

Art Brussels 2024

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DISCOVERY 6C – 23

Vika Eksta

The exposition at ArtBrussels consists of three important projects by VIKA EKSTA.

THE ENCOUNTER (2023) is a deeply personal and courageous piece, where the artist employs herself as a tool of documentation, baring herself in the most intimate moment imaginable – the birth of her first child.

“It happened at the end of the summer of 2022. In preparation, I went to Lamaze classes, read a bunch of articles, joined several pregnancy chat groups, and, of course, tried to live as healthily as possible. I mentally prepared myself for a natural hospital birth without anaesthesia.”

As she prepared to give birth to her first child Alma, the artist made sure to bring along a camera and tripod to the hospital. In the two self-portraits and in the series recording the chronology of childbirth pain, the artist captures herself, tracking the emotional amplitude of bodily experience, thus creating an unusually symbolic work about the birthing experience, unparalleled pain, and the emergence of a new identity.

Similarly, Eksta's photography series GOD, NATURE, TOIL (2013–2015) is the artist's work of performance art involving her own transformation.

A house is a person's monument, their archive. In the summer of 2013, she worked as photographic artist David Creedon's assistant, when he was in Latvia working on a series of photographs of elderly people in the countryside.

One day, we stumbled upon an abandoned house, and it was unique in that, unlike the others, it wasn't vandalised. There even was a wardrobe full of clothes, and I felt a strong impulse to try on some of them and take self-portraits. I guess that was the moment when the «God Nature Work» project was conceived. She continued to visit the house for a couple more years, trying to spend several days there at a time and even staying overnight, a task that initially demanded overcoming fear and discomfort. Using the clothes and items found there, she changed into various outfits and staged everyday situations, imagining the possible life of the former inhabitant of the house, and took pictures.

«Initially, I thought that the project focused on the life of an elderly woman. Over time, I came to realise that it addressed a broader issue of loneliness among women in our country, who often find themselves shouldering the burden of labour, as the men in their lives are either long deceased, absent, or otherwise incapable of dealing with daily tasks. All these themes come up in my project.

LITTLE STAR (2021)

This unique work was created in an analog photo laboratory over the course of several months.

A single frame forms the basis of the exhibition – a contemplative mid-shot portrait, captured at a $\frac{3}{4}$ angle, of a horse named Zvaigznīte (Little Star), evoking the image of a unicorn. This one frame was then explored in 28 variations. From almost pitch purple tones to completely washed out due to overexposure – each individual copy of the photograph represents a small leap into another tonal range, with all of them converging to create a single work.

The development of humanity and civilization has always been closely tied to our relationships with beasts of burden and how they've been cared for and nurtured, and often enslaved and worked to death. This common idyllic subject – the image of a horse – has been explored through the ages, from cave paintings to Romanticism in painting and sculpture, and has now again found its way into photography, live installations and other art practices. The study of a horse in motion, pioneered by Eadweard Muybridge, is, in fact, where photography finds its origins.

Now that people have largely moved away from relying on horse labor, the meaning and function of the symbol have undergone significant transformation. What remains are stark contrasts – on one hand, the preservation of elitist culture through participation in prestigious sports events, catering to the entertainment and economic interests of aristocrats and the financially privileged; on the other hand, the extraordinary «trust» placed in the animal in rural areas.

This holds true for the central figure in Vika Eksta's work – the mare Zvaigznīte, who resides in rural Latgale and engages in a variety of tasks designed specifically for her, such as pulling her owner's sleigh and harrowing the potato field. These activities seem to bring as much joy to the horse as they do to her owners.

Vika Eksta is a visual artist (born in 1987) who lives and works in Riga.

Her projects often comprise series of works in which, using the possibilities of photography to create a documentary sense of presence, the imaginary and the real are merged. Many of her works reflect the artist's personal experiences. Proficient in photography and analog methods, she also explores performance art and conducts research in audiovisual archives. Additionally, she hosts photography workshops for diverse audiences.