Darja Bajagić
In the Greyzones of History

"My work is a provocative exploration of contemporary society."

Darja Bajagić's work confronts loaded thematic content and recontextualizes history, urging viewers to navigate the complexities of contemporary society through their own interpretations.

We met with the artist at the Montenegro Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in her exhibition, *It Takes an Island to Feel This Good*. An exhibition that reframes the layered history of Mamula Island—a site once used as a fortress, prison, and concentration camp, now transformed into a luxury hotel.

Through fragmented archival images and symbolic shapes, Darja Bajagić challenges viewers to confront the tension between historical memory and contemporary reality without offering clear answers.

“My goal is to highlight the complexities of the world that we live in,” Darja Bajagić explains, “and assert agency to the viewer.”

Scavenging images from the dark web and state archives, Darja Bajagić explores the tension between what is seen and what is hidden beneath. Through imagery and formal decisions such as shape and composition, she subtly intertwines historical references and contemporary issues through a deliberately disjointed narrative style. The resulting work is intentionally ambiguous, echoing her ongoing theme of obscured and fractured narratives.

As an artist, Darja Bajagić resists offering her audience definitive interpretations, instead urging them to engage with the work on their own terms: “I don’t give instruction for the viewer on how to understand the work.”

Darja Bajagić (B. 1990 in Montenegro) is an artist whose research-based work is known for its provocative exploration of contemporary and historical themes. She splits her time between Chicago and Montenegro. In 2014, she received an MFA from Yale University. Darja Bajagić’s work has been shown at international institutions such as Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden; Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, US); Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Poland and Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, Franc. In 2024, she represented Montenegro at the Venice Biennale, cementing her reputation as one of the most compelling contemporary artists of her generation.

Darja Bajagić was interviewed by Nanna Rebekka at the Montenegro Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in April 2024.

Producer and editor: Nanna Rebekka

Cinematographer: Jarl Therkelsen Kaldan

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The New York Times

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries Right Now

By Arthur Lubow, Jillian Steinhauer, John Vincler and Will Heinrich
Nov. 16, 2022

Want to see new art in New York this weekend? Start in Chelsea with Sonia Gomes's fabric-heavy solo show and Ursula von Rydingsvard's wood sculptures. Then head to TriBeCa for a group show on landscape painting and June Leaf's memorable new show.

SOHO

Darja Bajagic and Lionel Maunz

Through Dec. 3. Downs & Ross, 424 Broadway, Manhattan; 646-741-9138, downsross.com.

Left, Darja Bajagic's painting "Baptism by Blood (Mother & Child)" (2022). Right, Lionel Maunz's "My Hands Make the Perfect Wound" (2022). via Darja Bajagic, Lionel Maunz and Downs & Ross, New York; Photo by Phoebe d'Heurle

ArtReview

Darja Bajagić on Representing Montenegro at the 60th Venice Biennale

ArtReview Venice Biennale 2024 13 April 2024 artreview.com

ArtReview sent a questionnaire to artists and curators exhibiting in and curating the various national pavilions of the 2024 Venice Biennale, the responses to which will be published daily in the leadup to and during the Venice Biennale, which runs from 20 April – 24 November.

Darja Bajagić is representing Montenegro. The pavilion is located at Complesso dell'Ospedaletto, Barbaria de le Tole, 6691.

Photo: Geray Mena

ArtReview What do you think of when you think of Venice?

Darja Bajagić The Biennale and the canals.

AR What can you tell us about your exhibition plans for Venice?

DB My exhibition, titled *It Takes an Island to Feel This Good*, curated by Ana Simona Zelenović and organised by the Museum of Contemporary Art, presents a critical consideration of the culture of collective memory and our relationship to shared historical heritage. I reflect upon these topics through painting and sculpture, focusing on the complex and multidimensional history of the Montenegrin island of Mamula. Its fort, built in 1853 by the Austro-Hungarian general Lazar Mamula, was converted into a concentration camp by the fascist forces of Benito Mussolini's Kingdom of Italy during the Second World War; and was revitalised with the assistance of foreign investments as a luxury hotel beginning in 2016.

The title, *It Takes an Island to Feel This Good*, was, in fact, lifted from the hotel's website – it is their slogan.

AR Why is the Venice Biennale still important, if at all? And what is the importance of showing there? Is it about visibility, inclusion, acknowledgement?

DB Yes, absolutely – and it holds significant importance for artists from 'underrepresented' countries such as Montenegro, which tend to operate on a more regional scale. Participation in the biennale offers unparalleled exposure and international visibility. As such, it represents an invaluable opportunity to transcend geographical boundaries and contribute to conversations within the 'global' art community.

AR When you make artworks do you have a specific audience in mind?

DB Yes, I do.

AR Do you think there is such a thing as national art? Or is all art universal? Is there something that defines your nation's artistic traditions? And what is misunderstood or forgotten about your nation's art history?

DB It depends. I am not one to be categorical. However, I do think there are artworks that exist on a spectrum between these two perspectives – national and universal. For example, there exist artworks that are deeply rooted in the cultural or historical contexts, or both, of a specific nation or region, but, nevertheless, retain qualities that resonate with a broader, 'universal' audience, therefore transcending [national] boundaries and speaking to shared human experiences. Ultimately, how this is perceived depends on a multitude of factors, including the intentions of the artist, the context in which the artwork is created and exhibited and the interpretations of its audience.

Photo: Marijana Janković

AR If someone were to visit your nation, what three things would you recommend they see or read in order to understand it better?

DB I would recommend watching the film *The Beauty of Vice (Ljepota Poroka)* (1986) by Montenegrin director Živko Nikolić (1941–2001). It is a comedy that, broadly speaking, describes the tension(s) between traditionalism and modernity. In this famed film, as in others, Nikolić points to the pervasive primitivism of the Montenegrin people while simultaneously highlighting their noble and righteous character, as they grapple with the incoming 'monsters' of contemporary society – corruption, self-interest and vice. Though, today, Nikolić is celebrated for his poignant, satirical depictions of the culture and people of Montenegro (including those in power), during his lifetime, he was often threatened and ostracised for his confronting and daring portrayals.

Another recommendation would be to visit the *Spomeniks* ("monuments") of Yugoslavia, commissioned by Josip Broz Tito to commemorate the sites of Second World War battles and Nazi concentration camps, referring to the resistance and fight for independence of Tito's multiethnic National Liberation Army. Despite the dissolution of Yugoslavia, these colossal concrete structures endure as symbols of remembrance and reflection – reminding future generations of the importance of preserving history and upholding the ideals of freedom and justice.

Lastly, stop by the Mausoleum of Njegoš – interring Petar II Petrović-Njegoš (1813–1851) – located on the top of Mount Lovćen's second-highest peak, Jezerski Vrh (1657m). Njegoš, as he is commonly referred to, was a Prince-Bishop of Montenegro, philosopher and poet – one of the most acclaimed South Slavic poets of his time. In the decades following his death, Njegoš's *Gorski vijenac* (The Mountain Wreath) (1847), a modern epic written in verse as a play, became Montenegro's national epic. It expresses man's struggle for dignity, freedom and justice in life's

never-ending battles – between good and evil; order and chaos; virtue and vice. The mausoleum, a secular structure designed by Croatian sculptor Ivan Meštrović, was constructed in 1971 and inaugurated in 1974. 461 steps lead to the entry, where two granite caryatids, clothed in traditional Montenegrin costume, guard the tomb of Njegoš. Inside, under a gold-coloured mosaic canopy, consisting of 200,000 tiles, a 28-ton statue of the former ruler, carved from a single block of black granite, rests in the wings of an eagle.

AR Which other artists have influenced or inspired you?

DB I don't have role models, but there are artists whose work I admire and respect. One of them is Boris Lurie (1924–2008), an American Holocaust survivor turned artist, writer and cofounder of NO!art, an independent, antiestablishment, avant-garde art movement, commenced in 1959 in New York. As such, throughout his career, Lurie sought to reinforce the existence of an uncorrupted art in the face of [an] oppressive sterility. Steadfastly determined in his efforts to bridge art and real life, he was unapologetic in his representations of reality. As Lurie bluntly put it, 'The price for collaboration in art is – as in the concentration camps – excremental suffocation. It is not by submission, coolness, apathy, boredom that great art is created – no matter what the cynics tell us. The secret ingredient is what is most difficult to learn – courage.'

AR What, other than your own work, are you looking forward to seeing while you are in Venice?

DB I am particularly looking forward to seeing an exhibition of Lurie's work presented by the Boris Lurie Art Foundation in collaboration with the Center for Persecuted Art, titled *Life With The Dead*; and a lot of colleagues and friends, and their projects.

The 60th Venice Biennale, 20 April – 24 November

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Special correspondents

THE BEST VERSION OF THE FUTURE

As we enter an accelerated age, with emergent technologies promising dramatic changes in how we interact with our surroundings and navigate our lives, I've been thinking a lot about the art world as model, because I suspect that what the art world offers (at its best) is well adapted to coming needs.

Imagine: an infinite barrage of content, all tailored to your personal preferences, pleasantly disconnected from the real – or amped up to the continual state of emergency of cable news – and precision-engineered to leach away your precious time. Even more than today. Fast, cheap, ersatz, good enough. Where do I want to spend my precious time?

The Venice Biennale.

Here, in this impossible island city, the past, present, and future braid together in a setting that demands and abundantly rewards your physical presence, with a global community of questing individuals congregating to wrestle with the work of great artists, to discuss, debate, and seek answers and inspiration. Works that ennoble our journey through this world. Expressions of creativity, audacity, and invention that are better than they need to be, allowing you to step outside of yourself and discover new dimensions of life.

Of course, that's the ideal. The city is sinking, the community is riven, society is in peril, our ecosystem is dying, injustice and war can make cultivated pleasures seem grotesque. But in that ideal, in that quintessence of the Venice Biennale, there is something that we will want to ensure we make space for, and extend, in our strange era to come.

by Andrew Goldstein
Journalist, media consultant, entrepreneur

Behind the scenes

A TIMELESS ALLURE

With roughly 200 biennials taking place worldwide, these events have become vibrant hubs of cultural exchange, drawing professionals from diverse backgrounds across the globe. This expansion challenged the traditional dominance of Western art but also shifted art's focal point altogether. Nowadays, discussions focus on multiple art worlds coexisting simultaneously.

Amidst this dispersed landscape, certain centers have maintained their prominence, with the Venice Biennale standing out as a prime example. Its enduring appeal lies in serving as a nexus where art practice, discourse, and market seamlessly intertwine, forging a dynamic atmosphere dedicated to the celebration of international contemporary art, with even deeper significance within modern-day Italy.

This year's Biennale promises thrilling exhibitions showcasing the extraordinary works of John Akomfrah, Koo Jeong A, and, of course, Massimo Bartolini, whose work will be featured in our September exhibition of the Enea Righi Collection at Museion. Similar excitement surrounds Anna Maria Maiolino, who's work is also part of the same exhibition. I'm particularly excited about the off-site exhibition *Nebula*, which will showcase 8 new video installations commissioned and produced by Fondazione In Between Art Film. Two years ago, the Foundation presented a new film by Welsh artist James Richards that resonated deeply with our program and which we acquired for the Museion collection, in collaboration with our colleagues at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

by Bart van der Heide
Director of the Museion di Bolzano

Photo of the day

EUN-ME AHN: SHAMANIC RHYTHM

On the Isola di San Giacomo, the Korean choreographer leads the audience into a transcendent atmosphere

The climax of Eun-Me Ahn's propitiatory choreography on the Isola di San Giacomo. From left, the shaman, a dancer, curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo and the choreographer.

The hotly-anticipated performance of artist, dancer and choreographer Eun-Me Ahn becomes a participatory and collective ritual blessing on the Isola di San Giacomo, during the pre-opening week of the 60th Venice Biennale. A dedication and tribute inspired by Korean shamanic tradition: a solemn ritual in which the bricks of a building's foundation were blessed, kissed, painted pink by a high priestess on a boat and then buried, to bring good fortune to the island north of Murano in its new life as the third seat of the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, which will open in 2025. The title of the work says it all: *Pinky Pinky 'Good': San Giacomo's Leap into Tomorrow*. With a hypnotic rhythm emphasized by gesture and colour - billowing pink smoke - Eun-Me Ahn has invoked the spirits of the island's past: it was once a monastery, later a Napoleonic military garrison. Together with a select curatorial team including Hans Ulrich Obrist and a deliberately "hybrid" choreographic approach caught between joy and solemnity, the artist has succeeded in building a fluid bridge between the past and the present, involving the audience in an atmosphere of transcendence.

by Chiara Corridori

Flash/1

Taiwan, war at home

Poignant, touching and very truthful: for the 2024 Biennale, the Taiwanese Pavilion presents *Everyday War*, a project by Yuan Goang-Ming, curated by Abby Chen. The difficult and alienating living conditions of Taiwanese citizens – memories of the past experienced by the artist's father who was forced into exile – are shown by employing different mediums; videos, installations and photos in which the paradox of normalised suffering emerges. Yuan Goang-Ming guides us through an everyday life threatened by the uncertainty of war, a condition of continuous resistance, flanked by a perpetual but latent threat.

