

# The Use of Landscape

26.03.-15.05.2021

Amy Casilda Bartoli · Dominik Buda · Cătălina Cosma · Vlad Dinu  
Flora Franke · Elena Kristofor  
Denise Lobont · Diana Păun · Patric Pavel · Nora Severios

Exhibition Space of the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna



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# The Use of Landscape OR We have to Listen to the Birds

Michael Höpfner

1. Diana Păun, *Pasul Meste-căniș, Suceava, Romania (2)*, 2021 (detail)
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*The Use of Landscape*  
Amy Casilda Bartoli,  
Dominik Buda,  
Cătălina Cosma,  
Vlad Dinu,  
Flora Franke,  
Elena Kristofor,  
Denise Lobont,  
Diana Păun,  
Patric Pavel,  
Nora Severios  
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In a conversation I've been having with British artist Hamish Fulton for two years, he contemplates how children experience nature in 2021. Or rather: is it still possible for us to experience nature at all? Because it no longer exists? Because our senses cannot perceive it? At one point Hamish muses, "We have to listen to the birds..."

In a year-long workshop in collaboration with Iosif Király, ten students from the Department of Photography and Video, The National University of Arts Bucharest and the Department for Art and Photography, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna followed this thought – nature is not invisible, and does not require human concepts in order to be rendered visible. The use or exploitation of the landscape, and the need to understand, explain or describe it, receded into the background throughout the collaborative

process, and temporal, sensory observation took centre stage; what can we do in nature all around us and how can we still use it?

Contemporary art generally has two approaches when it comes to nature: German Romanticism and Land Art. But the problems we are dealing with as artists regarding our concept of nature is not about these art historical categories – more revealing to me seems to be the history of Western culture and its ideas about nature in modernity. So I asked myself, when did our ancestors abandon and ultimately succeed in overcoming the invisible bond with nature? What are the dynamics that have made us continually yearn and search for this lost relationship ever since, well into the 21st century? Is nature dichotomous to culture? How are we sure that we no longer have access to certain experiences that others still supposedly do?

As an artist I see important moments of fundamental change occurring in the three revolutions of the late 18th century: the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and German Idealism. Before that point, most of our ancestors were farmers directly at the mercy of nature, until the tide turned with rationalism, modern industrial manufacturing and a subsequent new self-image of the Western man. Fear of nature was eradicated with laws of physics and technology, the idealists unveiled the principles of mind, man, society and nature, and adopted an intellectual view of nature and principles of higher knowledge. The labour that peasants had been doing amidst nature, and subject to it, for their survival since the Neolithic Revolution 10,000 years ago, was now transitioning from the theoretical to the real subordination of labour to capital.

At the same time, in this emerging marketplace based on the exploitation of nature, new spheres of knowledge began to open up as a result of the exploding worldview of Western empires. It was no coincidence that Friedrich Schlegel's most successful book, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians), was first published in 1808, bringing Asian philosophies and languages closer to the German public, although the author himself never set foot in India.

So what does this have to do with our observation of nature? Artists in France and England were very early to recognise the problems and futility inherent in a completely rational industrial society. Take for example William Turner's monumental painting *Wreck of a Transport Ship*, 1801 or Gustave Courbet's *The Meeting (Bonjour Monsieur Courbet)*, 1854. They were working their way through the drastically altered state of their world at the time, with the inkling that soon we would no longer be able to look at a stone without searching for natural laws or rational principles. Which has subsequently become something we can no longer manage: we must divide the world and nature, which we spiritually yearn for as either wilderness or a kind of industrial surrogate nature. We have become profoundly metaphysical, forever in search of the essential.

As the idealists continued to search for this absolute in intellectual terms, visible nature grew more absent from our reality over the following decades. We had to build a new future for humankind, but one always based on this invisible connection with the world: science, materialism with its limits, finitude and inevitability.

