

CRITICAL ESSAY

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While The Vertebrae of Time Continue to Spin.

Step 2 Group Show

Gillian Brett, Taisia Korotkova, Arseny Zhilyaev

Curated by Alessandra Franetovich

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Opening Reception

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C+N Gallery CANEPANERI

Foro Buonaparte, 48 – 20121 Milan

My beast, my age, who will try
to look you in the eye,
and weld the vertebrae
of century to century,
with blood?

In 1922 the poet Osip Mandelstam wrote *Vek* (The Century), a dense and visionary poem on the relationship between humankind and time dominated by an enigmatic foundation and stratifications of meanings that abandon the reader in a feeling of indefiniteness. In the flow of words, the passage from one century to another, as well as the reflection on one's role in the context of a specific era, are narrated through verbal constructions with imaginative power. Here, the personification of the burden that the poet and, by extension, the artist bears with the creation of parallel and alternative worlds to harsh reality was described in the form of the vertebrae of time. Body and flesh become one with one's destiny as a narrator and builder who clashes with the difficulty of making past, present and future meet and coincide.

Taking up the unresolved meeting between eras and eras, the exhibition presents an investigation into artistic research that is structured around the increasingly close relationship between humanity, technology and nature, recovering today aesthetics and stories of the recent past by re-actualizing them in purely contemporary dimensions, as «art is thought from the future» (Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecologies: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, 2016). Exactly a century has passed since then, and in light of the it, the perception remains that Mandelstam's words are mirrors that reflect thoughts that are still valid, through which it is possible for us to observe and discover ourselves within a world that not only surrounds, but of which we are one element among many capable of moving flows, energies, thoughts. We reflect ourselves as agents and part of a whole that is difficult to define because the dimensions (planetary or microscopic) are themselves mobile, while new sensibilities question the possibility of making categorizations and canonizations more fluid, open, if not demolishing them entirely. Processes that have already begun which cyclically return in the light of landslides of meaning and research that lie beyond what is already known. Precisely the poet's small mirrors reveal impalpable hints of déjà vu and in the reflective surface that *While the Vertebrae of Time Continue to Spin* tries to bring up to date, we discover ourselves as observers and witnesses of the re-emergence of themes and aesthetics that seemed to connote the post-World War II period: representations of terror resulting from the Cold War and nuclear risk on the one hand as well as the passion for interstellar travel on the other. Although itself a territory of technological as well as strategic contention for propaganda, scientific, economic and military issues, the exploration of the cosmos has given life to the cultural trend of science fiction which has recorded popular success in both blocks, carrying forward a pacifying message as well: the logic of conquest and colonization was contrasted with messages of union in the name of an understanding that being in the universe is a collective feeling. While a new space age is underway, new geographies are competing in interstellar expeditions together with private companies and the first forms of space tourism are developing. Here the imagery connected to the cosmos and the aerospace industry returns to make space in visual culture: the images of telescopes in orbit and the Earth filmed live by cameras positioned on the ISS are shared by the space agencies themselves on their social channels entrusted to private platforms, in the meantime billionaires provide services for research institutes, guests of their launches. That is, forms of privatization of knowledge and the image of the cosmos are making headway as we get used to seeing fragments of decodings reproduced on backlit screens, including logos, comments and various advertisements.

The algorithm-generated photo series *100 Seconds to Reach Heaven or to Perish Without Time for Repentance* (2022-2023) by Arseny Zhilyaev consists of shots taken by the artist with his mobile phone. In a precise temporal juncture delimited by the calculations of others, the artist portrayed daily scenes at night, taking one hundred seconds before midnight. The work is inspired by the calculation of the Doomsday Clock developed by scientists during the Cold War. Here midnight represents the possibility of the nuclear war and the distance from this is expressed in the calculation of the minutes remaining until it is reached. In 1947, the year of its creation, the clock counted seven minutes to midnight, while since 2023 it has been set to 90 seconds. Zhilyaev's work was therefore created when the calculation was around 100 seconds, between 2022 and 2023, and represents one method among the various developed by the artist in this time to reflect on the events and the state of mind aroused by the escalation of Russia's war against Ukraine.

