



LJUDORAH

in quest of Ljudoraha

In the wake of the disappearance of a large number of plant and animal species caused by human activity, the acute state of our planet has become a dominant social topic inseparable from the current geopolitical fractures. Enormous technological acceleration, frequent social control on a global scale, militarization and the threat of a nuclear disaster make every toponym a potential target, with flora and fauna being absolute collateral damage.

Despite different and most often unfavorable forecasts, critically articulating the current situation can also mean imagining a more favorable future for a moment. Nevertheless, a socially oriented image of our planet based on the principle of ecological justice and completely different interactions of human and other-than-human individuals can be the starting point for a narrative in which the plant world plays a leading role, whether it is about those constituents that are considered tame or invasive.

On that trail, the ambient installation *In Quest of Ljudoraha* was created, which represents a new chapter of Ivana Papić's research based

on invasive plant species. The artist's focus so far has been pajasen or Tree of Heaven (lat. *Ailanthus altissima*), an invasive plant originating in Asia, initially imported to Europe as an ornamental species¹. Since it spreads rapidly and is difficult to eradicate, in her artistic practice Papić presents this plant as a metaphor for female adaptability and resilience.

In this work, *Ailanthus altissima* is an integral part of the mutant called Ljudoraha², which is characterized by human or female and plant characteristics. The function of this form of life is multifaceted since it repairs the earth, protects certain plant species, and is characterized by symbiotic ecological care in the form of cohabitation with *Ailanthus* silkworm butterflies³. The story of Ljudoraha from the post-apocalyptic future of the planet Earth is the basis of the speculative narrative that extends across the exhibition space reminiscent of an intergalactic station.

Six video works function as possible illustrations of abandoned, impoverished, but feral landscapes⁴ inhabited by various forms of (plant) life. Projected on different surfaces, two projections each on walls, relief surfaces

¹ *Ailanthus altissima* was one of the first Chinese trees to be brought to Europe; the Jesuit priest Pierre d'Incarville sent seeds from Beijing to Bernard de Jussieu in France in the 1740s, assuming that they were from the economically important Varnish Tree *Toxicodendron vernicifluum*.

<https://www.treesandshrubsonline.org/articles/ailanthus/ailanthus-altissima/>

² Ljudoraha is a neologism in the feminine gender made up of the Croatian words ljudsko (human) and orah (nut).

³ The Greek goddess Psyche as the personification of the human soul was often depicted as a butterfly. Hence the Italian poet and philosopher Dante Alighieri claimed that humans were born to form an angelic butterfly.

⁴ Feral effects can be wonderful or terrible. Humans would all be dead without feral effects. If human landscape transformation was as effective as modernist dreamers claim in replacing earlier ecologies, we might have no more forests or fisheries. Forests grow back, fish escape and reproduce: in such instances, we are lucky to live with feral effects. At the same time, feral effects can kill us, both humans and nonhumans. - <https://feralatlas.supdigital.org/?cd=true&bd-text=introduction-to-feral-atlas&ir=true&cdex=true&name=true&text=introduction-to-feral-atlas&tttype=essay>

and aluminum plates, these images are complemented by pseudo-archival objects, i.e. organic materials cast in resin (parts of the Tree of Heaven plant, as well as eggs, cocoons and silkworm butterflies). The entire setting is colored by the soundtrack, that is, the aforementioned narration supplemented with experimental organic sounds generated by the artist (similar to the sounds of the bowels of the earth and ultrasonic waves produced by plants).

However, any form of representation of the main protagonist Ljudoraha is absent. This gesture can be interpreted in the light of the artist's decision to deviate from the established anthropomorphic perception, and focus on oral storytelling in the style of ecofeminist literary and activist practices⁵. In response to this, there is also a narrator of an equally enigmatic status. Whether it is a human scientific subject or some form of machine (artificial intelligence/cyborg), the rather warm tone with which the narrator presents the results of the long-term research related to Ljudoraha suggests perseverance, dedication, but also a certain amount of emotional charge. Performing poetic sequences, the narrator falls into a kind of trance as if dreaming⁶, which contributes to the absolute speculative nature of Ivana Papić's entire venture.