As a substitute, we created utopias as desperate attempts to improve the world ourselves. It was no coincidence to me that Karl Marx and Helena Blavatsky were developing their ideas of a future humankind that transcended nature concurrently. As an artist I find it very interesting how this is convoluting within modern art. Blavatsky and her theosophical school amplified the popular idealist model that exploits the mind as a medium, which influenced myriads of artists, not only at the turn of the 20th century but right up to 2021. It plays out in contemporary art in the minds of artists dealing with the world, the earth, nature: in a press text of a contemporary art institution in February 2021 I read with astonishment about water that possesses knowledge, planetary relationships, and non-human technologies. Blavatsky's esotericism, a melange of Asian religion and mythology, later carried over into Steiner's anthroposophy and was eventually incorporated into various ecological, political utopias. And it lingers on in the visual arts in a nostalgia for the 'authentic life', of pre-modern societies

and religions. It latches on to shamanic wisdom, to a spiritual bond with nature, but one we can no longer imagine, so it had to be reinvented by early modernity in the 19th century.

What must we do in order to just observe a bird again?

Maurizio Ferraris begins his 2011 *Manifesto of New Realism*, with the succinct proposal that we acknowledge once and for all that water is not socially constructed. It is first and foremost water, and was already water long before it was so designated by people and relabelled H<sub>2</sub>O in technical terms. In the same vein, 25 years before him, Jean Baudrillard issued an emphatic warning that our increasing subjectification of nature would destroy us.

In order to simply be in nature, I first need to emancipate my artistic working method from ideologies and concepts – *is* is not necessarily *ought*. The first step when in nature can be to observe and experience these conceivable and inconceivable worlds around us; I do not have to understand these connections, I can approach the reality of nature and my own existence in it by looking, grasping with my hands, or walking; as an artist I'm not obliged to understand (hermeneutics) or explain (science).

I don't want to misconstrue this as a form of naivety, it's just that to me the consciousness of having to stand on this earth is sufficient – as Jean-François Lyotard powerfully put it; to develop a sense for the realities surrounding us, contrary to our sense of entitlement, which can most likely only be overcome by renunciation.

This brings me back to a bird, a buzzard to be precise, which I watch for hours in a field. What kind of a world does it perceive? One modified by people, as we know, but it still sees and lives in its own natural world; as an artist, I can observe this bird of prey at this moment, imagine its worldview in its world, and come to the realisation that there are infinite possible worlds beyond our imagination.

## Dominik Buda



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The artists in the exhibition *The Use of Landscape* each have their own individual working methods and personal approach to nature.

Dominik Buda's landscape or close-up photographs stem from his direct responses to nature, and their initial seemingly pure documentary appearance is short-lived. On closer inspection we are confronted by subtle interventions in the pre-existing contexts: a toothpick wedged in a tree trunk, thorns growing in the opposite direction. Moments such as these, suspended between human design and chance, are also what the artist strives for in his work *Parabelflug [Parabolic Flight]*, in which a branch appears to yield to the arc of a basketball. (see image no. 4)

With his photographs, Buda not only casts doubt on the photographic reproduction of reality, but also questions the impartiality that is often considered the basis of our interactions with the landscape around us. How much of what we think of as a dialogue with nature is real? How much is projected onto it on our part?

6. Dominik Buda,  
*Findling*  
*[Glacial Erratic]*, 2021

# Elena Kristofor Diana Păun Cătălina Cosma

This observation of nature in our immediate surroundings continues in the constellation of works by Cătălina Cosma, Diana Păun and Elena Kristofor.

Over the course of the year in which the workshop ran, the three artists endeavoured to experience nature in specific sites in their immediate environment in the hopes of gaining insights for their artistic work. Human narratives, failed utopias and traces of exploitation embed themselves in processes of nature – be it the seasons or the rhythm of night and day.

