

# Fantasies of Creatureliness: Marko Jakše & Bojan Šumonja

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by Johannes Birringer

## An Introduction to Creatureliness and Dystopian Nature

Gallery Puzić has selected very recent, smaller-scale artworks by two Eastern European artists who first made a splash two years ago with a museum-quality exhibition featuring massive formats: *After the battle, all the generals are fucked* (in 2024) caused a sensation in Saarbrücken with its remarkably surreal, dark, and yet playfully enigmatic paintings. Particularly striking was the biting sarcasm – perhaps less familiar in a Western European gallery context – with which Marko Jakše and Bojan Šumonja populated crumbling cities and landscapes with teeming throngs of animals, tiny pop icons, and puzzling doll-like figures.

By way of introduction to the artists, it is worth noting that Marko Jakše represented Slovenia at the Venice Biennale in 2022 and recently had a major exhibition in Zagreb (*Antic-ontemporari*, Galerija Forum, 2026) – the show’s double-entendre title speaks volumes. In the paintings exhibited there, surreal, fantastical creatures – “ficto-animals,” as I shall call them – wander through mysterious dreamscapes and architectural settings. References to ancient and medieval art, as well as Pop Art, emerge; figures and animals bow, drown, and resurface, displaying incredible, mutating forms. They appear stranded in a strange space – perhaps an ancient Roman landscape or the Baltic Sea inside an aquarium – like humpback whales that are dying or are weary of life.

Bojan Šumonja is another one of Eastern Europe’s most important and exciting artists, having exhibited over a hundred times both in his native Croatia and internationally. His melancholic yet humorous Baroque compositions frequently feature sheep, gaunt flamingos, ostriches, refugees, and superheroes – and in this instance, also timid-looking deer and sweet pink flamingos or swans, along with the occasional tiny Donald Duck or Mickey Mouse – placed within absurd and perilous scenarios: dying or felled forests, burning cities, and apocalyptic gambling dens.

The provocative paintings by both artists in *Fantasies of Creatureliness* display striking chromatic qualities and color forms, interweaving diverse – often surreal – motifs with theatrical spatial arrangements. Ambivalent narratives and mythological elements appear – whether openly or subtly – alongside contradictory motifs; after all, one might not expect to see a Donald Duck figure wielding a chainsaw in a green forest (or popping uop

near a chainsaw massacre – unless, perhaps, the paintings are engaging with the Disney comic world through a lens of manic humor, complete with innocent, Bambi-like gazes directed at the viewer.

These gazes, like in Jakšes's *Die Beobachter*, are perplexing. Now, the task is to explore these visual worlds within the smaller-format works of this new exhibition. But how do we go about it?

### Excursus 1

What do I mean by *Kreatürlichkeit* (creatureliness?). By the fantastic and the “ficto-animal”? Or, to put it another way: can one lose oneself while attempting to wrest something from nature, to delve into what connects us all, animals, plants, humans, rocks, forests and rivers, fish and fowl? While trying to crystallize something out of natures and creatures – or, as it were, to *hunt* down something from aura or clichéd iconicity, to become a painter-hunter-gatherer? And, in that act of hunting, to deal a blow – a little kick – to the postmodern sensibility of citation?



Bojan Šumonja, *Inflated Reality II*, oil on canvas board, 50x70 cm, 2025.



Bojan Šumonja, *Heisenberg Pastor*, Oil on canvas board , 60x50 cm 2025

In his essay “The Life of a Landscape Painter“, Guy de Maupassant once described Monet thus: “Ce n’était plus un peintre, en vérité, mais un chasseur“ (In truth, he was no longer a painter, but a hunter). I assume, however, that the naturalist-pessimist writer of novellas and novels had something else in mind: attributing to the painter a kind of instinctive craving for the elusive prey – a process of lying in wait, as hunters do, an endeavor to capture the shifting nature and transience of light and color rather than to delineate precise details.

