

An abstract painting featuring layered textures and colors. The composition includes large areas of blue, brown, and pink, with intricate, fringed textures in shades of grey and white. The overall effect is one of depth and complexity, with various brushstrokes and textures visible throughout the image.

*LAYERS OF
PLACE*

NIKOLIJA BARETIĆ HELENA BIRIN
FRANKA VRLJIĆ

27. 02.-27.03. 2026.

Zen Contemporary Art Gallery

Layers of Place

Godišnji galerijski program Zen Contemporary Art galerije obuhvaća četiri do pet izložbi, uključujući samostalne i skupne izložbe već renomiranih domaćih i inozemnih autora. Poseban izložbeni projekt posvećen je mladim, nadolazećim umjetnicima i studentima završnih godina Akademije likovnih umjetnosti, s ciljem njihove dugoročne podrške i profesionalnog usmjeravanja. Podržavajući mlade umjetnike, galerija im ne pruža samo potporu u razvoju karijere, već stvara prostor povjerenja, dijaloga i dugoročnog profesionalnog osnaživanja. Kroz kontinuirano praćenje njihova rada i otvorenu suradnju, aktivno sudjeluje u njihovu umjetničkom sazrijevanju, potičući istraživanje, hrabre iskorake razvoj autentičnog likovnog izraza.

U tom kontekstu realizirana je i izložba *Layers of Place*, treća u nizu takvih projekata, koja predstavlja radove triju umjetnica: Nikolije Baretić, Helene Birin i Franke Vrljić. Kroz različite slikarske pristupe autorice istražuju prostor kao višeslojnu kategoriju, od gradskog horizonta i intime doma do materijalnosti buvljaka, gdje se prepliću memorija, identitet i suvremeno iskustvo.

Nikolija Baretić dobitnica je Rektorove nagrade za akademsku godinu 2022./2023. te nagrade „Crno drvo Laube” za najboljeg samostalnog umjetnika na manifestaciji Nesvrstani. Na izložbi se predstavlja serijom novih radova *Skies over LA*, u kojoj oblikuje kontemplativni ciklus urbanih pejzaža. Sjećanja na specifičnu klimu i arhitekturu mjesta preuzima kao aktivne nositelje prizora, gradeći suptilno strukturiranu atmosferu i produbljenu narativnu dimenziju ciklusa. Radovi su izvedeni u tehnici ulja na platnu, a nastali su prema predlošcima akvarela naslikanih tijekom boravka u Los Angelesu, gdje je i započela inicijalna vizualna bilježnica ovog ciklusa. U prijenosu iz akvarela u ulje zadržana je mekoća i transparentnost slojeva, dok je slikarski nanos dodatno usporen i promišljen, čime je naglašena meditativna priroda prizora.

U ovoj seriji Los Angeles nije prikazan kao ikonična metropola, već kao prostor tišine i atmosferskog stanja. Grad, prikazan bez ljudske figure, djeluje kao tiha scenografija, prostor u kojem je vrijeme usporeno, a ambijent postaje glavni nositelj narativa. Praznina nije odsutnost, već aktivni element kompozicije, ona omogućuje da pogled uroni u suptilne odnose boja, svjetla i prostora. Urbani pejzaž reduciran je na elementarne znakove: horizont, strujne vodove, nisku arhitekturu, poneki neboder ili vertikale koje presijecaju kompoziciju. Ti linearni akcenti, poput tankih tamnih poteza ili uspravnih masa, stvaraju ritam i blagu napetost unutar inače smirenih kolorističkih polja. Arhitektura je svedena na obrise, katkad tek naznačene sfumato prijelazima, čime prostor poprima obilježje sjećanja, a ne dokumenta. U pojedinim radovima motiv zalaska sunca formira toplo, gotovo pulsirajuće središte kompozicije, dok se ostatak prizora rastvara u hladnijim, prigušenim tonovima. Minimalistička redukcija i sklonost slikarstvu obojenih polja dodatno naglašavaju suzdržanost prizora, dok osobna naklonost motivima zalazaka i pejzaža gradi kontemplativni ugođaj i pojačava emocionalnu dimenziju slike. Površina platna tretirana je nježno, bez naglašene fakture, što pridonosi dojmu lebdeće, gotovo eterične slike. Pastelna, lazurna paleta i sfumato prijelazi stvaraju dojam memorijske slike u kojoj se brišu granice između neba, arhitekture i tla.

