

ACCOMPANYING PROGRAMME:

Artist and curator talk:

Wednesday, 8 Sept 2021, at 6.00 pm



Exhibition Colophon:

Simon Mlakar: This Is Our Universe
21 July – 12 Sept 2021

Ivan Grohar Gallery
Škofja Loka Museum
www.loski-muzej.si

Represented by: Aleksandra Saša Nabergoj
Exhibition curator: Boštjan Soklič
Proofreading: Mateja Arnež
English translation: Mateja Žuraj
Graphic design: Kolektiv DVA
Technical team: Vida Grah, Boris Krajnc



Simon Mlakar

THIS IS OUR UNIVERSE

Ivan Grohar Gallery

21 July–12 September 2021
Exhibition curator: Boštjan Soklič

The latest spatial installation, conceptually designed for the existing gallery venue at the Ivan Grohar Gallery, is the work of Simon Mlakar, a versatile artist and member of the Škofja Loka Artists' Association. The exhibition shows the artist's visualisation of in-depth reflections on the origin of the universe the way we know it, and an individual interpretation of the rise (and possible decline) of our galaxy, and along with it of our civilisation, whose existence within the infinite cosmos is most likely negligible... or it might be not. This is something we do not know. The installation is staged in a minimalist way, with contrasted light and colours.

In the first gallery room, Mlakar deals with the civilizational context of homo sapiens with a human comedy taking place inside of it. He presents a familiar motif on top of self-adhesive foil covering one of the gallery's longer walls. The monumental image in a decorative form is a continuation of the artist's exploration of a theme that he finds to be ever-exciting and is related to symbols appropriated by various ideologies in the past. However, unlike in the rose installation staged in the Slovenian Association of Fine Art Societies' atrium in 2005, in this particular case Mlakar develops his concept through the image of our (micro)cosmos, woven from the recognisable features of two world religions and a totalitarian system (communism), thematizing the mechanisms and perversions of state and religious institutions that use ancient symbols to achieve their political agenda. In his characteristic, slightly humorous and light-hearted way, Mlakar explains the similarities between (seemingly) different religious languages and symbols, taken from Christian as well as other – more exotic – contexts adapted to the needs of existing systems. He proves indirectly that ideologies and religions change during the course of the millennia, their symbols, however, remain unchanged – eternal, so to speak. On the gallery's only image, Mlakar highlights three symbols from ancient sources: a cross, a crescent and a five-pointed star. Using a dynamic artistic play, he combines and separates them playfully, bringing them to a common semantic denominator.

The cross and the crescent are associated with the two largest monotheistic religions – Christianity and Islam, and the (red) star has been a symbol of communism since the October Revolution in Russia and is considered a symbol of resistance against Nazi occupation and antifascism. The cross is closely associ-

ated with the ancient swastika, which is a ritual and ornamental symbol of various peoples from Tibet to Scandinavia. The crescent (either a waxing or waning lunar phase) has been a symbol of abundance or fertility since the beginning of human history. It symbolises the changing seasons, the waxing and the waning, and also the female menstrual cycle. In the world of Islam, the crescent is associated with the lunar calendar, and the star with the holy book of Islam, the Quran, and is considered one of the symbols of Allah. The star motif is an ancient symbol used by all the great Middle Eastern religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). In Christianity, the pentagram symbolises the five senses, the five wounds of Christ, and the five joys of Mary. The star was and is often used on flags and coats of arms.

The second part of Mlakar's exhibition titled *This Is Our Universe* is an attempt at presenting our universe in space and time by means of a logical-scientific consequence in a refined artistic and conceptual way that places the viewer in a different relation to things. The second exhibition room is immersed in black, pierced by a luminous point that can be interpreted in multiple ways: as the centre of our galaxy, as concentrated light – the remnant of the first stage in the formation of the universe. It can be viewed as the starting point of all galaxies that have been moving away from it since the creation of the universe. Perhaps it is a zero that also represents infinity, or it might be the “light” that marks the dynamics of the coming of things into existence both in the Old Testament and in other holy books of ancient cultures and civilisations. The artist has imaginatively assembled the “cosmic light” or the “eye of God”, placing it in the concept of the whole with the help of a light bulb from a photographic darkroom, using cacophonous sounds and disharmonious sound effects that are an equally important part of the project to bring to life various galaxy sounds. Unlike science, which transforms the unknown into the known, and the various sciences that analyse the world, trying to control it, Mlakar shows his own vision, understanding and the way he sees the present and future reality of our universe, of our solar system lying in a spiral galaxy that is also called the Milky Way. Since official science has yet to fully explain and empirically research all the events within our “home” galaxy, the artist has artistically reinterpreted the conclusions of official science, transferring them into a comprehensive system of the