As Monet drifts ever further from reality with *La Manneporte at Étretat* (1886) – repeatedly painting the chalk cliffs and perhaps seeking a kind of spiritual image of the rock arch in Normandy – his enthusiasm resonates in letters to his second wife, Alice Hoschedé: “You are right to envy me: you cannot imagine how beautiful the sea is, but the talent required to capture it is truly extraordinary. (...) If only I could finish several canvases at once. I have taken up some of them more than ten times without reaching the end.“ This failure to complete the painting – characteristic of the Impressionist pioneer who also obsessively painted Rouen Cathedral or the Thames (during a stay in London) time and again – stands as a testament to the process of searching.

This act of lying in wait is akin to a visual dialogue seeking to emerge between the object and the observer. The subject matter and the act of perception do not remain separate. Monet relies entirely on his intuition, able to immerse himself in the history of the cliff faces: over millions of years – as one learns from literature on Étretat—they formed from myriads of crustaceans deposited in the primordial ocean – snails, shellfish, and burrowing worms whose acidity transformed layers of limestone into flint. This material is glass-hard and black, used locally for houses and walls, yet not hard enough to withstand the seawater that washes the flint from the chalk and patiently rounds it from

tide to tide, until the resulting spheres and nodules form the beaches of the Côte d'Albâtre.<sup>1</sup>

Was Monet able to perceive this continued growth (or the quasi-mythological story of the cliffs' very slow evolution)? His painting transforms the stoic monumentality of the rocks into living beings, created using spectral colors that do not exist in the reality of the landscape. He paints a fictional cliff.

**Art-historical digression 2 / Theoretical remarks: animal antics (antic-ontemporari) / Animal nature with capers / Distorted reality.**

The title of the Zagreb exhibition reveals Jakše's approach: he plays with "antics"—and a pun on "contemporary"—while simultaneously hinting that he is creating a kind of "anti-contemporary art." He casually sidesteps postmodernism, evoking the late Middle Ages, Cubo-Futurism, and those modern artists branded as "degenerate" and banished by the Nazis. These antics are brilliant and frivolous.

The quality of "creatureliness"—or the materiality of the finished work—manifests quite differently in the paintings of Jakše and Šumonja. Yet, I believe I detect echoes of the Impressionism of Monet the "hunter", even though these Eastern European painters are unlikely to be found braving the surf for plein air sessions and worrying about the light. On the contrary, their compositions are thoroughly conceptual, devised in the studio and executed with great technical skill – using oil paint on canvas as well as other materials, particularly cardboard and wood. The use of deep black tar was also striking in the large work *After the battle, all the generals are fucked* and in the monograph *Mitologemsko i profano u slikama Bojana Šumonje* (The Mythological and the Profane in the Paintings of Bojan Šumonja), compiled and published in 2007 by Igor Zidić (which explores Šumonja's painterly themes regarding the divide between the mythical and the profane). The cover of the monograph consists of a very thick dried tar layer.

The inventiveness is immense; yet, in the current exhibition Šumonja presents a recurring motif of wild greenish-brown dystopian landscapes, whereas Jakše's work often displays a controlled architectural quality closer to Cubism and Surrealism. The massive, menacing "fictional animals" seen in the Zagreb exhibition (*Antic-ontemporari*) rarely appear here; in the smaller formats, Jakše limits himself to occasional oddities. Angels with halos emerge from a pond with orange-plants; sitting at the front in the boat are the "little green men" (about whom the chaotic country-rock singer Devendra Banhart once wrote a beautiful song), the observers gazing at us—watching and staring. I imagine that the visitors to the gallery stare back at this strange scene? Look at the outer design of the boat; and the lovely halos that adorn the saints and angel-creatures that grow in the swamp. The greenish-blue colors, intermixed with the pink flamingo-angels, are mesmerizing.