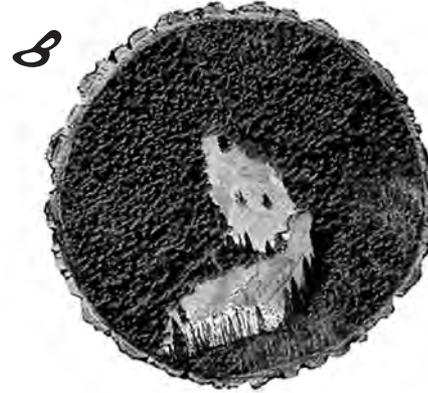
Elena Kristofor grew up with the open horizon of the steppe; for her the forest is of an alien nature that seems constricting and intimidating. Her artistic approach is formal and marked by contrast: the horizon versus the vertical lines of trees, organic shapes of branches versus wood that has been shaped through industrial design, brushstrokes of paint that touch and alter natural tones. With its formal and structural approach, the work comprises a transformation of forms that chronicles close encounters. Kristofor's works depict her personal perspective as she walks through the forest, whereas Diana Păun uses a view from above; a vantage point of the earth that has often led to the desire to dominate and control it.

Incorporating satellite photos of deforestation sites in her installation, Diana Păun consciously addresses the concept of reverence for nature. Beyond their documentation of deforested land, the views from such distance render formal structures akin to Kristofor's works. But Păun deliberately correlates the bird's-eye view of the photographs with the tactility and presence of tree stumps. Silkscreen prints of the satellite images are applied directly

7. Cătălina Cosma,  
*Impromptu forest – a study of artificial nature*, 2020–2021

8. Diana Păun,  
*Codrul secular Giuamălu, Suceava, Romania*, 2021

9. Elena Kristofor,  
*Entwurf eines Waldes in der Steppe [Draft of a Forest in the Steppe]*, 2021



onto the surface of stumps collected in her grandparents' forest. The high-tech image on the screen merges with the tree stump as a direct testimony of human intervention in nature.

Cătălina Cosma's works, on the other hand, revolve around an example of nature's reclamation of culture. In a documentary-style video, she examines an early suburb of Bucharest that was designed as an alternative community with a self-sufficient farm in the 1920s. As a resident of this suburb, she has witnessed this area since childhood. In the zone that was abandoned after the collapse of communism, the architectural structures with their distinct formal qualities – relics of socialist utopias – are visibly overgrown by nature. The transience of culture seems to come into direct confrontation with nature.

# Nora Severios Denise Lobont

The idea of origin – symbolised by the sun – is a focus in both Denise Lobont’s photography works, and Nora Severios’ installation. A yearning for nature in our society is often accompanied by a desire to get “back to our origins” – which the artists pursue through tracing natural resources and recreational lifestyles respectively. Nora Severios studies nature through plants that follow human settlement: nettles, for example, grow beside every farm in the Waldviertel. The weed was once an important fibre used in various traditional processing techniques – which Severios now appropriates and transfers into her installations: preserving jars filled with water and vegetable pigments that dye the nettle fibres through the warmth of the sun. The fact that dye production uses primarily those parts of the plants that are supposed to defend against predators, however, renders an idyllic image of naturalness to the point of absurdity.

A similar dialectic also informs Denise Lobont’s photographs, in which she captures sunbathers on a popular beach on the Black Sea. Shot during the lockdown caused by the spread of the Covid-19 virus, the photographs address a sense of freedom. But human existence is completely interfused with nature – the sun on our closed eyelids will remind us of this fact, even if a virus wreaking havoc on our lives has caused us to forget it. But the holiday mood that the photographs initially convey is deceptive: the focus of her inquiry revolves around our exposure to nature, which we usually think of as so idyllic, and how this can affect and even instil fear in us. Lobont demonstrates this exposure through traces that sunlight leaves on the skin in the form of sunburns – like light painting in photography.



