

ROMANTIC SPECIES

ARTIST: ALEKSANDRA CHAUSHOVA

CURATOR: DESSISLAVA DIMOVA
/BULGARIAN ART AND CULTURE FOUNDATION

Romantic Species is a meditation on the subject of identity, otherness and exoticism, which extends not only to human destiny, but also to the history of assimilation of the foreign and the different in the natural world. Birds from distant lands have been known and sought after since Antiquity, and geographic explorations, trade and colonialism have increased access and interest in the study of exotic species of flora and fauna.

In this broad historical and geographic context, Aleksandra Chaushova offers us a sentimental ecology based on the relationship between man and nature, the artist and the exotic species. In a series of self-portraits as exotic birds, *Romantic Species* traces the artist's experience of personal metamorphosis as a "foreigner": the foreigner-immigrant, the foreigner-artist, the foreigner-woman, the foreigner-human in Nature.

If exoticized identity can be compared to a costume - clichéd, flamboyant and mostly ill-fitting, in *Romantic Species* the artist becomes one with the mask.

Like a totem animal, the Alexandrine parakeet takes over Aleksandra's spirit, not in order to allow her to fly in a shamanic trance, but to undertake, in the full splendour (but also burden) of its rich plumage, all the ordinary, everyday duties of the woman artist.

The Alexandrine parakeet (*Psittacula eupatria*) is a species native to India. Together with other similar species, it lives in the wild in many European countries, where it has become part of the native fauna. The bird is believed to have been introduced to Europe by Alexander the Great, becoming a metaphor for the stranger and the immigrant.

Some of the drawings in *Romantic Species* are based on photographs documenting scenes of the artist's everyday life. In order to develop the drawings of the animal species, Aleksandra Chaushova obtained access to the rich collections of taxidermised tropical birds and birds from Central Africa at the Museum of Natural Sciences in Brussels, where she had the opportunity to draw on site. These same and other similar species can be also found in almost all specialised museums and collections around the world, including in the collection of the Bulgarian Museum of Natural History in Sofia. In this secondary "habitat", and precisely because of their original exclusivity and rarity, they are now an integral part of the global history of the colonial and post-colonial world, from the Age of Discovery onwards.

Romantic Species is a series of drawings that Aleksandra Chaushova has been working on for the last two years and which she will develop and adapt for the space of the Bulgarian Pavilion in Venice. All of the drawings are meticulously executed in pencil. For the installation in the pavilion one of them will be rendered in an unusually large scale.

The installation uses the exhibition space as it is, without changing it. The drawings follow the rhythm of the disrupted walls and crawl under the existing metal structure as if in a cage.

The labour-intensive process, the impermanence of the material, the vulnerability of the unframed paper, are all deliberately sought in opposition to the authority of the national pavilions, opening a space for vulnerability.

Aleksandra Chaushova is not only a talented draughtsman, but also a writer who knows how to employ the richness of text in order to give more freedom and flesh to her 'characters'. In a similar approach as in her work, *Annulment of the End of Things* (2015), in *Romantic Species* the artist will "stage" the objects from her drawings in a screenplay, in which each of them could speak with their own voice. This accompanying script will be made available to the public in the form of a small handout booklet in Bulgarian and English.

The installation for the Bulgarian Pavilion includes one monumental drawing (300x550 cm, divided into 5 panels), specially created for Venice, and 14 small, existing drawings from the series. (Some of the small drawings will be borrowed from private and museum collections with which we have already had preliminary contact).

The large drawing is unframed, and the paper and materials have been tested in a humid atmosphere. The artist uses a process whereby the drawing is left on the ground for several days to absorb the humidity of the exhibition space without being deformed and is only hung afterwards.

The drawings will be accompanied by a specially made cabinet, modelled after the ones keeping specimens in the archives of natural history museums, which will contain taxidermised exotic bird species.

A counterpoint to the eccentricity of living life and the attempts to systematise and standardise it is the inclusion of a drawing from the *Burotica* series, which also will be specially produced on a larger scale for the pavilion. The metal caliper "measures" the exiting visitor, introducing a sense of authority, order, and uniformity, while itself remaining profoundly alien and hostile to the objects it measures.

Aleksandra Chaushova's work is without parallel in the context of contemporary Bulgarian art, in its combination of skillful and intricate figurative drawing and almost literary narrative, with conceptual thinking, historical perspective and scale of ideas. Her approach is equally scientifically methodological (Aleksandra has a PhD in Art and Sciences of the Arts) and artistically nuanced and intuitive. Aleksandra Chaushova is among Bulgaria's most promising young artists, with an established international career who is also present on the Bulgarian art scene.

In the context of the Biennale and the theme of "Foreigners Everywhere", Romantic Species offers a broader historical and geographical, yet inward-looking view of otherness, as an endless inner metamorphosis without definitive form, as solidarity with the vulnerability of life in all its manifestations.

LIST OF WORKS

Blue Peacock (Pavo cristatus) II

pencil on paper

25,5 x 21cm

2023

Taupin grand-ocelle (Alaus oculatus)

pencil and watercolour on paper

53,3 x 38cm

2018

Blue Peacock (Pavo cristatus) I

pencil on paper

31,4 x 25,5cm

2020

Date Palm (Phoenix dactylifera)

pencil on paper

25,3 x 20,4cm

2021

Alexandrine Parakeet (Psittacula eupatria)

pencil on paper

28 x 47,6cm

2020

Great argus (Argusianus argus)

pencil on paper

73 x 40,1cm

2023

Pheasant Mask

pencil drawing on digital print

51,8 x 33,8cm

2019

Still Life Mask

pencil drawing on digital print

59,8 x 48,3cm

2019

Slender-billed Starling (Onychognathus tenuirostris)

pencil on paper

51 x 34,5cm

2023

Ostrich (Struthio camelus)

pencil on paper

34 x 25,7cm

2022

Baboon Mask

pencil drawing on digital print

39 x 32cm

2018

Superb Lyrebird (Menura novaehollandiae)

pencil on paper

25,3 x 20,4cm

2021

Cape Crow (Corvus capensis)

pencil on paper

31,4 x 25,5cm

2021

Blue Peacock (Pavo cristatus) III

pencil on paper

25,5 x 21cm

2023

Caliper

oil pastel and acrylic on paper

100 x 50cm

(project)

Bird of Paradise (Paradisaea raggiana)

pencil and acrylic on paper

300 x 550cm (5 pannels of 300 x 110cm)

(project)

publication "Romantic Species"

21 x 14,7cm

Edition of 10 000

table with drawers and taxidermized bird/s)

project