

Staš Kleindienst

INSOMNIA

12 May–10 June 2023

artKIT

Staš Kleindienst understands the process of painting as a non-verbal attempt to comprehend the world, somewhere between thinking and feeling, and explores how to represent the ineffable.¹ What cannot be put into words are often social, political, economic and environmental changes and events, as well as socio-political phenomena that have unfolded locally and globally in recent years, when, like in a Groundhog Day, we wake up every morning to a world blinded by collective historical amnesia, dominated by fanatical individualism, and driven by the exploitation of natural and human resources in the name of capital, while the landscape through which we walk daily is littered with the debris of a collapsed value system and sociability. Regarding this somewhat general description of the world situation, it should be noted that Kleindienst draws the material for his paintings primarily from his own environment, both from the local socio-political, cultural, and moral climate, including the manifold frustrations of *our Slovenian society*, and from personal, immediate experiences, situations and images that he once saw somewhere and thought about. Among other things, he is interested – both on an individual and collective level – in issues of ideology, national identity, power, authority, xenophobia, control, the shaping of public space, freedom of speech, and the primacy of corporate interests over the interest of the common good. The stories he depicts spring from rural settings, but they are never factual illustrations of concrete events. Rather, they are a synthesis of his lucid social commentary tinged with humor and optimism, a deeply personal understanding of his own artistic practice as “a way of facing social and cultural questions,” a constant exploration of the painterly medium, and a profound knowledge of art history.

In this exhibition Kleindienst presents his latest works, most of them small format and only a few large format. While one has been accustomed to large-scale works in his previous oeuvre, he has already indicated a move away from large formats and vast landscapes with the exhibition *Antiarcadia*² (2022) in the former monastery church of the Božidar Jakac Art Museum, and continued it in the first iteration of the exhibition *Insomnia*,³ held a month ago at the Savin Art Salon in Žalec. Small formats inherently imply a condensation of what is depicted, which presents a challenge to the artist – who believes that “a painting should not envelop the viewer; the viewer is the one who must enter the painting,” while at the same time preferring contemplative viewing⁴ – both in developing the content of the painting, when the complexity

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artKIT, Glavni trg 14, Maribor
Opening hours: Tuesday to Friday from 3 to 7 p.m., Saturday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

¹ Kač, Maja. *Staš Kleindienst: Čas 20. stoletja je minil in ostale so samo še ruševine. Intervju s slikarjem Stašem Kleindienstom*, RTV MMC, 5. 6. 2022. Access: <https://www.rtvsl.si/kultura/intervju/stas-kleindienst-cas-20-stoletja-je-minil-in-ostale-so-samo-se-rusevine/629244>

² Staš Kleindienst: *Antiarcadia*, solo exhibition, 6. 5.–28. 8. 2022, Božidar Jakac Art Museum, former monastery church, Kostanjevica na Krki, curated by Asta Vrečko, PhD.

³ Staš Kleindienst: *Insomnia*, solo exhibition, 9. 3.–29. 4. 2023, Savin Art Salon, Žalec, curated by Alenka Domjan, exhibition text by Maja Kač.

⁴ Kač, Maja. *Staš Kleindienst: Čas 20. stoletja je minil in ostale so samo še ruševine. Intervju s slikarjem Stašem Kleindienstom*, RTV MMC, 5. 6. 2022. Access: <https://www.rtvsl.si/kultura/intervju/stas-kleindienst-cas-20-stoletja-je-minil-in-ostale-so-samo-se-rusevine/629244>

of daily life must be captured in just a few details, and in visual exploration of the medium. To do this, the artist not only changes the viewer's perspective and point of entry, but also descends himself from an aerial perspective and observational distance into the immediate vicinity of the situation. The diminution of the scene reinforces the sense of unease to which we will return in the continuation and which is so characteristic of Kleindienst's painting. It should be emphasized, however, that the works in question are independent scenes and self-contained narratives that function as universes in their own right, not as a cutout or enlargement from a larger painting.

Regardless of the format of his paintings, Kleindienst remains committed to the landscape as the main motif; his landscapes reflect the geographical features of our wider (subalpine) landscape in all its homeliness and idyll. He is interested in the landscape in all its dimensions, not just as a backdrop for the scene depicted. The artist has studied the landscape intensively, and his unique view of it reflects a thorough knowledge of the development of the motif in art history. Kleindienst's landscapes can, in fact, be defined as a synthesis of various types of landscapes as they were developed in all major periods of Western art history. Looking at his paintings, large or small, various references can be identified: the pastoral landscape, a genre motif known in all periods from antiquity to the 20th century, Boschian and especially Bruegelian painting, naive art (mostly in large formats), and 20th century urban landscapes, which reflect the alienation and loneliness of the individual and society as such. The pastoral as a genre additionally fascinates the artist because, as he himself says, "on the archaic ruins of nostalgia, it can transform the particular into the universal, the political into the natural."

