Let's take a walk, shall we?

Strolling through Maria Pavlova's artwork, we come across a very serious kind of humour concerning the relationship of us humans with our surroundings.

The motifs she chooses range from landscapes (*Grandmother, 2009)* and animals *(Rabe, 2013)* to futuristic settings *(Let´s do something real, 2010)*, and reflect the search for a clear position in humanity's ongoing struggle—where do we stand between nature and civilisation, between raw pagan energy and technical endeavours? Far from forcing her personal answers upon the spectator, Pavlova's paintings instead testify to her own questions. As her observations vary, so do the figures in her artwork and her brush: from the calm and self-aware *Observer (2006)* to the energized *Bhutoman (2008),* oblivious to his surroundings.

Even when her paintings do not include people, we as spectators are always in the picture. Pavlova's paintings address the viewer, anticipating his or her gaze and playing with it. This approach transforms each canvas into a stage for interaction with her public, lending her paintings a touch of theatre and making them endearing without relinquishing any of their urgency. Her sharp observation never shies away from striking irony *(Happy Birthday 2009, You drilled too deep 2013/2015)*, and could be confused with sarcasm were it not for the vulnerability it simultaneously conveys. Pavlova also uses her titles create a relationship between her artwork and the spectator, often giving it a gentle twist in an uncomfortable direction. Take, for instance, the series *I´m not your mother and I´m your mother (2013-2016)*, in which sterile laboratory tools and outdated every-day objects lie awkwardly in the open as if waiting to be used. Their dependence upon us reflects our own alienation—almost as if we could be self-conscious on their behalf.

Pavlova frequently works with this kind of shifting perspective, creating new realities that are just close enough to the one we know to prevent their effect from hitting us all at once, instead giving us a sensation of dizziness that can be unsettling. *In search of something real*, we get lost and find ourselves torn between what is valued in society and what has value to us. Her paintings playfully challenge our notions of how we see ourselves versus what—or where—we actually are, e.g. a fairy tale princess in an underbridge, looking at herself from a few metres away *(Dislocation / Snowwhite, 2008)*.

Pavlova's gaze starkly points out injustice, like a child wondering out loud—or perhaps like a cosmic tourist, arrived on earth with the perspective of a stranger.

This tourist need not be a person, however; it can be an object as well. The greenscreen once stood for a state-of-the-art Hollywood technique that made people fly or placed them on top of houses or in the middle of the ocean—any place in the world, in fact—without ever leaving the studio. Nowadays, of course, every smartphone has an app that can do the same, and most likely in better quality than an old-fashioned greenscreen.

Today, many computer games very realistically give one the feeling of actually moving through a fictitious, digital scenery. One may stroll along green hills, swim in rivers, tame horses, cook up simple meals over an open fire, or casually kill one's enemies by shooting them with an arrow—all while sitting on a couch in a city apartment, miles away from the nearest forest. Oddly enough, the longing to be in nature, or in a romanticised version of it, is often evoked in artificial realities. It seems we have a desire to enhance nature while simultaneously keeping it at a safe distance to experience it, especially in a world where urban societies are ever so far removed from nature. In 2017, an Austrian newspaper article[1] claimed that the average children living in cities lack knowledge about nature: They can, for example, name more Pokémon than actual animals. The article also stated that vocabulary evoking nature is less and less present in literature, films and the lyrics of songs. And while one might rightly say that there simply exists no new comparison between a beautiful sunset and the eyes of a loved one that hasn't already been sung, it is nevertheless noticeable that metaphors using animals, plants or the weather are increasingly being supplanted by neologisms and vocabulary from the digital sector.

Your eyes shine like desktops, you are my phone
our giga-he(a)rtz beat together, just as one.

