Tanja Softić: *Migrant Universe*

Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art College of Charleston, South Carolina

Migrant Universe

By Tanja Softić

Planets spinning madly around her, a spider weaves her web of light. To be knocked down in due time by forces too large to be malicious, or too small to destroy anything else.

Fruit hangs heavy on the branches. Heap it up and eat it, mangia, let it stain your best blouse.

It will not last, you know:

It will fall on the ground in the middle of the night with a dull thud that could be mistaken for a startled kick of a deer.

Waste nothing, that's my point: someone somewhere is starving.

Night draws away daybreak rushes forth each jewel reflects all others and thousands of things are passing by, light fast swollen with impermanence.



ISBN 978-1-4507-9204-2

This catalogue was published in conjunction with the traveling exhibition Tanja Softić: Migrant Universe, organized by the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, College of Charleston, in association with the University of Richmond Museums, Virginia. For more information about this, and other traveling exhibitions, please visit: halsey.cofc.edu, or contact Tatjana Beylotte at 843-953-5652.

Editor: Mark Sloan Copy Editor: Gerald Zeigerman Catalogue Design: gil shuler graphic design, inc. Printed by





Cover Image: *Revolution;* acrylic, pigment, charcoal, and chalk on handmade paper mounted on board, 60" x 120" 2008

Previous Page: *The Heart of the Matter;* acrylic, pigment, charcoal, and chalk on handmade paper mounted on board, 60" x 60" 2008

Funding for this catalogue is made possible by grants from the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and by the members and patrons of the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art.

Copyright © 2011 Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art College of Charleston School of the Arts Charleston, SC 29424 halsey.cofc.edu

All rights reserved. No part of this catalogue may be reproduced in any form by electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without written permission from the copyright holder.

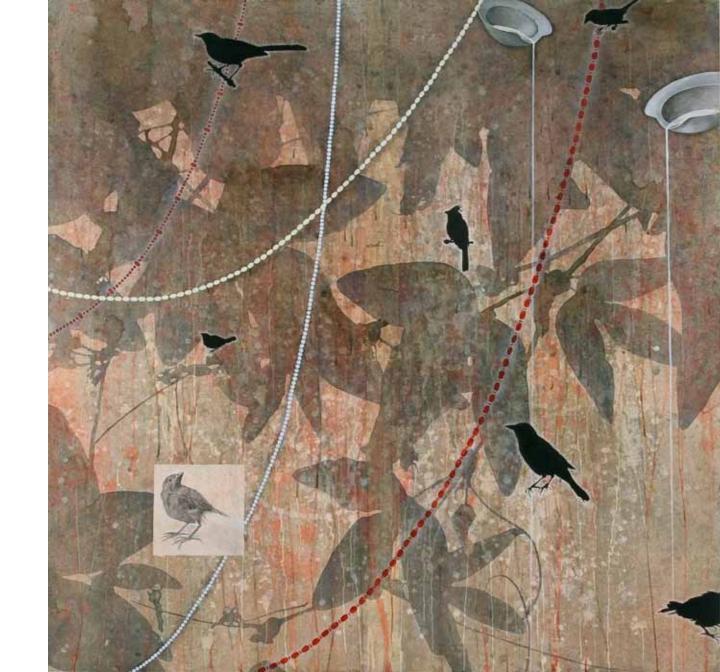
Tanja Softić: Migrant Universe

Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art College of Charleston, South Carolina

Tanja Softić is an artist of uncommon insight. Her multilayered works contain fragments of thoughts and things blended in a rich *mélange* of associational possibility. The imagery is at once familiar and strange; the juxtapositions hint at stories untold. The references to botany, jewelry, birds, bones, technology, vectors, vertices, and vessels unfold in a world where humans must utilize taxonomy and naming to stave off chaos. Throughout the Migrant Universe series, the artist directs viewers to examine the minutiae that envelop us as we contemplate not only the larger questions of life but our place in nature. We both contain and are contained by the world as we imagine it. Softić encourages us to see the macro in the micro and vice versa. In this sense, these works act as a Möbius, connecting the viewer to the larger universe while simultaneously pointing inward. It is the tension between the known and the unknowable that propels us into a state of wonder.

Mark Sloan

Director and Senior Curator Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art College of Charleston School of the Arts



Facing Page: Night in the Garden; acrylic, pigment, charcoal, and chalk on handmade paper mounted on board, 60" x 120" 2007

Seeing "the entire world as a foreign land" makes possible the originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music— is contrapuntal.... For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of those things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally.