Flash/2

The right to feel welcome

Lack of identity, of belonging to a place; the need to feel part of a community, the urge to feel welcome and protected within the walls of one's home.
In the Home of The Human Safety Net at the Procuratie Vecchie in St Mark's Square, artist Tracey Snelling presents the site-specific work *About Us*, in which different expressive media explore and highlight social dynamics in disadvantaged housing contexts. *About Us* speaks of problems of overpopulation and poverty, of crowding and annihilation to be tackled by adopting attitudes of inclusion, respect and support for the most vulnerable.

by Alessia Pietropinto

The Venetian

A SEASON OF FREEDOM

"As a child and during my teenage years, the Art Biennale represented a carefree moment. The fact that it started in June, coinciding with the end of school, gave me a great sense of freedom: the heat, the warmer months in general, create aggregation and unity, inevitably fuelling creativity. Today I experience this period in a slightly different way: for me it means maximum concentration, a commitment to trying to bring as many opportunities as possible to Laguna~B, the company I took over in 2016."

Marcantonio Brandolini D'Adda
CEO and Art director of Laguna~B

COURTESY OF TAIPEI FINE ARTS MUSEUM

Threshold (Gigantomachy Concerning a Void), multimaterial work by Darja Bajagić realized with concrete powder, acrylic, UV print.

States of the art

CHANGES IN DESTINATION

At the center of the Montenegro Pavilion Darja Bajagić puts an island-prison turned resort

While the title chosen for this year's Biennale is *Foreigners Everywhere* few can embody its meaning better than Darja Bajagić. Originally from Podgorica, she moved with her family to Egypt, then spent years living and studying in the United States before finally returning to Montenegro. This nomadic condition puts her in the position of never belonging completely to any one culture and thus being able to embrace them all.

This sense of foreignness when present, this being perfectly centred in no centre, makes Darja Bajagić's work centred around the here and now, the hic et nunc, which allows her to turn her attention to the fiercest and most difficult subjects by placing herself at the centre of them. And from there, simultaneously observer and part of the observed phenomenon, she explores the past, collective memory and history in order to understand, or at least narrate, the present and the image of ourselves that lives in that present.
With a powerfully post-modern aesthetic, made up of overlapping quotations and references in a melting pot of serial crimes and the dark web, religious symbols, weapons, pornography, misdeeds and perversions, Darja Bajagić also draws with paradoxical elegance – as well as from her own experience and archive data – from the best aesthetic brutality of past decades, reworked with great intensity and filled with the most pressing and direct ethics. Now with *It Takes an Island to Feel This Good*, the title of the project with which Bajagić represents Montenegro, her attention turns to the island of Mamula, which was a watchtower, prison and lager that has since become a luxury resort. Two years of exploration and archival research to redefine the collective memory of the people of the Bay of Kotor, overwhelmed by the media clamour of its latest destination, from which the title derives and which is the starting point for the creation of the work.

The project shows a place in its paradoxical historical sedimentation, but also the voyeurism before the pain of others, mentioned by Susan Sontag

A project that recounts the foreignness of the place in its paradoxical historical sedimentation, but also the strangeness of voyeurism before the pain of others that Susan Sontag describes. Through the considerations of the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, it refers to the lager as the foundation of modern society. And, ultimately, it reveals the character of Darja Bajagić's work which, through a practice made up of layering and cross-references, renders image and matter the reflections on identity and belonging, on the resort that was a lager, on the society it represents. And on her being a foreigner everywhere.

by Andrea Contin

It Takes an Island to Feel This Good
Complesso dell'Ospedaletto
04/20 - 11/24/2024

Talent O'Clock

SHANGHAI EXPRESS

Maya Gelfman's street art vibrates with the energy of the city's 24 million residents

"The theme of this Biennale, *Foreigners Everywhere*, touches on the universal experience of feeling alone and misunderstood, without a sense of belonging, and in search of connections that resonate with our hopes, beliefs and values." Born in Israel, Maya Gelfman has lived a nomadic life since 2017, blending painting, installations and street art into her unified creative practice. She was in residence at the Swatch Art Peace Hotel in 2023, and now in 2024 will take part in the Swatch Faces 2024 exhibit at the Arsenale with a selection of four paintings from *The Shanghai Series*.

Maya Gelfman. Born in Israel, she has been living and working as a nomad since 2017.

What personal and artistic inspirations led you to create this Series?
MG I immersed myself in the city, inviting it to inspire my work. I walked around town to capture its rhythm and atmosphere. I spoke with the people. The rhythm and energy of 24 million people expanded the boundaries of my process like a flood and spurred me into action. My practice is deliberately spontaneous; I use somatic instruments to work directly with my environment and react to it.

How did your experience at the Swatch Art Peace Hotel in Shanghai impact your journey?
MG Being able to rely on the staff and resources of the residence was crucial: it allowed me to sustain a period of deep immersion, concentrating exclusively on the process, free from everyday distractions. I had never been to China before, and Shanghai turned out to be very inspiring. Painting was the medium through which I expressed this profound experience and translated it into art. I will always have fond memories of my time there.

How are the themes of this year's edition and the *Swatch Faces 2024 project* expressed in your work?
MG I have experienced being a "foreigner", "stranger" and "other" in many ways. That experience led me to three crucial decisions: to work in diverse fields, to practice mindfulness for decades, and to embrace the life of an artist-nomad. As the daughter of immigrants who fled Moldova for their safety, I had first-hand experience of what it means to be marginalized, growing up in a secular family in a mostly religious neighbourhood. My best and only friend was queer: we were two misfits trying to make our way in the world. Questioning traditional paths and following a calling must be a family trait.

Amidst the Comings and Goings of Life #2, work from *The Shanghai Series.*

As the daughter of parents who fled Moldova, I experienced what it means to be marginalized, growing up in a secular family in a religious neighborhood

How far is the street, and street art, from the prestigious exhibition galleries of Venice?
MG From an artistic point of view, that passage from interior to exterior keeps me in tension. Naturally, the street imposes speed and adaptability, and the gallery favours precision. Each environment challenges our habitual ways of thinking, creates unique needs and sparks new ideas. What remains the same is the practice.

by Ilaria Solari

PHOTO OF THE ARTWORK: MARIJANA JANKOVIĆ, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST / CURATOR: GERAY MENA. COURTESY SWATCH

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DARJA BAJAGIĆ

It Takes an Island to Feel This Good

Potrebno je ostrvo za ovako dobar osjećaj

Pavilion of Montenegro
60th International Art Exhibition –
La Biennale di Venezia
20.04 - 24.11.2024.

Tara Downs 424 Broadway 3F NY 10013 office@taradowns.com

IT TAKES A PAINTING TO FEEL THIS BAD

Ana Simona Zelenović

Indeed, the past would fully befall only a resurrected humanity. Said another way: only for a resurrected humanity would its past, in each of its moments, be citable. Each of its lived moments becomes a citation a l'ordre du jour [order of the day]—whose day is precisely that of the Last Judgment.

— Walter Benjamin

It Takes an Island to Feel This Good is an exhibition featuring five paintings and one sculpture by Darja Bajagić. Born in Podgorica, Montenegro, she was raised in Cairo, Egypt, and received her formal education in the United States. Today, she lives and works in Montenegro. Her relationship with her heterogeneous heritage is twofold. She exists on both sides of heritage: as someone who imprints it into her work, thereby revising, preserving, and transmitting it, and, on the other hand, as someone who never fully belongs to any one culture, an eternal stranger, an observer without participation. This dual position prompts the artist to approach each series of works as a researcher, aiming to understand a phenomenon from all angles before offering her interpretation. This approach extends to the current topic at hand. The paintings, stemming from the artist's two-year investigation of the island of Mamula in the State Archives of Montenegro and the analysis of media coverage regarding its contemporary repurposing, delve into the history of heritage and contemporary attitudes toward it. The series' title is derived from an advertisement for the new luxury hotel, ironically referencing the layers of history of the fortress, which transformed from a prison and a concentration camp into a resort. Through themes of collective memory, history, and the present, Darja Bajagić's thoughtful approach presents us with a reflection of ourselves, highlighting all the potential, and particularly undesirable, implications of that reflection.

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The specific manner in which Bajagić constructs a painting originates from her approach to phenomena. The relationship between research and subject matter transitions from content analysis to the layering of form. Duality and ambiguity have characterized her method since the inception of her career, and the impossibility of fully grasping the meaning and the position of the artist is integral to her artistic message, which shapes the visual expression of her works. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* (2024) is a paradigmatic example of how a narrative without protagonists continues to cultivate an atmosphere on a formal level, offering an introduction to how visual elements are handled in other works. Despite its self-referential nature, the works' visual attributes—shapes, dark hues, and particularly subtle variations in shades—evoke a desire to

come nearer, to contemplate further, and to delve into the hidden meanings that unveil themselves upon prolonged observation from various perspectives. The layered nature of the works further complicates the understanding of their meaning: in addition to the purely formal, the artist adds two more iconographic layers, offering only hints for interpretation. Regarding the paintings *Frustum — Numero 11: Komadat Logora Mamula* (*Piece of Mamula Camp*) or *Komandat Logora Mamula* (*Commander of Mamula Camp*) (2024), *Gateway to the Gulf* (2024), *The Murder of the Sign* (2024), and *Threshold (Gigantomachy Concerning a Void)* (2024), we know that they contain xeroxes from the State Archives of Montenegro. In the exhibition, we lack precise information about who, exactly, is depicted; we only have information about their visible roles: commander, prisoners, and the fortress itself, which we know had changing functions—a fact that the third layer, the iconological layer of meaning, entirely leaves to the interpretation of the observer. Anchored in the first, formal layer, and the second, iconographic one, we examine the depictions: number 11, known as the serial number under which Mamula camp was registered in the fascist administration, becomes a framework for observing its commander; two photographs of the island depicting the fortress are amalgamated by a line, simultaneously dividing and uniting them, emblematic of marking presence and absence in the documentation of prisoners; the photographs of the prisoners are framed by the shapes of the works themselves—one by an exclamation mark, the other by a rectangle. We interpret all the representations in congruence with the works' formal properties; the textures and shapes of the canvases and frames, serving as the material layer, are integrated into the meaning. Raw canvases, which do not have an originally painterly purpose but rather a practical, sometimes even military one, together with the steel structures that frame them, point to the brutalistic aesthetics of the raw material itself; instead of embellishment, we witness the need to incorporate the associativity of the material into the meaning of the work. The shape of the painting becomes a sign, even a symbol—it directs towards the key in which the representation is interpreted, determining the angle of observation. The photographs, scanned and enlarged, but in their original state, are placed in a dialogue with visual interventions: materials, signs, shapes, compositional juxtapositions, imposed frames, and finally, in one part of the painting, the artist's painterly interventions.

In the presence of the works, already at first contact, the atmosphere swiftly engulfs the exhibition space, permeating the gaps between the paintings and the viewer's perception. The colors of the canvases, combinations of blues, grays, reds, and rust hues, convey the gravity of the subject matter. The grainy textures of enlarged printed photographs occasionally resemble abstract compositions; in *Gateway to the Gulf* (2024), the forms are blended to the point of unrecognizability. This sense of uncertainty breeds tension. Upon initial observation, we catch glimpses of the themes within the works: clear associations arise from the bullet holes in the steel frame of *Gateway to the Gulf* (2024); the sculpture *Limb Immobilizer* (*Iron Rings to Which Some Prisoners Were Tied*) (2024) replicating shackles from the fortress's facade; and the "point" of the painting *Threshold* (*Gigantomachy Concerning a Void*) (2024)—the painting shaped like an exclamation mark—whose abstract blend of materials resembles an open wound. Thus, even without prior knowledge, the obscure atmosphere simultaneously encourages further research into the works' meaning, albeit tinged with a sense of fear and quiet unease.