Granted, it may be a few more years before the world is ready for this smash hit, but what American scientists are calling "Nature Deficit Disorder" may very well already

[1] Irmer, Juliette: Kinder haben den Kontakt zur Natur verloren, in: Der Standard: https://derstandard.at/2000067599700/Den-Kontakt-zur-Natur-verloren [11.11.2017], zuletzt geprüft: 20.02.18

be real. I myself live in an environment where there is virtually no location devoid of some sort of screen whisking my mind away to some other place (generally one where I can buy something, like a holiday trip to a so-called remote island). This world is fast, and it requires us to be fast as well. We need to produce and consume, and there is no room left for quiet contemplation (and even if there was, there wouldn't be much quiet to contemplate). If I went out every day and took a long walk through nature, I could probably cancel my yoga subscription—but I don't, so I can't.

"So let´s take a walk then and see what all the fuss is about," says the little greenscreen in Pavlova's 2017 series—and off it goes. We see it walking through a winter landscape *(Ascetism won't help),* sitting on a bench *(In control of inertia),* hiding behind bushes *(Interaction with reality through conditions)*, or posing for a quick selfie in front of them *(Asking for forgiveness).* The object is always the same small greenscreen with no face or any kind of expression, yet in the course of its travels I find myself identifying with it, thinking of it as "cute" as though it had a personality and was actually sitting, hiding or posing, though all of the above are of course nothing but my own associations. After all, what better projection canvas for any spectator than an actual empty screen? This once again demonstrates the theatrical power Pavlova's paintings have, but there is more to it. The concept of a greenscreen going off to see some nature is particularly moving, letting us reflect on all the green the screen is missing out on—since although it is technically the same colour, it isn't really the same. The screen's glaring green stands out amidst the natural shades used for the plants. Even when trying to mingle with them *(Interacting with reality through conditions)* it still stands out, its colour being artificial and not generated by photosynthesis. Unlike the plants, it cannot nourish itself through sunlight. It comes from the world of humans, who must eat—which means to consume and produce waste—in order to survive. It is a human-made object, and though the materials used to create it may once have come from nature, it is now endangering itself by returning to that environment: It will become dirty and wet, and eventually turn into waste itself. In contrast to myself, however, it doesn't seem aware of its own perishability, and this may be precisely what makes me feel sympathetic towards it and all the technical ambitions of humanity it represents. When I wrote earlier that Pavlova doesn´t state her own opinion on where to stand between nature and technology, this may not have been entirely true. Perusing her motifs and images,

we can in fact surmise who she is rooting for when in the case at hand it may even be enough to look at the relative size of the objects. The greenscreen, associated with the big screen from cinemas, is tiny and looks quite lost among the unbridled green of the world surrounding it. And although it allegedly has the capacity to represent any of these landscapes, it is unable to contain them entirely. Like in the *mother* series, we find ourselves looking at an exposed, somewhat silly object—after all, everything it is meant to depict or enhance is already there in nature itself, possessing a strength that surpasses and most likely survives any and all imitations.

What is painting than, or art itself? For centuries, artists have turned to nature for inspiration, and visual art has developed from merely reproducing nature into a vast variety of expressions and visualizations. One could argue that software engineers who design virtual realities are in fact doing something similar, finding their models both in nature and in the fine arts. The possibilities seem endless: We can create, produce and own just about everything we can imagine. Art likewise has a place in this relatively new world order, and in this sense the greenscreen's travels can be read as a plea to look at what already exists—what doesn't need to be invented, but instead is worth maintaining and preserving. The screen can be viewed as the promise that anything goes, that we can have more, while the trees surrounding it tell us that what we have is enough. The exuberance of capitalism's ongoing growth is answered with the abundance of nature.
So what do we do now? Pavlova doesn't pretend to know, but you can tell she has given it a lot of thought. The titles of the greenscreen series acknowledge her attempts to *interact with reality through conditions, getting in control of inertia,* failing, *asking for forgiveness* and realizing that *ascetism won't help.* They tell a story of worrying about the state of things, which together with the imagery of the little projection screen wandering through different landscapes can be read like an empty book, ready for the viewer to fill it with their own story. In my case, I see a suggestion of downsizing, of coming to terms with my own ambitions and forgiving myself for my own ignorance. But that might just be me, and you may see something completely different in the empty greenscreen.

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Vienna, 25.02.18