- EDWARD SAID, ON EXILE

Artist's Statement

The *Migrant Universe* series is a visual poem about identity and the worldview of an immigrant: exile, longing, translation, and memory. An immigrant to the United States from Bosnia, once part of Yugoslavia, I am fascinated by questions of cultural identity or cultural belonging on an intellectual level, but I experience and feel what Edward Said called "the contrapuntal reality [of an exile]" very acutely: I have transitioned through three citizenships in addition to one period of being a citizen of no country. In both my new and old countries, outdated notions of national and ethnic identity and belonging continue to shape the politics and the society.

The visual vocabulary of the *Migrant Universe* drawings suggests a displaced existence: fragmented memories, adaptation, revival, and transformation. Because I do not live and work within the comfort or boundaries of the culture in which I first learned to observe, interpret, and engage the world, I have the arguable privilege of having lived more than one life. My memory is my virtual self and, paradoxically, my most authentic self. Yet, memory is a process that

involves erosions and accretions that occur with any reconstructive, interpretative, or artistic act. One reconnects with what has been broken, fragmented, or overlaid. Remembering becomes an act of reconstruction, where one works with what is there and tries to visualize what has been lost. Because each act of memorization necessarily involves interpretation, there can be no objective recollection.

Nor is there full erasure; like matter, memory seems to persist by transforming.

The images in *Migrant Universe* suggest what Said called "an awareness of simultaneous dimensions." For example, maps and star charts represent conventional interpretations of scale and distance, their fidelity assured only within accepted systems of perceiving and organizing space. I am interested in what they may become, layered upon each other in visual conversations with other elements in the drawing. In *Migrant Universe*, the drawings function as a rearrangeable continuum of maps, landscapes, and portraits of memory and identity.





Landscapes of Memory: Tanja Softić's *Migrant Universe*

Gary Shapiro

Tanja Softić advises us that her Migrant Universe series should be seen as a "visual poem" concerned with the "identity and worldview of an immigrant: exile, longing, translation, and memory."1 Certainly, all these motifs wend their way across her imposing and gorgeous works on paper. Yet, we do not find the artist herself depicted in any straightforward manner, in contrast to so many of her contemporaries who choose to represent themselves by focusing on identity, often by pluralizing it in hybrid or multicultural fashion. The closest approach to a human figure in this contemporary landscape—and I suggest that the entire series be seen as landscape—is rather enigmatic. It is the trace or faint outline of a figure wreathed in fire, most prominently in "The Map of What Happened." This memory trace from Softić's past is drawn from the story of Muhammad's fiery ascent to heaven. It hovers on the edge of traditional prohibitions of the prophet's image, since there are no discernible features; we are given just enough to aver discern that an indeterminate figure is aflame and in motion. Elsewhere, a small image of a hand is inserted in one of the characteristic square inserts that punctuate these panels, but the hand is inactive and apparently included for formal rather than gestural effect. Otherwise, human beings are absent, or are called to mind only by images of neurons and

(in one case) cancer cells; the neurons and cells are pluralizing assemblages and collections, rather than representations of integral persons. A set of four "angels"— again without human form—watches over the landscapes of memory.

This absence of customary figures from a "universe" full of movement marks a radical departure from the drama and narrative found in so much of the classic landscape tradition. Depicted here is a vast panorama, an epic without a protagonist. Humans are present through their artifacts: bowls of milk, overturned cups, strings of pearls, transmission towers for electricity, radio telescopes, a schematic map of Softić's native Sarajevo, and a diagram of the city's library. This landscape is structured by the organic forms of trees, vegetation, and birds, but these are typically transformed into black cutout shapes that contrast with the richly mottled multicolored textures of the panels.

The paintings are palimpsests of transition and movement. The birds, of course, are migrants, and even the vegetation includes kudzu and Virginia creeper, those notoriously traveling and invasive plants that the artist encounters in her working sites in the southern United States. When I visited Softić's studio, she cited an op-ed piece in that morning's *New*

Facing Page: The Evangelist; acrylic, pigment, charcoal, and chalk on handmade paper, mounted on board, 60" x 60" 2008 Previous Page: The Map of What Happened; acrylic, pigment, charcoal, and chalk on handmade paper, mounted on board, 60" x 120" 2008