Radovi iz ove serije, nastali u okviru diplomskog rada autorice, svjedoče o promišljenom istraživanju atmosfere i prostora kao nositelja sjećanja i osobne percepcije. Ciklus se može čitati i kao introspektivni zapis boravka u stranom gradu, ne kao topografska bilješka, već kao emotivna mapa mjesta u kojem su svjetlo, zrak i tišina postali temelj slikarskog promišljanja prostora.

Helena Birin dobitnica Rektorove nagrade za akademsku godinu (2020./2021.), umjetnica je koja razvija prepoznatljiv i autentičan likovni izraz kombinirajući ulje na platnu s vunom, često radeći na žutici (filcu), gustom tekstilu nastalom sabijanjem vlakana, čime slikarsku površinu transformira u taktilno, gotovo reljefno iskustvo. Njezini radovi ne ostaju na razini vizualnog doživljaja, oni prizivaju dodir, traže fizičku prisutnost promatrača i otvaraju prostor neposredne, osjetilne komunikacije. Površina slike postaje meka, zbijena i slojevita, evocirajući toplinu, zaštitu i bliskost. U tematskom

smislu, Helena polazi od pojma doma kao arhetipskog mjesta sigurnosti i opstanka, oslanjajući se na tradiciju Dalmacije i njezina zaleđa. No tradicija u njezinu radu nije nostalgичna kulisa, ona je aktivna referenca, živi okvir kroz koji se propituje suvremenost. Motivi zaklona, skloništa i trajanja oblikovani su kroz nasljeđe prostora iz kojeg autorica potječe, pri čemu se osobno i kolektivno pamćenje isprepliću u gustim, materijalnim slojevima slike.

Polazeći iz intimne pozicije, umjetnica istražuje krhkost i prolaznost ljudskog postojanja te načine na koje se pojedinac prilagođava zadanim životnim okolnostima. Njezini radovi postaju vizualne i taktilne metafore izdržljivosti, tihe, ali postojane. Slojevitost materijala odražava slojevitost identiteta, dok reljefna struktura sugerira tragove vremena, rada i nasljeđa. Vuna, kao tradicionalni i gotovo arhaični materijal, u ovom kontekstu nadilazi svoju uporabnu funkciju i postaje nositelj emocionalnih i kulturnih narativa. Ona je materijal sjećanja, dodira i prijenosa znanja; simbol kontinuiteta koji povezuje generacije. U spoju s uljem na platnu, vuna unosi element domaćeg, ručnog i taktalnog, čime slikarstvo dobiva novu dimenziju, postaje prostor iskustva, a ne samo slike.

Kao pripadnica nove generacije autora, **Franka Vrljić** gradi prepoznatljiv umjetnički identitet koji je već privukao pažnju stručne i šire publike. Na izložbi se predstavlja radovima iz recentnog ciklusa u kojem ishodište pronalazi u vizualnom iskustvu Hrelića, prostora čija se dinamika oblikuje kroz neprekidno kretanje, mnoštvo ljudi i raznolikost starih i odbačenih predmeta. Taj slojeviti, fragmentirani ambijent prevodi u slikarski jezik kroz ritmičan tretman površine, ekspresivne, gestualne poteze kista, lijepljenjem slojeva platna te izmjene zasićenih polja i svjesno ostavljenih praznih, čistih površina. Takvim postupkom autorica gradi kompozicije vođene unutarnjim ritmom, koje poprimaju pulsirajuću strukturu i evociraju energiju, gustoću

Iako ishodište pronalazi u intenzitetu i dinamičnosti tog prostora, autorica ne prikazuje doslovnu gužvu buvljaka, već stvara suzdržanu, gotovo tihu atmosferu koja naglašava njegovu specifičnu sivu melankoliju. Kroz distancu izdvaja osjećaj prostora koji je istodobno prepun i prazan, prenoseći dojam i unutarnji odjek mjesta, a ne njegovu doslovnu sliku. U ovom ciklusu Franka smiruje paletu kako bi dočarala blato, prašinu i sivilo Hrelića. To sivilo ne nosi prizvuk melankolije, već odražava stvarnost, prašinu, nagomilane predmete i ljude koji među njima pretražuju. Unutar te tonalne suzdržanosti povremeno se pojavljuju snažniji koloristički akcenti, poput predmeta koji među hrpama otpada iznenada privuku pogled i daju smisao samom činu traženja. Ti naglasci mogu se čitati i simbolički, kao trenuci smisla ili inspiracije koji se probijaju kroz banalnost svakodnevice, ali jednako tako mogu ostati tek materijalni fragmenti, oslobođeni narativa. U tom smislu Hrelić postaje mikrouniverzum suvremenog svijeta: mjesto gdje se višak i blato stapaju s povremenim iznenađenjima, a slika postaje prostor refleksije o stvarnosti koja nas okružuje.