The dominant theme—the relationship to historical heritage and collective memory—also aligns with other important subjects: the relationship to Evil, and questions of human and political responsibility towards others and memory. Walter Benjamin observes: "To articulate what is past does not ean to recognize 'how it really was.' It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger."[1] Darja Bajagić does not

1 Walter Benjamin, Illuminations (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

presume to use the archival material to address the notion of testimony; she simply evokes this moment of danger as always possible. The paintings before us are not memories; they are artistic visions that, using historical evidence, remind us of what we think we have avoided. Susan Sontag says that there is no such thing as collective memory, but only individual memory and collective instruction.[2] How historical events, like the suffering in fascist and Nazi camps, are remembered and interpreted in public discourse is heavily influenced by political and ideological power dynamics. But regardless of the crime being remembered or forgotten, the principle is the same—"these villains are not us." History unfolds within the vacuum of specific circumstances and individuals. As observers from a significant distance, we might consider ourselves innocent witnesses to its unfolding. Yet Bajagić's paintings from this series subvert this attitude. Evil(doing) happens always and everywhere.

"The camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule," concludes Giorgio Agamben, it's a space where the law is completely suspended.[3] The camp is the inscribing of the naked life itself into the order—"a sign of the system's inability to function without being transformed into a lethal machine."[4] His definitions imply that the camp is embedded within order itself, functioning as a concealed matrix of politics in which we still live. It is this structure of the camp that we must learn to recognize in all its metamorphoses.[5] In his book The Transparency of Evil, Baudrillard argues that in a society where it is impossible to talk about Evil, Evil has metamorphosed into a viral and terrorist form that haunts us. He poses the question: Where did Evil go?—and answers: Everywhere.[6] Both Agamben and Baudrillard depart from the naïve image of the world, politics, and society, where there are "victims" and "aggressors," where a polarized view of reality divides us all into "innocent" and "guilty," warning of the seductiveness of Evil (Enemy) and the danger of approaching from a distance, from the point of moral correctness. While Agamben warns that, sooner or later, we will start to identify with an enemy whose structure we don't know, Baudrillard says that Evil must be fought the same way—with Evil. If we lose our connection with Evil, if we stop identifying with it, there are two possibilities for us—to die, with no immunity, at the slightest contact with the world, or to start unconsciously reproducing it.

Bajagić invites us to reconsider the hypocrisy in turning away from Evil and evil-doing, whether contemporary or historical. The subject's unclear position in dealing with what happened (since it was allowed to happen) calls for responsibility. There are no innocent bystanders. Initially, the paintings evoke a sense of chill and fear, which then give way to feelings of anger, pain, and shame. If we have still managed to maintain ourselves as moral observers, the anger is directed towards the historical enemy—fascism, and its modern equivalent—oblivion. Out of anger and suffering, we pose the question: How were such barbarities committed in the 20th century? Or: How can a man commit such crimes against another? The two aforementioned philosophers highlight the hypocrisy and naiveté of such inquiries. Agamben suggests that the question we should pose is, in fact, "which legal procedures and dispositifs of power made this possible," while Baudrillard emphasizes that "barbarities" are not merely irrational episodes of humanity but rather align with [the] social aspirations of plunging into the abyss. If we abandon hypocrisy, three options remain: suffering, shame, or fear. Shame compels us to acknowledge and confront, to accept responsibility, regardless of our inclination. Fear, on the other hand, prompts us to close our eyes to horrors and creates distance between ourselves and others. The observer can always adapt as well. We are accustomed to shielding ourselves from the unsettling, closing our eyes to the dreadful realities we know are occurring. However, humans also possess a need to grieve, as the narrative of pathos is deeply ingrained in discourse and carries a healing

2 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Harlow: Penguin Books, 2004), 74.

3 The important thing that Agamben points out in the emergence of camps (both in the *campos concetraciones* that the Spaniards created in Cuba in 1896 and concentration camps into which the Englishmen put the Boers at the beginning of the 20th century) is that they emerge from the state of exception, its expansion to the whole civil society. (Agamben, 2020)

4 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer:* Sovereign Power and Bare Life, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press,1998).

5 Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

6 Jean Baudrillard, *Transparency of Evil* (London:Verso, 1993), 81.

influence. Discussing the portrayal of horror and pathos in depictions of suffering, Sontag writes, "So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering."[7] "Those with a stomach to look are playing a role authorized by many glorious depictions of suffering. Torment, a canonical subject in art, is often represented as a spectacle, something being watched (or ignored) by other people. The implication is: no, it cannot be stopped."[8] It is a grim reality, an intrinsic part of life, but it is not happening to me. This marks the limit of our responsibility, as well as the absence of fear—the suffering endured by others is physically and historically distant, presenting no immediate threat. After we have finished lamenting over the world's horrors, we can resume our virtuous lives, absolved by our suffering on behalf of others. *It's not happening to me because I don't deserve it, I am good.*

Facing the dreadful is different. It does not offer healing. Instead, it forces a choice between bystander passivity or cowardice, closing our eyes to avoid witnessing the scene. The work of Darja Bajagić has always featured the iconography of suffering, intertwined with picturesque horror. Hence, her paintings resemble a minefield. Without understanding their implications, they deter impulsive reactions and demand strategic thinking, self-awareness, and reflection. The boundaries between us and the depicted, between reality and fiction, between history and the present, remain unclear, thus invoking fear that Evil is encroaching upon reality, that it envelops us, perhaps even resides within us, yet unrecognized. Uncertainty and ignorance give form to the Devil. *What if I am Evil?*

The ambiguity evoked by the paintings regarding the observer's position generates the anxiety that is the Hell of our time. We lack sufficient information to ascertain whether we stand on the right side, and if, by chance, we find ourselves inadvertently aligned with the wrong side, we are unable to choose. We lack the means to determine our error, lack the strength to shoulder blame, and lack the courage to assume responsibility. We possess no pre-established evidence of our innocence, nor the opportunity to resolve the dilemma. Consequently, we remain ontologically paralyzed, incapable of assuming any of the roles presented—victims, aggressors, observers (accomplices), or innocent bystanders.

One might assume that a subject as stark as the transformation of a former concentration camp into a luxury hotel offers little room for nuanced exploration. However, for Bajagić, this gray area is precisely the focus of her artistic endeavor. Her approach is a transgressive one, which many artists shy away from due to contemporary society's increasingly polarized view of reality. This view often dictates a singular "right side of history," with moral correctness that remains unchallenged. By creating works that challenge both the observer and their perceptions of the phenomenon, Bajagić restores art's role in prompting engagement. Through art, she elevates collective memory and personal historical connections to a meta-level. Here, the precise time and place of Evil become less significant, replaced instead by a reflection on our involvement and the emotions it evokes. This new epistemology is not solely intellectual; it is visceral and emotional. Art interrupts judgment, urging introspection and a reevaluation of one's stance. It beckons for involvement, prompting moments of reflection and silence. Bajagić adeptly reminds us of history's intricacies and nuances, our role in its contemporary context, and the absence of moral innocence. By recognizing Evil within ourselves, viewing it as a continuum rather than a distant "other," and appreciating its seductiveness, we open the door to its prevention. In doing so, we can "deliver tradition anew from the conformism which is on the point of overwhelming it."[9]

7 Sontag , ibid. p 36.
8 Sontag, ibid. p 36.
9 Benjamin, ibid.

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WHAT YOU DON'T SEE IS WHAT YOU MAY GET

Ingrid Luquet-Gad

History returns first as tragedy, then as farce.[1] In the case Darja Bajagić's latest body of works, the farcical nature of eternal return is better understood through its current iteration: history returns as a sanitized, neoliberal limbo. Neither hell nor paradise, it is stuck in a perpetual present; one that has been carefully crafted to seem cool, smooth, and frictionless. To appear as such means that what we see is the result of a deeper process, aimed at a final stage of amnesiac depoliticization. There, the past does not exist, and the future has been suspended. Everything has been reshaped to please the median taste of an international, faceless vacationer: not a subjectivity, just a statistic. Welcome to Mamula Island: a tiny Montenegrin piece of land located in the middle of the Adriatic Sea and the rocky host to an impregnable 19th century fortress occupying almost the entirety of its surface area. Nowadays, the site hosts a luxury hotel whose website proclaims: "The word 'unique' is often overused. It is, however, the best way to describe Mamula Island." If one scrolls further down, a Swiss-style typeface spells out its slogan: "It takes an island to feel this good." We are already aware of how the universal, post-national order of an Empire[2] with no outside encompasses the totality of reality; we are also familiar with how different capitalisms only ever reframe that sole and same reality. And yet, feel-good capitalism has rarely seemed so unapologetic: this is the paradisiac manufacturing of consent,[3] tailored to fit our post-political age. With water so blue that any hard feelings, unsettling facts, or disturbing truths would just float away—wouldn't they?

The tagline now also gives its title to Darja Bajagić's participation in the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, where the artist has been chosen to represent her home country Montenegro. Born in 1990, the artist emigrated as a child and settled in Egypt before arriving in the United States in 1999. In 2021, she relocated to her native country and settled in Luštica Peninsula. From there, she explains, she would see the island looming from afar every day and heard stories about it from several people whose relatives had been to Mamula. That other memory, the embodied one, was kept alive through word-of-mouth; material documentation, however, was sparse and practically non-existent. Bajagić only knew, as most Montenegrins, that the site had a charged historical background. The fort was initially erected in 1863 by the Austro-Hungarian general Lazar Mamula, who gave his name to the premises. Otherwise uninhabited, the piece of land became a part of the Empire's defense plans. Then, during World War II, the fascist forces of Benito Mussolini converted the fort into a concentration camp. From 1942 until the end of the war, its deserted location enabled secrets to be buried, dissensus to be deadened, and forgetfulness to continue being fostered. The last part of the island's official development started in 2015, when the government granted a Switzerland-based development holding permission to convert the former camp into a luxury resort. Privatization began, and the mechanics of glossing over the past were set into motion. Gradually,

1 The much-quoted phrase appears initially as a remark by Karl Marx, commenting on Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,* 1852. It is also the title of a book by Slavoj Zizek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009): fittingly, he diagnoses the two-fold failure of Western liberalism, first as a political doctrine and then as an economic theory.

2 Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

3 The phrase was popularized by the book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988) by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, where the authors analyze how the modern U.S. government utilizes mass-media to the same ends as violent means of coercion.

in media representation and through the resort's public communication, the camp would be framed as a prison, and the erasure of history would be conflated with a "careful restoration" of the building.[4]

Darja Bajagić returned to Montenegro having established herself internationally as an uncompromising observer of both the symbolic construction and the mediatic circulation of images: the ones hidden and forbidden, and, therefore often also, the ones fetishized and collected. After graduating from Yale University in 2014, her first body of work took pornographic imagery as its source material. Bajagić's treatment of an otherwise post modern theme per excellence[5] related to its specific timeframe and technologically engineered perceptual regime. The artist chose to isolate figures that, already in themselves, eluded such reductive pitfalls as moralistic tales of consumption and objectification, or teleological stories of redemption and salvation.[6] One less explored strand of interpretation of these early works connects their inscription in art history with viewer theory as it emerges over the decade. The reversibility of subject and object positions concerns not only what is depicted but also how one interacts with what is depicted. Especially because of the "degree zero" of the pornographic image, we can read the construction of the painterly image in Darja Bajagić's early works as closely intertwined with what has been framed as "participatory culture"[7] in mass-culture and internet-culture alike. In that sense, a deeper, more all-encompassing politics of spectatorship has always been present in the artist's oeuvre; that is, if one concentrates on the relational structure of the works—how they present their subject as much as what they incidentally represent.

To understand the materiality of such a system of presentation and presentification, one needs to first consider their formal lineage. Trained as a minimalist painter, Bajagić isolates her figures inside a shaped canvas to provide them with a new context of apparition and reception. Geometric shapes further complexify the reading of the figure, flattening the traditional hierarchies between foreground and background; just as the use of colors, frequently in muted tones of black, grey, or red, contribute to opening up a space of correspondences. Utilizing a multilayered process consisting of print and painterly techniques, thin layers of acrylic paint and UV print on canvas leave each part of the process visible. The total impression is never illusionary, and the potential shock-effect is only accidental: a critical mind could very well unweave and unfurl the effects and working mechanics of the painting. That such a possibility is at hand yet rarely received as such only further enhances the brute power of an image, of any image that instinctively tends to supersede the careful consideration of its inner workings.

