

YOUR TRUTH, INTERPRETATION AND NOSTALGIA

Eline van der Haak

Artists

Vladimir Miladinović, Saša Tkačenko

Can a landscape still be beautiful if you know that atrocities took place in that grass, among those branches and those leaves? Is such a place now contaminated because it was the backdrop to an incident that actually had nothing to do with it at all? For his *Disturbed Soil* series of black and white drawings, Vladimir Miladinović started with forensic photographs from the archives on the war in the former Yugoslavia. The photos not only record places where mass graves have been found, but also locations suspected to be the scenes of war crimes. The landscapes in the drawings are aestheticized recreations of photos depicting actual places. However, if you are unaware of that fact, the drawings could easily be of other – perhaps even fictional – places. A striking aspect is the way in which the depicted natural landscapes are attractive in appearance and yet, at the same time, oppressive and frightening. There is also an element of darkness, due in part to the absence of colour, and the untamed proliferation of thorny branches seems to be concealing something.

That is what nature does: no matter what happens, plants keep on growing, water continues to flow and leaves fall from trees to be replaced later by new ones. Nature conceals the past and simultaneously reminds us of it because there are witnesses and they are recorded as such in the archives. Miladinović's drawings emphasise the ambiguity that probably applies to every war that has been fought anywhere. No matter how hard people try to return to their normal life and look to the future, the past continues to occupy the present. The earth may be tainted but it still forms the basis for moving forward while wanting to forget as well as remember what lies behind us and secretly surrounds us at the same time.

Miladinović's drawings of the front pages of newspapers report on the war in different ways, predominantly using words to form the image. In these works, the war is more clearly present, as it were, but how it is spoken about is hard to discover because to do so, the viewer needs a command of various languages. It is, however, clear to see that each country reports the same incident differently. This highlights the fact that rather than being impartial, as we would expect, the press is actually extremely biased. In these times which are dominated by digital technology, we must be highly alert to 'fake news' insofar as we

are able to differentiate between facts and fiction. But ultimately the press has always been capable of making people believe a particular version of a story, even if it is somewhat at odds with reality. Perhaps it is impossible to capture reality because there is literally not enough room to provide sufficient context. By recreating front pages, Miladinović makes something unique from a mass media product. His drawings also appear to suggest that a written report can sometimes tell us more about the writer than the subject matter.

The works of Saša Tkačenko refer to the past in a nostalgic way. They are prompted by a desire to return to Yugoslavia as it was before the war, a place that no longer exists and will never reappear. Whereas Miladinović depicts the remnants of war, Tkačenko, by contrast, is on a romantic quest for a world that has not (or not yet) been tainted by hatred and violence. At the same time, his works emphasize the impossibility of a truly utopian world. In this way, Tkačenko shows us that the desire to return to another time is often based on unrealistic ideas. For example, his work *Eternal Flame* is both a representation of a failed ideological project as well as an attempt to restore it in some small way. It is a model of the never-built Museum of the Revolution in which an eternal flame heroically burns. But this flame is not eternal because it is visibly fuelled by a gas tank positioned underneath the model – the gas will run out. The actual building was designed by Vjenčeslav Richter in 1961. It was never completed due to financial problems and changing regulations. The museum in Belgrade that was meant to be a symbol of the power of socialism never progressed further than the laying of foundations. Tkačenko's model radiates not only power and robustness but vulnerability, too. It is based on the plans for the actual museum, making it a tribute to the building as well as a memory of the museum's non-existence. The burning flame thus also symbolises the inevitable demise of ideologies that must be fought for if they are to be preserved.

The materials and design used by Tkačenko help convey, in an almost propagandist way, a yearning for a time that is, was and ever will be non-existent. This longing for the unattainable, the search for a time or place where you belong, creates a unique, highly individual symbolism that is focused on melancholy. This also applies to the work *Vanity*; visitors are offered coffee in a take-away cup bearing the title of the work. Being offered this warm beverage provides a kind of comfort and not only creates a bond between artist and visitor, but also between the exhibited work and the outside world. After all, you can take the cup with you. At the same time, such a cup is a reminder of less pleasant things like the plight of the homeless who use such cups not just to drink from but to beg for loose change. The word 'vanity' has various meanings. It can mean that someone takes excessive, almost narcissistic pride in their appearance and achievements. Such an outward focus may mean that the inner self is neglected. The artist doesn't use his works to provide answers or solutions but instead leaves you adrift and searching, examining big issues that are linked to daily life.