

Accompanying programme:

Wednesday, 26 July 2023, at 18:00

A guided tour of the exhibition with the curator



Exhibition Colophon:
Herman Gvardjančič SLOVENAE 22: Karst

19 July – 10 September 2023
Ivan Grohar Gallery
Škofja Loka Museum

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Ivan Grohar Gallery

19. 7.– 10. 9. 2023

Kustos / Curator: Boštjan Soklič

Herman Gvardjančič

SLOVENAE 22: *Karst*



The Ivan Grohar Gallery is presenting the academy-trained painter Herman Gvardjančič and his new series of art works. The featured works are part of a cycle of drawings titled *Slovenae 22: Karst*, which is dedicated to the devastating fires that swept through the Slovenian region of Karst in 2022. The drawings created by combining various techniques (charcoal, acrylic, ash) continue Gvardjančič's painting project titled *Slovenae*, which was started in the 1980s, thematically, however, they are also linked to the pictures created during the fires in Australia years ago. Gvardjančič came up with the title *Slovenae* back in 1988, and later that same year, he used it for a depiction of an architectural scene from the Slovenian urban landscape. As part of *Slovenae 22: Karst*, the artist explores Slovenian scenes and subjects, however, they are actually common, global and transnational. He is particularly concerned about drastic climate change (temperature fluctuations, extreme weather events, rising sea levels, warming oceans, etc.), which he has previously observed from an aerial perspective as a sport aircraft pilot. He is somewhat pessimistic about the fate of the Earth. *Slovenae* is an ongoing project and is yet to be finished. It can be perceived as a serious wake-up call and warning, because the greed for material possessions has led us dangerously astray as a civilisation.

Gvardjančič's artistic sensibility and concern about the fatal consequences of man's unwise environmental behaviour pervade all the exhibited works, which are essentially expressive depictions of concrete phenomena – wildfire aftermath sites. They are transformed perceptions of degraded scenes in the form of direct (impulsive) depictions, born out of a deep experience of the finality of everything, but also of the ever-changing world.

As part of the *Slovenae 22: Karst* exhibition, Herman Gvardjančič expresses his feelings about the tragic events that took place in the Karst in a very direct and spontaneous way. He creates art in the solitude of the studio, and his expressiveness is free and removed from any stylistic definitions. He combines various drawing techniques, using them in a way that allows them to express his multifaceted artistic narrative as best as they can. Most of the exhibited works depict parts of the landscape – the burnt, charred Karst world (wildfire sites, blackness, clusters of toxic particles created by burning,

smoke, ash, sparks, parched ground, desolate natural areas with forests and other growth, etc.), crumbling and disappearing in the dull, sooty landscape.

Slovenae 22: Karst – an impulsive synthesis of drawing and painting experiences – consists of atmospheric, dark stories exhibited in both gallery rooms. The first gallery room features drawings on different support media (paper, fabric) and in different formats with characteristic elements of Gvardjančič's recognisable painterly style. The narrative in the first gallery room is dictated by two large works and an organic wall construction of depictions. These are plains of instinctive records of fleeting thoughts, literally born out of a conflict – a clash (antagonism) between bitter realisation and the wounded karst landscape. All the works have been created using mixed techniques; with their wealth of real and (by means of drawing) simulated textures, these techniques allow Gvardjančič to fully express the drama of an internalised experience. The rough texture of the charcoal is combined with ashy coatings and acrylic colour accents that maintain the compactness of the artist's presentational universe in a way that is comparable to the musical polyphony. Gvardjančič's works are always created in connection with music. In rock and jazz, he recognises colourfulness and expressiveness, while in classical music, he discerns a spectral relationship between black and white, moderation and elegance. This perceptiveness of the sonority and sequences in an unchanging temporal sequence within a given time frame is a dynamic counterpoint to his artistic creation. When it comes to Gvardjančič, the relationship between music and fine art is very close despite of the differences between the two media. In the cycle *Slovenae 22: Karst*, the role of metric accents is taken over by rough colour accents in shades of yellow, red and green, while the images “resonate” in minor chords and a pentatonic scale, i.e. a musical scale with five notes per octave, typical of blues and jazz. Beneath the quivering swarm of artistic elements on the surface, one can perceive a balanced and unified compositional structure, which is vast and monumental at its core (regardless of the picture format).