A POLITICS OF RECEPTION: PARTICIPATION BEYOND CONTEMPLATION

The participatory framing of spectatorship entails that in Bajagić's works, two figures of the viewer coexist that would otherwise be encountered separately in the mediatic sphere. There is the everyday voyeur, attracted to the effect of an image rather than to the image itself, and the "emancipated spectator,"[8] interested in the constitution of an image beyond canonical art history and pedagogical visual education. Ultimately, a contemporary framing tends to dissociate them, especially if one considers the period of the 2010s: the viewer as a participant or as a user[9] is preferred over the inherited notion of the spectator as an ideal audience, however emancipated. This is made clear in the artists' oeuvre as she engages with a politics of reception; that is, provided that a first step, necessary and unconditional, be respected: an image's right to appear in the common space of visibility and engage with our indecisive gaze without being preemptively

4 The erasure of history and of its troublesome blind-spots also resonates with a more recent iteration of Empire, namely seasteading: This ultra-neoliberal ideology aims to create... permanent dwellings in international waters outside of governmental territory, thus escaping rules and regulations. It is usually seen through structures such as cruise ships, oil platforms, or custom-built floating islands.

5 See, for instance: Jean Baudrillard's frequent referencing of pornography in relation to war, cyberreality, or consumerism. In: *The Consumer Society* (1970); *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981); and various articles, such as "*War Porn*," in *Journal of Visual Culture*, 5 (1), Apr. 2006.

6 This is exemplified through the artist's recurrent figure of the actress Dominno through works such as *L'Hexagone* (*Intolerable Dominnation*), 2019 or *Transfiguration*, 2019: her blank-faced expression, refusing to engage, makes her an open canvas for projection, presentation (for the artist), and reappropriation (for both artist and viewer).

7 The concept of "participatory culture" was explored at length by pioneering works by Henry Jenkins such *Textual Poachers* (1992) or *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* (2006).

8 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (Paris: Éditions la Fabrique, 2008).

9 See, relating to visual arts in the 2010s more specifically: Stephen Wright, Toward a Lexicon of Usership (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2013).

deemed good or bad. Such a precaution particularly applies to a second period in the artist's production: a change in subject matter appears in the second half of the decade, responding to the times' shifting iconographical blind spot. More precisely, the circulated sexual content in the first era of Web 2.0 gave way to the more ominous presence of crime and war imagery. Where the sexual content is more than an image, too purely corporeal to be looked at, the sensationalized criminal content—whether extremist iconologies, portraits of mass murderers or of abducted children—is *less* than an image: already hiding in plain sight, even when circulated by the mass media, and therefore not even needing to be hidden anymore.[10]

Over the span of Darja Bajagić's production, it is noteworthy that the artist's core logic has remained similar—expanding, adapting, and deepening. The formal approach kept developing following the same axioms, although the fabrication of duality, necessary to escape the overly referential nature of the source-images, became an increasingly erudite task. In works from that second period,[11] we see how the manipulation of symbols now rendered available through their insertion into circuits of disseminated imagery overtake the global, ahistorical space of a mediatic environment with neither refuge nor respite. In a sense, what has often been postulated as the contextlessness of digital images is precisely countered by a careful reframing of those sources by the artist—for instance, by providing information in her titles. However, this does not mean that they are reattributed to their "authentic" origin, but rather the contrary: their circulation has added to the plurality of sources through various participatory uses and multiple sites of appearance. What the early techno-utopians of the 1990s did get right is that the free web made iconographic literacy accessible to most. After all, extreme-right groups and neo-pagan sects in particular mastered the manipulation of polysemic ancient signs and symbols, just as they did with the intricate semiology of social media. This ultimately adds to the position of an artist such as Bajagić, who minutely researches her sources, tracing most of their various uses and misuses,[12] and more essentially, deflects the one-sided purpose characteristic of any subcultural group or movement—the semiotic aspect of identity-building is true for subcultural groups, political movements, and nation building alike.[13] For the artist, polysemy and duality remain key: the fabrication of uncertainty is the goal of the operation; and this can ultimately be perceived once again as relating to a position of the participant-viewer.

Art escapes bourgeois contemplation but it also eludes its avant-gardist ethos.[14] This leads us a third period in Bajagić's oeuvre, corresponding to the body of works presented in *It Takes an Island to Feel This Good*. With it, the preliminary research process has now moved its sphere of operations from the digital to the physical world yet it still does not substantially differ—the current digital space can hardly be thought of as an "elsewhere" nor as separated from the material world. The works' iconographical content similarly stems from material that originally exists in hidden form and more precisely, obfuscated from the public eye. More specifically, the artist has excavated the sparse archive material relating to the disappearing history of Mamula, especially the period from its existence as a camp. As she was not allowed to scan the photographs directly, Bajagić instead used the xeroxes that she obtained in the works. The restricted access clearly appears as a material trace, as one perceives the poor quality of the scans as well as different clues regarding their provenance, such as various administrative markers, be they stamps or watermarks. Nothing is obfuscated in the image itself, only presented inside a reframing that enables the politics of spectatorship to emerge without the preconditioned perceptual reflexes of everyday life and belief systems. Bajagić has enlarged archival documents and transferred them onto the five canvases that compose the Venetian series. She then treats each canvas with a different shape and color. What emerges through the delineation of a

10 The narrowing and subsequent policing of a free web has been chronicled by Geert Lovink though his investigations into critical internet culture. See the trilogy formed by: *My First Recession* (2003), *Zero Comments* (2008), and *Networks Without a Cause* (2011).

11 Exemplified for instance in the 2018 works *Beate, the stony-faced nymphomaniac power-freak, projecting an aura of normality with Susann and Beate – helpful, kind, nice, obliging, primitive, subliminally aggressive and vulgar.*

12 In a previous interview, the artist detailed how she would assemble source-material comprised of "at least twenty pages of research, images and sketches." See: "Darja Bajagić: Save the Art, Kill the Image," in Spike Art Magazine, #72, June 2022, pp. 80-91.

13 In his 1993 book *Imagined Communities,* Benedict Anderson shows how media create a sense of community through the power of imagination, particularly through the written word in books, newspapers, and various magazines that he names "print capitalism."

14 The historical avant-gardes' conception of art elaborated in response to the rise of fascism is propagandist in substance: art is essentially responding to a social function (XVI) and needs to be efficient enough to counter the enemy's own "formation of masses" (XIX). See: Walter Benjamin's analysis of film in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*: Second Version, 1935-1939 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999)

new context of circulation is also a different, alternative framing of an event, thus subtly hinting back to the strategy applied in the real world of Empire. In the case of Mamula's manufacturing of the feel-good present, those multiple possible framings have been narrowed down to one sole and only path. No choice, no problem. Or to put it differently: no freedom, just forever feel-good capitalism.

PORNOGRAPHIC, CRIMINAL, ARCHIVAL: THREE REGISTERS OF THE IMAGE

In the Pavilion of Montenegro, the exhibition presents the five, steel-framed acrylic and UV printed canvases in dialogue with a sculpture.[15] The iconographical works are alternatively treated in a scale of grey or in a plain, muted background color such as burgundy, rust, or blue. What must be emphasized here is how none of the paintings apply the same iconographic strategy, whether through shapes or colors. They avoid any sense of unification at all, even an alternative one. If one considers the series from the standpoint of reception, the motives themselves are imbued with a silent quality, and a first encounter with this new kind of hidden iconographic material leaves one at a loss for words: the deep-seated, typically swift reflex of approval or condemnation, acquired through social media's "like button" paradigm, is derailed as perceptual reflexes must be relearned so as to leave space for nuance. All slightly bigger than human size, the works are hung low and supplemented with a sculpture anchoring their reception in physical space, and not only iconographical, context. Thus, a cast iron ankle holder rematerializes in the exhibition space, which references the ones used for captives. Formerly sprinkled around Mamula, they have now been removed and only subsist, like all the source material, through their vanishing traces on a carefully restricted photograph.

Submerged by the scale of the paintings, which bear little reference to the world as it presents itself to natural perception, we start to feel lost in a totality of grainy, disappearing motives as well as stubborn shapes and colors that now, more than ever in the artist's oeuvre, verge on the purely geometrical. Such a framing of the archive is one that displaces the truth-value that one tends to automatically assign to a historical document, any historical document, and particularly to one that relates to war crimes and stories of imprisonment. What Bajagić achieves through this ensemble is to show how an archival source tends to exert an unquestionable authority on the viewer, however much it has been distorted, reworked, and set into motion through another system of perception as well a different context of circulation and apparition. Conversely, the ensemble also hints at how the viewer, here as well, can regain their critical position in front of an image to reinterrogate how historically constructed perceptions operate on us and ultimately shape our reception when presented with a narrative, explanation, or theory. Neither pathos nor horror will save us from having to make a choice for ourselves.

Pornographic image, criminal image, archival image: inside her system, the artist reworks the three main registers of the contemporary image to carefully craft the conditions of a fragile suspension of (dis)belief. There is however a distinction to be established between those three regimes of the image. The pornographic, the criminal, and the archival image also correspond, in their reworking by the artist, to the specific techno-mediatic paradigm within which they are circulated. Namely, the archival image also demands to be read amidst the current tendency for abstraction to be perceived as a marker of truth, at the same time as transparency, conversely, is now being cast under the suspicion of turning oppressive. One of the most obvious examples of this shift is best observed through an artistic paradigm that was widespread at the turn of the last decade, ultimately conveying a belief in the emancipatory nature of non-visibility and

15 For the paintings: Darja Bajagić, *The Murder of the Sign; Frustum — Numero 11: Komadat Logora Mamula* (*Piece of Mamula Camp*) or *Komandat Logora Mamula (Commander of Mamula Camp; Threshold (Gigantomachy Concerning a Void); Gateway to the Gulf; The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, all 2024. For the sculpture: Darja Bajagić, *Limb Immobilizer (Iron Rings to Which Some Prisoners Were Tied)*, 2024.

in the intrinsic values of "not being seen."[16] Others, in a less simplistic fashion perhaps, have pointed to the abstraction inherent in machine vision, surveillance systems, and data extraction patterns alike,[17] or have articulated the "concrete and causal relationship between the complexity of the systems we encounter every day; the opacity with which most of those systems are constructed or described; and fundamental, global issues of inequality, violence, populism and fundamentalism."[18]

BEYOND TRUTH, PROOF, IDENTIFICATION, AND FACT-CHECKING

As subjects of mainstream 21st media culture, we are faced with the need to unlearn our blind trust in the image as proof and to begin moving away from the inherent truth-value we inevitably tend to attach to the historical document. One needs only consider the proliferation of hyper-graphic war images in our social-media news feeds, that eerie space where self-commodification blends with a general abstraction of the real, where all types of imagery come together and blend in a flood of images with no origin, images unmoored from any real coordinates, that is, the now fully generated images of artificial intelligence. This also entails that a representation that is too graphic, too precise, or too detailed immediately becomes suspicious: it is this kind of imagery, previously hidden (*true because hidden*), that has now become suspicious (*dubious because exposed*). Bajagić still has no interest in unveiling any truth, nor to cultivate any belief in its iconographic existence; rather, she keeps making us, the viewer, face the grey zone, where we will, ultimately, again and again, need to decide for ourselves, or to choose, but only after a process of unlearning, not to decide at all.

Our present time tasks us with reexamining the truth-value of archives. However, nowhere is this inherent attribution of value more evident that in the art world's blind faith therein.[19] At the beginning of the 21st century, a quasi-religious faith in the image as proof is shining brighter than ever and this especially manifests in the archival document, through the array of practices that have now turned to looking for a core truth in the molecular, atomic pores of the real. For several of those artist-seekers, truth-value has been rekindled: it is there but we just can't see it, meaning that a perfecting of new technological tools would lead us to a definitive unveiling. The question of mechanical vision and its relation to reality is not new. Walter Benjamin already contrasted two conceptual characters: the magician and the surgeon, which corresponded to the painter and to the cameraman. To him, the latter "penetrates deep into the subject's tissue,"[20] and from a pre-digital visual environment, already works from fragments and edits, alters the duration of time, space, and points of view. The relation one can draw to our present time is not explicit, but it can however be seen to mark the beginning of our current algorithmically engineered content-production: we now look for an origin in the invisible pores of the real. Thus, it is not truth value that has been abandoned, but its search that has been expanded.

Truth, proof, identification, fact-checking;[21] image recognition techniques, open-source intelligence tools, cultural analytics:[22] those are the current paradigms of the 2020s with and against which Darja Bajagić's new body of work must be read. The Mamula ensemble presented at the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia indicates a furthering of the iconographical regimes that make up the totality of her oeuvre by adding a third one, the archival, to the two existing ones, showing how her artistic system can encompass the shifting nature of mediatic circulation and of the viewer-participant's belief systems. Here, while the new mediatic environment runs parallel to the artist's own progression, Bajagić's iconological sources, aesthetic strat egies, and spectatorship politics can also be read through how this system differs in relation to this strand of practices and their implied framings of the real. Inside Empire, or its metonymic approach through the Mamula series, there is no community left, and therefore also no interpretative community to refer back to.

16 The theme of protesting and subverting facial recognition is recurrent in the works and writings from the 2010s by artists such as Hito Steyerl or Zach Blas.

