

This year's Oskár Čepan Award exhibition offers a possibility of change or escaping a dead end

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On the one hand, the Oskár Čepan Award finalist exhibition is a group project, on the other hand it is supposed to present as best possible the individual original projects by the shortlisted artists, namely: the painters Év van Hettmer and Viktorie Langer, digital artist Tamara Kametani and multimedia artists Luki Essender and Ondřej Houšťava. As stated by the curatorial duo of Lucia Gavulová and Jen Kratochvíl, this edition of the Award does not tell the audience what to do, does not point to the right or left, does not seek to replace authorities with new ones, but rather openly yet with precision offers a possibility of change or an escape from a dead end which we, seemingly hopelessly, are squeezed in together. The exhibition will open on 25 November in Kunsthalle Bratislava, the name of the laureate will be known on 9 December 2021.

The Oskár Čepan Award is organized by Nadácia – Centrum súčasného umenia (Foundation – Center for Contemporary Art) along with collective, a platform for support of contemporary art.

"It can be said without exaggerating that the artists produced a joint work, albeit broken up into their individual fragments. As if they unconsciously projected a navigation system directed towards different realities. Given the circumstances, choosing the so-called laureate is then but a minor disturbance which cannot "drown out" the impressiveness, expressiveness, relevance and impact of the individual outputs. There are ways to be found via meditation, queering of established discourses, current and historical narratives, utopian visions with hints of their counterpoles, a gentle flirt with dystopia, or a direct and acute voice of outrage," said Jen Kratochvíl and Lucia Gavulová.

The curatorial duo under influence of several months' worth of communicating with the nominated artists focused on their practice and works contemplates the entrance of the pandemic in our lives, all of that at the moment when there seems to be no end of it in sight. "Luckily, there are relevant voices who through their resonance drive away the otherwise seemingly impenetrable fog of pessimism and skepticism. This year's Award nominees are an example of this. Recently, all art awards have been looking at ways of eliminating competition and finding equality between artists. Through the lens of current affairs the discussion appears as merely a glimpse of more peaceful, and therefore privileged, times. The artists of the current edition build news systems of resistance, or sketch possible present and future narratives along their own axes. Each of them offers their own alternative to the state of society as a whole, whether by analysis and critical thought, directive polemic, concrete forms of resistance or assuming the stance of self-preserving distance," concluded Jen Kratochvíl and Lucia Gavulová.

Lucia Gavulová has been the director of Oskár Čepan Award since 2018, Jen Kratochvíl is the head of Kunsthalle Bratislava, the exhibition was designed by Peter Liška.

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Luki ESSENDER (*1995, Ilava)

The artist is based in Stockholm, Sweden.

In the exhibition, Luki Essender presents several stories which culminate in the form of an installation, which can nevertheless ultimately be understood as a complex sculptural statement. They create an environment consisting in part of components made and produced in Bratislava. "In the installation for the Oskár Čepan Award, he moves along the line between sculpture and ritual, exactness and precision of expression by means of strict materiality, through an open process, all the way to metaphor, hint, and transformation. The richness of internal questions, interest in language, the private, the public, and various types of relationships along this trajectory, the artist transforms into a robust and tangible vocabulary. ... They take their motifs from the public space, whether they be fragments of architecture or work with language, categorizing elements of building numbers with which the artist works as a type of substance – an index. Everything he takes hold of is transformed in the process into a matter of sculpture," wrote Lucia Gavulová in her curatorial text. Even though the installation – scene – situation – spatial sculpture Luki Essender may appear in the Oskár Čepan Award exhibition as a finished affair, the artist does not close their project: they like to revisit their older works with newly acquired knowledge and from the distance of time, which in Luki's oeuvre is not linear at all.

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Èv van HETTNER (*1987, Nitra)

The artist is based in Hamburg, Germany.

"Èv covers in bright shades of orange and pink the dark folds of the world which may have witnessed global movements such as #metoo or #timeisup and yet keeps tottering in the legacy of the almost unfathomable history of patriarchal system of power and the related oppression and neglect of bodies which are not masculine or white enough. With an enthusiasm and inner necessity she inscribes her monumental canvases with statements, slogans and quotes which stick sharp points into the ways of thinking of a man-dominated world. Èv is not afraid of confrontation, irony, sarcasm or sharp, direct critique, even though her expressions are mostly a sardonic, which comes naturally to her, rather than literal rendering of the problems around us," wrote the curator Jen Kratochvíl, who believes Èv to be a romantic artist in the fashion of art history books, one that creates according to her own vision and the circumstances are thus only another fold of reality.

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Ondřej HOUŠŤAVA (*1995, Vítkov)

He is based in Prague, Czechia.

