

TO BEGIN WITH

The exhibition *Paintresses From the Littoral From the Collections of the Piran Coastal Galleries* was originally conceived as a presentation of selected works of art from the collections of the Piran Coastal Galleries (PCG) in the Loža Gallery, the central exhibition space of the city of Koper. Its aim was also to reconsider the idea of a permanent presentation of the collection, with an emphasis on the Littoral artists. The idea for such an exhibition is actually almost as old as the Piran Coastal Galleries themselves. At the beginning of their activity in the second half of the 1970s, they set for themselves the ambitious task of creating their own art collection in parallel with their rich exhibition activity according to the highest standards, so that the best works of Littoral and other Slovenian artists would be permanently accessible to the general and professional public. This is why the former management of the PCG strived for a long time to obtain suitable premises in Koper for the presentation of the Galleries' collections.

No major developments have been observed to date and we are still waiting for the permanent presentation of the PCG's collections in Slovenian Istria. While the artworks are kept in rather inadequate spaces, which can hardly be called depots¹, and only some of them are exceptionally on display at various temporary exhibitions, including elsewhere in Slovenia, the public is constantly deprived of viewing artworks, of artistic experience and of learning about an important part of contemporary visual creativity in the local and national space since the 1980s. On the other hand, museum collections, which are not hermetic entities, maintain their important role and vitality particularly in direct communication with the public.

The initiative to have the exhibition present female artists from the Littoral region who are included in the PCG's collections was a unique challenge, despite my concerns about reasonableness of the division by gender. The initial doubt that the number of female artists in the parent collections is generally quite limited for such a project was justified, and even a cursory look at the structure of individual collections confirmed this.

THE EIGHTIES AND THE NINETIES

The Contemporary Slovenian Fine Arts Collection After 1976, which transcends the local space and also holds a special place in the national sphere², safeguards around 70 works of art. The collection is composed of many high-quality works worthy of being presented, but

¹After decades of efforts by the PCG's management to acquire appropriate depots, the Piran Coastal Galleries are today the closest to an adequate solution. With the engagement of the current management, in cooperation with the Maritime Museum "Sergej Mašera" Piran, the initiative for the arrangement of viewing depots for both institutions in the Monfort complex in Portorož is already in the phase of final project documentation.

² The Piran Coastal Galleries produced an important collection of works that (...) represent a unique insight into the historical formation of Slovenian postmodernism. (...) The quality of the collection goes beyond the municipal, local character, and is of fundamental importance for the study and treatment of Slovenian art in the last third of the 20th century. It is these works from the collection that are often cited and published as key works of art of the time and already have a solid museum status." In 2009, Dr Tomaž Brejc wrote in his assessment of the collections of the Piran Coastal Galleries, which is safeguarded by Andrej Medved.

unfortunately among these there are only three female artists, who are represented by their works created in the first half of the 1980s. This modest presence of artworks by women is all the more incomprehensible because, from the 1990s onwards at least, there have been quite a few outstanding female artists working in our country. For comparison, the *Factor Banka Fine Art Collection*, which was established in the 1990s, is mostly characterized by artists who also exhibited in the Piran Coastal Galleries at that time and whose works were acquired for the collection. Female artists already represent 20% of the art holdings of the Bank's collection. The gender ratio is somewhat better, but still markedly unbalanced, in another important collection, the PCG's *Littoral Fine Artists*, which was formed in parallel and today entails 75 works of art. Only seven female artists (Mira Ličen, Majda Skrinar, Beti Bricelj, Gail Clair Morris, Ira Niero Marušič, Fulvia Grbac, Lara Marconi Jeranko) are authors of these works of art, which were mostly created after 2000.

In the last decades of the 20th century, the absence of female artists is also noticeable in art exhibitions. The 1980s were also the period in time of numerous acquisitions of key works of art by Slovenian authors, which are still significant today. This was mainly thanks to the program and the open and inclusive operation of the Piran Coastal Galleries, as well as the fact that back then the fine arts of the Littoral region of Slovenia had a special status both nationally and in the wider, Yugoslav and international space (New Image, Genius Loci, etc.). However, at the exhibition *Painting of the Slovenian Littoral: New Generations*, which was prepared in the Piran Civic Gallery in 1994 by the then artistic director of the PCG Andrej Medved, the fine arts of the Littoral were represented exclusively by male artists.

