

VERONIKA HOLCOVÁ: UNFINISHED SELF-PORTRAIT

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The title of Veronika Holcová's preliminary retrospective, organised by the Gallery of Fine Arts in Cheb, together with the accompanying publication, is both derived from a painting that ultimately did not appear in the exhibition at all. It awaits the right moment to be completed in the artist's studio, along with a number of other canvases on which she is currently working and on which she has worked in the past. In her conception, time is a fluid category: she is in no hurry, yet she seems to create frenetically; the number of paintings she has produced in her lifetime is remarkable. All are essentially self-portraits, while at the same time they speak generally of the human — and specifically the female — experience. Although one might say the same of other female artists, here it holds doubly true. The fundamental driving force and essential foundation of her artistic practice is her uncompromising intuition and visual imagination. With extraordinary intensity, Holcová's rational mastery of painting intertwines with deep dives into the subconscious layers of the human psyche. She systematically projects into her works her personal life, intimate feelings, existential experiences, memories, visions, nightmares, and moments of daydreaming.

And yet it's deceptive. At first glance, her compositions may appear harmonious and serene, almost like an uncomplicated ornament. It might seem that at times they even teeter on the edge of the merely pleasing. However, her work does not remain superficial. The micro-narratives hidden beneath the alluring glazed surface vibrate with intense psychological tension and carry multiple layers of meaning. When the artist herself sought to express this principle in an interview, she used the metaphor of carnivorous flowers, which *"...lure you in with their beauty, and when you then discover what is going on inside them, the atmosphere is no longer quite so carefree."*¹

The body of work Holcová has been seamlessly developing with unprecedented focus since the early 1990s defies simple historicising or formal categorisation. Her paintings do not comment on the broader social and political situation; the era of their creation does not intrude upon them; they are, in the best sense of the word, 'timeless'. With a touch of hyperbole, we could date them somewhere between the 13th and 23rd centuries, as Dita Lamačová aptly noted in a catalogue text.² Although Veronika Holcová is frequently associated in art-historical discourse with the traditions of Czech Surrealism, German Romanticism or literary Symbolism, her visual language is highly autonomous. It is not

¹ Barbora Bartůňková, Carnivorous Flowers. An interview with Veronika Holcová, *Art+Antiques*, 2015, vol. 14, no. 7–8, pp. 34, 36.

² Dita Lamačová, The Creation of the Work..., in: *Veronika Holcová: PERLYVPERLE*, exhibition catalogue, Bubahof, Prague 2023, unpaginated.

subject to passing fads, yet she reinterprets a long tradition of painting through a contemporary lens.

Early days at the Academy of Fine Arts: from line to plane

Veronika Holcová was born in Prague in 1973 into a family with a rich cultural background, albeit oriented more towards music than the visual arts. A year after graduating in advertising graphics from the Secondary School of Applied Arts in Prague's Žižkov district (1987–1991), she was accepted at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague. In 1992, a strong post-revolutionary euphoria was still lingering at the Academy of Fine Arts, which enabled the student body to elect Milan Knížák as rector, opening the school to unprecedented freedom and experimentation. At the same time, however, the first cracks began to appear in this idealised atmosphere, not least in the closely watched conflict between Knížák and Jiří Načeradský, who left the teaching staff that year. These events signalled a shift from enthusiasm to a more realistic negotiation of the school's form under the new social conditions. It was also a time of transformation for Czech society and the art scene itself, in which an aspiring nineteen-year-old student, firmly determined to become a painter, had to find her bearings.

In the early 1990s, opportunities that had been unimaginable until recently opened up at the Academy of Fine Arts: a brief period when the international attention that was focused on events in Eastern Europe brought new contacts, exchanges, and unprecedented opportunities to Czech art. The internationalisation of the environment manifested itself, among other things, in the opportunity to participate in prestigious international exhibitions, which primarily concerned older students who already had a significant body of work under their belts and were able to quickly enter the newly emerging space of freedom.

Nevertheless, even younger students began to benefit from this openness — Veronika Holcová took part in a school exhibition in Düsseldorf as early as her second year.³ These experiences reflected the broader atmosphere of the time, when the Czech art scene was dynamically opening up to the world whilst simultaneously seeking its own self-confidence. Veronika's main task, however, was to find her own themes and her own style. Like some of her peers, she eagerly moved between several studios in order to familiarise herself with a wide variety of media and approaches. She passed through four completely different environments under the guidance of distinctive, even contradictory figures in the Czech art scene.

First, she headed to the drawing studio of Jitka Svobodová (1941–2023), an artist for whom this medium was not merely a technique, but a way of thinking. With her typically austere but gentle, almost meditative style, Svobodová had been dedicated, since the 1970s, to the monumentalisation of ordinary objects that — like Holcová's later paintings — also existed in a kind of timelessness, independent of contemporary trends. Moreover, she was the first

³ *Young Artists of the Prague Academy of Fine Arts*, Düsseldorf, Museum Kunstpalast, 6–22 February 1994.

woman in the entire 200-year history of the Academy of Fine Arts to head one of its studios. This particular student caught her attention “with her inventiveness and expressive style” and by presenting herself as a “well-rounded personality” during the admissions process.⁴ During her studies, Holcová embarked on large figurative pastel drawings. Like her teacher, she remained faithful to the line: the polarity of black and white, light and shadow. She was drawn to the anxiety and melancholy of Edvard Munch and the explosiveness of Emil Nolde; her figures possessed an expressive quality, with erotic, existential undertones. According to the academic records, she also completed a two-semester course in Chinese calligraphy, an influence that can also be detected in her later work.

Quite early on, at the end of her first year of study, Holcová held her first solo exhibition (together with her classmate, the sculptor Tomáš Vejdvský), in which she exhibited large-format figurative drawings. It was organised by Marcel Fišer, then a student of art history at the lesser-known AFFA Gallery in Prague’s Malostranská Beseda.⁵ Alongside Štěpánka Šimlová and Krištof Kintera, she was also included in the prestigious exhibition *New Names* at the Václav Špála Gallery, which each year showcased the youngest generation of the art scene.⁶ With characteristic diligence, Holcová achieved a certain technical precision in her early attempts. However, there was a risk that this would turn into “superficial mannerism”, as the assessment panel for the school’s final exams — comprising, among others, Milan Knížák and Jana Ševčíková — put it. They pointed out to her that she was becoming too absorbed in the problem she was addressing and recommended that she “...increase her engagement with current events” and change studios.⁷

It was not until two semesters later, however, that she turned her attention to the painter Bedřich Dlouhý (1932–2025). Dlouhý was the creator of virtuoso realist paintings in which absurdity and the grotesque intertwine with an almost Old Master-like illusionism. His imaginative and mystifying approach, shaped from the 1950s onwards, is characterised by an ‘aesthetic of strangeness’. In the 1990s, as a member of the Zaostalí group, he belonged to the older generation that commented on the advent of postmodernism with gentle irony and detachment. Although Holcová may today recall him as her most influential teacher,⁸ Dlouhý himself did not initially rate her very highly, writing: “*The summer term brought nothing new or remarkable. The results of the work are by no means dazzling; the issues*

⁴ Archive of the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague (AVU Archive), Academy of Fine Arts Prague Collection (AVU Collection), Veronika Holcová File (VH File), Record of the third part of the examination with assessment of home assignments, 12 February 1992, unprocessed collection.