17 See for instance, the works of Trevor Paglen.

18 James Bridle, *New Dark Age* (London: Verso Books, 2018), 12

19 A thorough analysis of this phenomenon is provided by Claire Bishop in her article "Information Overload," *Artforum*, 61 (80), Apr, 23.

20 Benjamin, Op. Cit., XIV.

21 See for instance the practice of Forensic Architecture in general for images; and Lawrence Abu Hamdan in general for sound.

22 Lev Manovich, *Cultural Analytics*, 2020.

In a neoliberal global world order, forever cool, always smooth, and above all atomized in its individualist social configuration, participatory spectatorship can still exist as a guiding principle, but it must at the same time be reframed as a radically solitary endeavor: the group-effect which previously gave ideology or religion their soothing solace is long gone. The neoliberal limbo only exacerbates the weight of perceptual freedom that Darja Bajagić extends to us here: it is a freedom, but one that doesn't feel like a liberation, double-edged and as heavy on the limbs as an ankle holder. What we can gain from such an act of iconographic and semiotic unlearning is one that will leave us in the throes of freedom and faced with the existential dread of choice. If, however, we chose to play along, well conscious of what we take on by accepting the weight; if we accept to enter the show and spend time in that suspended space of sensorial reconfiguration, we might be freed from the enduring allure of false algorithmic certainties. It really does take an island.

CULTURED

ART

Darja Bajagić and The Politics Of The Profane

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March 1, 2020

The artist Darja Bajagić, photographed by her mother, Sekana Radović, in her Chicago studio.

Darja Bajagić is a Chicago-based artist who has become known in recent years for canvases that depict harrowing violence. Her works pull together fragments culled from a panoply of sources including pornography websites, religious iconography, murderabilia stores and sensationalized news reporting of grotesque murders. Brazenly explicit, these compositions hold a mirror to a sinister world that, despite its aspirations towards liberal advancement, is inflicted by the fetishism of cruelty and exploitation. Whereas others use their practices as platforms to assert political and social stances, Bajagić has been —and continues to be—steadfastly opposed to taking obvious moral stances in her work. While her intentional ambiguity often attracts misinterpretation and ire, the artist's seemingly compulsive attraction to gore and licentiousness stems from a desire to amplify truths about human nature's darkest inclinations.

Bajagić's practice, unsurprisingly, provokes controversy. She first gained notoriety seven years ago as an MFA student at the Yale School of Art, where the faculty critiqued her appropriation of hardcore pornography and urged her to seek psychotherapy. Their derision, however, only emboldened the artist and it was at this juncture that she became increasingly fascinated with gruesome tabloid stories of young women who had been abducted, raped and murdered in

monstrously obscene ways. Bajagić took interest not only in the brutality of these cases but also in their depiction by news agencies and on the Internet. She saw a likeness between the media's pairing of horrific headlines with innocuous photographs of conventionally beautiful female subjects, and the iconic representations of Orthodox saints who were, in her words, "victims of tortuous realities." The artist deepened her research by delving into gore websites where murderers and online bystanders peddle graphic portrayals of appalling homicides. Filled with such images, her canvases force viewers to encounter the most debased strains of 21st-century voyeurism.

Over the past few years, Bajagić has drawn further contempt, to say the least, for turning her attention to the global explosion of far-right nationalism. Her work Bucharest Molly (2016), which features a woman wearing 'Heil Hitler' jeans while holding a Swastika-labeled teddy bear, was infamously removed from a 2016 group exhibition at the namesake city's Galeria Nicodim. She had stumbled upon the original image while casually combing the web for interviews with metal bands and appropriated it as a response to the exhibition's objective of examining "the aesthetics of paranoia and evil across a spectrum of cultural skeletons." Though the curator denied Bajagić's public allegations of censorship, its removal begged the question: under what circumstances should a work be considered too offensive for public presentation?

Far more inflammatory, however, was Bajagić's decision to participate in a two-person exhibition with Boyd Rice at New York City's Greenspon Gallery in the fall of 2018. Rice, more widely known by his music moniker NON, is an incendiary figure who has been well-regarded within countercultural circles for seminal contributions to the industrial noise scene. The iconoclast's decades-long tendencies toward fraternizing with white supremacists and engaging in misogynistic acts, however, sparked fury from an artist-run listserv, which in turn ignited heated protests and prompted the exhibition's cancellation before it ever opened.

Although most of the public's anger was harnessed towards Rice, the debacle caused an intense scrutiny of Bajagić's personal background, calling into question not only her own duplicity in actively choosing to collaborate with the elder artist but also her possible ties to white supremacism. Slated projects were further cancelled; former supporters either voluntarily cut their ties or were pressured into doing so; she regularly received hate mail. The enmity caught Bajagić by surprise, as Rice's monochromatic paintings had previously been exhibited and even received positive reviews without drawing any provocation. Of the backlash, the artist says, "I don't want to throw anyone under the bus with specific examples but, even today, I do feel that I get treated as if I have cooties. [It's] very juvenile, considering most of these people never saw the show (including images of the artworks) nor had they tried to learn about what was actually contributed—what the thematics of the show were."

True to her defiant nature, Bajagić never issued a public apology and instead posted images of the censored works on Instagram. In hindsight, she feels that the scandal proved to be fruitful in that it provoked critical conversations about censorship within the context of the upending anger and disillusionment that may very well come to define our generation's time, as well as about the current politicized climate of hyper-sensitivity. In an audacious move that is sure to further displease critics, she and Rice will be making a second attempt at exhibiting the Greenspon works, alongside more recent ones, this month at Oslo's Golsa Gallery. To her, those who decried the original exhibition had failed to think critically before giving in to a collective knee-jerk reaction. The artist's decision to realign with such a polarizing figure represents a personal stand against the art community's rejection of practices that do not conform to a reductive mode of binary thinking. Bajagić found hypocrisy and danger in the perceived desire to "sanitize" and to "infantilize" complex subjects. Even in the face of intensely nuanced criticism, she rejects the notion that artists should only make creative decisions that can be easily digested and understood to have an uplifting, empowering or easily marketable political agenda.

A detail from the artist's Screenshot at 13:49/15:02 of the NSU's "Pink Panther" confession video (2018).

In actuality, the series of works originally intended for Greenspon highlighted the barbarism of far-right terrorists, in the same way that Bajagić's earlier works uncovered humankind's shamefully instinctive fascination with the extreme sadism of rapists and murderers. The series revolves around a woman named Beate Zschäpe, a member of a German neo-Nazi group who was convicted in

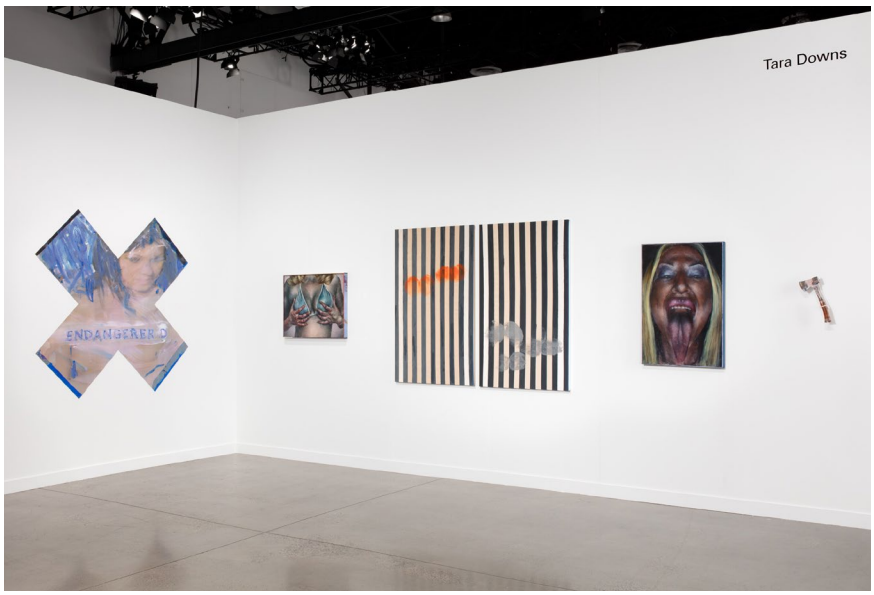
early 2018 for executing ten racially-motivated homicides. Police authorities had discovered a gloating video created by Zschäpe and her accomplices, which merged grisly images of the murders with an episode of The Pink Panther cartoon. Whereas news agencies opted to use photographs that portray the trio as maniacal and calculating, Bajagić chose others from younger stages of their lives, where they appear eerily pedestrian. The artist framed these compositions with disjointed versions of the Greek key—a motif commonly used in architecture and design that also exists as an emblem for Golden Dawn, a different neo-fascist political party based in Athens. Though absent of any obvious visual cues that might decry her subjects' wickedness, Bajagić's intentions—to reveal the insidious ways in which normality often masks revolting malevolence—is projected by the works' titles, such as Beate, the stony-faced nymphomaniac power-freak, projecting an aura of normality with Susann and Beate—helpful, kind, nice, obliging, primitive, subliminally aggressive and vulgar (both works 2018).

The argument that Bajagić's lack of an easily discernible moral compass equates to not only a flagrant disregard for sensitivity but also a shirking of the artist's—or, more profoundly, the white artist's—responsibility to take a stance against traumatic imagery is certainly valid. Yet Bajagić's practice may also rightly be interpreted as an anthropological study of human evil, not only of its manifestations but also of our collective reactions to its portrayal. While it goes without saying that our society should not tolerate white supremacism any more than it should the violent exploitation of women, Bajagić's takeaway is that abhorrence can give new impetus to critical dialogue about sensitive topics, if we allow ourselves to meaningfully contemplate its existence. She refutes the presumption that stifling unsavory opinions and images will repress evil in this world; on the contrary, these forces thrive in the dark corners to which we turn a blind eye. Her work therefore deliberately confronts and offends viewers with the violence, hatred and depravity that most would rather not see. Ever merciless in her delivery, Bajagić's practice is an assertion of a self-imparted responsibility to expose truth, no matter how unpleasant. As she puts it, "Provocation may be uncomfortable, but it's necessary."

ARTnews

The Best Booths at Independent New York, From Monumental Paintings to Tender Photographs

BY ANGELICA VILLA May 12, 2023 6:06pm



Tara Downs installation at Independent Art Fair, May 2023.
PHOTO BY PIERRE LE HORS

The Independent art fair's "no booth" layout, where there are few walls and visitors can mingle freely, has itself garnered a reputation among dealers. It's not hard to see why. At the opening of the fair, which runs through May 14 at Tribeca's Spring Studios, emerging and mid-size galleries showed off their wares as healthy crowds of people moved about, creating a more intimate vibe than is typical at most art fairs.

Twenty-three of the 70-plus participating galleries were staging debut presentations for their artists. Dee told *ARTnews* that introducing new talent was a focus: "This should be a place that almost mimics a whole day in New York going to galleries."

Below, a look at the standout showcases.

Darja Bajagić at Tara Downs

Darja Bajagić, *Engdangerer D*, 2023.
Photo : Courtesy Tara Downs.

Works featuring sexualized images of women by Darja Bajagić, Jacqueline Fraser, Marie Karlberg, and Catherine Mulligan were on view in a group presentation by Tara Downs. Bajagić's art formed the centerpiece. Photos that the 33-year-old Yugoslavian-born artist lifts from the internet and fashion campaigns merge in these pieces: in one, a giant X is mounted on the booth's wall, which is then overlaid with a UV-printed image of a partially nude woman; the word "ENDANGERED," which lends the work its title, is written beneath. In another work from 2023, titled *Ex Axes – Headless Body in Topless Bar,* Bajagić printed an axe with similar imagery that's mounted to the booth alongside garments with Zara tags that overlaid with printed pictures. Fraser's assemblages derive from her ongoing series of installations centered around film, while Karlberg parodies canonical male painters like Wade Guyton, Albert Oehlen, and Christopher Wool, and Mulligan's paintings distort imagery culled from advertising and pornography.

CULTURED

Tara Downs Could Be the First R-Rated Gallery

As she introduces her new, eponymous solo venture to the art world, the gallerist knows one thing for sure: she won't play it safe.

May 4, 2023

Tara Downs with Darja Bajagić's *Endangerer D*, 2023. Styling by Ava Van Osdol.

Outside the gallery, Tara Downs is participating in the upcoming Independent Art Fair with a racy presentation of work by Darja Bajagić, Marie Karlberg, Jacqueline Fraser, and Catherine Mulligan. Marking the gallery's first fair presentation as a solo venture, Independent is an important moment to introduce Tara Downs to the public and offer a sense of the new operation's ethos. But Downs isn't playing it safe.

