

The Letters of the Lioness

2024 09 19-10 31

Curated by Monika Lipšic | Participating artists: Eglė Pilkauskaitė, Elvyra Kairiūkšytė, Ieva Rizė, Ieva Rojūtė, Monika Jagusinskytė, Barбора Šulniūtė, Samuel Barbier-Ficat
 Exhibition scenography by: Barбора Šulniūtė, Monika Lipšic | A drawing *The Chandelier of the Lioness* and exhibition graphic design by Jonė Miškinytė

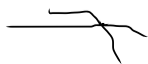
Textual editing and translation by: Alexandra Bondarev, Dangė Vitkienė | Historical consultancy by: dr. Aistė Bimbirytė, dr. Juozapas Paškauskas

We would like to thank Regina Norvaišienė for lending us Elvyra Kairiūkšytė's works, and Gasparas Zondovas, Eugenijus Byčėnkovas, Vadim Šamkov, Liudvikas Kesminas, Ūla Gečaitė, Juozas Augulis, Martynas Maziliauskas and Mantvydas Vilys for their help in the installation of the exhibition

DRIFTS

Gallery working hours III-V: 12.00-18.00, VI: 12.00-16.00
 T. Vrublevskio str. 6-2, Vilnius

The exhibition is financed by:



Multiple currents merge in the historic spaces of the city: particles of centuries-old materials float through the air, gradually becoming part of pavements or buildings. Like dust, they settle on windows or drift down the river, carried away by the water. Something is absorbed by the clothes, skin, and hair of people, whose conversations, whispers, songs, quarrels, and the clapping of horses' hooves have changed over time, while their scents fade away. The theme of this exhibition emerged from an attempt to grasp the porous and fluid nature of history.

Situated within the multi-layered cityscape of Vilnius, right between the Cathedral and the mighty River Neris, the location chosen for the exhibition was a significant starting point. It was here that we first encountered Countess **Klementina Potockytė-Tiškevičienė** (1856–1921), who initiated the construction of a palace nearby, now known as the Vrublevskių Palace. The Countess, often called the Lioness of Vilnius back then, was famous as an ardent fan of parties, entertainment, and romantic adventures, with her palace hosting grand balls, salon gatherings, tableaux vivant, and cabaret shows – events that likely tested the moral boundaries of the era and the rigid notion of women's roles in society. Art historian Dr. Aistė Bimbirytė, who shared some of her research on Klementina's personality with us, notes that the term 'lioness' had almost become a common term in society, used to describe a woman who used emancipation as a guise for entertainment. The main historical sources on Klementina's personality are letters written by herself, her contemporaries, relatives, and acquaintances, as well as the press of the time. There are records of men urging young ladies to avoid Klementina's company, yet the same men would later write love letters to her. Klementina's biography is full of intriguing details, some of which we will attempt to recount. However, at the heart of this exhibition are the artists' works, created and placed within the influence of historical stains and currents.

Historical information about the image of the city in the 19th and 20th centuries, leisure culture, and women's role in society hovered in the background of the creation of the works and the exhibition's body. The exhibition raises questions about the experience and perception of history, as well as the artistic means used to speculate upon and explore historical themes. Letters are treated as historical sources, yet ultimately everything is perceived as letters; thus, the artworks become historical sources in themselves.

Through the displayed works and exhibition space, a sensory perception of porous and fluid history unfolds. **Eglė Pilkauskaitė's** *Kapitelis (Chapter)* (2024) is an imposing participant in the speculative history of Klementina's interiors and decorations. The work consists of galvanized geranium leaves winding around a column, with the artist's grandmother's pearls integrated into a composition of metal-covered flowers. In *Kasnakt (Every Night)* (2022), Pilkauskaitė paints sweat stains on pillowcases used by her family members. The imprints of bodies and dreams, like abstract nocturnal maps, become increasingly evident as the fabric

fades. This work is about repetition, memory, and intimacy. Pilkauskaitė, like another artist featured in the show, Elvyra Kairiūkštytė, is one of those who cannot help but create. Her third work, *AI Dream Content of Vilnius* (2022), presents a legend of the creation of Vilnius, dreamt up by Artificial Intelligence using archival photographs from the Lithuanian Archive of Literature and Art. Connecting the exhibition to the city through this urban thread, the work also features photographic dreams of the palace. Today, the majestic yet still almost invisible palace houses an academic library, where small booths allow researchers privacy in their historical quests. In Klementina's time, this same hall served as a ballroom, witnessing grand revels and gatherings.

The exhibition features the work of graphic artist **Elvyra Kairiūkštytė** (1950-2006). Some might wonder what Klementina Potockytė-Tiškevičienė and Kairiūkštytė have in common. I believe that these two personalities are united by their creative expression and power. Kairiūkštytė worked relentlessly throughout her life – often at night, always fully devoted. Growing up in an orphanage, she lacked both financial and moral support, forging her own path and immersing herself in creative work. The artworks on display are possibly from the period between 1995-1997, when the artist moved to a studio apartment on Skapo Street in Vilnius. Today, one of them can also be found on her memorial tombstone in the cemetery of Kairėnai. However, unsigned and undated, these works may well have been drawn over a few sleepless nights in the artist's home in Vilnius Old Town. According to art historian Erika Grigoravičienė, Kairiūkštytė, while studying in Kaunas, inked erotic images, mysterious rituals of Adam and Eve, and stylized nude bodies influenced by ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian art, Indian miniatures, the Shiva temples' sculptural decorations, and Greek vases. Similar to Stasys Krasauskas' series of etchings *Giesmių giesmė (Song of Songs)* (1966), ancient or exotic clothing is used to cover erotic fantasies. The scent of old paper emanating from the drawings connects this exhibition space with the neighbouring library and Klementina's former palace.