The title of the ambient installation suggests an attempt to reconstruct the appearance of Ljudoraha and understand her existence in

the distant future, bearing in mind the devastating consequences of techno-feudalism, settler colonialism⁷, frequent war destruction and the ecological disaster we are witnessing in the present. Despite the presentation of her biological characteristics⁸, and the conclusions related to her behavior, as well as the *evidence* exhibited in the gallery space, the impression is that Ljudoraha is an operational work unit or, as the narrator calls her, a *herbal alchemist*. With the presence and help of silkworms characteristic of the Tree of Heaven (*Samia cynthia* better known as *Ailanthus silk*), Ljudoraha contributes unstoppably to the environment in its constant movement. Therefore, her action opens issues of labor in terms of ecosystem maintenance and care, which is a prerequisite for successful coexistence in extreme conditions.

Plants are most often seen as immobile, passive and insufficiently communicative by human standards, which makes them susceptible to maximum abuse, primarily in the form of deforestation, thus usurping land for human needs. Although the organization of plant communities, their resilience, as well as logic and sensitivity should be a model or an incentive for building better and more equal worlds, they remain marginalized and underestimated. This especially applies to invasive plant species such as wild walnut whose English name Tree of Heaven suggests origin or belonging to an imaginary space that cannot be defined.

Due to its high resilience and fast growth⁹, *Ailanthus altissima* is considered a threat in the context of Western societies despite the multiple constructive potentials of its biomass¹⁰, which is not the case in China, where this plant originates. The introduction of many species to Europe and America is a direct consequence of centuries of colonialism¹¹. The Tree of Heaven was brought practically by mistake, because it was considered to be the so-called Chinese varnish tree, from which, as the name suggests, varnish is produced. The moment it spread naturally, it was marked as an invasive plant species that should be sanctioned. This paradigm indicates that the entire flora is viewed from a strictly racial (white) anthropocentric perspective, which implies a clear distinction between wildness and control, or order.

The post-apocalyptic narrative of Ljudoraha is unfolding in space and time without order, which, despite all the forecasts of climatologists, is difficult to anticipate. On the horizon of the newly created wilderness, this self-sustaining nomadic entity that provides care for plant species through cohabitation with other organisms represents the hope that future forms of life can live completely pacifistically and in agreement with the needs of others that make a one toponym a functional ecosystem.

Viewed from a contemporary perspective, it can be said that Ljudoraha is an unattainable ideal for human civilization, but also a call to imagine more egalitarian and ecologically just (social) realities.

Vladimir Bjeličić
Art historian

5 The sign of equality between continuous violence against the natural environment and women is a prerequisite for understanding the urgent transformation of the capitalist system based on the extraction and exploitation of goods and land, especially with regard to reproductive rights. As women are sanctioned in this sense, it also stands in the way of the plant world, whose regenerative capacities cannot even be seen due to repressive mechanisms that are a consequence of colonialism and imperialism.

6 The indigenous art of the Australian Aborigines is centered on Dreaming, i.e. narrating knowledge about the land, events and beliefs.

7 Settler colonialism is an unfinished and continuously evolving project and the intimate interrelationships between transatlantic slavery, land grabs, genocide, ecocide, fossil fuel economies, and the financialization of nature continue to shape the global present. - Sria Chatterjee, British Art Studies, *The Arts, Environmental Justice, and the Ecological Crisis: A Provocation; Colonialism/Capitalism*, 2020,

<https://britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/18/assets/downloads/publication-arts-environmental-justice-ecological-crisis.pdf>