10. Nora Severios,  
*150 million  
kilometers  
away*, 2021

11. Denise Lobont,  
*Woman  
on Eforie Sud  
Beach no. 2*,  
2021



# Amy Casilda Bartoli Flora Franke Vlad Dinu Patric Pavel

Amy Casilda Bartoli, Vlad Dinu and Patric Pavel, and Flora Franke connect their experience of nature with particular sites where they grew up, or where relationships between humans and nature are ingrained for personal reasons.

Amy Casilda Bartoli’s photographs were taken on hikes over remote limestone plateaus in her native Malta, which her family still used as pastures at the turn of the 20th century. She presents them partially superimposed or overlapping in the exhibition, in order to mirror our perception in layers. At the same time, they are placed in dialogue with shots of religious imagery and ceremonies depicting the annual rhythm and cycle of nature, some of which are archaic and originated in the Mediterranean, and are still practiced today, if anachronistically. By drawing this parallel between nature and religion, she also evokes the idea of the “sublime”, as a central theme in the relationship between humans and nature in Western cultural history. In cathartic moments when we become aware of nature’s “sublimity”, its infinity and predominance, we also experience – according to Immanuel Kant – the certainty of our own transience, an extra-sensory capacity as well as an awareness of our own individual existence. The artist explores the subject of her own existence most explicitly in her series of plaster masks. They comprise plaster renditions of the different stages of a very specific visual process: Bartoli repeatedly ran her portrait through facial recognition software to the point that it was no longer recognisable. Regarding their arrangement on the wall, however, the amorphous masks more closely resemble the rock formation patterns in Bartoli’s photographs than they do a human face.



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Flora Franke's works take up this moment of searching for the self: the moment the self is reflected back on the surface of the water; the surface that is in constant flux, distorting the image, making it impossible to look at nature, and descending into an intangible infinite. The cyanotype technique, a direct form of photographic imaging, allows the artist to work with water in a tactile way, in the water itself. The abstract quality of the detailed surface structures of water is what captivates at first glance. Upon longer viewing, we begin to see shapes, figures and faces in the patterns that can only be attributed to human imagination and fantasy. The surface of the water becomes a reflection of our search for ourselves in the world around us.

12. Vlad Dinu and Patric Pavel, *unseen*, 2021
13. Amy Casilda Bartoli, *Dès lors je suis avec une horrible fascination le processus de déshumanisation don't je sens en moi l'inexorable travail*, 2020
14. Flora Franke, *Eberlsee*, August 2020

To create their work *unseen*, Vlad Dinu and Patric Pavel frequented particular forests around Bucharest, that are being exploited in questionable conditions, primarily by Austrian companies. These primeval forests are an important element of the artists' own histories as well as for the local population. In a multi-part video, these forests and uprooted tree trunks are shot from different perspectives and traversed with drones. In a kaleidoscopic projection, our own slow observation of nature is set in motion: horizontal camera pans alternate with vertical ones, trees are not seen as industrial material, but represent cycles that are violently interrupted. This attempt to gain an overarching view of their personal perception, which always ultimately fails and remains unseen, is something the two artists also pursue in their photographs, which document individual trees they repeatedly visited over the course of a year.

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# List of Works

**Amy Casilda Bartoli**  
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*I*, from the series "Tan-Najsi",  
2019  
Wallpaper print  
165 × 111 cm

*Dès lors je suis avec une  
horrible fascination le pro-  
cessus de déshumani-  
sation don't je sens en moi  
l'inexorable travail*, 2020  
Pigment print, framed  
84,1 × 59,4 cm

*Affarijjet li jǧru*, from the  
series "Fil-Garaxx", 2020  
Pigment print, framed  
84,1 × 59,4 cm

*Viva il-Manjus*, from the  
series "Fil-Garaxx", 2020  
Pigment print, framed  
84,1 × 59,4 cm