Ieva Rojūtė's text works, expressed through a spatial installation, explore everyday human relationships, conflicts of family and individual identity, as well as the folklore of daily life. Taking her cue from Klementina's legendary personality, Rojūtė created the work *Kankinanti mintis (Tormenting Thought)* (2024) in the form of fragments from a recently-ended wild party – perhaps an obvious choice, given Klementina's lifestyle and the number of hearts she broke along her path. The artist's aim was to use textual fragments to touch upon the emotional state of being appalled by another person, the feeling of condemnation. A shameful

daughter who leads everyone astray – this is how Klementina is described in some letters. The artist was intrigued by the Countess's creative and destructive powers.

The mantelpiece in the gallery space becomes a kind of pedestal for **Barbora Šulniūtė's** work *Are We Humans, Are We Dancers* (2023), which combines nurturing and destructive forces. Delicate and brittle butterflies, destroyed by the touch of their wings, land on the gloves of a woodcutter. The gloves, in turn, act as armor, protecting from sharp tools. Touch can serve as a sensitive mediator, a tool or instrument – ephemeral as a promise, ghostly, or even lethal. The piece speaks of the fragile relationship between humans and nature, between animals and humans, and between mechanical and fluttering, living movements. Šulniūtė's work also incorporates a coneflower she planted in the sculptors' courtyard at Vilnius Academy of Arts, along with the ephemeral promise that butterflies will one day dance in the yard.

Artist **Monika Jagusinskytė**, whose work explores themes of food and care, created a new photographic work inspired by the 'still rooms' of 19th-century manors – unique spaces run exclusively by women. These mysterious rooms stored food supplies, medicinal herbs, and other medicines, and served as small apothecaries to care for the sick. In a society where women had fewer social rights, still rooms often became their independent studios. Jagusinskytė's still room, in the form of a photographic composition, combines historical and contemporary objects.

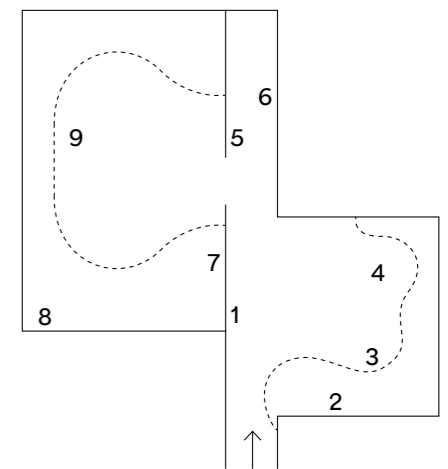
Ieva Rižė's recent work focuses on sensory knowledge, expressed through poetics, aesthetics, and bodily touches, offering alternative ways of understanding ourselves and the world around us. The artist's work draws inspiration not only from the Lioness Klementina Potockytė-Tiškevičienė, but

also from all the sincere, strong, determined, and distinctive beings she encountered along the way. Drawing from their passion for authentic living, the piece speaks about the courage to live. Three words in the work convey a message of love to them all – *endless positive obsession*.

The scenography of the exhibition was created by Barbora Šulniūtė and myself: diving into the mood of the time, we created a distinctive, timeless environment with historical elements. The exhibition space is conceived as a composition of mise-en-scène emerging in the coloured shadows of the palace, while the space, dissected with the help of fabrics, remains translucent. Some scenographic solutions (such as the copper tape by Eugenijus Byčėnkovas, the color red, etc.) were used in the 2021 exhibition *Audra (The Storm)* at the Lithuanian National Museum of Art's Pamario Gallery in the town of Juodkrantė, aiming to create



Klementina Potockytė-Tiškevičienė (1856–1921)
S. Rumbler, Wiesbaden, Germany, 20th-c
Collection of the Kretinga museum, inv. no. KM IF 7095



a sensual experience of artworks and stories through the theme of eroticism. Therefore the exhibition *The Letters to the Lioness* continues my curatorial research.

On the opening night of the show, artist and musician **Samuel Barbier-Ficat** will present a musical performance inspired by the living paintings popular among 19th-century city dwellers. The artist will perform compositions combining classical instruments with electronic music. Barbier-Ficat creates the tension and sense of finality that aristocratic society felt at the end of the 19th century, as the Industrial Revolution and changing social hierarchies signaled the end of an era. As a symbolic nod to the restrictive norms of 19th-century society, the artist will be dressed in an outfit inspired by the clothing of the period (stylist Aistė Frišmantaitė).

Monika Lipšic

- 1 - Elvyra Kairiūkštytė. Drawings. Around 1995 - 1997. Paper, ink
 - 2 - Eglė Pilkauskaitė. *Every Night*. 2022. Cushion cover, pastel pencils
 - 3 - Ieva Rojūtė. *Tormenting Thought*. 2024. Helium balloons, acrylic paint, acrylic primer, silk paper. Variable dimensions
 - 4 - Eglė Pilkauskaitė. *Chapter*. 2024. Galvanized geranium leaves, amber, freshwater pearls, glass
 - 5 - Ieva Rojūtė. *Tormenting Thought*
 - 6 - Eglė Pilkauskaitė. *AI Dream content of Vilnius*. 2022. Digital AI-generated images from the Lithuanian Literature and Art Archive
 - 7 - Barbora Šulniūtė. *Are We Humans, Are We Dancers*. 2023. Steel, pencil, pollen, PVC
 - 8 - Monika Jagusinskytė. *Still Room*. 2024. Photographic print
 - 9 - Ieva Rižė. *Endless positive obsession*. 2024. Bark, copper, resin, synthetic hair
- The exhibition is surrounded by the sculpture of Eugenijus Byčėnkovas