**ABSTRACT LANDSCAPE 2.0**

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Exactly sixty years ago (in 1962), the Art Gallery of the Cultural Centre of Belgrade presented the exhibition *Abstract Landscape*, based on the curatorial concept by Aleksa Čelebonović. Borrowing the term *abstract landscape* from French art criticism, Čelebonović adapted it to the needs of the local art scene and established as a flexible signifier for painterly research in the widely understood field of abstract language in Yugoslavia.[[1]](#footnote-1) The exhibition provided an overview of the genesis of abstract painting in the Yugoslav art space focusing on painterly exploration and the transformations of landscape on the path of modernist painting towards abstraction during the 1950s through the positions of the artists Petar Lubarda, Lojze Spacal, Stojan Ćelić, Miodrag B. Protić, Milutin Mitrović, Slavoljub Bogojević, Oton Gliha, Frano Šimunović, Stane Kregar, Radomir Damnjanović Damnjan and Moma Marković.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The exhibition *Abstract Landscape 2.0*, held as part of the *Critics Have Chosen* programme, is motivated by the layered history of the exhibition space where it is held, and developed as a commentary on one point in this history – the aforementioned exhibition *Abstract Landscape* in 1962. Just as Čelebonović borowed the term from French criticism and modified its meaning so, for the purpose of this exhibition, the term *abstract landscape* is used “without rigidity and stasis”[[3]](#footnote-3), as a contextual inducement for confronting the views of contemporary practices of artists on landscape. Guided by the belief that, in the art historical sense, ever since Cezanne’s intervention in this genre of painting, landscape has been an apstractly conceived space for the projection of artistic view, the exhibition *Abstract Landscape 2.0* is not limited to formally abstract language of painting, but brings together the views of artists who, from different methodological, media and semantic starting points, re-examine landscape as a genre, a motif or contextual and linguistic framework of their artistic research. Considering the media complexification of the image taking place in the past sixty years (and even longer), the exhibition gathers not only examples of painting, but also of the related media of photography and video. Besides approaching landscape as a widely understood field for performing contemporary artistic gestures, the exhibition also aims to – in line with the reference to Čelebonović’s curatorial intervention – re-examine the relationship of contemporary art examples with the heritage of modernism in the local context.

To consider landscape within such frameworks, we will find useful the proposal of the visual culture theorist W. J. T. Mitchell – to think of landscape (in the historical sense) not as a noun, but as a verb, as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed, a specific cultural practice that produces meanings.[[4]](#footnote-4) Derived from the modernist tradition of framing the view of the natural environment in the function of painting allegory, landscape has undergone numerous transformations that have turned it from the status of a genre in painting to a dynamic medium of exchange between man and nature, materialized in the form of installations (land art), moving images, etc. Owing to the procedural nature of producing the image of a place or forming a space, landscape in art today has a vitality grounded in the capacity to articulate new relationships that man builds to the environment, whether natural or culturally arranged. While the 1962 exhibition on abstract landscape considered landscape as a space of contemplative reduction, of (modernist) purification of the visual field, this exhibition, which has taken its title, approaches landscape as a visual space within which issues of place, sight and territory are problematized and meanings and effects of landscape redefined as a culturally conditioned medium. Accordingly, abstraction is understood outside the framework of the formal language by which landscape is articulated, and as an approach to the medium of landscape that insists on its conceptual thinking.

In the work *There Is No Landscape*, Vladimir Nikolić puts us in a situation of observing a landscape “framed” by a live transmission of its interpretation, posing the question of the possibilities of narrativizing the image and producing the meaning of a work of art. Performing the procedure of double framing – photographically separating the image of the landscape and framing it into a given interpretative matrix, Nikolić confronts us – through landscape, i.e., by declaring its negation – with the act of seeing as a culturally defined practice (and habit) that seeks meaning.

