



**JANA ŽELIBSKÁ**

Gandy  
Gallery

## BIOGRAPHY

Jana Želibská (1941, Olomouc, Czechoslovakia), visual artist living and working in Bratislava, play a key role on Slovak artistic scene from the end of the Sixties. She studied at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava and she started her artistic and exhibition career in 1967 with the exhibition *Možnosť odkryvania* (Possibility of uncovering) at Gallery of Cyprián Majerník in Bratislava. During the following year she spent several months in a residency program in Paris, but she returned back to already occupied Czechoslovakia. Despite this fact, her exhibition activity was and still continues to be very rich. Her work was exhibited in many Slovak, as well as foreign institutions: Tate Modern (London), Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), Ludwig Muzeum (Budapest), Zacheta – Narodowa Galeria Sztuki (Warsaw), Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig (Vienna), Gosudarstvennyj centre sovremennovo iskusstva (Moscow), Space Apollonia (Strasbourg), Muzeul National de Arta Contemporana (Bucharest), Centre tchèque (Paris), Embassy of the Slovak Republic (Washington D. C.), Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Wörlen (Passau), Národní galerie v Praze (Prague), XLVIII. Biennale di Venezia, Czechoslovak pavilion, Giardini di Castello (Venice), Courtyard Gallery (New York), Musée d'Art Moderne de la ville de Paris (Paris), Museo Universitario (Mexico) and others.



*Installation view*

## **THE WORLD** **Despair - Hope**

Jana Želibská's solo exhibition *The World. Despair – Hope* interprets the world in three images as a disturbed yet creative field of the present. The artist develops her visual language of sensuality, affective intensity, symbolic condensation, and ironic short-circuit. She presents the world as irritable. She articulates despair and hope as two affective poles of a shared reality.

The installation throughout the gallery space carries a culturally post-apocalyptic quality in its effort to render structures of power visible, to point to the vulnerability of trust, and to search for new meaning. For many years, the artist's postmodern visuality has interpreted crisis through unfulfilled desires or "past futures," and, especially since 1989, through the collapse of stable normative frameworks as a fundamental experience of the modern and post-socialist world. In Central and Eastern Europe, this mode of thinking is particularly significant in the work of women artists. It is connected to a situated post-socialist experience of rupture, to the collapse of ideological utopias and the threat of new totalities, to struggles over values, and to the repeated need to reshape social consciousness. Culture appears here as a field of intense struggle over interpretation, continuity, and value. In Slovakia, recent years have brought newly disturbing aspects of the acceleration of historical movement, in which loss, uncertainty, and emancipatory efforts are deposited within the same temporal layer. Jana Želibská's current exhibition emerges precisely from this experience.



*Uncovering II., 1991, framed print, 52 x 87 cm*

*Uncovering I., 1991, framed print, 52 x 87 cm*

*Courtesy of the artist and Gandy Gallery*

Since the second half of the 1960s, Jana Želibská has been one of the decisive figures of the Central European neo-avant-garde. From her first solo exhibition, *Possibility of Discovery* (1967), she has created situations that transform the conditions of reception, introducing a new regime of seeing and a different quality of spectatorship. It is in this sense that Želibská's work can be read within the broader genealogy of the feminist (neo-)avant-garde. Over the long term, she has devoted herself to cultivating sensibility through shock and to the gradual modelling of female consciousness in public space. Affect is a crucial dimension of her poetics. As Susan Best reminds us, art history has long named artistic tendencies and movements, formal innovations, and cultural meanings, yet has not focused on how works of art engage the senses, corporeality, and viewers' sensitivity.[1] Jana Želibská does not tie meaning strictly to iconographic elements or to a lexicon of symbols, although she willingly employs and cites them. She is equally interested in the movement of bodies through space, the rhythm of looking, light, surfaces, and the agency of different materials.

