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CETINJE, MONTENEGRO

Helidon Gjergji

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MONTENEGRO



Helidon Gjergji, *Trapa Natans Scutariensis*, 2018, acrylic, and soft drinks on the wall, 9'10" x 32'5" x 3.5". Installation view. Photo: Lazar Pejovic.

For the exhibition “SHKODAR LAKE,” CRATED BY Ana Ivanovic, Albanian artist Helidon Gjergji created a sort of museum of unnatural history in the Gallery Atelier Dado—a studio given to Montenegrin artist Miodrag Duric (1993-2010), known as Dado, in the late 1980s to lure him back from France. While Dado’s intention to make the space an anti-museum went unfulfilled, Gjergji reflected it in an immersive diorama of interpretative wall paintings accompanied by vitrines containing deceptive artifacts that illustrate the elusiveness of existence. The exhibition title was a hybrid of *Skadar* and *Shkoder*, the slightly different names used to refer to the lake in Montenegro and Albania—the two countries it straddles as a nebulous natural border. The lake serves as an example of the vagaries of territorial jurisdictions and disappearing histories, along with the erasures committed in the interest of political and socioeconomic forces, not least the uncontrolled growth of consumerism overtaking post-Communist countries.



One of the murals, *Trapa Natans Scutariensis* (all works 2018), was made up of a field of apple green latticed with a delicate pattern derived from the form of the eponymous, nearly extinct water chestnut, one of the lake's many rare endemic species now under threat. The pristine surface of the walls had been splashed with colors of commercial soft drinks—Bravo strawberry, Juicy Fruits lemonade, Fanta orange, Pepsi Max—discarded bottles of which are commonly found floating in the lake. On the adjacent wall was *Natural History*, a floating aggregation of handwritten Latin terms for local flora and fauna including 144 disappearing species, inscribed in vibrant colors one over another until they merged into a mesmerizing, amorphous chromatic smudge surrounded by a halo of appellations in their way to succumbing to the scribbled swarm.

Equally unnatural disappearances were represented in the vitrines, for instance in a work titled *Retouched Histories*. Here, archival photographs were presented next to versions in which certain figures had been expunged or inserted, the record thus altered to suit particular political goals. In one such image, ten dignitaries accompanying the Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha on the balcony of Shkoder's city hall have all vanished, apparently in order to lend the ruler an air of supremacy.

In *Seagulls and Cormorants*, a glass case contained a photograph of birds perched on branches over water full of buoyant plastic bottles next to the actual bottles bearing labels in different languages. The juxtaposition likened them to an alien species invading and gradually suffocating the habitat, while their labels emphasized the geopolitical context of the exhibition: In the Balkans, a region known mostly for its checkered history of ethnic conflict and territorial disputes, names can start wars. Perceived differences have been exacerbated among the largely homogenous Slavic population by the promotion of national and religious identities, perhaps like the various artificially differentiated brands of soda thrown into the water to float to the top.

As early as 1995, the short-lived Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (i.e., Serbia and Montenegro) requested that Skadar Lake's endangered ecosystem be officially recognized as "Ramsar List" of wetlands of international importance. Since then, however, political turmoil and regime changes have left the Balkans' biggest lake, part of a multinational network that flows out into the Adriatic Sea, to fend for itself. It is only through cooperation between Montenegro and Albania that the ecosystem can be saved; its further demise would make it a blot on the landscape of both. Yet while environmentalists have been developing ecotourism to encourage investment in wildlife preservation, the Montenegrin government has issued building permits to foreign investors to construct luxury resorts in the heart of the national park. Ultimately, this vast body of water is a metaphor for the entirety of nature as a single network, a swirling synchronicity oblivious to humanity's futile attempts to confine it in straight lines. As this show succinctly expressed, we are quite simply erasing ourselves from the picture, along with the wetland's rapidly diminishing Dalmatian pelican—a bird that is fittingly the mythical symbol of self-sacrifice.

--Cathryn Drake