⁵ Ivan Mečl recommended Vejdvský to Fišer at the time, and he chose Veronika Holcová as his co-exhibitor. The gallery opened with an exhibition held in May 1993; this was followed by further student exhibitions, often again featuring pairs, such as Ján Mančuška and Jonáš Czesaný, Krištof Kintera and Robert Novák, or Martina Klouzová and Michal Novotný. Email correspondence between the author and Marcel Fišer, March 2026.

⁶ *New Names*, Prague, Václav Špála Gallery, 24 June 1994 – 10 July 1994, curators Antonín Hartmann, Marie Judlová, Mahulena Nešlehová.

⁷ AVU Archive, AVU Collection, VH File, Minutes of the defence of student studio works for the 1992–1993 academic year, 7 June 1993, unprocessed collection.

⁸ Personal interviews with Veronika Holcová conducted by the author, 2025–2026.

remain unchanged. Two terms are evidently not enough for a student who has devoted years to drawing to venture into the realm of painting and become confident within it."⁹

Eventually, however, she managed to free herself from the linearity of drawing and learn to create volumes on a flat surface. For some time, she continued to work in black and white tones. She painted mostly self-portraits, in which she attempted to capture her inner state through introspection.

Thanks to Dlouhý, the world of colour subsequently opened up to Holcová — initially through the cautious use of crimson red, but it soon burst forth with great intensity; by the end of her studies, Vladimír Kokolia spoke of “a colour palette that effortlessly embraces even the most vivid shades”.¹⁰ After her studies, Holcová worked as Dlouhý’s assistant for a time. She prepared canvases for him in exchange for being able to work in his studio when he was not using it. An artistic dialogue developed between them, which was also reflected in one of his key works, the large-scale assemblage **Self-Portrait* * ** (1999–2005). Whilst working on it, he invited her to contribute to a section. She rendered the abstract head-ornament, which stands out from the painting with its vibrant colors, in her characteristic style.

When Bedřich Dlouhý left the school in 1995, she moved to the studio of Vladimír Skrepl (b.1955), who was closer to her in age and offered a radically different perspective. A leading figure of postmodernism, he had been developing his raw, expressive style since the early 1980s, based on an instinctive and unpolished approach. In the 1980s, his assistant, the former performer Jiří Kovanda (b.1953), also expressed himself through painting. Their work served as a counterbalance to the modernist emphasis on purity of form, introducing postmodern plurality, the freedom to work with both ‘low’ and ‘high’ sources, irony, and detachment. When they began running a painting studio together in the mid-1990s, they brought precisely this openness and rejection of a single ‘correct’ aesthetic to the school.¹¹ Their studio quickly became one of the most progressive, having a profound influence on a generation of artists who were entering the post-revolutionary scene with newfound self-confidence. Holcová was there right from the very beginning and completed her Bachelor’s thesis under their guidance, demonstrating a willingness to experiment and an ability to break free from conventional approaches.

The project entitled *Records from 26 February to 26 May 1996* was created over a period of three months and took two forms: at school she painted three works, including **Mimo stádo*

⁹ AVU Archive, AVU Collection, VH Folder, Minutes of the defence of student studio works for the academic year 1994–1995, 5 June 1995, unprocessed collection.

¹⁰ AVU Archive, AVU Collection, VH Folder, Minutes of the defence of student studio works for the academic year 1997–1998, 10 June 1998, unprocessed collection.

¹¹ “It was a shock for us. Suddenly, people were talking about foreign artists here.”, see Petr Vaňous, “I’m still waiting for some kind of impulse, perhaps it’s already happening... Petr Vaňous speaks with Veronika Holcová”, *Revolver Revue*, 2014, vol. 29, no. 96, p. 37.

*(Outside the Flock)** (1996), which she promptly exhibited at Galerie Caesar in Olomouc.¹² At home, she simultaneously created diary entries on paper using the oil painting technique. This combination allowed her to develop a tension between control and spontaneity. The thesis opponent, Dušan Brozman, praised the drawings in particular, in which, in his view, Holcová was able to free herself more significantly and express herself with greater immediacy.¹³

One within the other

Veronika Holcová completed her Master's degree in the studio of Vladimír Kokolia (*1956), who also represented a breath of fresh air among the teaching staff. Whilst in the 1980s he worked with a gestural style and a distinctive painterly energy, a decade later his work shifted towards an analytical exploration of vision. At the Academy of Fine Arts, he led a printmaking studio, but rather than focusing on the precise mastery of techniques, he guided his students towards a conceptual and philosophical approach to the pictorial surface. With him, they could reflect on working with visual metaphor or could perceive the hidden energy fields of an image.¹⁴ Holcová tried her hand at graphic techniques without excessive enthusiasm (unsurprisingly, she was most taken with monotypes) and went on to devote herself to painting.

In Kokolia's studio, however, she also began to focus on 'drawings', which allowed her a playfulness and lightness she had been unable to achieve in her paintings.¹⁵ In reality, however, even her works on paper were painted with oil paints — she even primed some of the paper. Whilst with Bedřich Dlouhý she had perhaps gained too much respect for the finality of the image, here she developed a taste for discovery; she made impressions with a brush, her fingers or a palette knife, created various patches of colour, and worked with chance and prolonged observation. In her works, she discovered various creatures and gave them names such as embryos, puparities, squishmies, slithermushkins, muffies, moisties, etc. A year later, she continued making finger paintings in an almost mediumistic manner. Much like the spiritualists or, later, Surrealist artists with their automatic painting, she transformed herself into an instrument and created without rational control. She likened the process of creating her tactile drawings to playing the piano, a pursuit she engaged in privately.¹⁶

¹² *Situations by Veronika Holcová*, Olomouc, Caesar Gallery, 4–28 February 1997, curator Roman Dergam.

¹³ AVU Archive, AVU Collection, VH File, Minutes of State Bachelor's Examinations 1995–1996, unprocessed collection.

¹⁴ Vladimír Kokolia, 'Awe'. Habilitation lecture, **Ateliér**, 1998, vol. 11, no. 25–26, pp. 2, 10.

¹⁵ AVU Archive, AVU Collection, VH File, Defence of the 1996–1997 Annual Project, 10 June 1998, unprocessed collection.

¹⁶ AVU Archive, AVU Collection, VH Folder, Defence of the 1997–1998 Annual Project, 10 June 1998, unprocessed collection.

