


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

 Give this article



 3

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'Ospedaleto, 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

CULTURED

ART

Darja Bajagić and The Politics Of The Profane

WORDS

Vivian Chui

PHOTOGRAPHY

SEKANA RADOVIC

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 impending 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

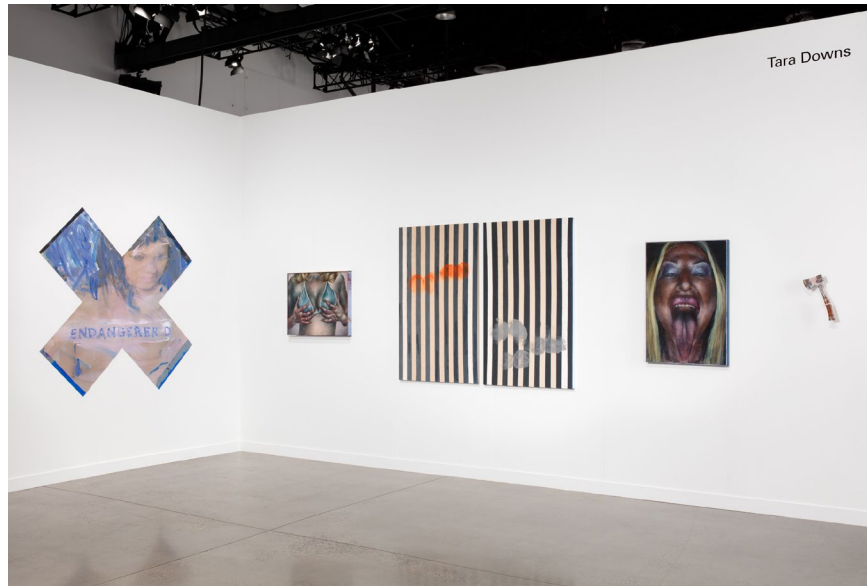
early 2018 for executing ten racially-motivated homicides. Police authorities had discovered a gloating video created by Zschäpe and her accomplices, which merged grisly images of the murders with an episode of *The Pink Panther* cartoon. Whereas news agencies opted to use photographs that portray the 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 supremacy 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, *Engdangereer 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.

Save the Art Kill the Image

Portrait



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



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-enforced, generating an individualised sense of moral obligation.

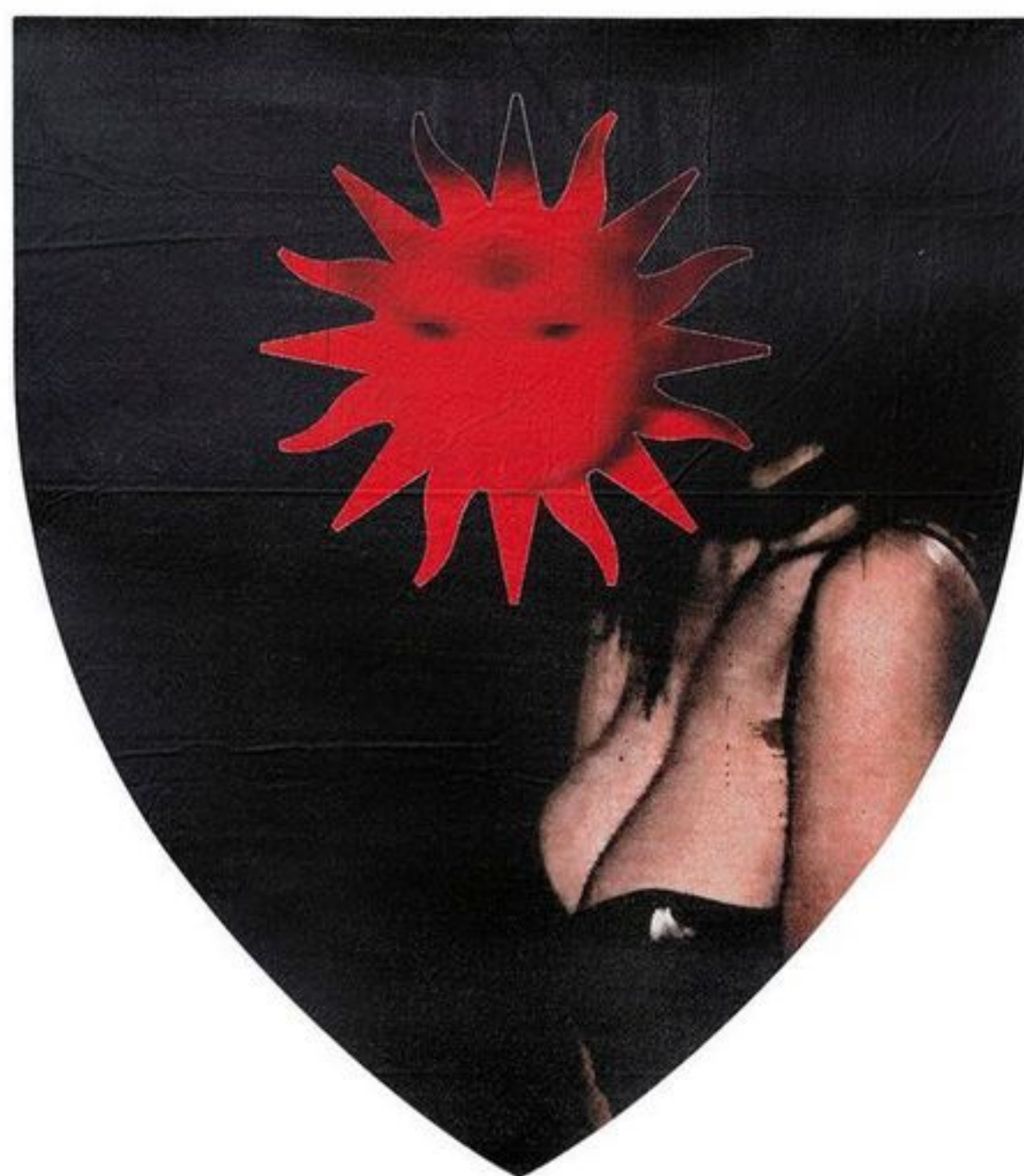
This tendency, however, serves no defined ideology, as it is fundamentally a mode of organising. This yields an implacable impenetrability between inside and outside, and a tightening of already small communities around personal “weak ties” that might be closer linked, but are ultimately