Iako svaka od autorica razvija vlastiti vizualni jezik i polazi iz različitih iskustvenih i tematskih uporišta, njihove se prakse susreću u zajedničkom istraživanju prostora. Upravo se u tim različitim, a međusobno prožetim slojevima oblikuje koncept izložbe *Layers of Place*, u kojem se prostor afirmira kao nositelj memorije, identiteta i osobnog značenja. U tom susretu otvara se polje suptilnog dijaloga koje zaokružuje cjelinu izložbe, naglašavajući promišljenost pristupa i potvrđujući snažan potencijal nove generacije umjetnica.

Frankica Mitrović Mihić
Povjesničarka umjetnosti i kustosica izložbe



Helena Birin, *Bijeli patuljak (napada me morski pas)*,
100 x 80 cm, uljana boja i vuna na žutici / oil paint and wool on felt, 2026.

Layers of Place

The annual exhibition program of Zen Contemporary Art Gallery includes four to five exhibitions, featuring both solo and group shows by established Croatian and international artists. A special exhibition project is dedicated to emerging young artists and final-year students of the Academy of Fine Arts, with the aim of providing long-term support and professional guidance. In supporting young artists, the gallery not only fosters in the development of their careers, but also creates a space of trust, dialogue, and sustained professional empowerment. Through sustained follow-up of their work and open collaboration, it actively contributes to their artistic growth, encouraging exploration, bold experimentation, and the development of an authentic visual expression.

In this context, the exhibition *Layers of Place* was realized, the third in a series of such projects, presenting the works of three artists: Nikolija Baretić, Helena Birin, and Franka Vrljić. Through diverse painterly approaches, the artists explore space as a multilayered category, from the urban horizon and the intimacy of the home to the materiality of the flea market, where memory, identity, and contemporary experience intertwine.

Nikolija Baretić, is the recipient of the Rector's Award for the 2022/2023 academic year, as well as the *Crno drvo Laube* Award for Best Solo Artist at the Nesvrstani festival. In the exhibition, she presents a series of new works, *Skies over LA*, in which she develops a contemplative cycle of urban landscapes. Memories of the location's distinctive climate and architecture are adopted as active carriers of the scenes, building a subtly structured atmosphere and a deepened narrative dimension within the cycle. The works are executed in oil on canvas and are based on watercolour studies painted during her stay in Los Angeles, where the initial visual notebook for this cycle was also begun. In the transfer from watercolour to oil, the softness and transparency of the layers are preserved, while the painterly application is slowed and made more deliberate, emphasizing the meditative nature of the scenes. In this series, Los Angeles is not depicted as an iconic metropolis, but as a space of silence and atmospheric mood. The city, shown without human figures, functions as a quiet stage—a space where time slows and the environment becomes the main bearer of the narrative. The emptiness is not an absence but an active element of the composition, allowing the viewer's gaze to immerse itself in the subtle relationships of color, light, and space. The urban landscape is reduced to elemental signs: the horizon, utility lines, low-rise architecture, occasional skyscrapers, or verticals intersecting the composition. These linear accents, such as thin dark strokes or upright masses, create rhythm and gentle tension within otherwise serene color fields. Architecture is simplified to outlines, sometimes only hinted at through sfumato transitions, giving the space the character of memory rather than a document. In some works, the motif of a sunset forms a warm, almost pulsating center of the composition, while the rest of the scene dissolves into cooler, muted tones. Minimalist reduction and a tendency toward color-field painting further emphasize the restraint of the scenes, while the artist's personal affinity for sunsets and landscapes builds a contemplative mood and enhances the emotional dimension of the painting. The canvas surface is treated delicately, without pronounced texture, contributing to the impression of a floating, almost ethereal image. A pastel, glazelik palette and sfumato transitions create the sense of a memory painting, in which the boundaries between sky, architecture, and ground are blurred.

The works in this series, created as part of the artist's graduation project, testify to a thoughtful exploration of atmosphere and space as carriers of memory and personal perception. The cycle can also be read as an introspective record of living in a foreign city, not as a topographical note, but as an emotional map of a place where light, air, and silence have become the foundation of a painterly reflection on space.

