

# Totem

Ján Triaška

Under the austere title of the exhibition "Totem", Ján Triaška presents an artistically formulated stance on the construction of concepts of national identity and collective memory. Its name corresponds to an object assembled from 3-D modules of Kriváň mountain, which suggests repetition through time ad infinitum, in the manner of Brancusi's Endless Column. Within his creative licence, Triaška interprets Kriváň in a Freudian sense as a tribal totem that plays the role of a kind of ancestral protective deity and symbol of Slovaks connected to a specific territory. The idea of identifying an ethnic group with the land it inhabits originates from the romanticism of the 19th-century National Revival. The bent peak of Kriváň, prominent in the High Tatras mountains, served the Štúr generation as a symbol of Slavic solidarity and the nation's steadfastness in the fight for freedom, later reinforced through the commemoration of the heroism and sacrifices of the Slovak National Uprising. As a frequently cited literary and visual motif in artistic production, Kriváň did not escape nationalist manipulation in the field of mass-media imagery. Let us recall that nationally oriented art, in order to reinforce a shared belief in common identity and history, tends to work not only with facts but also with myth-making aspects of traditional symbols that affirm the identical fabric of a community's spiritual essence. As Benedict Anderson pointed out, this abstract formal universality of nationality as a socio-cultural concept is accompanied by a contradiction between the objective understanding of the modernity of nations, as promoted by historians, and the subjective antiquity embraced by nationalists. For Triaška, the artistic interpretation of foundational symbols of "Slovakness" serves to expose their overuse in the propagandistic games of politicians who invoke the term "national" while deliberately flattening its meaning.

Much like in other exhibition projects addressing the issues and contradictions of contemporary society, here too the artist employs montage and the interplay of contrasts between history and the present, as well as unconventional arrangements of images within a spatial installation. Alluding to totemic worship – and the associated taboo – he lets the variants of Kriváň resonate throughout the whole exhibition space. The vertical form of the totem, suggesting belief in the continual elevation of the nation, is echoed in paintings stacked upon each other within one of the two tower-like structures, which simultaneously allude to the collapse of the ambitious structure of the mythical Tower of Babel.

He thus tests the relevance of a language originally reinforced by sincere ideals that once shaped a revolutionary consciousness of the nation's present and future meaning – but whose symbols have gradually become hollow through the course of historical events. We live in an age when, according to Marc Augé, "the acceleration of history complicates the creation of collective memories and the material or mental geography corresponding to them." Triaška emphasises this tension by pointing to the irreconcilable counterpoints in the perception of the old and new world. In line with a playfully ironic distance, he deconstructs symbols of ethnic authenticity rooted in nostalgically inherited attributes of our national history. One example is the Under the Kriváň Peak (Pod Kriváňom) series, with its repeated motif of the mountain in the background, where the artist refers to the work of Martin Benka, who during the Slovak State (1939–1945), with near-Baroque pathos in his figuration, exalted the heroism of the Slovak nation. In Triaška's rendering, two of Benka's robust, statuesque figures of Guardians of Slovakia are transformed into phantasmic avatars with shepherd's axes, entwined with ivy. According to traditional iconography, ivy – as an evergreen plant – symbolises eternity, immortality, endurance, and its ability to cling and wrap itself around objects signifies loyalty and devotion.

But as time is relentless, the clarity of symbolic messages gradually fades. Literally, "over the Tatras lightning flashes, thunder wildly strikes", and apocalyptic fires engulf the land. The multiplied symbol of Kriváň becomes a colourful pop-art media cliché, Benka's lofty Guardians turn into extinguished shadows among classical ruins, and the ivy that once entwined them withers and dries up. Under the pressure of time and consumerism, the original ideals of all revolutionary upsurges also wither. The shepherd's axes have gone limp, knife blades have dulled, weapons have become harmless toys, and the lofty heroes are replaced by roaring masses. The landscape scenery dissolves into amoeba-like camouflage patterns or is replaced by still lifes of rotting crops and flowers on which insects settle (Supplements to the Revolution; Remnants series). History is asleep much like Sleeping Beauty, dreaming of a happy future. Triaška's artistic imagination suggests that if we continue to mix history with mythology, if we fail to resist the arsenal of entrenched visual clichés and political kitsch that encrusts its reception, then – in the words of Aleida Assmann – the construction of our national memory will not be shaped as a dialogue between a dynamically changing present and a search for a past lost in the abyss, but will shrink into a passive gaze into the depths of that very abyss.