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 list-serve 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

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

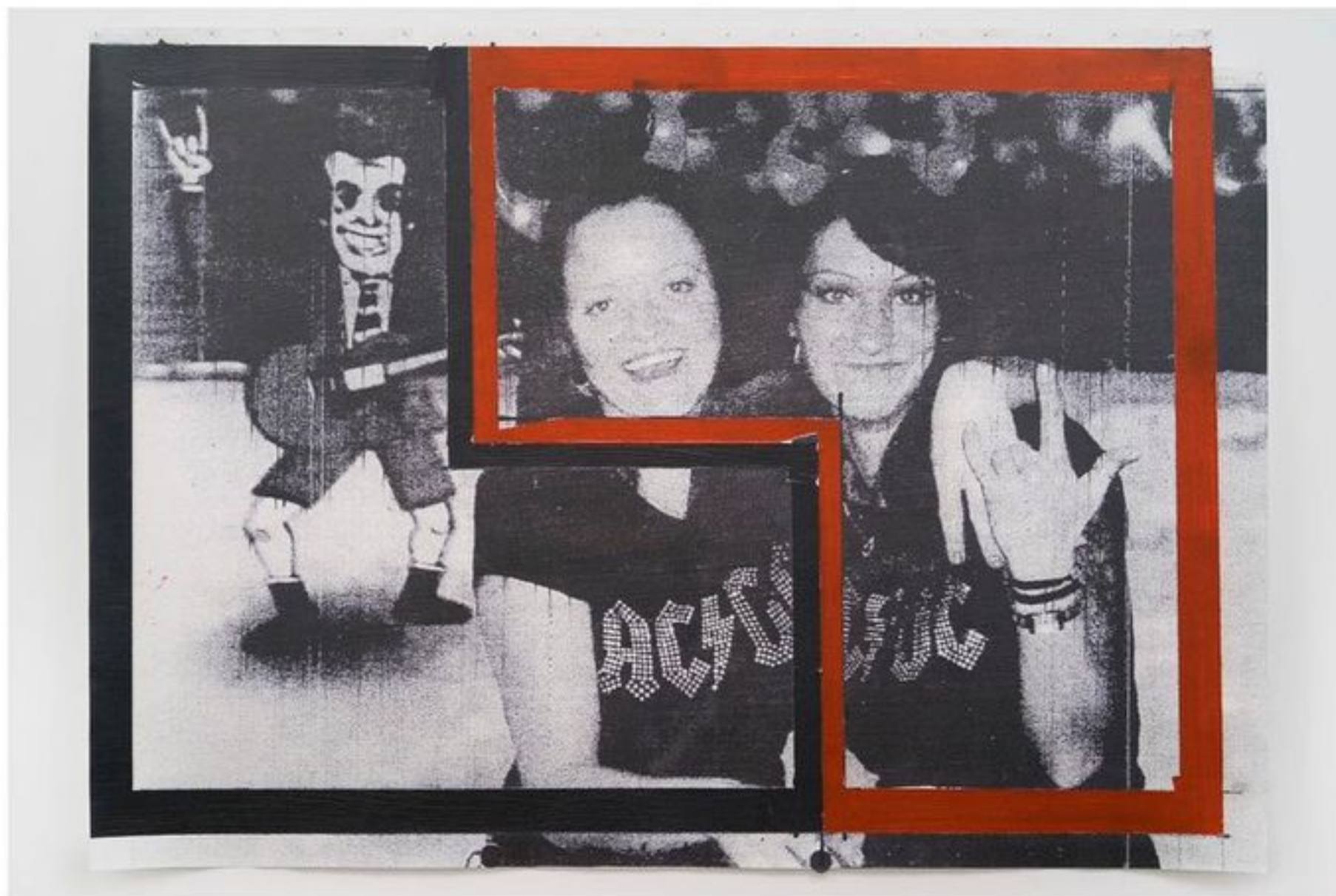
younger, smiling woman, her face partly obliterated by a black and red Greek key – another dual symbol, commonly used in architecture and kitchenware, but also by the brand Versace, as well as the Greek ultranationalist party Golden Dawn. The fact of the artist's focus on predominantly female protagonists 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,