Helena Birin recipient of the Rector's Award for the 2020/2021 academic year, is an artist who develops a distinctive and authentic visual language by combining oil on canvas with wool, often working on žutica (felt) – a dense textile created by compressing fibers – thereby transforming the painted surface into a tactile, almost relief-like experience. Her works do not remain at the level of

visual perception; they evoke touch, demand the viewer's physical presence, and open a space for immediate, sensory communication. The surface of the painting becomes soft, compact, and layered, evoking warmth, protection, and intimacy. Thematically, Helena approaches the concept of home as an archetypal place of safety and survival, drawing on the traditions of Dalmatia and its hinterland. Yet tradition in her work is not a nostalgic backdrop; it is an active reference, a living framework through which contemporary life is interrogated. Motifs of shelter, refuge, and endurance are shaped through the heritage of the space from which the artist originates, intertwining personal and collective memory in the dense, material layers of the painting.

From an intimate position, the artist explores the fragility and transience of human existence and the ways in which individuals adapt to given life circumstances. Her works become visual and tactile metaphors of resilience, quiet yet enduring. The layering of materials reflects the layering of identity, while the relief structure suggests traces of time, labor, and inheritance. Wool, a traditional and almost archaic material, transcends its utilitarian function in this context and becomes a carrier of emotional and cultural narratives. It is a material of memory, touch, and knowledge transfer; a symbol of continuity connecting generations. Combined with oil on canvas, wool introduces an element of the domestic, handmade, and tactile, giving painting a new dimension, becoming a space of experience rather than merely an image.

As a representative of a new generation of artists, **Franka Vrljić** is developing a distinctive artistic identity that has already attracted the attention of both the professional and wider public. In the exhibition, she presents works from her recent series, which finds its starting point in the visual experience of Zagreb's flea market Hrelić, a space whose dynamics are shaped by constant movement, crowds of people, and the diversity of old and discarded objects. She translates this layered, fragmented environment into painterly language through rhythmic surface treatment, expressive, gestural brushstrokes, layering of canvases, and alternations between saturated fields and consciously left empty, clean areas. Through this process, the artist constructs compositions guided by internal rhythm, which take on a pulsating structure and evoke the energy, density, and unpredictability of the flea market, while maintaining clear and deliberate pictorial organization. Although her starting point lies in the intensity and dynamism of that space, the artist does not depict the literal crowd of Hrelić; instead, she creates a restrained, almost silent atmosphere that emphasizes its specific gray melancholy. Through distance, she isolates a sense of space that is simultaneously full and empty, conveying the impression and inner resonance of the place rather than its literal image. In this cycle, Franka tempers the palette to evoke the mud, dust, and grays of Hrelić. This grayness does not carry a sense of melancholy but reflects reality, dust, accumulated objects, and the people searching among them. Within this tonal restraint, occasional stronger color accents appear, such as objects that unexpectedly draw the eye from piles of discarded items, giving meaning to the very act of searching. These accents can also be read symbolically, as moments of meaning or inspiration breaking through the banality of everyday life, but they can equally remain material fragments, freed from narrative. In this sense, Hrelić becomes a microcosm of the contemporary world: a place where excess and waste merge with occasional surprises, and the painting becomes a space for reflection on the reality that surrounds us.

Although each artist develops her own visual language and departs from different experiential and thematic points of reference, their practices converge in a shared exploration of space. It is precisely within these distinct yet interwoven layers that the concept of the exhibition *Layers of Place* takes shape, affirming space as a bearer of memory, identity, and personal meaning. In this encounter, a field of subtle dialogue emerges, bringing the exhibition into a cohesive whole while highlighting the thoughtfulness of their approach and the strong potential of a new generation of women artists.

Frankica Mitrović Mihić
Art historian and exhibition curator



Nikolija Baretić, *Art District*,
150 x 150 cm, ulje na platnu / oil on canvas, 2026.



Nikolija Baretić, *The Last Afternoon at Hollywood Boulevard*,
120 cm x 180 cm, ulje na platnu / oil on canvas, 2026.

BIOGRAFIJE

Nikolija Baretić rođena je 1991. godine u Bjelovaru. Diplomirala je Modni dizajn na Tekstilno-tehnološkom fakultetu Sveučilišta u Zagrebu 2017. godine. Sudjelovala u izradi minijaturnih rješenja za likove u kratkom animiranom filmu *The Ballad of Pipe and Necklace*, prikazanog na svjetskom festivalu animiranog filma Animafest 2018., u konkurenciji filmova za djecu. Akademiju likovnih umjetnosti u Zagrebu upisuje 2019., gdje je danas studentica završne godine diplomskog studija u klasi prof. Matka Vekića. U akademskoj godini 2022./2023. dobila je Rektorovu nagradu za sudjelovanje u timskom radu od većeg značaja, u nastanku opere *Amfitrion*. Za vrijeme studija izlagala je na nekoliko skupnih izložbi. Samostalno je prikazala svoje radove na izložbama „Horizonti“ u Galeriji Uža, te „Polariteti“ u Laubi (Zagreb, 2024.). 2026. godine izlaže na osmoj po redu manifestaciji *Nesvrstani* gdje dobiva nagradu "Crno drvo Laube" za najboljeg samostalnog umjetnika, a iste godine izlaže u Galeriji Vladimir Filakovac.

