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National Costume Today. Selected Perspectives

The current exhibition's study core is Ante Trstenjak's series *Sorbian Women*, whilst the theme also invites consideration on how it resonates in modern visual art. What is the contemporary message of the national costume? What is its symbolic significance? What is the context in which it appears? Three artists are featured in the exhibition, each with a unique take on the subject.

In 2009, German photographer **Eric Schütt** (b. 1967) started the series *Village Queens* with the goal of photographing the remaining women who still wear traditional garbs or elements of them in their daily lives. The exhibition features a selection of images from this series, focusing on women from the Lusatian region. Ante Trstenjak's portrayals of *Sorbian Women* have certain similarities. Between 1928 and 1934, the girls and young women shown by Trstenjak continued to wear their costume on a daily basis, despite the fact that certain components of the costume were already being phased out. In the paintings, they appear reserved, mostly gazing off into the distance and only making eye contact on rare occasions. Even the elderly women in Schütte's images look past the lens, as if looking back in time. They make a striking contrast to the modern household setting. They are nothing like the folkloric depictions of costumes that we are used to seeing. They are not hiding their age or exhaustion, and they are not attempting to be likeable, their posture is natural and casual, despite the fact that they are posing. They are what they are and they dress accordingly because they are who they are. Some of them simply wear a headgear, which is clearly a powerful identity-bearer and the final element of their costume before it vanishes altogether. Ante Trstenjak captured the last images of a tradition that was still alive at that time and clearly about to disappear. Eighty years later, photographer Eric Schütt documented the last living witnesses of the same tradition, now irreversibly committed to history and museum collections. Both artists have an ethnographic-documentary approach to their work and are cognizant of a fading tradition. If this understanding is still infused with nostalgia in Ante Trstenjak's depictions, it is instantaneous and inescapable in Eric Schütte's images. The aged *Village Queens* are clearly at the end of their journey, and this time their tradition will not be passed down to their daughters and granddaughters. We are all quiet witnesses to this silent and solemn farewell.

Tina Dobrajc (b. 1984) is a young Slovenian painter who combines contemporary painting with folklore motifs in her work. She frequently focuses on subjects that investigate the situation of women in contemporary culture, as well as archetypal motifs that bring insights from the collective unconscious to the surface. The exhibition features two of her works: the painting *On the Dark Side of the Alps* (2016) and the video *Milk* (2015). A woman in a long dark robe is depicted in the painting *On the Dark Side of the Alps*. She wears a bonnet, a typical headgear of the Gorenjska folk costume, and a picture of the high mountains with two ibexes is placed behind her back. The sole brightening aspect in the painting's brown-grey palette is a pink-hued schematised pattern behind the woman's back. While the form is

considered traditional, the vibrant pink gives it a modern feel. Although the outline of the cross is obscured by the woman's torso, we can still make out the shape of the cross. The omission or absence of legs is also a crucial detail. The woman is therefore exalted against a patriotic mountain image, out of contact with the earth, cut off from her strengths, and subordinated to a cross-shaped pattern. The two ibexes on the rock face behind her serve as a cruel reminder of what freedom and living in the natural world entail. The headgear or bonnet serves as an identifier, since it informs us that she is not just any woman, but a Slovenian woman. In a black mourning gown and with a previous emblem of identification on her head, a woman caught in a beautiful, but dominant and surviving pattern. Dobrajc's reminder is not particularly nice. It is comparable to a mirror in that it reflects aspects of ourselves that we do not see or do not want to see. As individuals and as a culture, we are compelled to ask questions. *On the Dark Side of the Alps* is a reference to the slogan *On the Sunny Side of the Alps*, which was popular in the years leading up to Slovenian independence. So, thirty years later, where does the Slovenian woman stand? On which side of the Alps? Only by examining our actual situation can we determine whether we are simply repeating past patterns or forging new paths.

Trine Søndergaard (b. 1972) is a well-known Danish photographer with a worldwide reputation. Her photography is factual and documentary in nature, with a delicate aesthetic and a minimalist poetic narrative. Her art is primarily concerned with universal existential questions and feminine themes, which she examines via personal and global lenses. Individual teenage girls wear an old piece of clothing—a bonnet, a headscarf, or fabric from the last century—alongside their own outfits in the series *Hovedtøj* (Headgear). Museum garments* tell a hidden or forgotten story about a woman's experience of life. The range of bodies and races show that the concept is universal, even if the outfits of current teenage girls convey the sitter's personal side. The girls' silent photographs, which do not reveal their faces, provide a link between the past and present experiences of being in a woman's body, transcending time and generations. Traditionally, the female experience was associated with the creation of garments and headgear, manual labour, and chores that took hours of bending and threading. Despite the fact that each piece of clothing followed a pattern that established the appropriate colour, shape, and ornamentation based on the woman's location, time, and status, the finished result was unique, displaying the maker's inventiveness and talent. All of these components are currently unreadable and hidden, but we continue to sense them. The *Hovedtøj* series highlights the differences between long physical labour and mass fashion from online sales or shopping malls, and the elusive component of time in the spectrum between past and present shines through from this clash. The photographs have a contemplative profundity, silence, and an emotional stillness that might be read as a narrative about women's position in the world. Søndergaard's art is linked by a subtle thread of inner life and the unravelling of concealed or hidden layers.

Trine Søndergaard has a solo show in the Maribor Art Gallery's Great Hall, while three of her pieces are also on display in the exhibition *Pride and Prejudice in National Costume*.

*The *Hovedtøj* series was created in cooperation with the Skive Museum in 2019 and the Greve Museum in 2020/2021.