The repetitiveness of the gesture, the nocturnal atmosphere, the daily life of moments frozen by the photographic medium tell of seconds lived in internal and sometimes external settings, fragmentary visions of a partially illuminated house, while someone presumably sleeps in an adjoining room, and even nights spent in front of the computer or mobile screen, private moments, sleepy self-portraits, people met, glimpses of the city. Scrolling through the work is a gesture that allows us to approach a possible visual diary of Zhilyaev's life and within which we can recognize ourselves, subjects active in a daily life exposed to the destruction that is closer and closer. The dating of the photographs together with the quotation of the speech held by Vladimir Putin on the use of the atomic bomb in 2018 (partly inserted in the title of the work) which then became a source of memes for the level of ideology exposed in an eschatological construction reminiscent of the Soviet Union, comment on the current geopolitical scenario characterized by the escalation of the war waged by Russia against Ukraine. With yet another shortening of the apocalyptic clock, the time remaining for humanity before destruction becomes even closer when the fear of the end has never respected political boundaries.

Decadent imagery associated with the remnants of the aerospace and nuclear industries characterizes paintings from Taisia Korotkova's Closed Russia series (2013-2015), which depict scenes from the Institute for Theoretical and Experimental Physics and fuel production and reproduction of nuclear power in Russia. These are images taken in militarized cities and shared online, recovered from platforms managed by communities born on the internet and frequented by the artist who, through backlit screens, interfaces with new and enigmatic scenarios created by modern stalkers. Faced with the ruins of the Soviet era, symbols of a civilization characterized by forms of mass industrialization, the question arises that what remains can be toxic and deadly: burying the nuclear waste and declaring the dismantling of the military shield was not enough. Korotkova's series of watercolors on paper Imagined Destinations (2023) embraces futuristic scenarios of coexistence between different species, representing a radical renewal of the decadent imagery associated with the remnants of the aerospace and nuclear industries that has characterized her work for years. Work. Animals, plants, minerals, and microorganisms are depicted in fantastic imagery inhabited by recognizable elements of the contemporary technological panorama: the Tokamak reactor and the Biosphere 2 experiment insinuate themselves into constructions reminiscent of illustrations with a science fiction aesthetic and retrofuturist, between the eyes of flies, fungi, microbes. For Korotkova, the comparison with the cosmos is a primary source for the conception of a model of interspecies coexistence to which we yearn and which develops in a historical period in which recent publications and entire editorial series turn to the investigation of non-human forms of intelligence, that they are precisely animals, material or digital, within which every existence in forms of radical collectivism can be nested - once these imagined destinations have been reached in a hypothetical future. A world that is contiguous but speculatively already distant from the one proposed in the series of paintings on the theme of humanoid robots, among which Philip Dick Robot is the portrait of a machine built in the likeness of the well-known science fiction writer, later forgotten and whose head has been lost. location. A comparison that leads to thinking about whether the care of the human body should pass through standardization processes and the creation of clones, through posthuman ideals based on the hybrid between man and machine, or precisely through embracing with extreme openness all forms of existence.

Gillian Brett's screens focus on this aspect, critical statements of the role of technological tools in limiting our observation of the world. These works are carried out through deliberate acts of techno-luddism carried out so that the surfaces of the devices, once broken, resemble the images released by the Hubble Space Telescope launched into orbit in 1990 and still active. By looking exactly at the work and the image of the cosmos reproduced there, one comes to reflect on the mechanisms of observation and understanding of the world, whereby the experience is mediated by entire processes of synthesis and preparation of images conceived and constructed to be easily usable. and with a monotonous contextualization. The same process also involves the artistic production itself: the devices made into works of art interrupt the cycle of presumed waste disposal which involves sending these wastes to disadvantaged geographical areas, with the aim of getting rid of polluting elements by selling them instead as functioning goods and low cost. Brett's works disintegrate a mechanism of exploitation generated within extreme consumerism and lead to a critical analysis of the functioning and hypocrisies of the English university education system in the artistic field in which the artist was trained, in which to offer constant updating of work tools to its students, working and recently acquired tools are made obsolete. All this while in the art system consciences are cleared by creating projects on ecological and post-colonial themes, without however putting into practice the teachings offered.

In the light of the journey undertaken, one can feel how the artistic imagination distorts the sense of time with an action that returns a crushed perception of past, present and future, allowing the futurological discourse present in the exhibited works to immediately express a positioning: against the presumed neutrality of technologies, against positivist progressivism and the forms of implicit propaganda that tend to leave the services we need in the hands of corporations and the creation of new desires conveyed solely by the needs of capital. In this horizon, the role of art emerges in parallel to that of the vertebrae of time which – while still spinning – try to solve the enigma of time. In this, the works amplify imaginaries of interspecies coexistence which – not wanting to offer accommodating images – postulate analyzes of the inconsistencies between eras, imagining futures based on the recovery of passages from the past within which to reflect the present.

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