"If there were ratings, our booth might be R-rated, but I'm not afraid of controversy and I love working with artists who feel the same," Downs says, offering as an example Karlberg, who parodies the reverence for expressive, masculine gestures in art history by stamping her own paint-covered backside on recreations of works by figures like Daniel Buren and Piet Mondrian.

WORDS
Annabel Keenan

PHOTOGRAPHY
Maegan Gindi

With the grim flare of a modernist, Lionel Maunz brutalizes the human figure; like a millennial surfing an internet of atrocities, Darja Bajagic cuts the macabre with irony. Bajagic, born in 1990, pings between Moldova and Chicago, while Maunz, 1975, lives in Brooklyn — but their sensibilities rhyme. Each of the four Maunz sculptures on view in the show “Forest Passage” at Downs & Ross has a Bajagic painting behind it, so that one can’t escape the other. Bajagic’s “Baptism by Blood (Mother & Child)” depicts a priest’s frock and hands on a liturgical book, giving the hands holding hunks of muscle in Maunz’s sculpture “My Hands Make the Perfect Wound” a sacramental aura. Bajagic frames her work with the same kind of welded steel stock that Maunz uses for his armatures — their formal sympathy and shared restraint chill the subject matter to the point of reverence.

This ambivalence between schlock shock and mortal meditation makes it difficult to say what you’re feeling — awed, affronted, or only sick. Maunz’s covers his hairless or burnt-looking animal forms in brush strokes, so that they appear fuzzy, gestural and artificial — rather than waxy and transubstantiated like one of Paul Thek’s “meat” works. The leftmost Bajagic painting, a trapezoidal picture of a group burial, has the noncommittal wit of a Warhol electric chair. In the company of Maunz’s mute slaughterhouse, Bajagic’s crypto-occultic wall hangings seem somber — and yet, their burlap surfaces are stitched up with embalmer’s thread: if you can stomach the thought, it’s almost funny. *TRAVIS DIEHL*

Darja Bajagić

Ultimate Reality, 2019
Acrylic and UV print on canvas
163 x 162 cm

If politics is now manipulated through memes, then visual literacy is vital and contemporary art should respond to this. The work of Darja Bajagić references pornography, murder, and death, not for the sake of transgression, but to hold a mirror to the moral compass of our time.

By Ingrid Luquet-Gad

Save the Portrait Art, Kill the Image

L'Hexagone (Intolerable Dominnation), 2019
Acrylic and UV print on canvas, 187 x 162 cm

Darja Bajagić

Kali Michaels, 2016
Acrylic-latex paint and UV print on canvas,
wooden frame, UV print on Plexiglas
172 x 166 (head), 94 x 118 cm (puddle)

Maddy O'Reilly, 2016
Acrylic-latex paint and UV print on canvas,
wooden frame, UV print on Plexiglas
180 x 155 cm (head), 126 x 116 cm (puddle)

The art world today could be viewed as an IRL Discord channel. The Gen-Z-favoured social media platform fulfills the desire for a more discreet web experience by facilitating smaller, often invite-only communities linked together with thematic hashtags. Its chaotic, hyperactive mode of engagement relies on the implicit pledge to connect users with like-minded individuals: To keep these channels private it relies on self-enacted content moderation to pre-emptively police problematic posts or positions. This internalisation of this task is the reason for its appeal; it breaks from the algorithmically engineered filter bubbles of Web 2 and promises a platform where an aligned mindset can lead to renewed – but displaced – places for free exchange.

Like Web 2, the monolithic death grip of gatekeeping institutions prompts a wish for exit strategies. It has become clear how institutions have submitted to extrinsic corporate interests and are complicit in deep-rooted exclusion mechanisms. The attempts to reform art from the inside have given way to an attempt to save art from itself. Making institutions engage directly with wider issues of social justice and accountability has its limits, and history has shown how prior attempts – such as institutional critique or participatory social practice – became co-opted, repackaged, and cannibalised, ultimately reinforcing what they tried to reform. In turn, there has been a shift in strategy in recent years: communities which view themselves as like-minded have taken a secessionist stance trying to build smaller spheres for interaction. Sedimented along the lines of shared values, communities gather around the workshop as an art practice, the self-organised art school or the Patreon-ed critical-discourse-meets-resource-groups. Here, as well, policing is peer-e forced, generating an individualised sense of moral obligation.

This tendency, however, serves no defined ideology, as it is fundamentally a mode of organising. This yields an implacable impenetrability between inside and outside, and a tightening of already small communities around personal "weak ties" that might be closer linked, but are ultimately

prevented from reaching new audiences. Ironically, the meaning of discord is "disagreement"; however, dissent is precisely what has come to be perceived as the biggest threat of the moment. This relates to the art world's increased tendency to self-censor, thus displacing the lines of previous acts of redaction from a conservative, external front to an internalised suspicion of any potentially triggering content, or people who might produce such content. A clear example of this was the preemptive cancellation of a two-person show curated by Chris Viaggio at Greenspon Gallery in New York in 2018. It was devised to bring together the works of artists Darja Bajagić and Boyd Rice, who was mostly known through his previous activities in the industrial music scene. When word spread that Rice had alleged ties to Neo-Nazism on the private artist listserv the Invisible Dole, there were calls to boycott the show and cut ties with the gallery. This led the owner to cancel the opening, framing it as a "personal" decision that was informed by a "responsibility" towards the artistic "community".

The works, which were not taken into consideration in this debate – they were not even seen through photos – would have included a series of abstract black and white paintings by Rice, and six new paintings by Bajagić. The artist developed work in light of her exploration of far-right terrorism in the West, mixing themes and symbols with those of ancient Eastern European mythology, so as to reflect on the visual literacy of the iconology of evil – an attempt to address the context in which the paintings would have been shown. Bajagić tells me how she has felt "a bit ostracised" ever since. "It felt like a tree falling in the woods when no one is around. At the time, I was really looking forward to the feedback on the new works, but nobody wanted to hear about it, whereas before I feel I was always asked to talk about it and to break everything down."

The case of Bajagić's cancellation seems like a relevant means to enter a discussion on the artistic climate at large. In her work, which spans painting, video, and sculpture, the Montenegrin-born, Chicago-based artist proceeds from found imagery, predominantly web-based, or that which circulates through tabloids, fanzines, or memorabilia. Her repertoire's motifs concern the most widely shared taboos in all societies: sex and death, pornography and murder. As she sources, a recurrent pattern emerges: What's central to the selected images is an intrinsic ambiguity – none of her material is explicit without additional background information or their use inside a specific chain of associations.

The pornographic film actress, Dominno – the artist's self-professed "muse" – is a recurring figure, but her depiction reveals no emotion. She stares back with an absent, indifferent look. In *L'Hexagone (Intolerable Dominnation)* (2019), she is centred inside a black hexagon, a shape derived from medieval church altars, and emerging from a white spiral that symbolises paranoia – ours, not hers. Or, in the shield-shaped *Transfiguration* (2019), Dominno's face has been replaced by a red heraldic sun symbol that has the facial features of a child – namely of a World War II camp survivor. In each example, she can be interpreted as the opposite of an object of pleasure: aggregating intricate historically and geographically discordant symbols, her image does not conform to porn's accepted status of a "degree zero" – as Baudrillard would have it – but is rather an embodiment of polysemic power. As the epitome of an imagery intended to produce an effect – jouissance and consumption – the neutrality of her gaze deactivates its immediate reception and frustrates pre-defined expectations. This is further amplified when similarly charged iconography, relating to religion or genocide is presented inside the same picture: there is no essential nature of the images, once circulated they have already become an uprooted

Transfiguration, 2019
Acrylic and UV print on canvas
87.5 x 76 cm

surface that reveals less of their subject than of our own quest for meaning.

Mass murderers or child abductors are presented in candid or mundane situations and similarly counter an immediate, one-sided tethering of an image to meaning. Here, our previous knowledge of a certain event determines its reading, causing us to overlook how the most barbaric individuals can present an outward appearance of utter innocence. In a 2018 series, of which two paintings were intended for the Greenspon show, Bajagić depicted Beate Zschäpe, former member of the German Neo-Nazi National Socialist Underground. In *Beate, the stony-faced nymphomaniac power-freak, projecting an aura of normality with Susann* she cheerily poses with a friend in matching rhinestoned AC/DC band T-shirts. In *Beate—helpful, kind, nice, obliging, primitive, subliminally aggressive and vulgar* she appears as a younger, smiling woman, her face partly obliterated by a black and red Greek key – another dual symbol, commonly used in architecture and kitchenware, but also by the brand Versace, as well as the Greek ultranationalist party Golden Dawn. The fact of the artist's focus on predominantly female protagonists is again directly related to how those images have already been inserted into previous chains of meaning. Namely, how mass media plays into the same, well-oiled spectacularised affective device that is the porn industry, presenting conventionally appealing, innocent and beautiful, women, even if the headline describes an act of horror.

Already as a preteen, Bajagić appropriated images of girls from porn sites or scam pages to role-play in stereotypical female identities on various social networks, a response to the exoticising gaze on Eastern European women. As a student at Yale University's Painting and Printmaking programme, this method evolved into her characteristic painterly vocabulary. She starts with a monochrome background of assembled panels or shaped canvases onto which she screen-prints a selection of images. Through geometrically reconfigured signs and symbols, the final composition reinserts itself within a new symbolic context, one which can also be read as the spatial equivalent of a network, some parts are linked or singled out, superposed or colliding. Each painting is like a freeze-frame: it attests to the perpetual circulation of its source material, recombined inside a certain perceptual matrix where multiple connections are available.

The power of imagic dissemination is a core factor in the reception of Bajagić's works, as she considers all potential interpretations to be correct. "I feel that it is really important not to hand the information over as I want the work to ignite different perspectives on the work or the images."

f.l.t.r.: Ex Axes – Hunting for Bitches, 2017; *Ex Axes – This Is Serenity!*, 2018; *Ex Axes – The Pleasures Received In Pain*, 2018; *Ex Axes – Corna*, 2017; *Ex Axes – undeRage*, 2017; *Ex Axes – Another Lost Year*, 2018; *Ex Axes – The Last Delight*, 2017; *Ex Axes – Walls Sweat Images*, 2018
Direct-to-substrate print on steel axe, 33 x 13 x 2.5 cm

For each show, she will assemble source-material comprised of "at least twenty pages of research, images and sketches". She will send this to a curator while opting for strategic allusiveness with the public. "I want it to come out in an organic way. The only direct context comes through the titles. They are usually full of information, or at least, in the scope of a show, some of them will be, so that you can connect the dots in that way like a puzzle." The works are a sort of mirror held up to the "banality of evil", per Bajagić, in which the perceiving body also sees itself, caught in a triangulation between real evil (human), projected judgments (societal), and felt emotions (individual).

We see an artwork that is the result of a subjective act of researching, connecting and making, through her specific knowledge of Orthodox iconology and Slavic mythology, but at the same time, we indirectly regain access to the greater

The work's meaning is also derived from what lies beyond the artist's control, as it bears the traces of its participation in a given system.