The current exhibition continues a longer arc in the artist's work with time as a theme and with motifs of transformation. The intermedia installation *Swan Song Now* at the Venice Biennale in 2017 translated the artist's personal apocalyptic poetics into a transcendental image of the swan's final song, expressing solitude as a quality of an ageing world. At the same time, it also addressed youth and its alarming desire for a stolen, already consumed future against the backdrop of environmental catastrophe. It worked with temporality as a form of duration on the edge, intensifying presence precisely at the moment of transformation. *The World. Despair – Hope* develops this energy in an even sharper social register. The exhibition brings into view an image of the world after rupture, interruption, and the erosion of trust in society and in its future. At the same time, it emphasizes the strength of hope in persistence, cultivation, growth, and insists on the value of survival itself.

[1] Cf. Susan Best, *Visualizing Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant-Garde*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2011.

## First image: Despair?

The first image emerges from an experience of injury. The apocalyptic body of the world is female. Rescue foil, as a material of emergency care, also carries an awareness of fragility. Its golden sheen evokes a sacred layer of the scene that, in this simulacral form, activates a multitude of contradictory emotions. The digitally measured time on the wall makes present another, organic time of wood, of the body, of its weight, and of decay. This temporality is further developed in the diptych by the motif of the "beginning of the world," the fissure of time, the holy wound, or the yoni, alongside the artist's characteristic motif of the "prohibition of touch," the impossibility of entering, passing through, and continuing. Želibská has created a constellation in which body, object, and sign become bearers of a shared affective field. Black, gold, wood, and various symbols generate visual tension, but also an experience of the present as a space of care and injury, control and escape.



*Despair, 2026*

*Installation, variable dimensions*

*emergency blanket, plastic mannequin, digital clock, wood, stone, sound*

*Courtesy of the artist and Gandy Gallery*

## Second image: Where is our sister?

The second image represents the exhibition's current cultural, political, and symbolic knot. At its centre stands the object of the "sister," through which Želibská activates historical imagery, not only female, but also cultural memory, care, and public responsibility. The plaster bust, which the artist had already used in the installation *Amateur contra Renaissance* (1989) and to which she returns again in this exhibition, enters into a powerful relation of meaning with the story of the Levoča bust attributed to Cecilia Gonzaga. [2] It is precisely through this transfer that the exhibition space concentrates the conflict between scholarship and propaganda, between scholarly continuity and power's intervention, between care as a principle and an unbearably simplified public handling of a complex cultural and art-historical problem.

The issue did not concern only whether the bust was an "original" or a "copy," nor a simple "yes" or "no." Framed in this way, the matter produced a false situation that radically oversimplified the entire problem. It vulgarized and, in the eyes of the public, devalued cultural and art-historical research, whose value lies not only in a single final verdict, but also in its very capacity to produce new readings of a period, a place, relations, cultural ties, and contexts. This very web of nuances and information constitutes a value in itself: it is a space of knowledge in which the work becomes not merely an object of identification, but a node of historical imagination, (inter)cultural relations, and a new interpretation of both past and present.

[2] The plaster bust used in the installation *Amateur versus Renaissance* (1989) and in the "sister" object in the current exhibition is a copy of the Parisian reliquary bust known as *Constancia*, now housed in the Louvre, not a copy of the Levoča bust of Cecilia Gonzaga attributed to the Renaissance sculptor Donatello, to which it bears a close resemblance. Art historian Marta Herucová has summarized the history of the scholarly evaluation of the Parisian original, from its acquisition by the Louvre in 1888, through Oronzio Lelli's plaster cast of 1894, to later reassessments of its authorship and dating. Lelli belonged to the important Florentine makers of plaster casts and replicas after antique and Renaissance models; he also produced casts after works by Donatello and works attributed to him. The Levoča bust in Carrara marble, whose art-historical significance was opened precisely by Marta Herucová's research, differs from this type in both size and details of modelling. Želibská therefore does not work with the literal identity of the two objects, but with a symbolic transfer between them. The figure of the "sister" allows her to connect historical female imagery, cultural memory, and the current struggle over the interpretation, value, and protection of culture in Slovakia.



