

ZORA PLEŠNAR – retrospective
19 April– 4 August 2019

The Maribor Art Gallery is proud to present the first retrospective exhibition of photographic works by **Zora Plešnar** (1925), the most prominent Slovenian female photographer of the 1970s and 1980s. She joined the photographic club **Fotoklub Maribor** in 1968 and became the only female member of the renowned **Maribor Circle** (1971–1974), a photographic group known for implementing a modernist expression in photography that was freed from the dictated notion of beauty. Other members of the Maribor Circle were Ivan Dvoršak, Zmago Jeraj, Janko Jelnikar, Branimir Jerneić, and Stojan Kerbler. Zora Plešnar participated at the Circle's first exhibition with the photograph *Spain* (1970).

In the series *Passing* (1970–1982), which began to emerge during the period of the Maribor Circle, certain technical elements typical of the photography of the Maribor Circle appeared, even though the whole series is pervaded by a greater amount of airiness and a brighter light, and is foremost dedicated to landscape, which had not been a feature of the Maribor Circle. The prevailing feeling is that of contemplation rather than an ideational concept, which Zmago Jeraj repeatedly associated with the Maribor Circle. The series *Passing* is a poetic image of the passing time, with a touch of shrouded melancholy.

The series *Above the Clouds* was created in 1975, when the photographer flew to Malta for New Year's Eve and photographed clouds through the plane's window. The black edge of the window is visible in the bottom left of certain photographs and acts as a grasp of or the last contact with reality, before we are released into the soft hunk of clouds that take us to a different world. Similarly as in the series *Passing*, we are no longer looking into real space, but are as observers invited to experience and to feel.

The series *Childhood* (ca. 1970 – ca. 1990) represents in regard to its intensity and sensitive characterisation the highlight of Plešnar's portrait photography. As a teacher with subject specialisation, she loved children, and it is evident that she was able to establish a genuine contact with them. The children's world is all but monotonous. We are witnessing a whole range of children's experiences; their images are straightforward and vivid.

In the **portraits of adults**, Plešnar often paid attention to the environment of the portrayed or their activities (*Photographer, Cooper, Spinner, Seamstress, Worker*). Also characteristic of these portraits is her interest in common people. The exhibition features two such examples in the portraits of female factory workers, illustrating the spirit of the time.

In the series *Reflections* (1979–1983), Zora Plešnar captured reflections in puddles and exhibited the photographs turned upside down. She processed the bright version of *Reflections* in a diluted developer, which reminds of similar procedures used by Ivan Dvoršak in 1972. In this way, she obtained bright, ethereal images that approach illusion, and further exacerbated this effect by blurring and diffusing the margins.

The series *Tereľj* (Mongolian National Park) from 1976 is a homage to wild nature. In the foreground is the contrast between the dark horizon and the vast sky with various cloud formations. This dramatic scenery provides a framework for a few simple highlights between the sky and the earth: a group of trees, a bird, electric poles, a silhouette of a deer with mighty antlers, a lonely tree, etc. These contrasts increase the dramatic effect and reduce narrative elements.

Sequential and experimental photographs

With the exception of processing in a diluted developer, Zora Plešnar has not consciously experimented in the darkroom, but in some cases rather preserved random irregularities and included them into her photographs. Under the influence of Ivan Dvoršak, she focused on sequential photography from the mid-seventies to around 1990. Plešnar's and Dvoršak's interests were similar: to document small changes that testify to the flow of time and the inevitable passing.

The series *Celebration* (1984) was created by chance, as the photographer unknowingly used the same film twice. Scenes from the seaside thus overlap with the scenes she captured at a celebration on Pohorje. The rhythmic sequence of scenes again reminds of a fast motion film tape, where all elements (sea, earth, church, ship, spruces, waves, people at a table, musicians, etc.) are captured in non-selective remembrance, where every moment has an equal place in the course of a lifetime.

The series *Circus* (1978–1984) was created during several visits to the Italian circus Medrano in Maribor. The circus spectacle itself did not particularly attract Zora Plešnar's interest; she was rather drawn by people, animals, peripheral images of daily life, and performance preparations. In the portraits of people and animals, the photographer confronts the oddity of the circus world with the Maribor's suburban environment. Some photographs reflect the artist's immense love for horses, which she also testified in the series *Lipizzaners* from 1980.

The series *Birth of a City / New Belgrade* (1981–1982) was created during a winter stay in Belgrade. Plešnar captured an empty, dune-like space in the foreground, behind which are rising the silhouettes of the growing city. The contrast between the dreary foreground and the high-rise buildings in the background resembles a surreal mirage. The series may be interpreted as a metaphor of unstoppable civilisation progress and an intimate portrait of the environment, in which despite its wounds, we discover beauty and the possibility of something new.