

A guided tour of the exhibition with the curator:

Saturday, 13 August 2022, at 10:00.



Invisible Companions



Exhibition Colophon:

Barbara Kastelec
Invisible Companions

20 July – 10 September 2022
Ivan Grohar Gallery

Represented by: Aleksandra Saša Nabergoj
Curator: Boštjan Soklič
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Ivan Grohar Gallery

20. 7.–18. 9. 2022

Curator: Boštjan Soklič

*Barbara
Kastelec*

Painter Barbara Kastelec has been systematically and cyclically researching, artistically developing and revealing the hidden interconnections between the micro- and macrosystems for years. With her cycle of recent circular paintings exhibited at the Ivan Grohar Gallery, she returns to the content and themes halfway between art and documentary depictions of the ecosystems of interconnected soil organisms. The exhibition titled *Invisible Companions* is the third act of the artist's conceptual project related to the exploration of universal primordiality spanning several years. It offers an insight into the networks of "invisible sources of life" that are essential for human existence and also establishes continuity with the artist's painting cycles titled *Seeds*, *Pollen* and *Plant Cells*, created between 2012 and 2020. In terms of the content, the multimedia exhibition consists of two main sections (Life: Slime Bacteria and Life: Penicillium), complemented by drawings that show the initial stages of the artist's creative process in a straightforward way.

The exhibition is a vivid depiction of the organisms at the very bottom of the food chain, the slime bacteria (myxobacteria), moulds and soil bacteria – unicellular or multicellular organisms that are (much like fungi and algae) only visible under a microscope at several hundred times magnification. They are the key protagonists in the natural food cycle. Understanding how these tiny organisms, which inhabit everything from the ocean depths to the atmosphere, work is just as important as researching the substrates, fertilisers and other substances found in back gardens. Since the human skin is densely populated with various microorganisms – in fact, it is completely covered with them – it can be compared to the home of Barbara Kastelec's "invisible companions", to the soil (humus), which is like the skin of our planet. Fungi, bacteria, algae, protozoa, worms and other organisms in the soil represent an army consisting of a billion of small creatures that need humus to live, but they are also the ones to create it and are essential for plant growth. The artist pays special attention to moulds, which form enzymes that decompose organic matter into simple sugars and are important decomposers within the ecosystem.

Barbara Kastelec creates her depictions in a well-thought-out way, using all sorts of knowledge and information about the biological, philosophical, ecological, anthropological and artistic properties of microorganisms. She uses microscopic photographs and occasionally collaborates with scientists. Her firm commitment to science is further reflected in the Latin names of the depicted organisms, such as *Elaeomyxa cerifera*, *Penicillium camemberti* and *Cladosporium*. According to her, watching videos about microorganisms inspired her to come up with a number of interconnected associations, which led to her search for shape- and colour-related parallels between the

plant rudiments of life and simple deep-sea creatures, as well as fractals and phenomena in space.

The *Invisible Companions* cycle consists of a series of circular large- and small-format paintings, which were created using an acrylic-based mixed-media painting technique and are exhibited in first and second gallery rooms. The choice of a circular format, also known as the *tondo*, was a conscious one; on the one hand, it is associated with the ocular microscope, the optical part of the microscope that magnifies the image; and on the other hand, it resembles a petri dish, a glass dish used in laboratories for growing bacteria and preparing immunology tests. A special feature of the exhibited series of works is the colourfulness of the depicted subjects, which are not visible on microscopic photographs (at least as far as bacteria and moulds are concerned). The artist's imaginative colour interpretation of the particles of a complex microcosm is free, idiosyncratic and exuberant. In many ways, it resembles the psychedelic art style of the late 1960s, filled with repeating kaleidoscopic and fractal patterns, aiming to reflect (simulate) the altered states of consciousness. The *Invisible Companions* cycle presents different states and shapes of microorganisms, from rod-shaped and spiral ones to hole-shaped, round, cone-shaped and drop-shaped ones. Since many of the depicted organisms (algae, bacteria, fungi) are capable of producing and emitting light (bioluminescence), the painter depicted their luminescence using an iridescent acrylic pigment, which casts a metallic, fluorescent and iridescent glow in darkened rooms.

Barbara Kastelec's images are a depiction of ever-changing worlds, both internal (her own) and external ones. In contrast to some older cycles, which are characterised by photorealism and minute details resulting from her desire for accuracy of depiction and the need for botanical recognition (*Seeds*, *Pollen*), in the *Invisible Companions* cycle the artist returned to broad brushwork and vivid colours characteristic of her older painting cycles (*Fetishes of Memory*, *Atomic Fungi*). It could be said that under the influence of scientific experience, the artist devotes herself even more enthusiastically to depicting the hidden complex mental processes she has experienced herself; as for the depicted microorganisms, they are artistic parables and visual incarnations of the archetypal states she has discovered as part of her artistic process. She pairs colours and shapes, using combinations characterised by wild contrasts and eye-catching formal elements, which transform groups of slimy protagonists and bacteria into fantastic landscapes and unusual constructions typical of dreams, delirium, ecstasy and apocalyptic visions.

In the second gallery room, the content from the *Invisible Companions* cycle is paired with a short animated film titled *Penicillium / Čopaste plesni* from 2019, which was

conceived by Barbara Kastelec at the La Cité internationale des arts artist residency in Paris and created in collaboration with computer expert Igor Tavčar. In the video, viewers can simultaneously follow everything that goes on in two petri dishes containing *Penicillium* fungi taken from Camembert cheese. The video shows an original, black-and-white magnification of a microscopic mould during dynamic development, alongside a projection of the artist's colour version of the same process.

Barbara Kastelec's circular paintings (tondos) exhibited in the Ivan Grohar Gallery are an unexpected sight because scenes of an invisible organic world are not a common subject of paintings. A microcosm in a macro format, left to the artist's imagination, reveals the unusual reality of spaces that look fantastic, mysterious and virtual. Barbara Kastelec has combined her artistic concept, immersed in an organic dance of microorganisms, with the medium of painting in an original and elegant way. By striving for a veristic depiction of the microcosm, she has transformed her research and artistic experience into a new vision of the media, which is well-founded, scientifically meaningful, and visually attractive and enigmatic. The exhibited circular paintings are one-of-a-kind "gallery macroscopes" used by the artist to visualise her feelings of cosmic and general changes in life, providing the viewers with an insight into an interesting and exciting artistic universe.

Boštjan Soklič, Škofja Loka Museum, Curator

Barbara Kastelec (1976)

Barbara Kastelec (1976) graduated in painting, new media and printmaking from the Academy of Fine Arts and Design at the University of Ljubljana in 2001. She continued her education in the field of painting and philosophy, completing her postgraduate studies with a master's degree in painting in 2004. In the same year, she was in charge of the international project *Let's Realize the White Paper through Art* in Wrocław, Poland, which was carried out as part of the EU Youth for Europe programme. In addition to her independent artistic practice, she has been teaching painting courses for children, youths and adults since 2005. Her work has been on view as part of various exhibitions in Slovenia and elsewhere since 1997. Her artistic production is focused on the fields of painting, illustration and video. She is a member of the Slovenian Association of Fine Arts Societies and the Škofja Loka Artists' Association. She lives and works in Ljubljana.