York Times, which explained that a vast number of the plants we disdainfully label weeds in the U.S. are. in fact, migrants, unintentionally brought to the New World by colonists and merchants. The electrical towers are conduits for the transmission of energy: the radio telescopes are attuned to cosmic radiation and (perhaps?) interstellar messages. Neurons and cancer cells are busy networks and assemblages, impersonal dynamic pluralities that either constitute or eat away at what we consider our stable selves. The bowls pour forth milk, without any visible human agencv. Sheer delight abounds in this motif that captures motion; the artist's work engages in dialogue with exemplary treatments of pouring vessels in such artists as Velázquez and Vermeer. This is, indeed, one of the classical problems and tasks of painting: How can a static, two-dimensional surface convey the sense of movement? Softic's universe is not a full plenum: in this re-

Softic's universe is not a full plenum; in this respect, it is markedly contemporary. Throughout, there are vortices, which she calls black holes. Because they suck space and matter into themselves, they are visual reminders of the ineluctable dimension of loss, invisibility, and enigma. Similarly, the panels are dotted with elliptical black forms, like those mysterious empty spaces, conjured up in animated cartoons, that magically open or close; these sudden abysses render the landscape uncannily precarious. Perhaps, then, this is not a universe but what William James provocatively called a pluriverse. Similarly, the chrysanthemums (flowers symbolic of death) that appear on most panels can be read as either imploding or exploding forms, intensifying the ambiguities and binaries of position and movement in migrant life.

The panels' titles can suggest the artist's own traiectory, such as "The Map of What Happened," "Revolution," and "Landscape and Departure." Softić grew up in Sarajevo, when there was still a Yugoslavia, as a Bosnian of Muslim heritage -a city where Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived together with varying success over centuries. A powerful narrative of Bosnian history, from the sixteenth century to the hostilities of 1914, is Ivo Andrić's The Bridge on the Drina, which captures much of the entangled story. As the assassination of 1914 sparked a world war, so the siege of the city in the 1990s marked the last European war of the twentieth century. Saraievo had seen Ottoman rule, incorporation into the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the creation of the kingdom of Yugoslavia after World War I, the horrors of the next war, and the socialist transformation that maintained a fragile metastability through a complex balancing act among world powers. In the wars and ethnic cleansing of the 1990s, the fault lines or black holes of an ancient history of blood feuds opened up, consuming thousands of lives. Yet, this is more than personal history. These conflicts, hybridities, and transformations are exemplary dimensions of the living memory of how we all have become what we are, and we do not need to look very far to see similar dynamics of war, displacement, exile, and diaspora around the shrinking globe. If one of these panels acknowledges a specifically personal story, it is Nocturne for My Father, a memorial for Softić's father, a physician who died of cancer while the work was being completed. Even here, neurons and cancer cells are impersonal webs, layerings, and aggrega-

Previous Page: Landscape and Departure; acrylic, pigment, charcoal, and chalk on handmade paper mounted on board, 60" x 120" 2008 Facing Page: Time and Place; acrylic, pigment, charcoal, and chalk on handmade paper mounted on board, 60" x 180" 2010





tions that remind us how the personal is embedded in a vast, dynamic, biological network. The greenish tones of this night piece reinforce suggestions of elegy and mourning. A furled fabric reminiscent of banners and flags in traditional history paintings (think of battle scenes) lacks the inscription whose meaning would override transience and multiplicity.

The theme of exile is pervasive enough to constitute a "universe." Exile is the original theme of the three major monotheisms, all tracing their lineage to Abraham. Called by God to leave his home in Ur and set out on a divinely directed journey, Abraham puts in question any claim by the three religions and their heirs to a fully native, autochthonous territory, a true motherland or fatherland. There could, in these traditions, be no more pagans-that is, those who lived on, from, and in the land. According to the ideology of the nation-state (which belies its relatively recent creation in the nineteenth century), the migrant, nomad, and exile are anomalies in a world normatively defined by national boundaries, character, and heritage. Yet, as Nietzsche and others saw already in the 1870s, this is a defensive reaction against the actual movement and mixing of populations; after World War II, Hannah Arendt analyzed the tragic modern condition of the exile and the stateless in her classic The Origins of Totalitarianism.

On a formal level, Softić has constructed works in a series of varying dimensions. Those in which the landscape theme is most prominent—like "Time and Place"—are elongated rectangles, with a length three times their height. She has avoided the classic "golden section" proportion, which lends itself to framing a story or drama. The extended form (we might think of certain Chinese scrolls or Monet's *Water Lilies* here) enables a broader view, a panoramic reception of landscape as such, rather than presenting a story with identifiable protagonists. These landscapes that proceed on their lines of flight could be contrasted with such models as those of Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin, which frame a story by enclosing it in something close to the golden section model. This is landscape, not drama.