Two years later, the exhibition *Genius Loci. Painting From Koper* was on display at the Equrna Gallery in Ljubljana, the second in a series of three in the frame of the high-profile Genius Loci project, which was conceived and founded by art historian, professor and art critic Dr. Tomaž Brejc. In his critical essay *Two Exhibitions From Two Decades*, he highlighted the specificity of the Littoral painting and analyzed its position in the last two decades of the past century. At the first exhibition in 1986, the Littoral painting was represented in the aforementioned gallery in Ljubljana only by male artists. In 1996, the painter and architect Majda Skrinar was among the three exhibiting artists, while a decade later, at the third exhibition in 2006, she was joined by the younger painter Joni Zakonjšek. Brejc's selection certainly confirms that high-quality "women's painting" was also characteristic of the Littoral art.

Artists who worked in the Littoral region in the last decade of the past century also participated in the group exhibition *The Nineties in the Littoral Fine Arts* at the Piran Coastal Galleries in 2000. Twenty-two painters and sculptors responded to the invitation, among whom only three were female painters: Mira Ličen Krmpotič, Ljerka Kovač and Majda Skrinar. At the exhibition, critics pointed to the absence of multimedia artists, which was also the reason for the concept of the exhibition *Littoral Fine Arts: A Different View 1990–2013*, which was curated by Andrej Medved only a good decade later (2013) and with exclusively male names.

THE NEW MILLENNIUM

In the Slovenian fine arts, a greater presence of women is noticeable in the new millennium and we can also observe a greater professional commitment to their inclusion in various exhibitions and other artistic and research projects. The exhibition *Contemporary Slovenian Painting: The First Generations After the Year of Nothing*, which premiered in 2014 at the Cankarjev Dom Gallery in Ljubljana³, is worth mentioning, if only because it was prepared by Andrej Medved, who conceived it and who for a long period of time also directed the acquisitions for the aforementioned Piran Coastal Galleries' collections with his suggestions. For the exhibition, he selected eight Slovenian female painters of the then younger and youngest generations "with a new artistic power, united by the exceptional quality of their work". Unfortunately, none of the participating authors, with the exception of two Littoral artists, is still included in the PCG's collections today.

In the national space, among other things, several recent projects, that are related to female creativity and the issue of equal representation in the field of visual arts, stand out. The spring of 2022 group exhibition *Returning the Gaze*, which was held at the Cukrarna Gallery in Ljubljana, presented a selection of the creative practices of almost sixty Slovenian or Slovenian-based artists from the 1990s onwards. It problematized the ever-current issue of women in art and beyond, relating to "specific social themes, issues of identity, feminism and the representation of female artists in the art system".

A year later, the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana prepared a group exhibition *For Your Pleasure. Feminist Positions in Visual Art From Slovenia* (October 2023–April 2024)⁴. The exhibition was dedicated to "artistic production that addresses gender and the resulting discrimination, sexism and inequality of women (and all of those who identify as women), whereby discrimination manifests itself at the intersection of gender and other categories and circumstances, e.g. class, work, race, nationality, gender identity and age.«

The 10th Triennial of Contemporary Art - U 3 / *Against the Stream of Time* (June–November 2024) recently concluded at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana. Independent curator Tevž Logar upgraded his subjective view and focused on other issues in today's art system with an analytical approach. He also invited the most important gallery institutions from Slovenia to participate, including the Piran Coastal Galleries. The exhibition presented works of art created in the last five years and was therefore a direct reflection of the current state of contemporary visual art. It is relevant and encouraging to note that the exhibition featured 39 authors and groups from the "Slovenian art space", including 19 female artists.

An interesting look at gender inequality in the field of visual art in Slovenia is provided by the recent research project *The Discomfort of Absence: Women in Visual Art, A Survey of the Presence of Women in Art in Slovenia*, which was realized by Hana Samec Sekereš and Kristjan Sedej ahead of the exhibition *For Your Pleasure. Feminist Positions in Visual Art From Slovenia*. The methodologically complex research covers the fields of education, profession and the presence of female artists in public life in the national space between 1991 and 2021. It is emphasized in the introduction that "the percentage of female artists in the collections of

³ In the summer of 2014, the exhibition was also on display at the Piran Civic Gallery.

