

DEBORAH SCHAMONI
Mauerkircherstr. 186
D-81925 München

Jonathan Penca
Slupan
27.04. – 13.06.2024

The damp air weighs heavy on the streets of Bangkok. With slow, heavy steps, a monitor lizard navigates the waterways that divide the city's concrete streets and plazas. The blinding light of the midday sun bounces off the glass facades of high-rise buildings, reflecting in the dark puddles below. Each movement of the scaly reptile leaves long ripples that disturb the water's surface, shattering the illusion of a second skyline.

The drawings, watercolors, and sculptures in Jonathan Penca's solo exhibition *Slupan* (from the Old English "slūpan," meaning "to slide," "to slip") evoke fragmented remnants of an alternate timeline—a reality in which Penca captures specific encounters from his travels in (fever)-dreamlike scenes. The resulting works brim with references to film, literature, architecture, fashion, and both cultural and natural history, where human and animal protagonists—if one can even make that distinction—unexpectedly converge. Ultimately, it is the very processes of producing and acquiring knowledge that Penca's artistic tour de force puts up for debate.

But what does that mean exactly? Taking a closer look at the structure of the exhibition, the series of images becomes a kind of expedition through the biotopes and recurring motifs from which Penca derives his surrealist scenarios: a roller skate morphs from a mode of transportation into a pelican mutant, spiders and sirens creep and slither through diverse terrains, human figures clad in futuristic avant-garde suits encounter flying foxes and the specters of fish saurian. Evolutionary branches are laid bare, the once-presumed dead are resurrected.

The skeleton of an ichthyosaur strikes a pose in front of a cave entrance. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, this prehistoric creature gets a second life after being unearthed from its stony tomb. It even has its own museum in Berlin, Nevada, complete with a spotlight display inside the temple-like structure built in 1966. It is in this artificial environment that layers of current and historical paleontological research come together. Penca, who visited Berlin, Nevada during a trip to the United States in 2023, combines scientific descriptions with local anecdotes, mythologies, and his signature humor to create new narratives. *Blaisdell*, a sculpture of the ichthyosaur skull, harks back to Penca's performative revival of the ancient creature in the man-made Bronson Caves near Los Angeles, which served as a filming location for many B-movies in the 1950s. *Fossil barn protecting in situ displays* shows the journey to and from Berlin as painted fiction.

Navigating Penca's universe requires the ability to decipher the imagined. But like the enchanted "red shoes" in Hans Christian Andersen's tale, the tools required for such understanding often elude their users and falter in practical application. Here, an alligator's snout glides with serene elegance through Zaha Hadid's One Thousand Museum in Miami; there, in *Misplacing the 13th Century*, crested newts frolic inside the four iconic cylindrical towers of BMW's headquarters, recalling the 1975 dystopian sci-fi classic "Rollerball" in which the headquarters served as the nerve center for a dubious energy conglomerate. Penca's zoomorphic subjects thrive in these precise moments of transgression: where the relationships of dependency between humans, machines, and animal hybrids are in constant flux.

Text: Dierk Höhne (translated from German)