

## ephemerally tangible | ephemerally tangible

In cooperation with AIR - ARTIST IN RESIDENCE Lower Austria  
Artists: Vasudha Kapadia (IND), Helga Cmelka (A)

Opening remarks, David Komary, 8. 10. 2022.

*(text extract from David Komary's exhibition opening talk)*

Small works on paper by Vasudha Kapadia were deliberately chosen for this exhibition. On the one hand, this is due to the transportability, on the other hand, the artist has worked, or had to work, in a small space over the past two years due to the pandemic. The laptop screen - as a window to the world - functioned here as a second reality, so to speak, and the desk, now a drawing table, as a studio. Nevertheless, despite the small size of the drawings and paintings, the artist poses weighty questions in her works. The ostensibly central question here is what is a landscape, or better, what can be called a landscape *today* and *for us*?

Kapadia's starting point for her image series *I am not a robot* are so-called captchas, textual or pictorial puzzle-like tests, as they are used by numerous websites to verify the identity of the user. "I am not a robot," is ultimately to be confirmed by correctly answering the tasks, such as recognizing a fire hydrant on nine different cityscape images (or cutouts). The artist uses these pictorial puzzles, which can only be answered accurately by humans, as a foil for a general question about the topos of landscape. When and from what degree of concreteness can the attribute "landscape" be applied to what is seen. Conversely, this also means - at what degree of abstractness, incompleteness of the image detail is it not (anymore) or not yet identified as landscape.

These captcha tests were essentially designed to prevent fraud and identity forgery. The tasks should be set in such a way that they cannot be answered meaningfully by an artificial intelligence, a program, but only by a human being. Through the use of these picture puzzles, the programs behind them (of the operating websites) have long since learned from the behavior, the success of the tests, but also from the mistakes of the users. The machine learns from us, so to speak, what a landscape is, and in turn gives us those learned image categories as real landscapes under other circumstances.

Kapadia's investigation of those digital, algorithmic image puzzles poses, if one thinks the question further, a fundamentally image-ontological question. Namely, the relationship of the image per se to reality. And this leads us, even before digital space, to visual space, or more precisely to visual culture, the visual culture that surrounds us, into which we are, to exaggerate, born, socialized.

Even if we understand the image, in terms of reference theory, once again very simply here, as an image of something, as a signifier in relation to its signified, an image, let us take the example of the Mona Lisa, through its manifold multiplication and circulation, has long since been able to become something like a visual vocabulary, a cipher, a

cliché (the term cliché can also be used wonderfully for many a landscape painting). The image detaches itself - through its use, its circulation, its communication offers and semantic couplings and charges - from its original object of depiction and develops, as it were, a life of its own, its own mode of operation. Advertising makes use of such ciphers, i.e. images that function less through their representational content than through what they trigger (associations, charges, emotions). Already in these pictorial spaces of visual culture, the connection between image and reality is quite fragile, broken, displaced.

This referential gap, that under/broken connection between image and reality, is unequally expanded and dissociated in digital space. It is precisely at the point where robots/computers (learning programs) learn from our reading of images and our use of images and in turn mirror this learned knowledge to us, that is, present it in renewed applications, that a pictorial-ontological circular argument is formed, a feedback loop that causes familiar categories of here (image) and there (landscape/reality) to come apart at the seams. Kapadia's interrogations of the image are based precisely on these borderline processes.

The screen or laptop screen functions as the final filter between the eye and the viewed in this series of images, which is thus thoroughly media-reflexive and also media-critical. Within this frame, in turn, the most diverse image forms can occur and thus become the "model" or, in a paradoxical way, the real, which serves Kapadia as the starting point for her very own landscape interpretations. The artist thus contrasts her seeing, image reading and interpreting with that of the machine. She exaggerates the principle of the Captcha tests and applies it, admittedly alienated and individually interpreted, to images of the "machine". In this way, highly different images - with regard to the actual scenes depicted - can function as the starting point for a reinterpretation into a "landscape".

In this way, the abstracted, fragmented image of a Covid test (here one sees a person facing the or a test person through the separating glass pane), which is torn out at the bright parts of the image, can become a "landscape", or the lower end of a curtain, or rather the photograph of a curtain, which the artist found on the net. In yet another of Kapadia's landscapes, one sees in reality - admittedly only if one knows the reference - a policeman rescuing a woman from the desert, carrying her on his back. Or a newspaper photo of two rice farmers working in the fields becomes a semi-idyllic nature scene.

The artist creates her own inventory, a highly individual archive of landscapes - and this decidedly under current, contemporary viewing conditions. Kapadia not only expands the concept of landscape aesthetically, but also uses it metaphorically. Daily landscapes or temporal landscapes can thus become as much a part of her collection as actual, so to speak recognizable landscape images. After the first pictures of the series, which are quite referential, in which the pictures distance themselves from their actual subject matter in a partly ironic, partly abstracting way and become Kapadia's landscape, the second half of *I am not a robot* is superficially quite classical (landscape picture), partly even impressionistic.

One of the most common screensavers of the Windows XP operating system, showing a landscape of meadow hills with a cloudy sky, thus became for Kapadia the starting point for an almost classical, semi-abstract landscape painting. Following her interest in water fountains, in another painting the artist reinterprets the spraying of a fountain, that artificial nature, so to speak, into an abstract, sfumato-like pictorial event, not so much depicting water as tracing its (here "artificial") essence.

At the latest - if one reads the course of the series from left to right - from this screensaver translated into painting onwards, Kapadia negotiates the pictorial space in a decidedly abstract manner, at times dissolving it almost impressionistically. Thus Kapadia's second series of paintings, entitled *Synthetic Landscapes*, which follows on almost seamlessly from the first, reveals mostly ephemeral, atmospheric pictorial events that confront the viewer with an aesthetic of the vague, indeterminate. In this way, for example, fog and light reflections and shimmer become picture-filling protagonists. Hanging around the corner, we find the continuation and finalization of the series. Reading backwards, so to speak, in terms of the history of images and media, the artist seems to end up with an almost romantic-impressionist concept of landscape, i.e. in the medium of painting, from the digital, everyday aesthetic (newspaper). A picture of foliage is thus able to find its place uninhibitedly, almost innocently and (ironically) unbroken next to a picture of clouds and an abstracting representation of water, even though the reference, the "original" pictorial object in Kapadia's work has long since ceased to be a real, natural one, but rather a circulating image in the pictorial space of the digital.

The topos of nature and the natural also plays a central role in the thoroughly shrill calendar pages of *Landscape Calendar*, which Kapadia sometimes comments on in a photorealistic painting style and breaks semantically. In the color-intensive calendar conundrums, the artist juxtaposes the highly artificial and often kitschy, overdrawn depictions of the natural - such as a lion or a group of giraffes or elephants - with equally artificial, yet realistically painted backgrounds or other animals, which at first glance complement what is shown, i.e. seem coherent, but on closer inspection are discovered as fake, as false and even disturbing. Kapadia juxtaposes different forms, even "orders" of the pictorial-artificial, allowing them to coexist in part, but also to satirize each other and lead each other ad absurdum.

The theme of the landscape, the natural, forms an obvious, also aesthetic and iconic common ground between Vasudha Kapadia and Helga Cmelka. But while Kapadia's pictorial semiotic shifts and (pictorial) ontological doubts are mostly, albeit distantly, referential, i.e. they refer to a reference context - often broken across several pictorial layers - between the image and the pictorial object, Cmelka's theme of landscape is rather conceived from within.