

Dorota Gawęda

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*The lower bound of a landscape is constituted by the Earth. Under the same field at which I find myself looking lies the sullen but sustaining Earth, a vast layer of materiality composed of soil, stone and rock that is, in its own way, as capacious as the sky. But where the sky is eminently visible, and the horizon coyly demi-visible, the Earth withdraws from sight at every remove: Only the outer surface of the topsoil gives itself to me as a manifest presence. It takes rare glimpses of its upturned depths—excavated earth, cliffs striated with sedimentary deposits—to sense what lies below the surface.**

The second solo exhibition of Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė at Lucas Hirsch presents a new development in artists' practice. The duo's hybrid, cumulative output which encompasses video, objects, installation, photography, sound, and fragrance turns to performance as an operative aid acting as a bind for a practice in which somatic experience, be it material, molecular, individual or collective, forms the core. Framed under a title which functions as a call or chant, an instruction directly addressing the viewer, the exhibition presents a selection of photographic, sculptural and notably new work on canvas. This body of work rests on soil as metaphor for porosity of boundaries resisting the very idea of dichotomy and threshold, an exercise that feels all the more personal, not least because of the prominent presence of forms, mythologies, rituals and fables that originate from Baltic and Slavic landscape histories and rural folk traditions, that are as much the artists' own.

The sculptural works titled *Spectator (I-III)*, 2020 highlight the behavior required to transform a body into a viewer, positing nature as the object. By means of the sitting, the senses are aligned, structuring the perspective, designating the goal and demarcating the target within the landscape. To become a spectator, is to drive out nature. *Spectators* encircle the *Parable of the Sower*, 2021 - a conical pile of soil planted with a nameless seed, its title recalling Octavia E. Butler's 1993 novel set in an apocalyptic near future. The soil is also a harbinger of multiple fictions, stories to be retold and futures to be inhabited.

The new works-on-canvas with their titles referring to Slavic folkloric entities are created through image breeding aided by Generative Adversarial Networks. The mutant imagery is then transferred to canvas through gesso printing and completed with acrylic paint. Occupying the space in between figuration and abstraction the paintings become hybrid forms paralleling the depictions they carry. Malevolent spirits inhabiting Eastern European bogs such as *Topielec* or *Rusalka* serve to demonstrate that the past was never actually 'past' at all. The dead, drowned, burned and buried alive—they have always lived—in the spill and in the landscape.

The photographic series exhibited alongside falls within the scope of the artists' performative project *Mouthless* (2020-ongoing), in which they address the overhanging ecological anxieties and the monstrification of nature resultant in its historical othering. These photographs depict behind-the-scenes moments captured by the artists during the filming of their videos *Mouthless Part I*, 2020 (recently exhibited at Julia Stoschek Collection as part of *horizontal vertigo*) and *Mouthless Part II* (currently in production and due to premiere at Istituto Svizzero in Palermo this autumn). Embracing speculative fiction and fusion of disparate texts, this body of work sets out to critically contend with dominant concepts of nature, body, history and landscape and offers artworks as interfaces to mutate and re-think their relations as receptacles of multiple fictions, ghost vehicles of counter-stories. A photograph of the hand-written civic trial record from Fribourg magistrate proceedings marks a case of the early-modern witch persecutions in Europe (XVth - XVIII c.). The artists attempt to understand witchcraft as a transcultural and transhistorical signifier across disciplinary, social, geographic, and traditional boundaries. The duo propose the horror convention as a means for looking into the fear which is attributed to being outside and othered. In the photographs, the readers performed by the artists' friends are captured in the in-between moments of performance, becoming-monster they are to embody. Within this aesthetic the series of work considers the construction of the deviant, heretic subject, and conversely monstrification and othering of nature as intertwined phenomena. Horror, and folk horror in particular, embodies an explicitly ecological worldview in which human and nature, human and nonhuman, are thoroughly imbricated.

*Quote from: *The Edge(s) of Landscape: A study in Limnology* by Edward C. Casey in *The place of Landscape*, ed. Jeff Malpas