At that time, in 1998, her daughter was born, Julie Daňhelová, who is now also a successful graduate of Kokolia's studio. This pivotal personal experience undoubtedly influenced her work. What was remarkable, however, was that Holcová persisted in her artistic pursuits, practically throughout the entire period, as her teacher also emphasised.¹⁷ She never interrupted her studies,¹⁸ even though she had to contend with a number of difficulties.¹⁹ The period of pregnancy and new motherhood gave rise to the theme of her final thesis, entitled *One Within the Other*, referring not only to the physical experience of a pregnant woman but also to her chosen method of work. The starting point was the first painting, from which the other works in the series emerged in an imaginative way; in total, there were ten large-format canvases. Each painting developed from the previous one, forming a chain of transformations in which visual motifs flowed seamlessly and gave rise to one another.

The series, painted using a combination of oil and tempera on canvas, was also a space for intense experimentation. Here, Holcová worked not only with a brush, but also by applying paint with a sponge, which created foamy, irregular marks on the surface. The result was a painting based on the dynamic interplay of imagination and chance. Although this was a university project, it was already clear that the artist was gradually finding her own voice. In his assessment, the thesis advisor noted that she was a student who had already developed a distinct style; at the same time, however, he expressed concern that her own virtuosity might lead her into superficiality. The external examiner, Tomáš Pospiszyl, also commented on the work in a similarly critical yet appreciative manner. Both agreed that she had not managed to achieve the same spontaneity on canvas as she had on paper.²⁰ Nevertheless, the thesis contains much of what would continue to characterise Veronika Holcová's artwork: spontaneous imagination, openness to chance, and the constant oscillation between figurative representation and autonomous painterly structure. It is precisely this tension between recognisable figurative elements and the abstract — at times almost informal — texture that defines her entire body of later work and demonstrates the breadth of her painterly range.

The end of painting?

In 1999, when Holcová graduated, an exceptionally strong cohort was graduating alongside her. Among those who left the school at that time were, for example, Milan Cais, Krištof

¹⁷ AVU Archive, AVU Collection, VH Folder, Minutes of the defence of student studio projects for the 1997–1998 academic year, 10 June 1998, unprocessed collection.

¹⁸ AVU Archive, AVU Collection, VH Folder, AVU Confirmation for the Prague 10 District Office, Department of Maternal and Child Care, 26 May 1998, unprocessed collection.

¹⁹ As revealed, for example, by this sentence: "My whole defence is chaotic too; don't be surprised, there's a rattle with three little hearts rattling in my head, I'm not getting much sleep, so I'm going to bed now..." AVU Archive, AVU Collection, VH Folder, Defence of the 1997–1998 Year-End Project, 20 May 1998, unprocessed collection.

²⁰ AVU Archive, AVU Collection, VH Folder, Minutes of Final State Examinations 1998–1999, unprocessed collection.

Kintera, Markéta Korečková, Martin Kuriš, Ján Mančuška (who had been her classmate at secondary school), František Matoušek, Jaromír Novotný, Petr Pavlík, Michal Pěchouček, Milan Salák, Jan Šerých, Jáchym Šerých, Jan Turner, Blanka Valchářová, and Markéta Vaňková.²¹ Many of them had already formed artistic groups whilst still students, had established galleries, curated exhibitions, or were included in key collective shows that shaped the contemporary discourse (indeed, the then most influential curators, Jana and Jiří Ševčík, were active at the Academy of Fine Arts). Holcová did not become part of any movement or group, which is one reason why she is still regarded today as a “distinctive, solitary figure of her generation”²² and a “painter through and through”.²³ She entered the art scene at the turn of the 1990s and 2000s with a double ‘disadvantage’. She was the mother of two young children — her daughter, and later, her son Bruno — and she had also decided to express herself exclusively through painting, without the intermedia overlaps or (post)conceptual strategies that dominated during this period. In the 1990s, debates about the so-called ‘end of painting’ flared up once again in both the Czech and international art scenes, building on similar discussions dating back to the 1960s, when painting was regarded as a conservative medium unable to compete with technical images or installations.²⁴ During this period of intense debate, a focus on pure painting thus signified a conscious step outside the mainstream. Nevertheless, Holcová gradually developed a distinctive and elusive style that defied the trends of the time. She continued with her peculiar, almost alchemical mix: on the one hand, there were the uncoordinated, automatic, almost mediumistic paintings springing from the depths of the unconscious and creating Jungian ‘ideograms of unconscious content’; set against these, a highly professional approach, precise in regard to both technology and composition.

Although Holcová was not part of the dominant curatorial narratives — including Milena Slavická’s exhibition **The Last Painting** (1997) or Olga Malá and Karel Šrp’s **Perfect Tense** (2003–2004), which, on the contrary, sought to defend painting — she managed to exhibit extensively. In 2000, Radek Váňa and Marek Pokorný organised a solo exhibition for her at the non-profit Starter&Sorter Gallery, which focused on young talent; Váňa also included her erotic paintings in the exhibition **Opravdová láska* (True Love)*²⁵, and in his own exhibition **Girls Show** at the MXM Gallery in Prague. He sought to interpret her as one of the female artists who began to make a significant mark in the 1990s, yet who “do not ignore their

²¹ *AVU Graduates 1999*, exhibition catalogue, Academy of Fine Arts, Prague 1999, texts by Jiří David, Jiří T. Kotalík.

²² Marcel Fišer in a text for the exhibition leaflet for *Veronika Holcová, Canada 2015–2019*, Cheb, Gallery of Fine Arts, 10 September – 22 November 2020, see: http://www.gavu.cz/data/919-holcova_web.pdf.

²³ Petr Vaňous (ed.), *Spectrum. A Book on Contemporary Young Painting in the Czech Republic*, Biggboss, Prague 2020.

²⁴ At the Academy of Fine Arts, this issue was discussed in 1994 in the symposium *The Form and Meaning of Painting in Contemporary Art*; see also the proceedings of the same name.

²⁵ *True Love*, Prague, Kavárna Velryba gallery, 6 May – 15 June 1996.

gender”.²⁶ She subsequently presented her paintings on paper in exhibitions at the Moravian Gallery in Brno²⁷ and at the private Behémót Gallery in Prague.²⁸ The latter was reviewed by Tomáš Popiszyl in the magazine *Umělec (Artist)*, the conclusion of which is worth quoting: “With the exhibition *Sladký život (Sweet Life)*, a painter has emerged in our art scene whose development must be closely followed. She expands the small but significant group of artists who have the ability to see beyond the boundaries of the visible world (K. Malich, V. Kokolia) and, moreover, to depict their alternative universe convincingly. This promise may well become one of the discoveries of recent years.”²⁹ Sixteen of her *Drawings from a Diary* (2000–2001) were also included in the Laboratory of Contemporary Art, a permanent exhibition of the Modern and Contemporary Art Collection at the Trade Fair Palace in Prague. All this definitively confirmed her establishment in the Czech art scene.

