



Breaking Expectations (translated from Latvian)

Interview with the curator of the photo exhibition, Eric Lawton

Until September 28, the exhibition "Valley of the Strange" is on view in the ISSP gallery. It brings together six young European artists who, through photography, explore the boundaries of time and how the ordinary becomes special. The exhibition examines the role of images in understanding the past and the present, while highlighting how photography and video foster everyday life to be seen in a different, unfamiliar light. LSM.lv invited the curator of the exhibition Eric Lawton to the conversation.

The exhibition is part of the "Parallel" photography platform program . Can you tell us more about what "Parallel" is?

It is an organization based in Portugal that cooperates with various types of institutions that support photography – galleries, museums, magazines – and organizes exhibitions and shows for European

audiences. About sixty percent of the artists come from Europe, but other countries, for example, the US, are also represented. Artists present their projects, and curators select these artists and create exhibitions accordingly.

Speaking specifically about this exhibition, what were the criteria by which the artists were selected?

There wasn't any initial overarching theme. I was just drawn into work that was difficult to wrap my head around. Sometimes when working with artists, it's more fulfilling to work with what is actually not easy to digest. In a sense, I found these works attractive and engaging - I also liked the content of this exhibition on an aesthetic level. After looking at all of their work together in totality, the theme emerged. Then I started the research process and began reading theory.

What is the biggest challenge of curating a group exhibition of six different artists?

I think curating group shows in general are difficult because you don't want to organize, say, six separate solo shows, and most artists' work is much larger than these particular edits. Some artists, for example, have only one photograph in the exhibition, but in total there are about 15 to 20 works in the show.

How did you decide to refer to Russian theorist Viktor Shklovsky's concept of "alienation" in the exhibition?

While researching Freud, I discovered this person - Viktor Shklovsky, who coined the term "defamiliarization" or "alienation". Translated into English, the word literally means to make strange. It's like when you recognize something but also experience something unknown at the same time. The way I explain it to people is when you say the same word over and over again, it loses its meaning and you sense the word become something separate in itself.

When you look at these exhibition works, you can recall something based on your memory - you recognize it and can understand it, but at the same time there is something strange about it. It references both the intimate and the alienating aspect of objecthood.

What fascinates you the most in photography?

It probably has something to do with subverting expectations. Everyone has preconceived ideas about the world, and photography is a creative way to liberate them. You can present what people don't expect, and this gives you the opportunity to change the viewer's understanding. Everything is also based on visual literacy - what people experience in their mind and how it can change the way a person looks at the world. Our memories are constantly being rethought and processed through imagery. Photography is a unique visual medium and its specialty can be awakening certain memories.

Given that you work with a lot of young artists from Europe, have you noticed any trends emerging in contemporary photography?

In America there is a lot of identity-based photography, while in Europe, existential themes - life and death - are reflected more on a much wider scale.

Do you think this snapshot aesthetic will be popular for a long time?

The snapshot aesthetic is popular now, but that doesn't mean it will be in five years. Photography trends come and go.