While constantly “moving” between concreteness and abstraction, Gvardjančič never strays into fields of ambiguity; instead he builds a balance, a logical structure or a fusion of torn fragments from the (devastated)

Karst landscape. In this way, he suggests to the viewers a web of various associations and allusions from a direct perspective to the subject of the scorched Karst landscape, thus reaching a stage where he approaches a kind of organic ideogram and touches on abstraction. Each outstanding fragment – in relation to other fragments and structures – is transformed into a symbol. Drawing a parallel with the word as a linguistic unit reveals that the depiction works first as a sound (or music), and only then at a level of notions.

The painted tapestry leads to the second gallery room, which can symbolically be perceived as a complex allegory of the world – a prison (Plato's allegory of the cave). The installation with the meaningful subtitle *A Day After* can be understood as a story about being trapped in the world and the body, accompanied by anxiety and fear of death. Gvardjančič confronts us with his own fears and demons. Those he struggles with on his life's journey, but pushes them into the subconscious, dismissing them. *A Day After* is first and foremost an allegory of a (common) traumatic life experience, which changes over time, but nevertheless exists and persists as part of the natural order. Gvardjančič materialises his feelings in art – especially feelings related to pain, both physical and even more so psychological. He uses art to synthesise a subject – an emotion – and then, by placing it within a gallery room, he classifies it and places it into a system or a drawer, in a way that is similar to a biologist classifying insects or plants. In fact, he uses lines and hatching to create an artistic “herbarium” of feelings arising from the tragicomedy of human existence on the “stage” that is the Slovenian landscape. Gvardjančič uses creativity as a means of reducing his heavy existential burden. A special characteristic of his drawing style at this exhibition is a (slightly) perceptible turn to depicting the human figure in the manner of expressive figurative art, which opens a new sub-chapter in the artist's work. The installation is complemented by two spatial objects – light boxes: artificial light transmitted through a canvas stretched on a wooden frame and drawn with temperamental painterly strokes adds a special mystical note to the whole work. Using light as an expressive medium, Gvardjančič brings subtle stained glass-like effects and a touch of ambient sacredness to the *Slovenae 22: Karst* cycle.

Herman Gvardjančič is one of the most prominent and finest representatives of Slovenian modernism. Over the decades, he has developed his own form of existentially based objectness within traditional painting, thus literally changing Slovenian landscape art. He introduced “landscapes of the soul” into it in a self-reflexive way – archetypal depictions of his subjective experiences, while also actualising drawing as an independent technique and popularising it (within the Slovenian context). His works – both colourful or monochrome ones – reflect his respect for nature and the places he comes from and that are now his home. His entire oeuvre is a kind of rebellion against absurdity, nested in the relationship between man and the world, which are not in harmony, in fact, they stand in contrast to each other. Discovering the nature of the world is a constant feature in Gvardjančič's oeuvre, which, however, does not deter the artist from positive thoughts and humanistic principles. The way he “records” the landscape stems from real, even unpleasant and painful facts, which he interprets and concretises. He translates his life experience into a poignant artistic narrative, thus becoming a permanent part of the history of Slovenian art.

Herman Gvardjančič was born on 21 October 1943 in the village of Gorenja vas - Reteče near Škofja Loka. After finishing the secondary school of design, he studied for two years at the Ljubljana Education Academy – the present-day Faculty of Education (University of Ljubljana), and from 1964 onwards painting at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design (University of Ljubljana). He graduated in 1968 and completed his specialisation in 1971 – his mentors were Professor Maksim Sedej and Professor Zoran Didek respectively. He took study trips to Poland and Germany. From 1971, he worked in various primary schools, before becoming a freelance culture professional in 1991. Between 1986 and 1997, he was a drawing and painting lecturer at the Faculty of Education – from 1987 onwards as an Assistant Professor and from 1990 as an Associate Professor. In 1996, he was appointed Full Professor and head of the painting department at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design. He is a founding member of the Škofja Loka Artists' Association and a recipient of the Prešeren Lifetime Achievement Award. Since his retirement, he has been living and working in his hometown.

Boštjan Soklič,
curator, Škofja Loka Museum