Anima and animus

In 2003, Holcová began collaborating with the Jiří Švestka Gallery, which organised two solo exhibitions for her — in 2005 and 2008 — and with which she took part in a number of international art fairs, including the prestigious Art Basel.³⁰ Jiří Švestka (b.1955), one of the most influential figures in the art scene at the time, also became her husband. As a returning emigrant, he introduced the Western model of a commercial gallery to Prague in the mid-1990s. In the 2000s, he expanded his activities to Berlin. This undoubtedly had an impact on Holcová’s international contacts; since 2005, she has been represented by Berlin’s Galerie Albrecht, where she exhibits regularly.

At the start of the new millennium, the artist gradually developed her own distinctive style, which found expression in the visually striking paintings of the latter half of the 2000s. The heroine of her paintings became her alter ego — a walking girl, sometimes accompanied by a small black dog, who at times appears lost, pensive or dreamy, and at other times, contrarily, resolute and joyful (*On the Way*, 2005; *Evening Hunt*, 2005; *She*, 2005). Formally, these paintings were based on the contrast between a meticulously rendered figure and an abstracted background. The indeterminate landscape functions here as a metaphor for inner mental states — both desire and anxiety.³¹ She took the motif of the girl in motion from a war photograph, which is one of the few instances where her imagination is inspired by a

²⁶ “There are two kinds of women in Czech art. Female artists who are artists, and female artists-as-artists. It is these I have tried to show here.” Monika Čermáková; “I wanted to create a purely female exhibition,” says curator Radek Váňa, *MF Dnes*, 31 May 1994, p. 4.

²⁷ *Veronika Holcová: Handicrafts*, Brno, Moravian Gallery, Pražák Palace – Atrium, 27 July 2001 – 26 August 2001.

²⁸ *Veronika Holcová: La Dolce Vita*, Prague, Behémót Gallery, 7 November 2001 – 6 January 2002.

²⁹ Tomáš Pospiszyl, *Painting through Drawing*, *Umělec*, 2001, vol. 5, no. 5–6, p. 88.

³⁰ *Veronika Holcová: Territory*, Prague, Jiří Švestka Gallery, 19 October – 3 December 2005, *Veronika Holcová: Memory / Paměť*, Prague, Jiří Švestka Gallery, 11 April 2008 – 24 May 2008.

³¹ As the title of this review suggests: Sylvie Petráková, “I draw what I see, I paint what I feel”, *Lidové noviny*, 2 November 2005.

technical image. In other canvases, the girl turns her back on the viewer, pondering a book she has just finished reading or simply gazing into the future. She exudes a timeless calm, but also a strong melancholy and a resignation (*Laura*, 2006; *Murakami's Reader*, 2007). A direct counterpoint to these paintings is the series of so-called 'hominids', prehistoric males symbolising primitive male strength and sexually driven aggression — the club they hold in their hands is depicted as an erect penis (*Pilgrimage I–IV*, 2008).³² Prehistoric scenes also form the subject of other canvases (*Společnost [Society]*, 2008). Gradually, the paintings come to feature entirely dark moments capturing a suffocating situation from which there is no escape and which engulfs the individual just as the raging forces of Nature do (*Past*, 2007; *Není úniku [There is no Escape]*, 2007; *Vertigo*, 2009; *Celestial Body*, 2008).

This fascination with unsettling inner landscapes, memories, and archetypal symbolism also crystallises in the painting **Her Memory** (2008), which already employs features that Holcová would go on to develop further, such as a focus on the centre of the composition, the layering of planes, and the interplay of the painting's texture. The painting carries a powerful tension: in the foreground, on the edge of an abyss, lies a young girl with her eyes closed, clutching her short skirt between her legs with both hands — perhaps she is dreaming, and yet early sexual desires are awakening within her; perhaps she feels shame after her body has been objectified by the male gaze, perhaps she is in a state of shock following a sexual assault (a counterpart to this painting, *Her Story* from 2007, directly depicts an act of violence or even rape). Behind her, in the background, a landscape unfolds — perhaps the epicentre of an active volcano or a mountain range bathed in the evening sun. Within this darkened natural setting, punctuated by striking red accents, several parallel stories unfold, though at a much smaller scale than the figure in the foreground: monkeys encounter a beast, prehistoric brontosaurus and mammoths with phallic tusks pass by in the distance, a flock of birds flies overhead, and human figures — a little girl standing and a mature woman seated — are also part of the scene. In this painting, which clearly shows the influence of the artist's favourite painter, Balthus, she has depicted her childhood nightmare. It is linked to the illustrations of Zdeněk Burian, which shaped the preconceptions of prehistory for several generations. Once, as a child, while she was looking through his monograph with fascination, she fell asleep from exhaustion and found herself in his world in her dream. This terrifying nightmare recurred throughout her life and may have contributed to her having such a sense of epic narrative in her painting.

In 2011, Holcová ended her collaboration with the Jiří Švestka Gallery, and this challenging period, marked by life changes and an eight-month search for a studio, found expression in paintings that blend melancholy with a sense of calm and inner purification. The theme of several paintings is the withering foxglove — a poisonous plant which, in small quantities, is actually used to treat heart conditions (*Digitalis I*, 2010; *Digitalis II*, 2011). The painting

³² The artist's initial inspiration was František Kupka's gouache painting **Antropoides** (1902), depicting fighting apes, as well as Stanley Kubrick's film **2001: A Space Odyssey** (1968). See D. Ž. Bor, **Průvodkyně probuzenou pamětí**. Interview with D. Ž. Bor and Veronika Holcová, *Tvar*, 2008, vol. 19, no. 10, pp. 12–13.

Innocence (2010), in which a woman — an empty vessel symbolised by a white chemise — levitates within an indeterminate natural setting, bears clear parallels to *The Abandoned Burrow* (1937) by the painter Toyen, which, coincidentally, is held in the collections of the Cheb Gallery. Surrealism, and Toyen in particular, are among Holcová's key sources of inspiration. She later engaged in direct dialogue with Toyen in the painting *I Wish You Good Health* (2023), in which she developed the motif of the dove from one of the painter's canvases. A key work of this period is *Melancholia* (2010), in which she abandons the figure which appears only in miniature scale as a hint of a narrative — and focuses on the centre of the painting, a circular object — perhaps a planet, perhaps a giant pearl — signifying the infinity of the universe which transcends all that is human.