Beate, the stony-faced nymphomaniac power-freak, projecting an aura of normality with Susann, 2018
Acrylic and UV print on canvas, 165 x 231 cm

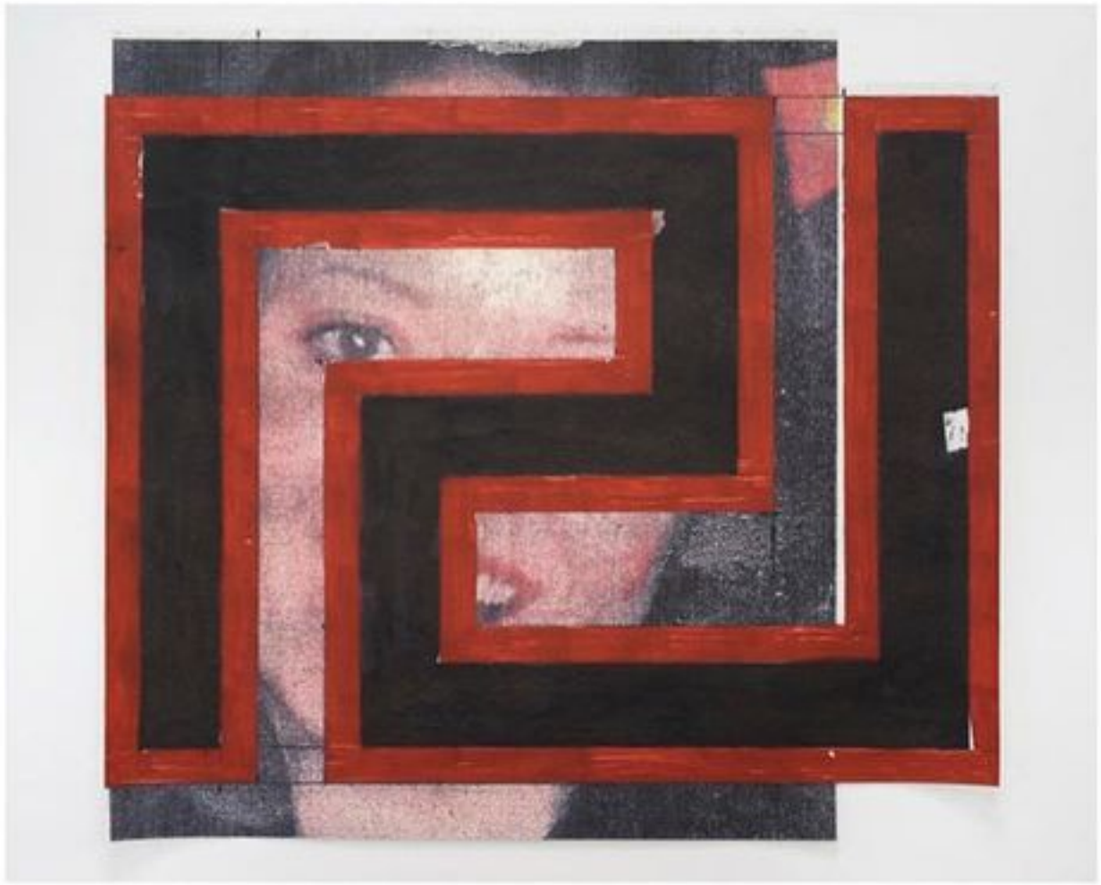
picture – how image industries orient our gaze towards a specific determination of the same images. By presenting both levels, and doing so from inside the symbolic context of art, which enables time for a critical observance as well as a consideration of the "clues" in the titles and through the press release, we are given an opportunity to detach ourselves from a preconstructed – and potentially manipulated – reception. In spite of the art world's tendency to segment itself into neatly maintained safe spaces, art confronts us with content that lies outside of our interlinked bubbles because of its public address. Or at least, it *could*, provided we can materially access it. Here, two levels come into play – the secular question of how an artwork's status relates to the artist's intention. The first concerns the recent, topical debate of emphasising the artist's aim. Bajagić says that she feels that such distinction is necessary: "Art can't just be about how a person is presenting themselves through art. The artwork is important, it is not just a detritus of the person behind." That this might come to pass is, to her, related to "art's function today, which just doesn't seem to carry the same weight or value anymore, but feels more and more like a straight-up product."

The second level feeds into a wider, canonical approach of reception. It is, also a question of the position of the artist: the inherited romantic figure of the free and individualist genius, where inspiration and intention exist in a pure state devoid of external disruption. To reaffirm the status of the artwork is to posit that art derives its critical function from infusion with contextual elements and its embeddedness in certain frameworks, networked and societal. This is to say that the work's meaning is also derived from what lies beyond the artist's control, as it bears the traces of its participation in a given system which informs the perceptual configuration of its contents, while simultaneously allowing the step back necessary for this very system's visualisation, and therefore,

View of "Goregeous", Le Confort Moderne, Poitiers, 2020
left: Boyd Rice; right: Darja Bajagić

conscious analysis by symbolic distance and deceleration. In his essay "After Art" (2012), David Joselit calls for a revision of critical methodology attuned to a shift from the production of art to the power of images. The art historian debunks two common misreadings, "the naïve and the sophisticated": That the contemporary artwork is *about* its represented subject, or that it is *about* its mechanical reproduction. Both "fail to recognise that the work's power lies in its staging of a performative mode of looking through which the single image and the network are visible at once." In the case of Bajagić, this becomes apparent in the way that each work stages an oversaturation of colliding symbols, which, despite their openness, still relate to a certain mode of circulation. What a current climate of trigger-core indicates is the danger of losing a space for experimenting with symbolic circulation and construction to better understand how meaning is generated through visuality and how opinions gain traction in contemporary, image-based society. Art, provided that its open-ended reception is reassessed, stands as a middle ground between immersion and isolation – it is at the same time resistant and reflexive to its societal context – and as such is needed more than ever, even more than a couple of years ago. The imperative is a

Can the art world take back free speech, image power and shock value?



Beate – helpful, kind, nice, obliging, primitive, subliminally aggressive and vulgar, 2018
Acrylic and UV print on canvas
165 x 182 cm

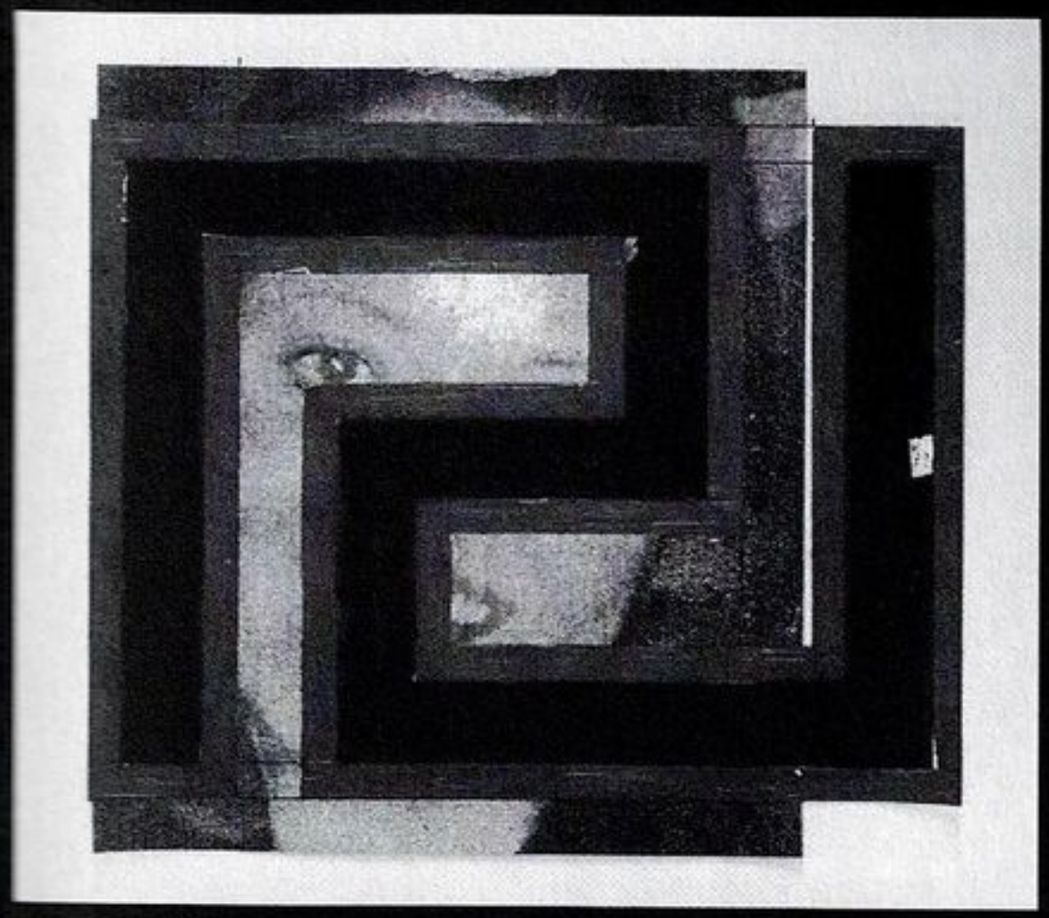
Molly 5 (Woods), 2016
UV printed aluminum brushed Dibond with motion activated liquid mechanism and shaped MDF frame container
100 x 79 x 7 cm

political one, to counter the rise of extremisms of all kinds and the loss of critical nuance. This changing new media landscape led philosopher Mike Watson to ask, in the title for his 2020 book, *Can the Left Learn to Meme?*, raising similar questions regarding the symbolic sphere of art: Can the art world take back free speech, image power and shock value? "I like to include something in the opposite end of the spectrum too in the work, or a dual-energy, something 'funny', light-hearted or off-kilter," Bajagić underlines. That the work does not contain, at its core, a fixed meaning, one that could simply be unveiled, is both the cursed power and the subversive force of her oeuvre.

*DARJA BAJAGIĆ (*1990, Podgorica) is an artist based in Chicago. She has recently participated in the group shows "L'homme gris", Casino Luxembourg – Forum d'art contemporain, Luxembourg (2020); "When the time swirls, when it turns into a black hole", Futura Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague (2019); and "Paradise", Queer Thoughts, New York (2019). Recent solo exhibitions took place at Confort Moderne, Poitiers (2020); Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson (2018); and Künstlerhaus, Halle für Kunst & Medien, Graz (2016).*

*INGRID LUQUET-GAD (*1990) is a critic and contributing editor at Spike. She lives in Paris.*

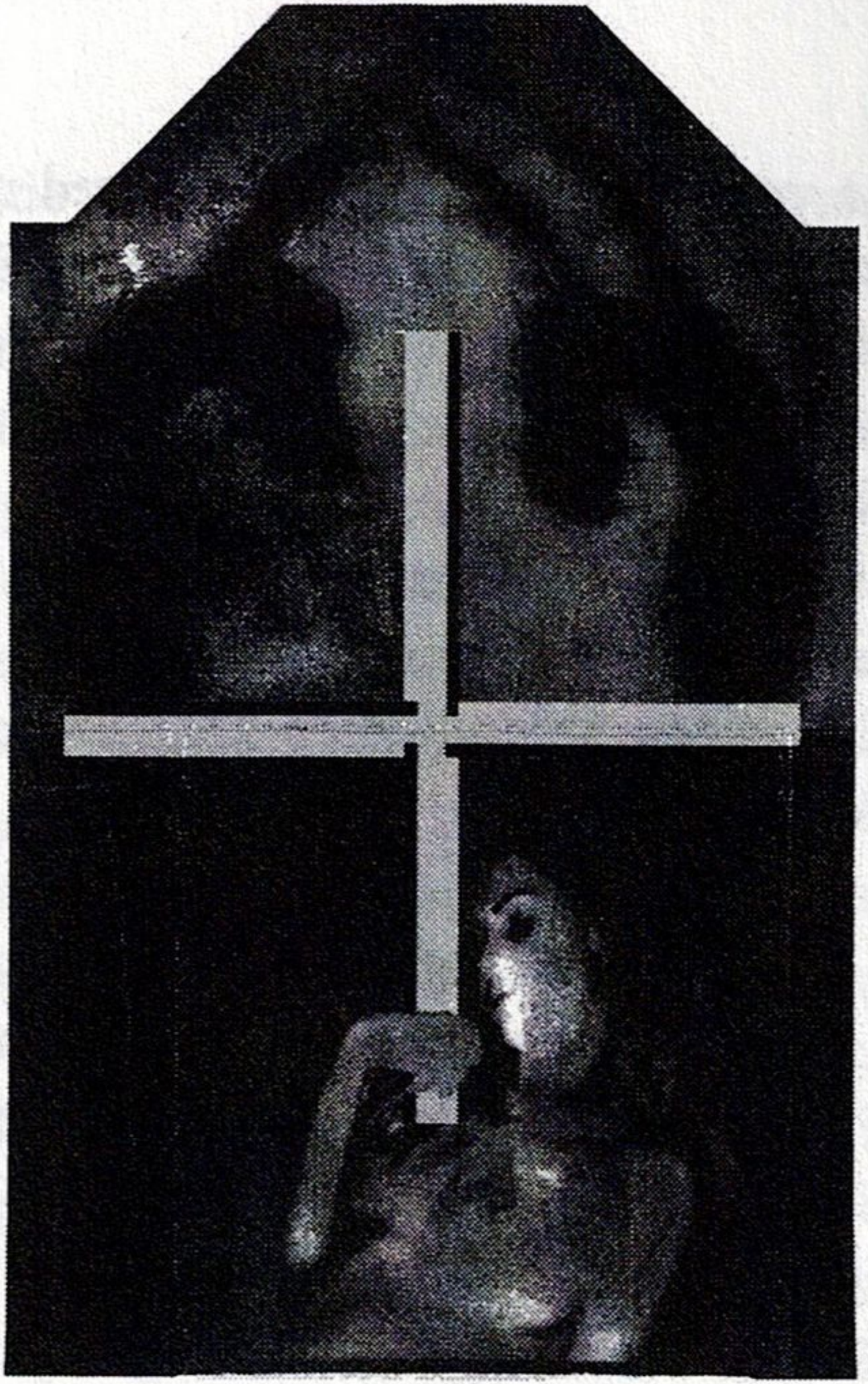
DARJA BAJAGIĆ



There is no single definition or "essential nature" of images, and different meanings and use can overlap. The meaning of a word is its use in the language. This is a fact, and it inexhaustibly excites me. Instances of this in my most recent artworks are *Beate – helpful, kind, nice, obliging, primitive, subliminally aggressive and vulgar* and *"German Madeleine McCann,"* two paintings that were a part of the Greenspon show. They feature the Greek meander – one of the most important symbols in ancient Greece, and, still today, one of the most common decorative elements. It's on everything, from architecture to Versace thongs and bikinis designed by Instagram "celebrities," as well on the flag of the Golden Dawn, a political party in Greece that is ultranationalist and far-right. It is thought to symbolize infinity and unity; to the Golden Dawn, they see it as representing bravery and eternal struggle. So, does this make Versace a supporter of ultranationalist and far-right policies? Of course not. The meaning of a word is its use in the language. However, judging by, say, the logic of the attitudes of the persons who forced the shut-down of the Greenspon show, Versace is unequivocally a supporter of ultranationalist and far-right policies due to their continuous use of the Greek meander in their designs, a symbol now notoriously tied to ultranationalist and far-right policies.

