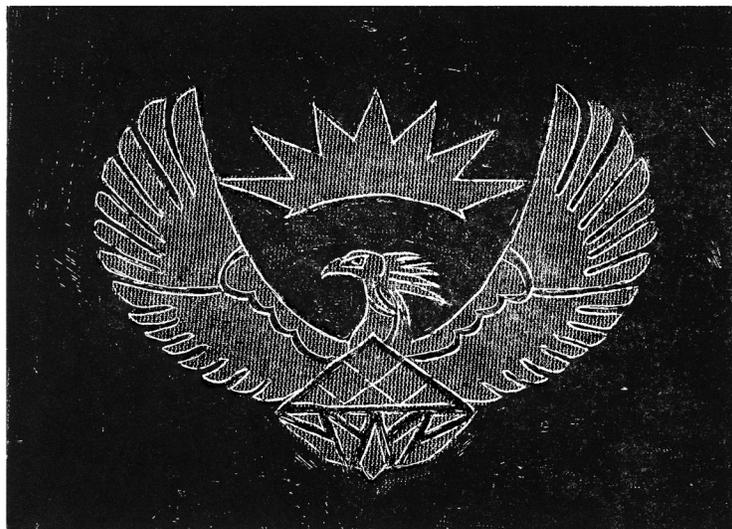


Alina Bliumis *On the Land of Eagles*



Exhibition : september 14 - october 26, 2019

Alina Bliumis' exhibition, *On the Land of Eagles*, voyages through global national symbols and identities. The *Poems Without Borders* series features the world's tourism slogans in patterned rhymes. *Amateur Bird Watching at Passport Control* unlocks symbolic imagery from passport covers. The artist traces global territories in the allegorical *Maps Unleashed* drawings, and portrays national animal symbols in the *Nature of Nations* series.

"I feel Slovenia, I need Spain, Fiji Me, Cameroon is back." Tourism slogans market countries to an expanding industry fueled by low-cost no-frills airlines. Abstract yet suggestive taglines allow foreigners to dream up their own ideas about the countries they want to visit. The series *Poems Without Borders* (2018-2019) arranges official national tourism slogans of forty-eight nations into sixteen poems. For this exhibition, the text-based piece is placed directly on the wall in one straight line that wraps around the gallery space.

Tourism and migration are the most significant manifestations of globalization. While economic, political and environmental migrants are routinely blocked at the border, tourists are ceaselessly wooed on various media and advertising platforms. While countries sculpt their national identities to make themselves more appealing to visitors, they use ethnic and cultural definitions to reinforce laws limiting migration.

"Free as a bird" we definitely are not. Yet ironically there are fifty bird symbols incorporated into the coats of arms depicted on the passport covers of forty-three nations. The *Amateur Bird Watching at Passport Control* series (2016-2017) presents forty-three works on paper. From eagles to doves, from Albania to Tonga, Bliumis studied all existing passport covers – 195 in total -- looking for birds in order to free them from their national context. She traced each bird, true to its source, with a focus on the species' characteristics. The birds at the intersection of nation and nature include: the famous one-legged pose of a flamingo (Bahamas), a vulture in a gliding flight (Mali), an extinct flightless dodo (Mauritius), a rooster with an axe (Kenya) and a mythological creature that is part woman and part bird known as a Harpy (Liechtenstein).

Birds are not the only animals that nations use to symbolize themselves—a brown bear, a Fennec fox, an Apennine Wolf, a Barbary Macaque, a Marten or a goat are all official national animals. *Nature of Nations* (2019) is a series of watercolor portraits inspired by official national animals, heraldic design elements, geographical borders, folk fables, and stereotypes. The resulting images portray: A bird of prey, the bald eagle, freed from the USA coat of arms with a halo made of two olive branches is staring at the viewer, its claw is free of arrows. A seductive double-headed rooster of France is flirting with the audience. An outraged bear with wings is a combination of two symbols, the bear of the Soviet Union and the double-headed eagle of contemporary Russia. A goat of Iraq is crowned with a sword-shaped horn.

The series ***Nations Unleashed*** (2018-2019) is inspired by the historical tradition of satirical maps, which employ animal symbolism and stereotypes to convey biting political critique and/or to cover up human actions in certain political theaters. The series comprises watercolor and pencil drawings on paper. Delicately toned washes of blue surround loosely sketched landmasses populated by an array of diverse animals, each representing a critical political interest. Blümlis' interpretations range from the literal – as in the American bald eagle – to the fanciful – as in a two-headed Scandinavian lion. What these maps lack in geographic accuracy is made up in thorough doses of imagination and humor, leaving further interpretation open to the viewer.

All four series in the exhibition investigate the formation of national identity, its historical and geographical roots and its ambitions in global geopolitics. National symbols often reflect national interests, but imagine for a moment if, as the myth goes, the U.S. Congress had conceded to Benjamin Franklin. For instance, he might have chosen the wild turkey as the national bird, instead of the bald eagle. Would the country's domestic policies and international interests have unfolded differently?

Image: ***Amateur Bird Watching at Passport Control; Secretary Bird, South Africa*** 2016-2017, Relief etching on paper, 30 x 22 cm, Unique