To what extent a landscape can be burdened with meaning that cannot be read “at first glance” is the question dealt with in Ivan Petrović’s photographic work. He approaches landscape as an image that problematizes the issues of borders and territory. Recording the scenery around the administrative border between Serbia and Kosovo, Petrović provides a subtle look at the place of political tension, reveals a topography of controlled conflict that translates an image of a land into a landscape of unregulated relations between peoples, states and different political aspirations towards one territory.

Dušica Dražić’s work *Seaside* emerged from an imaginary cartography; it recreates a story about understanding the distance between places, intended for school children. The artist used a cheap ballpoint pen to draw straight lines on paper every day until the ink ran out, making 99 drawings in a period of two months, from which she then created an animation. The imaginary sea horizon was revived as a result of a simple and continuous manual procedure, referring to the process as the central point of the produced landscape.

Seascape is a central motif in Žolt Kovač’s paintings, created as a kind of *pop* commentary on the current issue of global warming. Wind turbines on icebergs that float, melting under the influence of the sun’s rays, ironically point to the possibility of (global) change in the destructive attitude towards nature. Kovač’s anthropocentric scenario landscapes surpass a critical connotation; they offer a reminder that the “way of life we used to have” is no longer possible. What kind of landscape is ahead of us in the given situation?

Technological interventions in landscape are the subject of Nikola Marković’s painting practice. In his work *Pins & Pines*, a landscape composed in the good tradition of classical painting is marked by symbols of digital navigation “in real time”, which has greatly changed human movement and orientation in landscape. The complexification of the media character of landscape here takes place through introducing a specific, symbolic temporality into a static scene that alludes to disorientation, getting lost in the horizont of impossible navigation through the image.

The impossibility to navigate the view through the image characterizes the work of Ivan Šuletić. The artist’s interest in the procedures of translating scenes into cultural patterns and generating an image of a place stems from the need to understand the relation of the eye to the environment. This relation is not static – it is characterized by constant variations between the seen and the constructed space, similar to the procedures that Šuletić performs in creating images: finding a sample of a scene, its reproducing and representing through repetition. In that process, however, landscape is not revealed. The image of the scene is generated in its own camouflage, questioning the possibility of perception – an elusive space of subjectivization in landscape.

The selection and *sampling* of culturally and chronologically distant visual templates is the basis of Ivana Kličković’s approach to painting; she uses various technological procedures in painting to construct landscapes as simultaneously overlapping coloured strips of reduced image fragments that form spatially flat and meaningfully open, abstract and/or quasi-representational compositions. Her landscapes comment on the multidirectional and incessant, often chaotic circulation of images in our everyday life in which everything is *already seen* and exists in a networked way, overcoming independent or isolated cultural patterns and social phenomena.

Siniša Ilić and Bojan Đorđev approach landscape as a medium of political struggle, a specific form of historical painting that engages abstract language in the function of social emancipation. Referring to specific events and places from anti-colonial history and neo-colonial present, in the work *Topographies of Emancipation and Coercion*, an abstract landscape of the modernist type is given as an ideological sign, as an active participant in historical processes and their narrativization, by which – more directly than other artistic positions presented in this exhibition – a relationship with the local modernist heritage is established.

The exhibition *Abstract Landscape 2.0* closes with Goran Micevki’s work *100 birds to save the landscape*, a photographic homage to landscape as a place of unfixed representation, as a space for framing the horizon that (always) eludes. Micevski is a dedicated and passionate hiker, a careful observer of the environment, with which he builds a discreet relationship through images, finding in the seen unexpected twists to fabulise the scene. If a hundred birds are enough to preserve a landscape, would there be no salvation for a bird without a landscape?

1. Aleksa Čelebonović, *Apstraktni pejzaž*, Galerija Kulturnog centra, Belgrade 1962 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In detail on the importance of this exhibition in the historical-artistic sense in: Lidija Merenik, *Umtnost i vlast. Srpsko slikarstvo 1945–1968*, Filozofski fakultet and Vujičić kolekcija, Belgrad 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Aleksa Čelebonović, *op. cit.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, 2nd edition, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2002 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)