Through her series on the mythical Lilith, she symbolically takes power back into her own hands. According to Jewish mysticism, Lilith was Adam's first wife, who refused to submit to him and, because of her independence, was forced to leave Paradise. She transformed into a demonic creature of the night and became a symbol of unbridled feminine power. When the artist spoke about the painting *Lilith* (2012) in one of her interviews, she also described the process her paintings undergo and how she incorporates intuition into her work: *"My first painting of Lilith was strange – I painted it without knowing it was Lilith. I had a work in progress in my studio, which was being created in several layers. At first, it was an autumn landscape bathed in tranquillity. I framed it with a wall, and this created a view of the landscape from a monastery window. I then placed a girl in the window, looking out. I then let her burn away, creating a shape that looked like a landscape reflected in spectacles, so I called the painting The Loss of Rose-tinted Glasses. One day, however, I came into the studio, took some black paint and painted a woman with a strange cocoon, animal, or veil on her head, towering over the figure of a man lying beneath her. I left the painting as it was, having no idea what would come of it. On the very same day, a poet friend of mine asked me to illustrate a poem about Lilith for a surrealist issue of Analogon. And I asked her who Lilith was. The following day I came to the studio with the documentary filmmaker Vítěk Janeček and he suddenly exclaimed, "Lilith!"*³³ Another from the series, *Lilith Gravity* (2013–2015), gives the impression that she is either pregnant or shrouded in a billowing cloak. She rides a headless animal, sitting proudly and upright, her determined gaze fixed ahead — towards whatever awaits her on the journey. The motif of a certain transformation is also evident in the painting *Perlorodka (Freshwater Pearl Oyster)* (2015), which depicts a woman as a mysterious, shapeless being emerging from the landscape. The veiled figure, alluding to Surrealism (this time, for example, to Vincenc Makovský's 1933 sculpture *Girl with Child*), is both mysterious and terrifying. Yet she's also precious — she spawns pearls, which again carry powerful and multi-layered symbolism: they are delicate yet firm. Their round shape evokes cyclicity: they are a symbol of the moon and feminine energy. They may signify

³³ Bartůňková (note 1), p. 34.

fertility and the ability to transform pain or a 'foreign particle' into beauty. They signify purity, but also sadness and grandeur.

Across the ocean

The years 2016–2019, during which she lived in Canada, were an intense and inspiring period for the artist. Initially, she did not have a studio at her disposal, which was challenging for someone accustomed to focused and regular work, but simultaneously, it allowed her to pause and open herself up to new possibilities. She drew strong inspiration from Nature in North America, which, from a Czech perspective, stretched out on an unimaginable scale, as well as from the traditional culture of the Inuit, the indigenous peoples of Canada's Arctic regions, whose visual language and relationship with Nature resonated with her. Whilst still there, she presented some of her new work in Prague in a solo exhibition at Villa Pellé,³⁴ and later also dedicated an exhibition at GAVU Cheb to this period.³⁵

It is in Canada that she expanded her evolving artistic style with a series of unusually geometric paintings. These depict figures constructed from basic elliptical shapes reminiscent of shells or husks, levitating in an undefined space as if in a state of weightlessness. Everything has a light feel to it: the iridescent colours, the playful assembly and disassembly of the depicted forms and motifs — the figures in * * resemble princes with swords, jesters or other archetypal beings, yet their meaning is considerably darker, as the titles of the works suggest, for example **Narcis (Narcissus)** (2018) or **Míra úslužnosti (Level of Servitude)** (2018). Holcová, however, painted landscapes above all else. The unusually monochromatic painting *Escape* (2017), with patterns resembling those drawn by the frost on glass, captures not only the harsh Canadian winter, but also serves as a window through which one can slip out and escape. In the work *Fantasmagoria* (2018), the landscape, conceived as a symbol, transforms into a dynamic organism in which, on closer inspection, plants flourish, streams flow and crystals grow — Nature and the psyche merge here into a single dramatic whole. During a period of losing her foothold, she also created, for example, the sombre *Companion I* (2017–2021), a hybrid head-landscape, half terrifying and half kind, which embodies the ambivalent nature of loneliness and inner support.

Conversely, Holcová found external support and connections with other artists at the Gallery 17/18 exhibition space in Ottawa, which she established directly within the premises of the Czech Embassy — her husband, for whom she had moved to Canada, held the post of ambassador. Her curatorial work is evidence of the painter's unceasing need to remain an active part of the art scene, even abroad.³⁶ Over the course of four years, she organised

³⁴ *Veronika Holcová: Wild Game / Divočina*, Prague, Vila Pellé, 19 July – 22 September 2017, curated by Petr Vaňous.

³⁵ *Veronika Holcová: Canada 2015–2019*, Cheb, Gallery of Fine Arts, 10 September – 22 November 2020, curated by Marcel Fišer.

³⁶ She has continued these curatorial activities in recent years, contributing to the gallery programme at Prostor Olga in Prague-Strašnice.

thirteen exhibitions there, in which she mostly brought together or contrasted Czech and Canadian artists, thus creating a platform for dialogue between them.³⁷ Holcová also made a partial foray into the local art scene, with solo exhibitions organised for her by the prestigious private gallery, Christopher Cutts Gallery, in Toronto³⁸ and the Axenéo7 gallery in Gatineau, Quebec.³⁹

Reimagining the past

All the plans she had for her return to Prague were put on hold by the pandemic-induced limbo of 2020 and 2021. For many, this period was painful and exhausting, but Veronika Holcová found the space to focus on herself and her work,⁴⁰ deciding to undertake a major reworking of her paintings. Notably, she did not destroy those that didn't stand the test, but began to overlay them with new layers, motifs and meanings. Even during her studies, she sometimes found it difficult to finish her paintings; she liked to return to them and had a tendency to revise them. She first resorted to the radical reworking of an older piece — a painting from her time studying under Bedřich Dlouhý — in the late 1990s: *"This canvas, with all its layers of overpainting, carried with it a subject that remained deeply personal to me. I therefore decided to preserve the original painting as a background for the new work, where the old motif is shifted to my current vision and perception of a buried memory,"* she wrote whilst still at the Academy of Fine Arts.⁴¹ Now it was something similar, only the sediments of memory were somewhat denser.

The past as a collection of factual events cannot be rewritten. The past as meaning, memory and interpretation, however, is constantly being rewritten. In Veronika Holcová's work, the repainting of older paintings represents a way in which the artist returns to her own past and actively transforms it — much like human memory, which is not an archive but a process of constant reconstruction, as Marcel Proust demonstrates well in *In Search of Lost Time*: memories are not stable, but return in bursts, in fragments, transformed by time. Hence, Holcová does not forcibly erase the past, but overlays it with new meaning. This can even be therapeutic. Psychology describes this mechanism as 'memory reconsolidation', whereby a traumatic or painful memory is reopened and stored in the memory in a new, less burdensome form. It is not a matter of inventing a different past, but of changing its interpretation so that it becomes more bearable, more understandable, integrated — much

³⁷ For the full programme, see: <https://www.gallery1718.ca/>.

³⁸ Veronika Holcová: *Owl, Soul, and Heart*, Toronto, Christopher Cutts Gallery, 8 September – 1 October 2016. See also Hugh Alcock, The Imaginary World of Veronika Holcová, *Artoronto.ca*, see: <https://artoronto.ca/?p=42030>.

³⁹ Veronika Holcová: *Inside Out*, Gatineau, Axenéo7, 13 March – 20 April 2019, curated by Lumír Hladík.

