

JACQUELYN DAVIS

Exhibition Review: *Unexpected Encounters*

Unexpected Encounters: Arsenāls Fine Arts Museum, organized by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art. Riga, Latvia: December 13, 2019–Feb 23, 2020.

The short stories written by brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky confront issues such as differences between civilizations and the complexity of human encounters with diverse, far-flung species. The group exhibition *Unexpected Encounters*, organized by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, took its title from a story collection by the Strugatskys and drew attention to concepts such as the “stalker” and the “zone,” among other science fiction concepts, appropriated from their once-banned novel *Roadside Picnic* (1971). This show primarily drew attention to the sociopolitical history of the literary community in Latvia and neighboring regions during the twentieth century, where the state and certain publishers were known to censor works or drastically edit the content of works before they reached the public. Yet, despite this general climate of censorship, literary science fiction publishers in Latvia and the Soviet Union were often successful in producing and supporting works that revolved around the question of utopias and progress because these literary explorations supported recurring ideas present in communist ideologies or highlighted nationally fueled concerns. Many science fiction writers were able to address or criticize concerns such as colonization, race, gender inequality, and oppression by using literature and publishing as a less confrontational platform for examination. This exhibition, at Riga’s Arsenāls Exhibition Hall, paid homage to esteemed science fiction writers such as Issac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Octavia E. Butler, and Ursula K. Le Guin.

As evidenced in the exhibition’s curatorial statement, the curators are aware of ongoing frictions and transformations happening internationally: geopolitical power shifts toward and away from the right; unfolding global developments such as heated political elections, Brexit, and corruption; the problematics of maintaining democratic societies; the confrontation of the patriarchy; and colonialism as it manifests in multiple forms. As the world grows increasingly concerned with environmental destruction, climate change, possible nuclear threat, and apocalyptic outcomes, it is understandable why many exhibitions and discussions revolve around the future and the Anthropocene epoch. The curatorial concept was devoted to the dissection of the literary genre of science fiction from a historical and archival perspective, and these related observations stem primarily from three Latvian women curators (Solvita Krese, Inga Lāce, and Andra Silapētere) who graciously influence Riga’s cultural milieu. Yet, their primary curatorial approach was to view society at large

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through the lens of science fiction—using multiple narrative devices for how this artistic story should ultimately be told via the exhibition’s platform.

The sociopolitical climate continues to change, as do the ways in which science fiction themes and concerns are contextual; they are often site-specific, subjective, or historically motivated. As technology advances and human beings’ relationship to other living things is altered through ecological disasters and unpredictable events, the necessity for cooperation and tolerance appears imperative. Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) touches upon these issues in a story collection highlighting an Earthling’s journey to Mars with aspirations to colonize a new planet already populated by Martians. Feelings of anxiety, isolation, and uncertainty persisted throughout the exhibition with the intent to remind visitors of the delicate existential condition of mankind coupled with the possibility that *something else* might be waiting to be discovered. The exhibition encouraged visitors to turn the lens upon themselves and examine their role in the world, to witness and experience the awe of the universe and locate more possibilities for expansion and cooperation. Other points of interest such as cosmism, transhumanism, Eastern philosophy, and Marxism were incorporated into the show in a peripheral manner. With eyes on the past, present, and future simultaneously, the show’s concept and results provided insight into how the same mistakes are frequently repeated and accumulated to create irreversible damage for the Earth and its seemingly self-centered inhabitants.

Unexpected Encounters included older works from an archival perspective and newly commissioned works by emerging and established artists from contrasting regions. The exhibiting artists are primarily based in the Baltics, yet there were examples of creative work from other countries as well. To begin, the lithography of Latvian artist Māris Ārgalis in *The Bus* (1976–77) illustrates the interior of a bus filled to capacity with aliens. The visually blurred perspective of being on the bus with a cluster of unknown travelers is portrayed. Included in this archival exploration were the paintings of Latvian artist Auseklis Baušķenieks. His painting *Afternoon* (1986) revolves around the motif of an introspective man seen in his private environment reading a newspaper alongside a daydreaming woman glancing upward into the distance; they are observed inside their home in the midst of leisure, engrossed in their futuristic world—one hinted at by the view observed through their porthole window. This painting, alongside others by the same artist, perhaps, exposes the paradoxes and contradictions witnessed within the artist’s own life.