Marko Jakše, *Die Beobachter*, oil, 45x55,5cm, 2026

Flamingo, ostrich or humpback whale? Which ficto-animal offers a more realistic metaphor for a discourse on cultural theory, now? In early summer 2026, the drama of a humpback whale stranded in the Baltic Sea gripped the German media and public for weeks in an almost surreal, entirely inexplicable fashion. That stranded, ailing behemoth – suddenly lying right on the doorstep, quickly taken to heart by the people and dubbed “Timmyv – became the focus of very volatile emotions and a flurry of fanciful, frenetic activity. Activists gathered at the sea shore daily; the police had to watch over the turmoil, the Environment Minister becomes involved, soon receiving death threats. The flurry included various attempted rescue operations, recriminations, and unscientific presumptions, ultimately culminating in the dying whale being towed into the North Sea inside a steel-mesh transport cage – an act bordering on animal cruelty – only to sink there.

Authorities and experts eventually abandoned hope, and scathing commentary ensued—such as Christian Geinitz’s piece in the *FAZ* on April 22: “Germany resembles Timmy, the stranded whale“ – aimed at contextualizing and interpreting the grand spectacle of chatter and displays of compassion playing out on the Baltic coast (even as real devastating wars raged in Ukraine and the Middle East). The entire situation revealed a macabre symptomatology of environmental panic and clueless activism, or perhaps esoteric chaos in which hands were laid upon a terminally ill, bloated animal in an attempt to turn the whale into a stage for human dreams. Attempts to distract from an increasingly ugly reality?



Bojan Šumonja, *Zečija Rupa (Rabbit Hole)*, *Omnibus* exhibition, Art Pavillon Zagreb, 2019

The ostrich-like figures in Bojan Šumonja's painting *The Healing Power of Mother Earth* – or *Zečija Rupa (Rabbit Hole)*, from an earlier exhibition (*Omnibus, Zagreb, 2019*) – seem to be collectively burying their heads in the sand. They made an impression on me, yet one might also question the myth itself to grasp – or challenge – Bojan Šumonja's irony and biting sarcasm. For the ostrich, that singular and largest flightless bird, does not actually stick its head in the sand out of fear – as the saying goes – but rather to guard the eggs in its shallow ground nests. When faced with predators, the ostrich can simply run away, reaching top speeds of up to 90 km/h.



Bojan Šumonja, *Warped reality*, Oil on canvas board, 60x50 cm, 2025

In the current show, there are the inflatable swans (in a swimming pool?), the deer in the woods we see here searching in the rubble, the flamingos, the little creatures in devastated landscapes – pecking around or examining felled tree trunks whose red markings are clearly visible (condemned to the chop, punished, off to hell)? That little Mickey Mouse next to the chainsaw? They are wonderfully profane anachronisms within a kind of climate catastrophe that we cannot pinpoint. It is everywhere.

Critics in his homeland say that the motif of the sheep – which also appears frequently in Šumonja's work – acts almost like a leitmotif within the contemporary Croatian cultural landscape. It is found everywhere: in performance art and stage productions, political discourse, and even advertising campaigns. The sheep has been a presence in Šumonja's painting for some time; it is not merely a single, isolated sheep (serving, for instance, to question a religious context), but rather a flock – representing the strange passivity and inertia of a “collective.” Are these animals – the pink flamingos and “kawaii” antlered Bambis – perhaps another curious, postmodern, sarcastic twist? A form of socio-political critique? A kind of drone flying toward us from Eastern Europe, combing through our Western European artistic and pop-cultural treasure trove—à la Tarantino (*Pulp Fiction*)? Are we capitalist ostriches and Bambis?

I detect a certain harsh parody of both religious and popular contexts: the Bambis are perhaps innocent icons of redemption amidst a devastated, toppled natural landscape... Figures like Batman and Spider-Man also frequently appear in Šumonja's paintings – not only in burning futuristic cities but in rural settings filled with a sense of calm, a dysfunctional calm born of dystopia and climate catastrophe. Here, the subjects are small, cute creatures: the Bambis appear simultaneously detached and indifferent, cozy and familiar – almost ridiculous, even, and in stark, ironic contrast to the painted landscape.



Marko Jakše, *Antic-ontemporari*, Galerija Forum, Zagreb, 2026. © KIC

Perhaps they will survive, like all other cultural relics and decaying icons.