The series is anchored by four square panels, entitled as four distinct angels. These guardians involve no direct representation of a humanoid figure. The angel is a messenger or witness, one who has been sent, and the "Evangelist" (as one is named) brings good news, or purports to. Yet, the angels proclaim absence and becoming rather than presence and eternity. The news, then, is the diagram of the black hole, the sign of an absence, the trace of a past that has never been present (adopting an expression of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas). We may be reminded here of Walter Benjamin's discussion of Paul Klee's Angelus Novus in his Theses on the Philosophy of History. Benjamin understands Klee's "angel of history" as moving away from the past on which his gaze remains fixed: "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise: it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."2

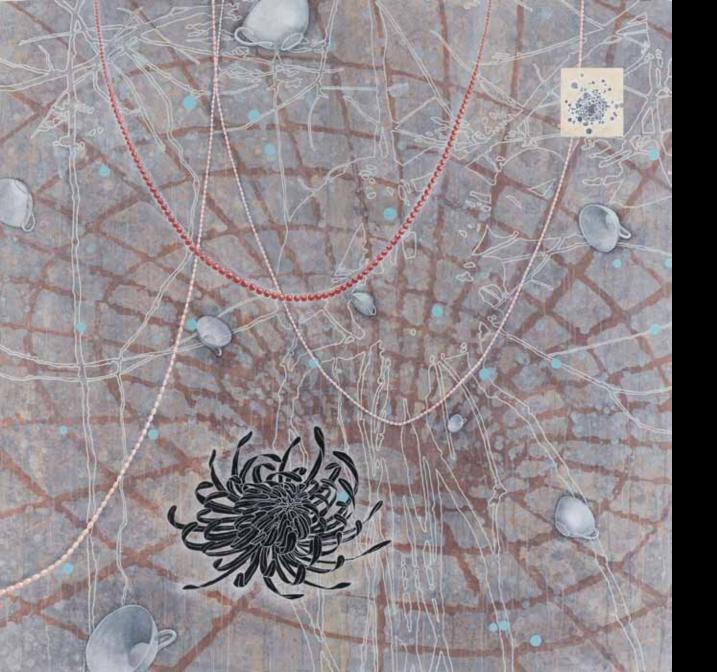
Biographical Note

Tanja Softić's prints, drawings, and paintings combine images of natural and man-made structures with drawings based on appropriated visual material: medical and botanical illustrations, maps and charts, manuscript illuminations, and comic art. Her work addresses concepts of cultural hybridity, chaos, and memory.

Softić is a recipient of the Pollock-Krasner Grant, National Endowment for the Arts/Southern Arts Federation Visual Artist Fellowship, and Soros Foundation - Open Society Institute Exhibition Support Grant. Her work is included in numerous collections in the United States and abroad, among them the New York Public Library, Library of Congress Print Department, and New South Wales Gallery of Art in Sydney, Australia. She participated in the 12th International Print Triennial in Cracow, Poland, and won a first prize at the 5th Kochi International Triennial Exhibition of Prints at the Paper Museum in Kochi, Japan, in 2002. Recently, she completed print projects at the Flying Horse Press, the Tamarind Institute, and the Anderson Ranch's Patton Printshop. She is professor of art and chair of the department of art and art history at the University of Richmond.







Artist's Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the following organizations and individuals who helped bring this project to fruition: University of Richmond School of Arts and Sciences, for sabbatical and grant support during the four years it took to make Migrant Universe; to my colleagues and students in the department of art and art history, for their camaraderie, encouragement, and inspiration; to the Virginia Center for Creative Arts, for the time, space, and birds as well as the company of remarkable creative people; to the Pollock-Krasner Foundation and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, for grants that allowed me to take off a semester, during the critical phase of the project, to focus on this body of work; to Mark Burrell, for logistical help and dedication; to Gary Shapiro, for his insightful essay and many great conversations on art and philosophy; to Mark Sloan, for his encouragement and constant interest; and to friends and family members who have lent a hand in tangible and intangible ways.

Tanja Softić

Facing Page: Angel of Absence; acrylic, pigment, charcoal, and chalk on handmade paper mounted on board, 60" x 60" 2009

To the memory of my father, Dr. Dževad Softić (1927–2009)