The exhibition title *Insomnia*, which coincides with the title of one of the large-format paintings, suggests the mood that permeates the exhibited works as soon as one enters the exhibition space, connecting them into a multi-layered whole. Evening and night motifs, which predominate in Kleindienst's seemingly idyllic landscapes, correspond with the thematic context of his works. It seems as if we are looking at what is depicted through the eyes of an *insomniac*, freely referring to the words and thoughts of Maja Kač in her text *Lovilec žarenja* [*Catcher of Radiance*], which accompanied Kleindienst's last exhibition at the Savin Art Salon, where insomnia is understood as a symptom of the acute state of contemporary society and its delusion and madness. The *insomniac*, through whose eyes we look, thus becomes the bearer of the gaze, the universal viewer, in front of whom Kleindienst's images play out. The artist frames and assembles these images into thoughtful and self-contained, independent scenes, but at the same time integrates them - in the juxtaposition of the works themselves - into a complex scenario that unfolds in the gallery space. In the large-scale works *Insomnia* (2022), *People of the Forest* (2023), and *Rocket Science* (2019), as well as the smaller work *The Long Way Home* (2023), the eyes of the *insomniac* alternate between micro and macro views, moving attentively and precisely across the pictorial plane, observing the tiny figures and not quite identifiable and thus dubious scenes unfolding in the dark corners of the evening forest, in the illuminated clearings - or gliding across barely lit streets, along the winding river reflecting the evening light, across empty fields and parking lots. In small-format works, the gaze of the *insomniac* quickly becomes voyeuristic as it penetrates intimate spaces, as in *Night Atelier* (2022), where we actually gaze upon "the image of a magical space, a *hortus conclusus* arranged into a coherent composition,"⁵ and are granted "a glimpse into an almost sacred place where the creative soul flees or closes itself off, to devote itself to its primary task."⁶ Or in *Young Lovers in a Landscape* (2022), where the gaze of the *insomniac* looks back on a strongly lit, possibly forbidden relationship, when in fact

⁵ Kač, Maja. *Lovilec žarenja* [*Catcher of Radiance*], text accompanying the exhibition *Insomnia* by Staš Kleindienst at Savin Art Salon in Žalec.

⁶ Ibidem.

the true atmosphere and complexity of the scene is determined by the combination of the dark, almost threatening figure and the radiant sky sinking into the depths of the night. Night and evening scenes are, according to the artist, "particularly attractive as a metaphor for a kind of psychological space hidden under the blinding light of representation, yet open to vulnerability and doubt that can lead us to question our social roles and positions." On the one hand, *the gaze of the insomniac* roams Kleindienst's landscapes, alienated and alone; on the other, it surreptitiously and treacherously penetrates intimate spaces, always making its way through the cultural subconscious, shaped and controlled by various authorities in positions of power with different social and political rituals.

So it is the atmosphere that plays the main role in the artist's work, it becomes the bearer of the visual mood, reflects the social reality and speaks of the intimate world of the individual, who is most imbued with loneliness and alienation precisely in the twilight and in the depths of the night. It is the evening and night scenes that allow the artist to devote himself intensely to the exploration of the visual problems that interest him at the moment - the exploration of light, luminosity and radiance on the pictorial plane. The artist's technical sophistication in painting radiant light is most evident in the aforementioned work *Night Atelier* and in the painting of a slightly smaller format entitled *Harbinger of the Night* (2023), in which the nocturnal landscape is illuminated by the radiant hayrack reminiscent of a neon sign. This work, however, not only testifies to the artist's technical virtuosity, but reaches its climax in the subversive exploration of such a meaningful symbol as the hayrack in the Slovenian context.

One of the key elements of Kleindienst's work is undoubtedly the omnipresent antagonism, which he achieves primarily through an interplay between the literal and the intangible, between the idyllic landscape as such and individual, grotesque scenes which, in their uncanny homeliness, can confuse and evoke a sense of unease, as we know from his older works. Kleindienst builds this tension masterfully - using a realistic visual language, he creates a clear narrative and thus, as he himself says, "sets certain discursive threads," and by eluding clearly defined details in the scenes and allowing the speculative potential of the imagination, he leaves an open *in between space* for the viewer's own interpretation.

- Živa Kleindienst

BIOGRAPHY

Webpage



Staš Kleindienst graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Ljubljana in 2007, where he also received a BA in 2009. His works are in several private and public collections. In 2014 he was awarded the OHO Young Visual Artist Award. Among other things, he curated the student exhibition *12 Reasons to Paint* at Škuc Gallery. In 2019 he received the title Recognition of important works of art, awarded by the University of Ljubljana. In 2023 he received the Rihard Jakopič Award. He lives and works in Vipava.