⁴⁰ As the pandemic draws to a close — perhaps due to the unusual circumstances and the need for a fresh start following this difficult experience for society as a whole — she has, exceptionally, combined her exhibition with a conceptual dowsing project: Veronika Holcová: *The Legend of Water*, 26 May – 30 June 2021, Prague, Altán Klamovka, curator Lenka Sýkorová.

⁴¹ AVU Archive, AVU Collection, VH Folder, Thesis Defence, unprocessed collection.

like the characters in Japanese author Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day*, who recount the past in such a way that they can withstand it.

Holcová translates this principle into the visual realm. She returns to paintings created in different life situations, enters into them, and adapts them so that they correspond to her current inner space. In the painting **Time Lord** (2008–2022), for example, one of the hominids is concealed. Just as memory is not linear but layered, Holcová works precisely with the layer of paint as a fundamental principle. The old layer does not disappear completely; it remains present as sediment, as a trace. The new surface overlays it, yet at the same time communicates with it. As long as the paintings are in her studio, they may undergo this kind of revision: *"Sometimes it happens that a painting comes into my hands that has already been photographed for a catalogue, and I rework it."*⁴² This may also be the fate of some of the paintings featured in this book in the future.

The body of work that Holcová has reworked in recent years is quite extensive (e.g. *Hyalite*, 2013–2024; *Complementary Image*, 2013–2025; *Who Fears Death*, 2014–2020; *Magician*, 2017–2021, etc.). This also includes *The Birth of Indigo*, 2013–2020, an imaginary continuation of a motif from her degree project. From a distance, it appears to be an imaginary head with a single eye, which is, however, both a peering face and a pregnant belly at once. In both cases, the female body is conceived as a cosmic vessel from which another world is born. The revised works also include the monumental, three-metre-high abstract painting *Purgatory* (2012–2025), which symbolises the artist's transitional phase through its subject matter — exploring the in-between space where pain and hope coexist.⁴³ Repainting thus becomes not only a formal gesture but also an act of emancipation, in which Holcová claims the right to reshape her own history, refusing to be defined by an older version of herself, and transforms the painting into a living organism that can grow alongside her.

Works on paper

In parallel with her paintings, Veronika Holcová also creates 'drawings' — at least that's how she refers to them, and how they have been described in the existing literature.⁴⁴ Their logic, however, is that of painting, and from the point of view of artistic technique, they are essentially still paintings. She applies oil paint — a "wet medium" — to paper, working with surface, colour, and layering rather than line (though her extensive body of work does include pieces of a more drawing-like nature). She perceives these works as diary entries, though they do not serve to describe everyday events or narratively capture the surrounding

⁴² Bartůňková (note 1), p. 38.

⁴³ She first presented it at the exhibition *Analysis of Purgatory*, Prague, Trafo Gallery, 8 March – 21 April 2024, curated by Petr Vaňous.

⁴⁴ Petr Vaňous even concludes from these that the fundamental means of expression on which the artist bases her work is the medium of drawing. Text from the exhibition catalogue for *Veronika Holcová: The Birth of Indigo*, Prague, Vyšehrad Gallery, 4 September – 11 October 2020.

reality, but rather function as a seismograph of her current state of mind. Creating them is a “purifying process” for her.⁴⁵ In some cases, quite literally. She calls these “brush erasures” or “brush cleansing”, and they are pure automatism created at the end of a work, during which she relaxes by wiping the brushes she has used. But they are also cleansing in a figurative sense: by recording her subconscious through them, she releases the excess pressure that builds up during the creation of a painting. During the demanding work on large canvases, which lasts for weeks or months and involves long periods of inactivity, observation, and deciding how to proceed, she creates these ‘drawings’ based on a free play of associations. The process of their creation is profoundly liberating for her; it functions as a therapeutic ritual during which the artist literally clears-out the private contents of her unconscious and brings to light on paper what had hitherto been hidden from her.

Her works on paper form a truly parallel stream. These are not sketches for paintings, nor does she use them to test motifs that she would later develop on a larger scale in her paintings, although these two approaches undoubtedly influence one another.⁴⁶ We can trace the origins back to her student days at the Academy of Fine Arts. Back then, these kinds of drawings became for her a means of experimentation, relaxation, and play, during which she sought her own form of expression — and indeed found it: for the most part, they were received more favourably than her early attempts at painting. It was actually a coincidence that sparked it all: thanks to an offer from a paper mill in Velké Losiny, AVU students were able to purchase A3-sized scrap paper at a very favourable price. Holcová spent all her savings on three thousand sheets. Immediately and with great eagerness, she began applying paint directly to the paper with her fingertips.⁴⁷ Although over the years she has developed a refined technique of brush painting, she continues to approach her work without any prior rational preparation, sketch or plan. Her works are highly intuitive; she employs methods akin to Surrealist automatism or the mediumistic free-hand movement familiar from Art Brut, to which she is sometimes compared.⁴⁸ At times she herself becomes a medium and trusts in the mystical power of the image, including its healing power (*Healing*, 2016). Occasionally, her connection with her work is almost absolute: “*When I paint something, it usually happens to me afterwards. So I’m now careful about what I paint, even though one can never escape fate.*”⁴⁹ The result of these sessions are dynamic chains of

⁴⁵ Jiří Zatloukal, “I love paintings in which I can wander and lose myself,” says painter Veronika Holcová, *Euro.cz*, 1 February 2020, see <https://www.euro.cz/clanky/miluji-obrazy-ve-kterych-se-muzu-prochazet-a-ztratit-rika-malirka-veronika-holcova/>.

⁴⁶ “I began to introduce peculiar artefacts or mysteries into my paintings, which resemble drawings.” Bartůňková (note 1), p. 36.

⁴⁷ V. H. [Veronika Holcová], “I remember a moment...”, in: Veronika Holcová, *Within Reach*, Trigon, Prague 2015, p. 10.

⁴⁸ She also exhibited together with Anna Zemánková, a leading figure in Czech art brut: *Ostara / Veronika Holcová, Anna Zemánková*, Berlin, Galerie Albrecht, 27 April – 22 June 2024, curated by Terezie Zemánková.

⁴⁹ A distinguishing feature: a stain. My paintings are like a landscape in which one sees what one wants to see. Interview with Veronika Holcová by Markéta Kaňková, Vizitka programme, Český Rozhlas, 23 March 2022, see

associations into which the artist subsequently intervenes — thanks to her refined professional eye and compositional sensibility — correcting their spontaneous proliferation and shaping them into concrete forms, figures, or landscape elements.

These exceptionally intimate works often reflect a very wide range of human emotions. We find everything here from deep melancholy through anxiety to latent and overt erotic fantasies. It is precisely the courage to visualise eroticism and repressed instincts that brings to the surface scenes that are at times raw and brutal, reminiscent of the visions of Hieronymus Bosch.⁵⁰ The standard A3 size is due to the as-yet-unexhausted supplies from the studios, though during her stay in Canada she also worked on a larger format on several occasions (*Open Heart*, 2016).