*Where is my sister?, 2026*  
*installation, variable dimensions*  
*plaster bust, frames, paper, canvas*  
*Courtesy of the artist and Gandy Gallery*



*Where is my sister?, 2026*  
*installation, variable dimensions*  
*plaster bust, frames, paper, canvas*  
*Courtesy of the artist and Gandy Gallery*

The situation surrounding the Levoča bust thus revealed a fundamental conflict between long-term scholarly work and an administrative gesture, between culture as a space of subtle interpretation and a power that needs to accelerate it, simplify it, and close it down – to use it and devalue it, to violate it. It is precisely in this sense that the Levoča Cecilia has become the face of the present struggle over values and over the space of culture in Slovakia.

The question “WHERE IS MY SISTER?” transforms the “sister” object into the living voice of a woman, calling for solidarity and sisterhood while also appealing for the awakening of civic consciousness. The “sister” becomes the central figure embodying a culture exposed to uncertainty and to a struggle over interpretation. The found icon of the “black square on a white background” and the darkened images in frames create a field of interrupted visibility, reflected gaze, and zones of uncertainty. The historicity of works from the past enters a regime of memory, forgetting, and recollection, transferring responsibility for their interpretation and meaning to the current public, to us. In this image, two mutually incompatible planes of reality meet and form a paradoxical bond. The result is a precise configuration in which absurdity functions as a form of truth. Culture itself speaks here through a historical woman and asks after its tormented sister. [3]

[3] Following the public presentation of Marta Herucová’s research and during preparations for the public display of the work in 2025, the Levoča Cecilia Gonzaga was “abducted” from Levoča by representatives of the Slovak Ministry of Culture and spent 94 days in a government storage facility of the Centre for Security-Technical Activities in Topoľčianky. It was subsequently returned together with an expert opinion commissioned through the Ministry, according to which it should be considered a work from the late nineteenth century, classified as an “intentional forgery.” This report, however, represents one scholarly opinion by an Italian professor, rather than the definitive closure of the whole case. In itself, it does not annul the complexity of the hypothesis opened by Marta Herucová’s long-term research, nor the broader field of historical, material, stylistic, and cultural relations that her research has made accessible.

### Third image: Hope as the germination of the future

The green room carries the energy of hope. It germinates from the sediments of lived experience, from the bottom of Pandora's box of evil and decomposition. In Želibská's work, the flower has a long genealogy as an erotic, corporeal, feminine, feminist, and political sign with multiple layers of meaning. Here, the flowers symbolize the renewing, eternal hope as well as its immortal beauty. In this room, hope takes shape as a force of cultivation. It grows out of knowledge and experience. The future does not arise outside crisis, but through its working-through, through the capacity to preserve sensitivity, cultivate values, and open a new space for meaning even in difficult times.

Jana Želibská has created an environment that seems to think and feel at once. It does not present the current cultural situation in Slovakia and in the world descriptively, but condenses it into images that speak of memory and of the horizon of the future. Despair and hope appear here as two motifs of the same composition, two affects of the same reality. Hope is in our hands – as an active, conscious, and shared practice of care.

Lucia Gregorová Stach



*Hope, 2026*

*installation, variable dimensions*

*artificial grass, artificial flowers, gilded branches, book, painting*

*Courtesy of the artist and Gandy Gallery*



Hope, 2026  
painting, 73 x 103 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Gandy Gallery



*Hope XII., 2026  
painting, 50x50 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Gandy Gallery*

## GANDY GALLERY

Gandy Gallery's programme was developed in the context of the early 90s, when Europe was determining itself by confronting different histories, ideologies and hopes, and the opening of the gallery in 1992 in Prague, marked the beginning of this history...

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