Another instance, in this same body, is *Beate Zschäpe in Lonsdale, shrouded in intrigue.* In it, Zschäpe is pictured in a Lonsdale top. Lonsdale is a long-running (ca 1960), hugely-popular UK-based brand of sporting clothes. In the late 1990s and through the early 2000s, neo-Nazis co-opted the brand as a means to bypass laws outlawing the public display of Nazi symbols, as by cunningly concealing the first and last two letters with a jacket, only the letters *NSDA* were left visible, one letter short of *NSDAP*, the acronym for Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers' Party). Lonsdale reacted to this trend by marketing initiatives promoting multiculturalism and sponsoring anti-racist campaigns ("Lonsdale Loves All Colours" and "Lonsdale London Against Racism & Hate"). Notwithstanding, the trend (coined *Lonsdale youth*) was too widespread and took on a life of its own. It was subsequently selectively banned in schools across Germany and the Netherlands. Still, does this make every Lonsdale wearer a neo-Nazi or a member of the NSDAP? Of course not. The meaning of a word is its use in the language. We have to engage with things as they are and not as they appear to us.

Darja Bajagić was speaking to **Adam Lehrer**



AVOID

ISSUE 4

Credits

Trevor Blake
Boyd Rice
Whale Song Partridge
Nina Power
Adam Lehrer
Darja Bajagić
Anna Sebastian
David Icke
Michael William West
Valya Korabelnikova
Ilya Permyakov
Polina Tsvirko
Joan Wayne Gacy
Eric Acosta
Sisi Savidge
Bill Knott
L Ron Hubbard
Samuel Lees
MaryAnn Kozlowski
Annika Holland-Tierney
Joseph Pancucci
Jeremy Reed
Melissa Lee-Houghton
Kate Giffin
Curtis Yarvin
Unworneasel
Kenneth Anger
Ben Marks
Nicholas Pell
Paul Marsh
CIA declassified files
Mads Brügger
Supervert

Designed by Penny Metal
Directed by Lev Parker

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MORBID BOOKS

BORIS LURIE
ART FOUNDATION

An interview with artist Darja Bajagić

photo of Darja Bajagić taken by Christian MacDonald

Darja Bajagić is a contemporary artist who lives and works in Chicago. Never a stranger to difficult themes or intense subject matter in her art practice, she has corresponded with the Boris Lurie Art Foundation to share her ideas related to Lurie's art and writings as well as those she conveys through her own work.

We first made contact through your interest in Boris Lurie's novel, *House of Anita*. Was the book your first exposure to Lurie or were you familiar with his work as an artist before?

No, I had admired Boris Lurie's work as an artist for several years prior to discovering *House of Anita*. Then, in 2018, a friend gave me *Boris Lurie: Anti-Pop*—an exceptional book, and one that propelled my even-further fascination with Lurie. And, so, that is how I came upon the Boris Lurie Art Foundation and *House of Anita*.

Can you tell us a little about your thoughts on the novel, as well as Lurie's artwork?

House of Anita is a remarkably forthright insight into Lurie's mind, as well as, essentially, the depth of his lifelong investigative practice concerning the bottomless abysses of the human psyche.

Naturally, Lurie's experience as a Holocaust survivor and witness to the Nazi's murder of his grandmother, mother, and sister affected him, stimulating a lasting scrutiny of existence in a post-Holocaust world. In *House of Anita*, Bobby (the protagonist) is a consenting slave, gleefully held captive in a BDSM lair. For Bobby, a masochist, pain is pleasure. For Lurie, as I see it, "pain," as it is manifested in *House of Anita*, is a metaphor for fervent intensity. For both, pain, in Bobby's case, or fervent intensity, in Lurie's case, is absolutely essential in life, to feel alive; otherwise, it is apathetic torpor.

To Lurie, a man who had defeated odious torture, emerging as an unstoppable creative force, the world—particularly the self-satisfied art world, in which he identified a great void, and the degradation of art to vapidity—surely felt dispassionate, if not outright obsequious. Of everyone, he knew it best: that certainty was a farce in this wasteland of a world—one cannot even be certain of one's own existence. Transfiguring [his] trauma, Lurie dove head-on, fearlessly, into ultimate reality, ascending with an unbridled, innovative visual language. However much he was misunderstood and underappreciated, Lurie's [material] legacy speaks for itself, plain and simple. He stood out amongst other art-worlders, masturbatorily busying themselves brown-nosing one another; art was not a safe, vainglorious activity to Lurie—it was a hammer, with which he mystifyingly attacked the mundanity of life, reaching towards abyssal, unknowable truths.

Darja Bajagić
Viva la Muerte (Aino Myth) (2020)
acrylic, bed-sheet, embalmer's thread, fabric dye, gauze, gold leaf, and UV print on canvas
53.75 x 49.25 in. (136.525 x 125.095 cm.)

GOREGEOUS, your survey exhibition from earlier this year, deals in "re-appropriating the images manufactured by the capital-power-pleasure triumvirate." Can you explain how these forces interact in your work?

Those are not my words; they are the words of the curators of Goregeous—their interpretation.

My art is unconcerned with pleasure. In fact, you might say it is absorbed in its absolute antithesis. Frankly, for the record, it has nothing to do with feminist perspectives on power, the male gaze—no. It never has. Pornography, quick to be named and futily concentrated on, serves two roles in my artworks: a.) an architectural one, like a caryatid; b.) an abrasive one, like a literal abrasion. In both, it is in a position of servitude. Its presence is nonliteral. Its function is symbolic.

Would you say that Lurie exhibits similar interests in these forces and how they shape our society?

In the direction of defilement, Lurie sought to reinforce the existence of an uncorrupted art in the face of an oppressive sterility. (Variations of "sterile" frequently appear in *House of Anita*; the awareness of Lurie's concentration camp imprisonment further saturates the word ["sterile"] with depravity, terror.) Undeniably a result of his history, he felt repugnance toward what he evidently perceived to be a soulless [art] world of oblivion. He loathed a high-gloss, depthless art, and its commerciality, experiencing it as a form of Nazism—dictatorial and repressive.[1] Lurie, in contrast, pursued, an-other [art] world, one that escapes aseptic mediocrity for boundless, bare filth. In 1959, he formed his own [world]: NO!art, "a radical avant-garde anti-art-establishment movement" targeting "the hypocritical intelligentsia, capitalist culture manipulation, consumerism, American and other Molochs," NO!art, according to Lurie, undertook "total unabashed self-expression in art"—"No lighthearted Duchampesque Dadaists, Neodadaists, or "pop-artists"; no consumerism's middle class nor Nouveau Riche Liberals' neuter background makers. But believers in the unfashionable notion of Art with a capital "A".[2]

Steadfastly determined to bridge art and real life, Lurie was unapologetic in his representations of reality—always unvarnished, sometimes vulgar. In a period of "decorative regressive Greenberg abstraction flat serial sculptural," "various regurgitations of old Dada made marketable," "'Earth art,'" and "pathetically boring" "Body examination," Lurie stood out.[3] What I have found particularly telling in my research of Lurie is a moment captured in a 2000 video-interview with Estera Milman on the æsthetics of doom. Milman observes a group of xeroxes pinned to a wall of Lurie's studio. They depict female victims of the Liepāja massacres, forcefully disrobed and posed for the perpetrators' camera just moments before their public execution. Asked why they are there, Lurie exclaims, "for me to remember, and to see." This gesture is replicated by Lurie, throughout his œuvre. Juxtaposing [pictures of] delight and horror, or "the real stuff," as Lurie put it, he created [visual] charged acts, in the shape of an assault, enlivening the viewer—as Lurie bluntly put it, "The price for collaboration in art is — as in the concentration camps — excremental suffocation. It is not by submission, coolness, apathy, boredom that great art is created — no matter what the cynics tell us. The secret ingredient is what is most difficult to learn - courage."[4]

America's post war image consumption deeply affected Lurie, he could open a LIFE magazine and see advertisements for hair care products next to images of concentration camp survivors, and both images influenced and appeared in his work. Can you discuss how coming of age with mass media on the internet has influenced your art?

The influence of mass media is quite evident—even illustrated, you might say—throughout my practice, but it mutates, relying upon the content in focus. Because of this, it is difficult to express in generalizations.

Having said that, my perception of pictures was firstly, fundamentally, affected by growing up surrounded by Eastern Orthodox iconography. The word "icon," itself, is thought-provoking. It is derived from the Greek *eikōn*, "image," from *eikenai*, "to be like," but the Greek word for "icon" (*agiografía*) is comprised of two words: "holy," or "not of this world," and "to write." In Orthodox theology, the iconographic is observed as singular in relation to the symbolic. Accordingly, the [traditional] observation of the symbolic preserves the transcendence of God, or what is not of this world; whereas the observation of the iconographic reveals the transcendent, while, still, shielding its [transcendent] essence and unknowability. This belief, arduously opposed to dualism, acknowledges that man, made up of both material and immaterial parts, relates to the immaterial *through* the material. Moreover, the icon, though beautiful, and often spectacularly ornamented, is not intended to provide pleasure—a "carnal" activity; instead, its purpose is to transfigure what is of this world (the visible) in order to bear what is not of this world (the invisible).

The Internet, on the other hand, and mass media, generally, stands in direct opposition to this [Eastern Orthodox] theology, negating everything outside of surface. Aura, intrinsically linked to the iconographic, is absent from the Internet—replaced with spectacular circulation. In the process, context is lost, and if the image, itself, does not reveal its context, it has the tendency to appear trivialized. And with its [essential] meaning blurred, it is opened up to countless connections.

That said, they are not without commonality. With both, the picture's response is unsatisfactory: thwarting our desires, rejecting our questions—leaving our curiosity unsatiated. Yet it is by way of this nullification, in the assertion of its own agency, that it engages us further, forcing us to embrace our wonder and continue searching (…). All of this is of special interest to me, and I have examined this, through and through, throughout numerous series.

Your artworks incorporate imagery that some audiences will certainly find disturbing- elements that deal with pornography, Nazism, murder, the occult, terrorism. What draws you to these subjects? What impacts on the viewer are these themes meant to have?

The world in general, around me or otherwise, affects my thematics. The faint boundary between reality and unreality, especially as it is manifested in the artificiality of art, is of special interest to me. Hyperconscious of and motivated by this boundary, I re-present the more-sinister facets of reality (often via dichotomies) as an expression of the dualities in which we exist, like a mirror unto the viewer—not as a charge of wrongdoing but as a beckoning to consider again. To quote Otto Muehl, "The artist clears away taboos. What really shocks is being confronted with the facts. There is plenty to show."

Can you describe your reactions to being faced with censorship?

Censorship is like pruning: it gives new strength to what it cuts down.

[1] B. Lurie, House of Anita, 2nd edn., NO!art Publishing, 2016, p. 126.

[2] Boris Lurie Art Foundation, NO!art Pin-Ups, Excrement, Protest, Jew-Art; Introduction by Boris Lurie [website], https://borisslurieart.org/2016/noart-pin-ups-excrement-protest-jew-art.

[3] B. Lurie, "Curse Works 1972-73 (1975)" in NO!art: Pin-ups, Excrement, Protest, Jew-Art; edited by Boris Lurie and Seymour Krim (Koln/Berlin: Edition Hundermark, 1988), 94.

[4] B. Lurie, Introduction, Sam Goodman: No-Sculptures, (New York: Gallery: Gertrude Stein, 1964).