⁴ A selection from this exhibition was then on display in the Piran Civic Gallery from May to August 2014.

selected galleries and museums does not even reach 30%. However, an overview of solo exhibitions over several years shows an increase in exhibitions by female artists". Among the selected galleries and museums from Slovenia, the project also included the Piran Coastal Galleries, which, according to the findings of the research, only hold 12% of works of art by women in their collections⁵. The data is relevant, and it is worth emphasizing that women are numerically best represented in two of the PCG's collections – paintings and ceramics – which are linked to the international event Ex-tempore Piran. The dynamics of purchases here differs from those planned for most of the remaining collections, as these still depend on the subjective selection of the international expert jury, which decides on the most important awards. It is also interesting to note that in the last decade alone, the highest purchase award, the Grand Prix, awarded by the PCG at the aforementioned event, has been received by as many as seven female artists, mostly from Slovenia. Many young artists have also been awarded with a solo exhibition at the PCG.

The long-awaited anthology *Review of Artistic Creativity in Slovenian Istria of the Past Decades* from 2022, written by art critic Dejan Mehmedovič, head of the Insula Gallery in Izola, is also revealing. This publication, which is extremely rich in terms of content and with minutely documented records, offers us a wide range of information about the artistic developments in southern Littoral region of Slovenia from 1920 to the present day. Looking at its extensive list of artists that we can follow through different time periods, we soon realize that the field of art is still a largely male domain (80%), although, especially in the last two decades, the number of female artists in the concerned field has been increasing steadily.

THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition Paintresses From the Littoral. From the Collections of the Piran Coastal Galleries presents seven Littoral artists of different generations: **Mira Ličen** (1950), **Majda Skrinar** (1963), **Fulvia Grbac** (1968), **Beti Bricelj** (1974), **Joni Zakonjšek** (1974), **Lara Marconi Jeranko** (1984) and **Ira Niero Marušič** (1989). Their works – mostly paintings on canvas, supplemented by watercolors and prints – were acquired by the Piran Coastal Galleries through regular acquisitions, prizes at the Ex-tempore Piran and donations. Since the smaller-scale exhibition space of the Meduza Gallery dictated the selection, some artworks were unfortunately left out of this exhibition: paintings by Barbara Čižmek and Arelena Zakonjšek, works on paper by Aljoša Križ, Klavdija Marušič and Katja Smerdu, and ceramics by Tanja Krstov, Kristina Rutar and Nataša Sedej; The large size sculpture by Gail Clair Morris is, as the only artwork by a female artist, included in the group exhibition *Miscellanea, Stories and Artworks From the Depots of the Piran Coastal Galleries*, which is currently simultaneously on display in the Loža Gallery In Koper. Among the modest selection of female painters and sculptors in the collections, we certainly miss female artists who work in the field of increasingly popular and established intermedia art practices.

⁵ For comparison, the share of women artists in the collections is noticeably higher (26%) in the younger and smaller collection held by the Nova Gorica City Gallery, founded in 1997.

The exhibition does not delve into individual artistic expressions and authorial, personal poetics. Its common denominator is gender and status in the collection, and above all belonging to the coastal area of Slovenia from which the artists originate and in which they create. They are not only recognizable in their home environment, but are all already well-known and established names who creatively shape the Slovenian art space and are often seen in referential group exhibitions at home and abroad.

This presentation, modest in terms of the number of authors and works, clearly shows the great absence of female artists in the PCG's collections and points to the still too large of a gap between the pronounced presence of women in the art scene in recent decades on the one hand and the modest share of their works in the public collections on the other. If there were indeed fewer female representatives in this field until the 1990s, and therefore this was the reason for the absence of their works in the collections, it is incomprehensible that even later, with the success of younger female artists, their representation in the PCG's collections did not improve much. Nevertheless, it is an encouraging fact that the planned acquisitions have recently been focused on women's art production and are gradually filling a long-standing void in the collections

How to continue the policy of collecting and where to orient it in the future? In the era of globalization and the unstoppable radical changes that we are experiencing, limiting the artistic production of local authors seems almost pointless. With the increasing presence of women in the increasingly complex system of visual art, equal representation and appreciation of both or all genders is necessary and all the more important. Of paramount importance above all is, of course, the creative quality of artworks, which should never be disregarded on account of the creators' gender or sexual orientation. To put it simply: real art is always good or it isn't art.

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