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 visibility 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

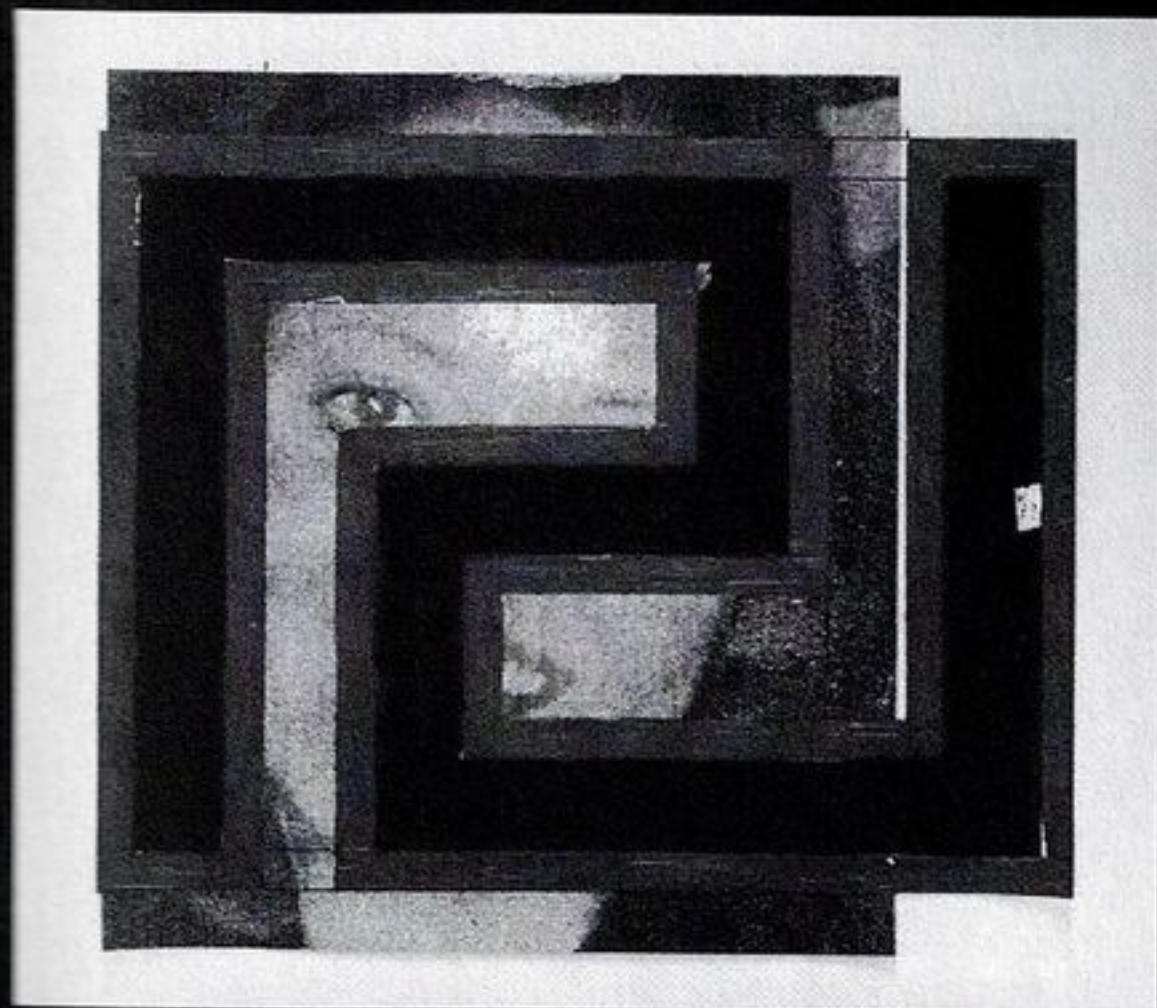
political one, to counter the rise of extremisms of all kinds and the loss of critical nuance. This changing new media landscape led philosopher Mike Watson to ask, in the title for his 2020 book, *Can the Left Learn to Meme?*, raising similar questions regarding the symbolic sphere of art: Can the art 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

