
Tekla Aleksieva

THE GALAXIES OF TEKLA

Drawings for book covers 1979–1989

solo show

2 November – 27 December 2019

Opening 2 November, 6:30 pm in the presence of the artist

SARIEV Gallery, Plovdiv is pleased to present a solo exhibition by artist Tekla Aleksieva. The exhibition presents for the first time to the public the original drawings of the cult book covers created by the artist in the period 1979–1989 in Bulgaria.

The exhibition will feature 38 drawings by Tekla Aleksieva for the covers of the Galactica Library series, 18 drawings from the Eco series and the Bulgaria Library and other books that represent almost all the preserved original covers for her work before 1989. Some of the presented works are in the collection of Veselina Sarieva, while others are provided by Tekla Aleksieva for the purposes of the exhibition.

The exhibition "The Galaxies of Tekla" is a gesture of the gallerists, which, while illuminating a small part of the work of Tekla Aleksieva, has the task to raise the issue of the unique place of the artist in art before 1989, to show the conditionality of the concept of "applied art" and freedom of expression, which it, through its undervalued role by the system, gave the artists in the conditions of a controlled artistic environment before the fall of the Iron Curtain. Using the example of Tekla, the exhibition particularly looks at the place of women artists in this categorization paradigm of that time. The exhibition not only has a retrospective character, but recalls and re-establishes the themes of Tekla Aleksieva's works, relevant to the present – questions about the utopias and dystopias of the past and future, materialism and consumerism of the developed society, the connection nature – man – technology, questions about the transcendental and the imagination in relation to the construct of the political and generally accepted cultural order.

And last but not least, presented in the year when Galactica Library celebrates 40 years since its creation, the exhibition is a gesture to the thousands of fans of the Galactica Library and its creator Milan Asadurov (1949–2019).

The exhibition "The Galaxies of Tekla" at SARIEV Gallery is at the same time the second ever solo exhibition by artist Tekla Aleksieva, who turns 75 on the day of its opening – 2 November 2019.

The text for the exhibition is by art historian Desislava Dimova, authors of the film to the exhibition about Tekla Aleksieva are Kalin Serapionov and Vesselina Sarieva.

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A Galaxy of Desire**The covers of Tekla Aleksieva 1979–1989**

When in 1979 the ambitious and risky project of the Publishing House from Varna "Georgi Bakalov" to publish a series of international science fiction received green light from the authorities in the capital, Tekla Aleksieva was already an accomplished artist. Her paintings were in line with the quests of the young artists of the time, in the direction of increasing freedom and awareness of what was going on abroad. Her style was a particularly attractive mix between photorealism, naivism and pop art, which were just making their way on the remnants of Bulgarian socialist realism, where they would linger only briefly, in favor of more expressionistic tendencies. In Tekla's works, the bold colors, the originality of the compositions and frames, the attention to detail were combined with a sense of the object and the material environment, which were rare in Bulgarian art. Her sense of the absurdity and stagnation of the seemingly dynamic urban everyday life of late socialism was refracted through the visual codes of a surprisingly vital imagery, as if coming from outside, from the West. Knowing Tekla, however, it was coming just as much from within, from her own ability to enchant and to be enchanted with the world.

The paintings of Tekla Aleksieva are relatively few. She is also the author of murals, stamps, tapestries, animated films, textbooks, children's books illustrations, where her characteristic approach while inevitably recognizable, is different each time. It is probably a pure feminine trait that Tekla assumes without complexes, or probably because of her tendency to seek

and find something inspiring in everything, she adapts to the specifics of the particular environment, and does not impose her own style, but creates it each time anew.

In 1979 she was tasked with the book covers of the new series Galactica Library – around 10 issues a year, on which she would continue to work for exactly 10 years, totaling 107 covers. The titles include key works by many Western authors – Ray Bradbury, Clifford D. Simak, Arthur Hailey, John Wyndham, Arthur Clarke, Ursula Le Guin, but also Russian and Bulgarian. Bestsellers of the detective novel also shine through – Raymond Chandler, Agatha Christie, Georges Simenon.

The conditions that Galactica Library provided to the artist were rather luxurious for the socialist book publishing. Full color, high quality print, sober graphic design that gave precedence to the illustration– the series was designed to break the established norms. The unprecedented success of Galactica Library has become a social and cultural phenomenon in Bulgaria since the 1980s, and to this day. It is largely due to the book covers of Tekla Aleksieva, whose images captured the imagination of generations of readers.

Tekla dedicated herself to the book covers and their worlds, with the flair of an artist and the humility of an applied arts practitioner*, accepting the challenge of illustration – the artworks had to synthesize the message of the text into an image, no more, no less.

Many examples in the history of art from the socialist times have shown us that experiments, often impossible in highly representative genres such as painting, occurred in the less controlled areas of illustration, graphic or applied arts. Knowing the other work of Tekla Aleksieva, we can hardly speak of liberation of her style in the covers. However, the opening up to the world, which this unexpectedly admitted series signaled, the fantastic utopian or anti-utopian worlds of the texts themselves, provided a new basis for the artist's approach. The contemporary urban reality, which inspired Tekla was opening up here to new worlds whose materiality she diligently set off to recreate.

What is the magic of Tekla's cover art?

At first glance, for the unbiased, and especially for the Western viewer, they look strangely familiar, reminiscent of covers of boulevard novels, magazine ads or motifs of well-known works of art (echoes of Magritte and Dali appear in many of the covers). In any case, this is a completely non-socialist imagery. Tekla Aleksieva does not avoid the clichés and references, they are part of a collective visual unconscious, part of the image of another world, dreamt of and unfamiliar. The fantastic worlds of literature are projected here on the imagery of the world beyond the Iron Curtain.