speculative type. This involves direct modelling of the depiction of the way the (known) universe developed from its very creation to its potential annihilation, beyond the integral image of reality as we know it or at least think we do. Mlakar is familiar with the scientific finding that the average density of matter and energy in the universe determines whether the universe will either expand perpetually or collapse back on itself due to gravity. At the moment, there seems to be too little mass and energy for this sort of cataclysm, it has, however, been proven that the universe is expanding and will continue to do so. Research into the motion of galaxies suggests that the universe contains a larger amount of matter than can be detected in ordinary ways. This invisible matter is called dark matter, and this is the thing that the artist pays special attention to in the second gallery room. Here, Mlakar draws on the thoughts of the famed physicist Stephen Hawking, who believed that the universe was born as an infinitesimal point of infinite density in which, despite its unimaginable small size, all the matter that surrounds us today was packaged. According to the general theory of relativity, quantities such as temperature, density, and gravitational force had infinite values at the beginning of the universe. These, however, are the kind of conditions in which any physical theory fails.

With his new art project exhibited at the Ivan Grohar Gallery, Simon Mlakar raises a number of questions related to the origins of our universe, the possible existence of alternative worlds and parallel universes in different dimensions of space and time. The exhibition is a visualisation of the artist's reflections on reality beyond an empirical reach and direct experimentation. With great seriousness and philosophical depth, the artist analyses the history of knowledge about the origin of our planet and the solar system our planet is part of, while using a cosmic allegory that may be more telling about the universe itself than about humans, their nature and the way they work. In his desire for boundless power, man ruthlessly destroys nature and thus indirectly also himself. He is arrogant in believing that the earth is at the centre of the universe. He considers himself the most successful work of nature, the crowning achievement of creation, and the earth the centre of the universe. He is looking for his own idealised image in the universe. The artist is well aware that man is not the master of the cosmos and that the destruction of the

cosmic balance is likely. The causes of a potential cataclysm lie in man's unstoppable development of his own species (overpopulation, pollution and contamination of the environment, the possibility of atomic war) or in a cosmic cataclysm (meteorites, collision of worlds). The universe exceeds man's physical, mental, and intellectual abilities. Man is powerless in contact with the universe; the artist is aware of his own smallness in infinite space and does not trust the “mighty rulers” of our age: he knows that man is not a machine operated by the society, not is he run and steered by a computer that has his entire life programmed from birth to death. The artist's warning is clear: humankind needs to give up its anthropomorphic passion for appropriation and violent change of the natural order. Homo sapiens' continued biological existence depends on the reevaluation of anthropocentrism. The concept of Simon Mlakar's *This Is Our Universe* reveals allusions to religious teachings, philosophical systems and scientific theories, i.e. those forms of human consciousness that originate from the original mythical view of the world. In fact, the *This Is Our Universe* exhibition is a modern-day myth imitation and a substitute for science.

SIMON MLAKAR (1954)

Simon Mlakar graduated in painting from the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana in 1980 (his mentor was A. Jemec). He lives and works in Škofja Loka.

Mlakar is an artist whose works have always taken a critical stance towards various topics from Slovenian (recent) history and have, as part of this, also deal with the concept of all things national. In addition to vedutas, still lifes and labourer-related scenes, his works created in the early 1980s also showed scenes of various political manifestations characteristic of the socialist era, focusing on the aesthetics typical of socialist realism. Today, he explores these themes through iconography, confronting the symbols appropriated by various ideologies in the past in order to remove any ideological connotations and bring back their original, universal context. His works are a commentary on the state of society relating to, inter alia, the context of contemporary urban consumer society, with a touch of humour and the pop art aesthetics.