Works on paper from 1997 to 2015 are brought together in the lavishly illustrated publication **Na dosah ruky (Within Hands Reach)** (⁵¹), in which reproductions of selected works are accompanied by texts by writers D. Ž. Bor, Petr Borkovec, Markéta Pilátová, Jakub Řehák and Jáchym Topol, whom the artist asked to reflect on specific pieces of their choice. The book figuratively confirms Tomáš Pospiszyl's words that her works are "illustrations for a non-existent book", through which he sought to emphasise the strong narrative aspect of her work.⁵² Holcová possesses a close affinity with literature and attempts to bridge the worlds of art and literature. In 2010–2011, she initiated, together with the poet Petr Borkovec, a series of twenty evenings entitled *Literární sklony (Literary Inclinations)*, in which Czech writers presented their favourite works of art at the Jiří Švestka Gallery.⁵³ She also occasionally illustrates books.⁵⁴

Thanks to their immediacy (and probably also simply because they are easier to transport), Veronika Holcová's works on paper are exhibited abroad more frequently than her canvases. An important link to the international scene for her is the curator Lóránd Hegyi, a prominent theorist of Hungarian postmodernism, who, as director of the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain in Saint-Étienne, organised a major solo exhibition there in 2011, based precisely on her 'drawings'.⁵⁵ However, he had and has been following Holcová's work for a long time, examining it in his books within the broader context of world painting, such as in

<https://www.mujrozhlaz.cz/vizitka/poznavaci-znameni-skvrna-moje-obrazy-jsou-jako-krajina-ve-ktere-clovek-vidi-co-videt-chce>.

⁵⁰ Julia Stellmann, Veronika Holcová, in: *Gulliver's Sketchbook*, exhibition catalogue, KAI 10. Arthena Foundation, Düsseldorf 2022, p. 75.

⁵¹ Holcová (note 47).

⁵² Tomáš Pospiszyl, *Painting through Drawing, Umělec (Artist)*, 2001, vol. 5, no. 5–6, p. 88.

⁵³ Markéta Pilátová, 'It's Better to Have Toyen Inside You Than Zmatlíková', *Lidovky.cz*, 28 July 2011, see: https://www.lidovky.cz/kultura/lepsi-je-mit-v-sobe-toyen-nez-zmatlikovou.A110727_125152 In *kultura wok*

⁵⁴ The first was Kateřina Klaricová's book, *Fairy Tales for Mr Izra*, Baobab, Prague 2000; the most recent to date is Silvie Šeborová's *Voice of the Forest*, Labyrint, Prague 2024.

⁵⁵ *Veronika Holcová: Within hand's reach*, Saint-Étienne, Musée d'art moderne, 14 May – 21 August 2011, curated by Lóránd Hegyi.

Painters of Uncertainty: Remarks of Narrative in Contemporary Painting from 2017,⁵⁶ and regularly includes her pieces in his exhibitions. Holcová's works have also appeared in other prestigious shows abroad, notably in Germany, Switzerland and the USA, as well as in Canada.⁵⁷ She also values her artistic affinity with the Chilean artist Sandra Vásquez de la Horra, who lives in Berlin, and with whom she has exhibited on several occasions, including in an impressive exhibition at the historic Colloredo-Mansfeld Palace in Prague.⁵⁸

Method

Just as with her works on paper, which are largely based on automatic painting, though subsequently refined by the trained eye and hand of a professional, she employs medium-based techniques when painting her canvases as well. She does not sketch. She does not know in advance where the painting will lead. She allows herself to be guided. She refines what takes shape beneath her hands. Occasionally she struggles — just as she did in her early days — with excessive technical skill. It is almost astonishing how much the words she had used to describe her work at the very beginning of her studies at the Academy of Fine Arts still apply to her current work: *“Every one of my paintings is a painting of experience. My work is a sublimation of personal experiences and dreams without any form of control.”*⁵⁹ She has been applying her characteristic method — which could be described as working with an initial stain, drippings, associative painting, the use of a central motif, foreground and background planes, or the insertion of micro-narratives — particularly over the last decade, although it appears earlier, too, for example in the painting *Echo of the Sun* (2009–2011). She described her approach in detail as follows: *“Working on a painting is a long process — I work on some paintings for several years. I start with a stain, in which I search for something, as if reading tea leaves. I observe the stains on the canvas for hours, days, sometimes weeks or even months. And when a motif reveals itself to me, I start working on it and adding further glazes. Even if the original scene is lost beneath another layer, it is still present there. I start from a certain chance, but there is work behind it. I both build on and do not build on chance. It is a strange state where I balance between the conscious and the unconscious. Sometimes a certain movement, a figure, or a direction is discernible in a patch, which then leads to further steps and interventions in the painting. One sometimes clings*

⁵⁶ Lóránd Hegyi, *Painters of Uncertainty. Remarks on Narrative in Contemporary Painting*, Silvana Editoriale, Milan 2017.

⁵⁷ E.g. *Lilith / Selina Baumann, Veronika Holcová, Sandra Vásquez de la Horra*, Zurich, Katz Contemporary, 26 October – 21 December 2013, curated by Stefanie Schneider; *On the Blue Shore of Silence*, New York, Tracy Williams Gallery, 26 June – 3 September 2014; *Gulliver's Sketchbook*, Düsseldorf, KAI 10. Arthena Foundation, 18 February – 26 June 2022, curator Ludwig Seyfarth; *Faces of Mind*, Berlin, Haus Kunst Mitte, 17 January – 11 April 2026, curators Carmen Peikert, Dietmar Peikert, Anna Havemann.

⁵⁸ *Pandora's Vox / Veronika Holcová, Klara Kristalova, Sandra Vásquez de la Horra*, Prague, GHMP, 15 July – 1 November 2015, curator Terezie Zemánková.

⁵⁹ AVU Archive, AVU Collection, VH File, Defence of final year project for the 1992–1993 academic year, 27 May 1993, unprocessed collection.

terribly to a single spot; it seems wonderful and one doesn't want to lose it. But in the end, one realises that only by covering it up will the painting move forward, so it's a terrible ordeal."⁶⁰ This is also made possible by a special technical process in which she mixes oil with acrylic paint — in some places the layers repel each other, creating textures similar to those familiar from the works of Max Ernst, Toyen, or Josef Istler. Sometimes she also integrates other materials into her paintings, such as asphalt, a favourite material of the Czech Informel movement, amongst others.⁶¹ She said of this process: *"I discovered that by combining media that don't really belong together, beautiful alchemical processes arise, and that I'm interested in that alchemy. When I pour a stain onto the canvas and play with water, turpentine, oil and various binders, I create a stain that is disgustingly beautiful."*⁶²

Motifs and themes

Veronika Holcová's imagery is a vast and ramified organism in which certain motifs and thematic areas constantly recur, intertwine, and find ever new constellations of meaning. It is impossible to sort them into clear-cut categories — rather, they form a network of archetypal signs that are rearranged anew in every work. Although Lóránd Hegyi speaks in this regard of an inexhaustible, bottomless encyclopaedia that cannot be grasped through 'pseudo-scientific' cataloguing,⁶³ we can attempt to trace several fundamental axes with which Holcová works.