At the same time, Tekla Aleksieva's covers are unlike anything else we can see, in the West or in the East. They are a synthesized, artistic reading of the content of the text. Although the artist was familiar with many foreign examples of graphic layout and design, the specific texts reached her as translated manuscripts and she did not have access to their other publications and visual solutions.

Although the covers of Tekla are very diverse, mainly due to the fact that they follow the text closely, we can establish a certain system in the approach, which makes their originality. The compositions are designed to include the back of the book, i.e. the cover has a sequel which can be "read"; the image almost always contains an aspect of a story, we are invited to read the story in the picture; the compositions are mainly single-plan, highly concentrated, even when containing multiple elements; they provide ample space for the text, which makes them atmospheric and spacious, even when they are heavily symbolic and busy, they always "breathe".

Perhaps most striking in the approach of Tekla Aleksieva, however, remains the particular attention to detail, to the elements that materialize the mental reality they recreate. This is probably also the most "western" element of the worlds of Tekla – the interest in the object, its history and aesthetics, the desires we project on it. The worlds of Tekla are worlds of desire. Their appeal is in the encounter between the fields of fantasy and their absolute material concreteness, combined with purely artistic talent and skill in their execution. There is no compromise between imagination and realization, in that lies the applied modesty and intelligence of Tekla that makes these images so accessible – we can literally "enter" the world of the covers. Here lies also her generosity to the reader – his desire is understood and responded to.

There is hardly another moment in Bulgarian art in which the object of desire and consumption is so accepted and recognized. The covers of Tekla not only recreate a world in which symbols and fantasy become the material object of desire. They also take the book itself into account. This is also the almost revolutionary, subversive role of the Galactica Library – the books in

* I use "applied" in the double sense that, for instance, the French language gives us – as applied and dedicated at the same time. "Apply" – *applicare* in Latin comes from *plicare*, to fold. Applicability as flexibility, dedication to the conditions, rather than domination.

the series are probably the first "commodity" in the socialist era in Bulgaria, in which a product is recognized as an object of desire.

In the 80s Tekla Aleksieva also illustrated the covers of another series – Eco, as well as covers for the library Bulgaria – Bulgarian books in Russian. Although stylistically her approach was the same, it is obvious how different subject matter gave rise to different types of imagery. In Eco, the connection between nature, man and technology, the questioning of the hierarchy between man and animal, the search for a connecting thread between all the manifestations of life on the planet, are probably even more relevant today. They also contribute to a general sense of doubt in the ideology of progress, which in the 1980s, in the context of declining socialism, has the added value of criticism.

Tekla's covers captured the collective imagination and opened up a gap in reality, after which the world could hardly be the same. They turned out to be a paradoxically accurate picture of the imagination of late socialism – remnants of a cosmic future clad in the shiny packaging of Western advertising, whose promise of happiness fell into the surreal dream of parallel realities.

Desislava Dimova

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The exhibition of Tekla Aleksieva is part of the Rediscovery program of Sariev Gallery for the search and rediscovery of artists whose work, whether in or outside the context of contemporary art and despite its historical distance, remains relevant today. Such are the exhibitions organized at different stages by Vesselina and Katrin Sarievi, by the artists: Ivanka Sokerova (2008), Albena Mihaylova (2008), Rab (Edge) group (2009), Sasho Stoitsov (2012), Sirma Sarafova-Orahovac (2016). In this line of work of gallerists Vesselina and Katrin Sarievi is also the historical part of the large-scale exhibition "Open Art Files: Notes and Footnotes" (2019) with Open Arts Foundation and curator Vera Mlechevska, which gave a broader retrospective look to Bulgarian art from the 70's to the present, presenting over 50 artists.

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Tekla Wilhelm Aleksieva was born on 2 November 1944 in Sofia. She graduated from the National art academy "N. Pavlovich", Sofia, Department of Monumental-decorative painting, with Prof. Gocho Bogdanov. She worked in the field of painting, tapestry, monumental murals and illustration, makes stamps, tapestries, animated films. The paintings she created are few in number, but today have become iconic and are the property of Sofia City Art Gallery and other collections. Since 1974 she has participated in a number of general art exhibitions in Bulgaria and abroad, in which she shows a vivid development and affinity for the urban theme and its modern, photorealistic transformation.

She became known for the original covers she created between 1979 and 1989 for the books in the science fiction series Galactica Library of the Publishing House from Varna Georgi Bakalov. In addition to the series of covers for Galactica Library, Tekla Aleksieva has contributed to science fiction in Bulgaria by participating in initiatives of the Science fiction clubs in Bulgaria and the Club of the Bulgarian fiction artists "Vassil Ivanov" – exhibitions of science fiction art.

In the 1980s, Tekla Aleksieva also illustrated the covers of the Eco series and the library Bulgaria, she also worked on the design of textbooks, the experimental textbook of 1980, the book of "Kibea" Publishing House "Spiritual Guides of Bulgaria" (in collaboration with artist Boyan Filchev and Hristo Hadzhitanev), calendars and more. In 1996, Tekla Aleksieva implemented a postage stamp project with the image of Baba Marta, which, according to critics, is the first attempt to convey her mythological, rather than folklore, image.

She has won awards at illustration exhibitions in Bulgaria, and in 1985 on Bulgarian National Television was screened a film about her with screenwriter and host Stefan Tihchev.

Although she has an incredible popularity and presence in the media environment in Bulgaria and a number of fans, Tekla Aleksieva has no solo exhibitions in representative galleries and museums in Bulgaria and abroad until 2019. In 2016, she had an exhibition in the space of her friends Artie Jamboure in Sofia. "The Galaxies of Tekla" exhibition at SARIEV Gallery, Plovdiv in 2019 is the first analytical presentation of her work.

She is a member of the Union of Bulgarian Artists.