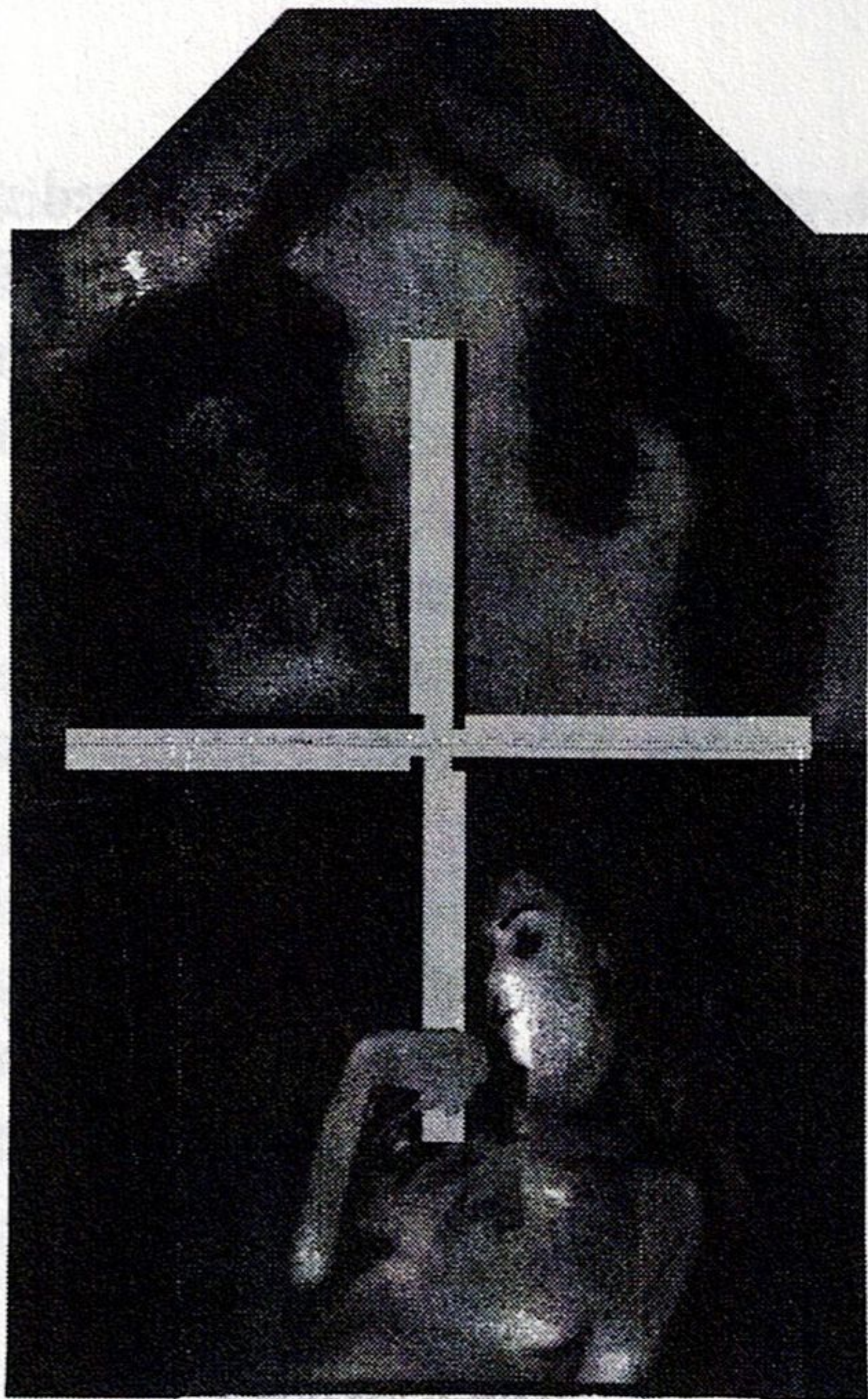


There is no single definition or “essential nature” of images, and different meanings and use can overlap. The meaning of a word is its use in the language. This is a fact, and it inexhaustibly excites me. Instances of this in my most recent artworks are *Beate* – helpful, kind, nice, obliging, primitive, 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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MORPID BOOKS

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 vapidly—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 futilely 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 aesthetics 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 oeuvre. 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 *eikēnai*, “to be like,” but the Greek word for “icon” (*agiografia*) 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://borislurieart.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 (Köln/Berlin: Edition Hundermark, 1988), 94.

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