

The ontology of the image within the medium of painting has long ceased to correspond to the high modernist ontology of the easel painting. Indeed, within the long history of painting, that moment now appears to have been only a very brief episode. In the supposedly post-medium condition of contemporary art, one should arguably no longer concern oneself excessively with ontological questions regarding the medium of painting: the phenomenon of the image extends across media, adapting to an ever-changing reality, and thus one should not expect the image in painting to manifest itself in a form intrinsic to the medium itself. Nevertheless, painting, as the native medium of the image—within the context of art, but also of civilization in general—continues to defend its position. By assimilating everything that takes place within visual culture, it continuously tests its sovereignty in relation to alternative modes of image production. Although there is no longer, nor can one expect there to be, a prescriptive discourse defining what painting is or ought to be, the question of the distinctiveness of the medium—as a system of signs, a sensory experience, a mode of cognition, and a set of techniques—remains relevant, indeed imperative.

Ivan Šuletić's painterly practice is similarly investigative in spirit. Persistent and willing to confront the various "challenges" imposed by contemporary conditions of image production and distribution, it is founded upon the conviction that painting is a leisurely occupation that, precisely in the era of digitally generated reality, can function as an exclusive space for critical meditation on the nature of the image and pictorial representation in general. It is directed toward long-term experimentation, without obvious conclusions. The works through which the artist presents himself to the Zagreb audience continue a previously established conception of the image, which, among other things, involves the use of artificial intelligence in the creation of painterly templates. All the variants of images displayed in the exhibition—moving and static, on canvas and screen, on the wall or in space—are based on computer-generated scenes of ruins, that is, of cataclysmically devastated urban landscapes. In most cases, these are classically executed paintings—works in which the prolonged translation of a relatively complex template into the medium of painting constitutes both the initial premise and the artistic statement.

The assumption that such a medial transposition would produce a heuristic effect has proven justified: it is only in this new, secondary form that the perversity of the AI-generated scene becomes apparent, simultaneously picturesque and horrific. In addition to conventional paintings displayed on the wall, there is also a painterly triptych installed in space as a screen. Within the exhibition as a whole, this painterly installation constitutes another moment of questioning the epistemological integrity of the image—the fact that it is possible to move "behind" not only the painting as an object but also beyond the represented scene directly undermines the illusionism not only of painting but of any image-based medium. The circumstance that the title of the triptych contains the English word "screen" underscores the analogy between the image and the screen.

In addition to the paintings, the exhibition also includes a video work whose title serves as the title of the exhibition as a whole. As already noted, it likewise consists of digitally generated images of devastated urban structures, now accompanied by music and text: an aria from Handel's opera *Ottone*, performed on the cello, and the transcript of the trial of American actress Gwyneth Paltrow concerning a skiing accident, which appears scrolling at the bottom of the screen, unfold simultaneously with the images as three voices within a polyphonic composition. The semantic loop that emerges between these distant components is fundamentally open to interpretation; however, the fact that the work lends its title to the entire exhibition suggests that, within the exhibition's totality, it functions as a kind of *concerto*. In addition to the video work, there are also two masks. They resemble masks from classical Greek theatre, although this reference is not crucial to the

exhibition's narrative; regardless of the origin of the form, the presence of the mask points to its universal function—not to conceal, but to represent "falsely."

If one begins, therefore, with the title *Falsa imagine*, borrowed by the exhibition from the video work, it is reasonable to conclude that the exhibition as a whole is framed by a discussion of the truthfulness or falsity of the image in general. The fact that images deceive is hardly a novelty; nor is the idea that aesthetic falsehood, or illusion, is in some sense itself truthful. Should the exhibition be interpreted in light of its title, the falsity of all images should certainly be embraced affirmatively, as an initial hypothesis. Whether an image lies or reveals the truth cannot, of course, be known. In a reality mediated exclusively through images, experiential verification is impossible; what remains available is deliberation concerning the conditions of truthfulness. What applies generally also applies in individual cases. Can it be established that computer-generated images merely simulate, or should one instead ask whether they might also reveal truths about the realities they draw upon for their creative confabulations? And what epistemological difference would there then truly exist between such images and those arising from free artistic imagination? In Ivan Šuletić's artistic practice, these questions are posed and deliberately left open.

Whether an image is false, fictional, or truthful is, however, a question inherent to painting itself. Although the epistemological conditions have changed significantly since the time of Zeuxis and Parrhasius, painting has historically—and therefore essentially—been defined by the discourse of "truth in painting." The exhibition *Falsa imagine* thus fundamentally reopens these "old" questions. Even if one no longer expects some grand narrative of painting, reflecting upon the epistemological premises of the image remains an essential task of the medium.

The *conchetto* concealed within the titular video work addresses precisely this issue. However sadly banal its immediate impetus may be, the courtroom discussion concerning a Hollywood actress likewise considers whether images tell the truth—that is, whether the visual reconstruction of an accident corresponds to the actual event and whether this or that recording may serve as evidentiary material. Similarly, the plot of Handel's opera revolves around an image, and the heroine's aria in the first act—lamenting that the figure in the portrait does not correspond to the appearance of the man claiming to be her fiancé—is entitled *Falsa imagine*. The computer-generated images of devastated urban environments, meanwhile, closely resemble the drone footage we encounter daily on the interfaces of the devices through which we follow the news. Yet they also differ from such images, primarily through the absence of the expected context. Accompanied by music and text whose meaning is not immediately revealed within the work as a whole, these uneasily anonymous images unfold one after another, invoking information that might explain the horror of the ruined city.

Confronted with the dilemma of the truthfulness of these images, the viewer may conclude that they are artificially generated images that do not reflect reality, but also that the semantic effect of these images is real, even though they are artificially created. In the context of cognitive hyper-adaptation to scenes of destruction and suffering, painting thus once again confirms itself as a medium capable of awakening both consciousness and the eye.

*Dr. Ivana Mance Cipek*