Now we also begin to grasp the “antics“ – the capers, or the “anti-contemporary“ fantasies – in Marko Jakše’s paintings. Jakše is one of those artists who, given the diversity of his body of work, could be assigned to entirely different eras—a point once raised in 2010 by curator Peter Tomaž Dobrila, our friend from the KIBLA Cultural Center in Maribor (Slovenia), after Jakše had spent a few months living among the Aboriginal people in Australia. Upon his return, Dobrila curated an exhibition back home titled *More Freshest Meat*, featuring the strangely beautiful epigraph:

"Have you been crying again, my love?"

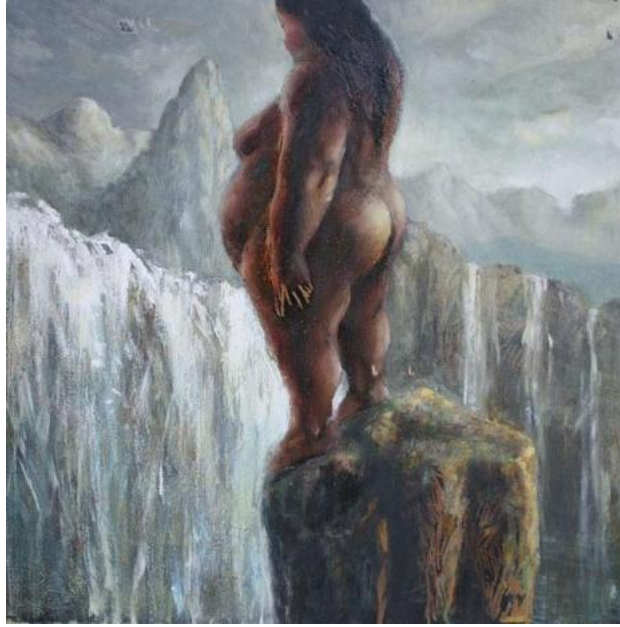
"Oh yes! And I am still crying. I shall cry forever."

Jakše is an extraordinary painter of fantastic sculptures or creature-like constructs – built into architectural forms through brushstrokes and shaped by paint. He is a poet who transforms what may be deeply private fantasies into images, evoking, at times, Hieronymus Bosch (such as *The Garden of Earthly Delights* at the Prado: The Garden of Eden on the left, and on the right, a hellscape of monstrous beasts and bizarre, contorted figures) or Pieter Brueghel; he calls to mind the Late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, as well as later Modernism and Postmodernism. He also brings to mind Goya – specifically his somber late works, the *Black Paintings* – as well as Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, and the Surrealists.

Like Goya, Jakše is a storyteller who layers narratives as if they were unfolding in a single gesture – as though a fictional life were opening up before our eyes. Yet it is a counter-life, a counter-reality akin to those found in daring fairy tales. He is an author (cf. Peter Dobrila) of science-fiction fairy tales or sagas – a master of a creature-filled, amphibious future that defies classification within any specific artistic movement. This includes, of course, the Impressionism I alluded to earlier.

What is he suggesting to us through the paintings of these creatures within the Roman-arboreal (stone-and-wood) Palladian structure? How do they speak of our civilization? The land of the Aborigines – which he once visited – is inhabited by indigenous peoples who tell their stories through images. If we were to understand the Aborigines, perhaps we would also learn something about ourselves and the art of living – about relationships with nature and the land that are primal and direct, involving animals, humans, and plants, as well as earth, water, air, fire, and stone.

In this context, one might recall the painting *Dom in svet sta dom* (Home and the World are Home) – exhibited back in 2010 – which depicts an Aboriginal woman standing on a cliff or a tree stump, crying out into the mountain landscape.



Marko Jakše, *dom in svet sta dom* (Home and World are Home), oil, wooden panel, 2010.

Consequently, every painting in our exhibition is also a narrative about life, home, and the world, imbued with symbolic meaning – and allow me, in closing, to draw a connection from our Eastern European artists back to France (Bojan, I believe, studied in Italy). Yet I am thinking now of the philosopher Georges Bataille, or indeed the visionary of the theater, Antonin Artaud – and thus of the liberation of the eye and the body from the logos.