Accompanying these earlier works is the graphic art series by French artist Aleksandrs Dembo. Within these works, aerial views of outer space are littered with planets, stars, and UFOs. In *Over the Threshold* (1976), an egg-shaped spacecraft carries a lone passenger toward a distant planet at night. Trepidation and solitude can be sensed alongside a more traditional presence of masculinity and courage in Dembo’s distinctive style. Zenta Logina was a twentieth-century Latvian textile artist and painter of figurative compositions and abstraction whose work is now considered nonconformist and, to some, radical, because at the time abstraction was unrecognized and often excluded from public exhibitions. Her sculptural work *The Weeping Planet* (1976) hung from the wall—a globular mossy concoction resembling a diseased dripping eye or dubious portal into a less friendly realm.



IMAGE 1. Installation view of *The Weeping Planet* (1976) by Zenta Logina; courtesy Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art.

Works by current contemporary artists and key international creatives deserved attention when making the rounds through the massive exhibition hall. Latvian-born, New York City–based artist Viktor Timofeev is gaining traction in Latvia, the United States, and Russia due to his detailed sketches, paintings, installations, and collaborative energy. The artist is versatile and committed; he presented the *Godflower* painting series (2019) where vivid plant-like organic growths attempt to free themselves from subtly threatening modular dreamscapes of far-ranging shapes and designs. Norwegian artist Ann Lislegaard presented her 3D animation *Malstrømmen* (2017–19), which is a cyborg’s self-portrait and narrative based on Edgar Allen Poe’s story *A Descent into the Maelström* (1841). In Lislegaard’s story, the cyborg time travels through different areas and receives communications from unknown entities from the eras encountered. The animation is sensory: accompanying sound intensifies and wavers to accentuate the ethereal mechanical mood.

The show didn’t avoid the confrontational and invited the excessive; this was confirmed by the inclusion of new works such as Artūrs Virtmanis’s large-scale installation *In the Dust of This Universe* (2019). The work is influenced by the artist’s research of helium weather balloons, and his interest in the overlap between scientific speculation, metascience, and sci-fi pop culture; in the exhibition hall, Virtmanis’s three-dimensional balloon is tied to a wall with multiple rubbery strings in a seemingly unstable manner. Chinese artist Zheng Bo presented his video works *Pteridophilia 1* and *Pteridophilia 3* (2016 and 2018, respectively) in which he highlights the relationships between queer individuals and queer plants; the artist investigates eco-queer potential via select hybridized scenarios. These rapports are emotional, physical, and spiritual, and mainly rely on the visceral realm of the body—without



IMAGE 2. Installation view of *Godflower* paintings (2019) by Viktor Timofeev; photograph by Jacquelyn Davis.

depending on words for expression. The fern species is significant, and BDSM practices surface throughout. Danish artist Sif Itona Westerberg presented the timeless sculpture *Fruit Picker* (2019), consisting of concrete and steel. The work draws attention to mythological possibilities and future worlds inhabited by graceful gods and post-human species. Her sculpture resembles a feminine oracle-like being with multiple arms, wings spread, picking fruit in an imagined garden.

Much effort went into highlighting contrasting artistic practices within the show's framework; many of the participating artists work in experimental realms and from hyper-aware perspectives. The creative synergy—among artists and curators alike—could be detected; it was impossible to avoid the presence of a particular kinship thriving between and among the works as they visually and conceptually played off of each other. Contributing artists seemed to be aware of one another's perspectives; there were few to no repetitions in approach, design, or practice among them. For example, with the reality that books and words have been censored in the past, many artists have created works that emphasize the inherent importance of freedom of speech, expression, and communication. The mediums and approaches incorporated were colorful and intricate; the contrast between works of older generations paralleled the current era of creatives and bred lovely ruminations.

The exhibition's curators are experts in academia, art historical research, and curating, and they seamlessly collaborated—which is no easy feat when more than one curator organizes a large show. Their sensitivity and expertise confirm that Baltic women arts professionals are



IMAGE 3. Installation view of video works *Pteridophilia 1* (2016) & *Pteridophilia 3* (2018) by Zheng Bo; courtesy Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art.

strong and resourceful. Though the science fiction theme is perhaps over-circulating at the moment due to the reality of climate change and sociopolitical strife, this exhibition is an example of one that adopted the responsibility of approaching the topic thoroughly—with respect to its included artists and their overlapping aims. The future is tenuous as is the state of the current art world, yet well-informed creative initiatives such as this one may expedite desired change and push conversations into more precise directions. ■

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