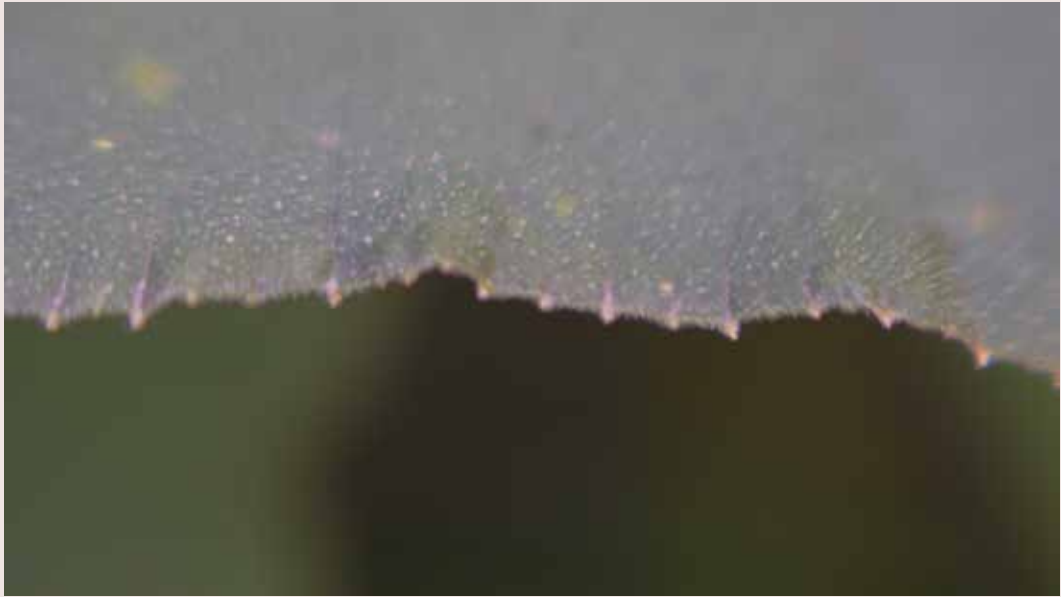
8 The narrative does not imply whether Ljudoraha is the product of some biotechnological experiment.

9 *Ailanthus* found wide application for reforestation on industrial regions, mining dumps and contaminated zones and as shelter belt due to its wide physiological amplitude characterised by a high resistance against pollution and unpretentiousness concerning growing conditions in regard to soil type, soil humidity, nutritional value as well as climate conditions (annual precipitation, mean annual temperature as well as longer periods of aridity). - Reinhard Brandner, Gerhard Schickhofer, *Tree-of-Heaven (Ailanthus Altissima): Enormous and wide potential neglected by the Western Civilisation*, World Conference on Timber Engineering (2010)

10 The Tree of Heaven wood can be potentially used to make paper pulp which contributes to the sustainable development of ecologically ethical production.

11 Historians of science have documented that where colonists went, they transformed landscapes through colonial forestry, plantation crops, and spice trades. Colonial histories are fundamentally about the exploitation of colonized peoples' labor and of plants and other natural sources. - Banu Subramaniam, *Botany of Empire: Plant Worlds and the Scientific Legacies of Colonialism*, University of Washington Press, 2024

Great waters that slither I have not seen yet on Earth,
Water images I look for when I close my eyes.
I see that same being on the green meadow.
Next to the wooden house that levitates on water.
Human being is she.
So she approaches me carefully and grabs me by the hand.
Her hands resemble to mine,
but her skin is not rough.
It's delicate, and her nails are translucent.
Her hair is not coarse,
It's like silk threads from silkmoths.
Through her eyes I see my eyes and my silhouette.
She says that we walk towards the wooden house.
Great water is now blue,
now crimson, red.
It shines, it murmurs.
On the house terrace two beings are standing.
One with dark, voluminous hair and a small one in its lap.
She runs down the stairs and throws herself into their arms.
They call me, they wave.
The great water suddenly swells.
"Adova! Adova!"
But they don't hear me, they keep waving at me.
Adova destroys the house, takes them far away from me.













Ivana Papić is a multimedia artist and educator who lives and works between Germany and Croatia. Using text, video, sound and objects in her art-research practice, she builds layered poetic works that touch upon the notions of migration, identity and belonging from the perspective of the relationship between man and the plant world. So far, Papić has exhibited at solo and group exhibitions in Croatia, Serbia, Germany and Peru, of which stand out solo exhibitions at MKC Gallery and Salon Galić in Split, Pogon multimedia hall in Zagreb and DOB – Youth Center of Belgrade. She won the prize of the 21st Festival of the First on the theme “(In) visible Women” in Zagreb in 2023. During the last year, she worked at the University of the Arts in Berlin as a guest lecturer of the master’s program of the Institute for Art in Context, and from the current year at the *Stodium Generale* study program.

LJUDORAH
Ivana Papić
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