Helena Birin rođena je 1996. u Šibeniku. Studentica je druge godine diplomskog studija Likovne kulture na Nastavničkom odsjeku Akademije likovnih umjetnosti Sveučilišta u Zagrebu pod mentorstvom izv. prof. dr. art. Snježane Ban. Do sad je izlagala na nekoliko izložbi. Izvela je nekoliko murala u javnom prostoru (Čuvaonica Etnografskog muzeja Zagreb; *Izložba na cesti*, CKIM) te sudjelovala na brojnim edukacijsko, umjetničko- istraživačkim projektima (*Ekologije odsutnosti: učenje iz fragmenata*, Bauhaus Museum; *Senzitivno mapiranje Vjesnika*, Kontejner; *Did you ever eat tasty wheat?*, AUKOS). Dobitnica je Rektorove nagrade za veliki timski rad (2020./2021.) i nekoliko Pohvalnica akademskog vijeća za uspješan rad (2021. – 2024.). Prethodno je diplomirala Fitomedicinu na Agronomskom fakultetu Sveučilišta u Zagrebu s najvećom pohvalom (2021.).

Franka Vrljić rođena je 2003. godine u Zagrebu. Studentica je zadnje godine diplomskog studija na Akademiji likovnih umjetnosti u Zagrebu u klasi prof. Matka Vekića. Do sada je izlagala na nekoliko skupnih izložbi u Zagrebu, Beogradu, Rijeci, Krku, Puli i Križevcima. Od samostalnih je izložbi do sada imala izložbu "Ploča, pigment, pogled" u galeriji Poola u Puli 2025. godine, izložbu "Prisutnost svezana uz pogled" u KIC-u, u galeriji Bratske kuće na Šolti 2025., te izložbu "Big Brother" u Laubi, u Zagrebu 2025.



Franka Vrljić, *Put sagrađen od tuđih povijesti*,
100 x 100 cm, ulje na platnu / oil on canvas, 2025.

BIOGRAPHIES

Nikolija Baretić was born in 1991 in Bjelovar. She graduated in Fashion Design from the Faculty of Textile Technology, University of Zagreb, in 2017. She contributed miniature character designs for the short animated film *The Ballad of Pipe and Necklace*, screened at Animafest 2018 in the children's competition program. In 2019, she enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, where she is currently completing her graduate studies in the class of Prof. Matko Vekić. In the academic year 2022/2023, she received the Rector's Award for significant team contribution for her work on the opera *Amphitryon*. During her studies, she has participated in several group exhibitions. Her solo exhibitions include *Horizons* at Gallery Uža, *Polarities* at Lauba and exhibition at the Vladimir Filakovac Gallery. In 2026, she exhibited at the eighth edition of *Nesvrstani* at Lauba where she received Award for Best Solo Artist.

Helena Birin was born in 1996 in Šibenik. She is a second-year graduate student of Art Education at the Academy of Fine Arts, University of Zagreb, under the mentorship of Assoc. Prof. Snježana Ban. She has participated in several exhibitions and created murals in public spaces (*Čuvaonica* of the Ethnographic Museum Zagreb; *Exhibition on the Street*, CKIM). She has also taken part in numerous educational and artistic research projects (*Ecologies of Absence: Learning from Fragments*, Bauhaus Museum; *Sensitive Mapping of Vjesnik*, Kontejner; *Did You Ever Eat Tasty Wheat?*, AUKOS). She received the Rector's Award for a major team project (2020/2021) and several Commendations from the Academy Council for outstanding achievement (2021–2024). Previously, she graduated in Phytomedicine from the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Zagreb, with highest honors (2021).

Franka Vrljić was born in 2003 in Zagreb. She is currently completing her graduate studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb in the class of Prof. Matko Vekić. She has participated in several group exhibitions in Zagreb, Belgrade, Rijeka, Krk, Pula, and Križevci. Her solo exhibitions include *Board, Pigment, Gaze* at Poola Gallery in Pula (2025), *Presence Bound to the Gaze* at KIC and at the



Franka Vrljić, *BMX HRLČ*,
100 x 100 cm, ulje na platnu / oil on canvas, 2025.



Helena Birin, *Habitat Tree III*,
160 x 120 cm, uljana boja i vuna na žutici / oil paint and wool on felt, 2025.



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