Woman: body, vessel, container, power

A central and recurring motif is the female figure in its myriad forms. Holcová explores the female experience through her paintings as a complex existential situation that is strongly linked to her physical nature. In these, the woman first appears as a body — vulnerable, resigned, erotically aroused and yet threatened. It is a body undergoing metamorphoses, becoming both a vessel for another life and an empty shell. At the same time, however, the woman is a victim. The girls looking forward to a better future are permeated by melancholy and passivity, yet they also exude a kind of quiet, latent defiance, which later transforms into strong female figures. The process of repainting older works, mentioned above, therefore also has thematic significance: the woman-victim transforms into the determined-woman and embodies the very trajectory of emancipation through which the artist herself is passing.

Man, animal, and the archetypal prehistoric era

⁶⁰ Bartůňková (note 1), pp. 36–37.

⁶¹ It should be added to this restorer's nightmare that, technologically speaking, the process of layers drying at different rates is managed to such an extent that the paintings age well and do not crack.

⁶² Bartůňková (note 1), pp. 37–38.

⁶³ Lóránd Hegyi, 'Mysterious Field of Seduction'. The Power of the Imagination in the Drawings of Veronika Holcová, in: *Veronika Holcová*, Silvana Editoriale, Milan 2011, p. 17.

The male figure appears less frequently in Holcová's work, but all the more strikingly for it. He features in several archetypal roles: as a usurper, a primitive force, a lord, or conversely, a prince. Sometimes the male presence seeps through more implicitly via threat and tension than as a clearly identifiable figure. The man is often encoded through animal symbolism: the monkey as primitive energy, the wolf as both a threat and a suffering creature, the bird of prey as a phallic symbol. From here, another significant thematic area opens up: Holcová does not conceive of the archetypal prehistory articulated by hominids or dinosaurs as a historical period but as a state of the human soul — as the collective unconscious in the Jungian sense, that archaic layer of the psyche in which the species' primal memory is reflected.

Landscape as mental topography

Landscape is omnipresent in Holcová's work, yet never as a mimetic transcription of reality.⁶⁴ It is an inner, mental, metaphysical landscape — a projection of a state of mind. At first glance, it seems familiar, like a real place; on closer inspection, however, it transforms into an unsettling, dreamlike space. It is both a symbol of freedom (the sky, the universe, infinity) and safety (a cave), and simultaneously, a place of danger (an abyss). A specific compositional principle that has become increasingly prominent in recent years is the focal point arising from her working method, namely the initial stain from which the image gradually emerges. The foreground functions as a curtain or drapery behind which a depth opens up, articulated by the motif of the eye, the window, the cave, the chasm, the opening. This principle — drawing the gaze inwards — is also psychological: the viewer is enticed to cross the surface and enter the layers of the subconscious or unconscious that lie hidden beneath it. Not infrequently, the canvases function as Rorschach tests — everyone sees something different in them, something they carry within themselves. Indeed, Holcová has painted several smaller canvases that directly reference this famous psychological test (*Revelation*, 2023).

Bird, pearl, crystal: natural symbols

Alongside figurative and landscape motifs, Holcová works with a rich realm of natural symbols. The bird appears in several guises: as a symbol of freedom, as a threatening predator, as a swan embodying sensuality, as an owl possessing wisdom. In some drawings, the bird motif transitions into phallic symbolism and becomes the bearer of the masculine principle within the pictorial composition. Pearls and shells carry the meaning of purity, but

⁶⁴ Among her key sources of inspiration are 19th-century landscape painting, particularly the work of Adolf Kosárek and German Romantic painters such as Caspar David Friedrich. These influences are evident, amongst other things, in her compositional arrangement, her treatment of foreground and background, as well as in her romantic experience of Nature and her ability to reflect the inner state of the human soul. However, as the artist herself emphasises, the landscape of the Ore Mountains is also key to her; she feels a close connection to it and spends a great deal of time there.

also of sadness or melancholy — they arise from pain transformed into beauty. Their round shape evokes cyclicity, the moon, and feminine energy. Colourful beads, reminiscent of soap bubbles or glass marbles, which also appear in the paintings, signify fragile transience. Crystals and minerals, meanwhile, represent the opposite pole: something that grows slowly, under pressure, in the depths (*Agate*, 2011). This is a motif central to the artist's entire approach to painting — the crystallisation of the image is a slow, alchemical process.

Flowers, eroticism, narrative

The flowers that feature in many of Holcová's compositions are not merely decorative elements. They merge with bodies, landscapes, and faces. The flower is an alluring trap — hence the latent erotic charge that permeates many of her works and is particularly evident in her recent output (*Maceška [Pansy]*, 2022; *A Grain of Sand*, 2018–2025). In Holcová's work, eroticism is not explicit but instinctive, hidden beneath layers of glazes and patches of colour, and it is precisely this latent quality that makes it so unsettling.

Face, structure, reflection

In her more recent works, the motif of the face appears with increasing frequency; it is not a portrait in the classical sense but rather a symbol or a landscape in itself. These hybrid forms again emerge from the original patch of colour, and the artist only recognises them during a long process of observation. This is also linked to the more general tension between structure and amorphousness that is inherent in Holcová's work. Colourful patches, running paint, dissolving textures — all of this appears as chaos from which she creates order. The opposing force is the principle of reflection and duality, manifesting itself in the depiction of the water's surface and reflection, but also in the painting of diptychs (*Laura*, 2006; *Digitalis I*, 2010; *Digitalis II*, 2011; *Couple*, 2008–2016; *Couple*, 2009–2024), or evoking the decalcomania technique (*Devils or Anemones*, 2018; *Anemone*, 2013–2024). Yet this symmetry is never perfect — it is always disrupted, shifted, vibrating. As if order were constantly plunging back into the chaos from which it arose.

Ultimately, all these motifs reflect a single fundamental principle: Holcová does not aim for a single meaning, a single interpretation. She opens dangerous portals to other dimensions and holds up brutally honest mirrors of anxiety, repressed instincts and unfulfilled desires. Her metaphysical landscapes are often unsettling, even raw, yet at the same time they are irresistibly magical and alluring. Her paintings are multifaceted fields in which archetypal figures, natural symbols, and abstract structures meet in ever-changing constellations. In a single painting, several parallel scenes unfold; figures meet, pass each other, and rush by. Some scenes resemble a fairy tale, others a horror film, and still others a mythological story. Motifs and themes are not fixed points but floating islands on the surface of the unconscious — they emerge, vanish, and return in new forms. This is perhaps precisely what makes Veronika Holcová's work so exceptionally alive: it's never finished, it always invites a fresh look.