*Manipulation I–VIII*, 2021  
Ceramic masks  
Each 25 × 20 cm

*Ta' Caf Caf Lane 1*, 2020  
Pigment print  
42 × 29,7 cm

*Ta' Caf Caf Lane 2*, 2020  
Pigment print  
42 × 29,7 cm

**Dominik Buda**  
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*Findling [Glacial Erratic]*,  
2021  
Pigment print, framed  
72 × 54 cm

*Parabelflug [Parabolic  
Flight]*, 2021  
Pigment print, framed  
72 × 54 cm

*Stamm [Trunk]*, 2021  
Pigment print, framed  
72 × 54 cm

*Stich [Sting]*, 2021  
Pigment print, framed  
72 × 54 cm

**Cătălina Cosma**  
pp. 6–7

*Impromptu forest –  
a study of artificial nature*,  
2020–2021  
Installation with 3 color  
prints, video  
Dimensions variable

**Vlad Dinu and Patric Pavel**  
pp. 10–11

*unseen*, 2021  
Multimedia installation with  
color prints, video and tree  
Dimensions variable

**Flora Franke**  
pp. 10–11

*Eberlsee*, August 2020  
Fine Art print  
40 × 40 cm

*Pareidolia*, 2020  
Series of 3 cyanotypes,  
framed  
Each 80,4 × 61,4 cm

*Pareidolia*, 2020  
Cyanotype, framed  
128,5 × 130,5 cm

**Elena Kristofor**  
pp. 6–7

*Wald [Wood], 2020*  
Fine Art print, mounted  
on dibond  
120 × 80 cm

*Entwurf eines Waldes in der  
Steppe [Draft of a Forest in  
the Steppe], 2021*  
Installation with Fine Art  
print, branches  
250 × 160 cm

*Waldobjekte [Wood  
Objects], 2021*  
Wood  
Dimensions variable

*Zwischen Wind und Zeit  
[Between Wind and Time],  
2021*  
Fine Art print, framed  
75 × 50 cm

*Zwischen Wind und Zeit  
[Between Wind and Time],  
2021*  
Fine Art print, framed  
75 × 50 cm

**Denise Lobont**  
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*Sun Dazed no. 1, 2021*  
B/W print  
170 × 60 cm

*Sun Dazed no. 1–7, 2021*  
Series of 7 color prints  
Each 30 × 30 cm

*Woman on Eforie Sud  
Beach no. 1–3, 2021*  
Series of 3 color prints  
70 × 50 cm, 50 × 70 cm

**Diana Păun**  
pp. 6–7

*Codrul secular Giuamalău,  
Suceava, Romania, 2021*  
Screen print on tree trunk  
Dimensions variable

*Pasul Mestecăniș, Suceava,  
Romania (1), 2021*  
Screen print on tree trunk  
Dimensions variable

*Pasul Mestecăniș, Suceava,  
Romania (2), 2021*  
Screen print on tree trunk  
Dimensions variable

*Pasul Mestecăniș, Suceava,  
Romania (3), 2021*  
Screen print on tree trunk  
Dimensions variable

*Valea Uzului, Bacău,  
Romania, 2021*  
Screen print on tree trunk  
Dimensions variable

**Nora Severios**  
p. 8

*150 million kilometers away,  
2021*  
Installation with natural dyes  
and water in glasses  
Dimensions variable

**All works:**  
Courtesy the artists

The exhibition *The Use of Landscape* presents works by ten students from the Department of Photography and Video, The National University of Arts Bucharest and the Department for Art and Photography, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. This collaboration started as a workshop with Michael Höpfner and Iosif Király one year ago. The workshop is part of a larger project initiated by curator Alexandra Manole and Galeria Posibilă during 2020 that explores the concept of landscape with artists, scientists and architects and will be followed by a publication in 2021.

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- 17. Vlad Dinu and Patric Pavel, *unseen*, 2021 (still)
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24.06.-07.08.2021

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Galeria Posibilă, Bucharest