Ondřej does not like to see himself as an artist, because he critically sees the concept as a historically defined construct established by the patriarchal power systems of the privileged West. He sees himself rather as a producer or mediator of a plurality of voices which he invites to collaborate. Art to him is a means of resistance, of creating new inclusive narratives and subverting the codified manners of perception, behavior, and existence. "His new film installation explores the questions of orientation, the ties between body and the space it is located in, as well as the mutual influences implied by such relationships. He seeks ways to express himself differently, listen differently, move differently. Once the original contexts are deleted, space becomes unknown, offering the potential of getting lost in absence of the originally clear navigation points. It is then a question whether the original authoritatively set up system of landmarks should be replaced by a new one, or whether it is possible to fully accept the unknown and the confusing and learn to live in it as such," wrote the curator Jen Kratochvíl.

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Tamara KAMETANI (*1988, Nitra)

She is based in Athens, Greece and London, UK.

In 2005, the French publisher Libraire Arthème Fayard published Michel Houellebecq's novel *The Possibility of an Island*. In it, he deals with all of humanity at the stage of ultimate decline of the world. In 2021, Tamara Kametani comes with the first part of her predictive trilogy on the possible directions the world is headed in, the possibility of an island, Null Island. This goes to prove the topical, if not universal, quality of this issue across decades. Null Island is a place which is only yet to become a home for everyone. In 2020, the artist realized that she wants to move her practice closer to the ideas and notions she had about its future direction. "Even then, in Tamara's mind a story began to unfold, oscillating along the line between utopia and dystopia, de facto arriving from the future but reacting to the present. It involves the pandemic, religion, faith, conspiracy theories and escapist scenarios. The mission and content are clear in their expression, as is the choice of the film medium – in the time of uncertainty regarding possibilities of presentation of physical objects, it appears as a sufficiently flexible and representation-ready – even in case of potentially difficult circumstances – alternative," wrote Lucia Gavulová in her curatorial text.

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Viktorie LANGER (*1988, Žiar nad Hronom)

She is based in Prague, Czechia and Novara di Sicilia, Italy.

"With her oeuvre, Viktorie offers an alternative to the codified reading of reality. She literally presents a sort of abstract map for seeking a road to enlightenment. It is however not a digital map that would compute the fastest trajectory for us, show us a string of refilling stations and rest areas along the way and warn us of possible congestion or increased risk of accidents. Her map is more of a guideline for how to move through the current world of late capitalism while completely dodging its systematic encroachment on our personal and professional lives. Along with the installation "Free Spirit" she offers the latest issue of her zine called "Victory"," wrote the curator Jen Kratochvil. He believes that Viktorie follows a very strong trend in contemporary art of seeking a new spirituality, completely divorced from the institutionalized and political wholes of big religious traditions and systems.

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After presenting exhibitions in the East Slovak Gallery in Košice and Nová synagóga in Žilina, the Oskár Čepan Award returns to the capital, marking its first collaboration with the young Kunsthalle Bratislava. According to Lucia Gavulová, optimally, a continual working model for the Award should result, marking the current edition as "testing" in this sense. Since Kunsthalle is the only state-run physical institution focused primarily on contemporary art, Jen Kratochvil sees this as a natural connection.

The international jury considered portfolios of forty-two applicants under forty years of age who responded to the open call. They chose a shortlist of the aforementioned five artists. The decision was made based on the works' quality and the urgency of the problems they reflect. Its members will convene for the second time during the upcoming exhibition and its guided tour.

The Oskár Čepan Award laureate will go on a two-month residence in New York hosted by the Residency Unlimited program, receive a financial prize and a solo exhibition or a similar other type of project (exhibition, performance) they opt for.

This year's jury contains three new members and two returning from last year – Kathrin Bentele, the director of Kunstverein für Rheinalde und Westfalen and Jan Verwoert, of the Oslo National Academy of the Arts and the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam. The new members of the jury are Søren Grammel, until recently of the Kunstmuseum Gegenwart in Basel, currently an independent curator, Edith Jeřábková, active as a curator in PLATO Ostrava and the person behind several non-institutional platforms such as Institut úzkosti or Are/are-events.org, and Margot Norton, a curator of the New Museum v New Yorku and of the fifth edition of the New Museum Triennial. According to Lucia Gavulová, the current jury has a very good representation of institutional trends and individuals in terms of the most up-to-date tendencies in the field of development of global contemporary art.

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The Oskár Čepan Award is open to visual artists of up to forty years of age. Participation is not restricted to any specific visual art medium. It is organized by Nadácia – Centrum súčasného umenia in cooperation with collective, a platform for support of contemporary art, and with support from the Residency Unlimited program (New York, USA) and the Trust for Mutual Understanding (New York, USA). Supported using public funding by the Slovak Arts Council. In 2021m the project was supported by the Foundation of the city of Bratislava and the Bratislava Self-Governing Region. The Award is a member of the international network YVAA – Young Visual Artists Awards.

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