I am thinking of the philosopher of *The Accursed Share* (*La Part maudite*) and editor of the journal *Acéphale*, published between 1936-1939. The name *Acéphale* (“headless”) underscored the anti-authoritarian and anti-fascist character of the organization; through it, Bataille sought – by his own account – to create a progressive counter-myth to the regressive mythology of National Socialism. It was the publishing house Matthes & Seitz that released Bataille’s work in Germany – as the pioneer of the concept of *expenditure* (*dépense*) – presenting his central thesis of a concept diametrically opposed to all economics.

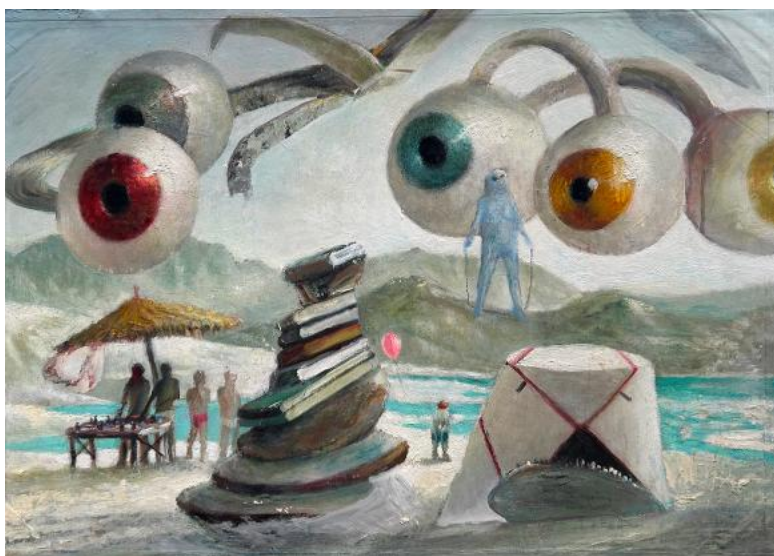
Bataille’s view of the economy focuses less on the level of production than on “expenditure” or “consumption.” A losing of oneself—to pick up the thread from Monet. Bataille views the economy primarily through the lens of “energy surplus”; that is, he takes an approach entirely different from that of a classical economist like Karl Marx. Bataille confidently explains his concept in these words: “The expansion of growth itself demands the overturning of all economic principles – the overturning of the morality that underpins them. The transition from the perspectives of restricted economy to those of general economy is, in fact, a Copernican revolution: the turning upside down of thought and morality” (pp. 27f). In doing so, Bataille anticipates the catchphrase regarding the “limits to growth”: “The immediate limit for every individual, every group, is set by other

individuals and other groups. But the earthly sphere – or more precisely, the biosphere, that is, the space in which life is possible – is the only actual limitation” (p. 32).<sup>2</sup>

I would like to conclude with these words from Bataille and draw attention to the various surreal biospheres found in the paintings of both our artists:



Bojan Šumonja, *Excuse me, where is the beach?*, oil, 70x50cm, 2026.



Marko Jakše, *Die Fata Morgana des Jungen*, oil, 60x84,5cm, 2025.

Šumonja's amusing painting *Excuse me, where is the beach?*—depicting a flying flamingo in the forest asking the way to the beach – and Jakše's painting *The Boy's Mirage* (both certainly typical of the retro-futuristic mood found among the exhibition's many provocative paintings) invite self-exploration and “sich verlieren“ (losing oneself). Lose yourself on these imaginary beaches!

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted here to Gert Heidenreich's interesting research and review of the exhibition *Monets Küste: Die Entdeckung von Étretat*, Städel Museum, Frankfurt. *Die ZEIT*, 29 April 2026, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Georges Bataille, *Der Verfemte Teil: Versuch einer allgemeinen Ökonomie*. Trans. Traugott König and Tim Trzaskalik, Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2021.