people out into the fresh air to find my twig using only GPS coordinates. The exact location is never public.

The background story of those twigs is here: I create my works using my analogue photos, my sketches, my moody imagination and also using my collection of twigs and branches, saved from the garbage, collected over years. Later on I’m constructing those twigs onto various compositions, photo-shooting them and putting them on the canvas. So I was searching for the second use for those branches, and it all came together. I brought the dead wood back to the forest, because dead wood and dead trees are an important part of the forest and play an important role in ecosystems. By colouring them I wanted to point that fact out, visually.

It’s a long term project, which has no expiration date, no dead-

line and I can place a twig wherever I want, whenever I want so I’m not planning to stop soon. My main goal is to encourage people to go deeper into woods, not just running along the tourist trail without stopping and to insert some game into it, because everyone loves to play hide and seek.

What is your working day like? Are you freer with your time or do you stick to regular hours?

Depends on whether I’m heading for an exhibition or experiencing sweet ordinary days. I like ordinary days more. I wake up about 9 o’clock, have some breakfast while sitting silently in the kitchen, go to the park with my dog and have a coffee with my sister, run some errands, do some administration on computer and after this routine I go to my studio, have something for lunch at the local bistro (because my studio is located in a cultural and creative centre in Bratislava, called Nova Cvernovka, a former chemical school, where is more than a hundred art studios, and creative spaces with public park,

library and cafeteria). After that, first thing I do is turn on the music, water my plants – my studio is like a small jungle with the smell of oil colours and incense sticks.

I do not always paint, actual painting is that luxurious moment/activity when everything else is done (administrative work, planning, putting together the frames, gessoing/put a gesso on the canvas, then applying at least three layers of acrylic, cleaning up the mess, have meetings, keep the website updated, sending applications to open calls and painting competitions, communicating with clients, etc.).

I leave the studio when the sun goes down, even earlier if it’s “not my day”. I like to have an evening for myself, to stay up long and read and listen to some music, or to watch movies, wash my paint brushes and stare at my phone for hours looking at the new painting I made earlier that day, that’s my favourite thing to do. On the other hand, there are those stressful weeks before exhibitions and the burned out weeks after them.



Previous page: N 48°28'13.4292" E 18°52'55.29", Konár štvrtý/The fourth twig.

This page, left: Vrbické pleso (Vrbické lake).

Below: Helen Tóth in her studio.

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