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MAJA DJORDJEVIC

FOREVER FRAGILE

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Maja Djordjevic is a London-based Serbian artist whose work combines traditional oil painting techniques with the computer-aided aesthetic of MS Paint. In this interview, Djordjevic expounds on the formative influence of her childhood during the 90s, replete with endless rounds of arcade games and MS Paint drawing contests, on her artistic

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Athens.

The current exhibition is inspired by philosopher Giulio "Delminio" Camillo's 16th-century vision of a memory theatre. Through symbols like flowers and water, Djordjevic explores the ephemeral nature of beauty. What makes her exhibition even more intriguing is that her paintings are crafted as objects, akin to blown-up picture frames, enabling the viewer to almost step into the scene. Djordjevic's works are introspective reflections of her own personal experiences and those of her friends, imbued with a sense of tenderness that elicits empathy and introspection from the audience. Her exhibition serves as a meditation on the universal human experience, encouraging viewers to embrace their own vulnerability and recognise the fragile moments that make up the tapestry of life.



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and now you came to create the type of art you do now?

First, I have to say that I am a child of the 90s. I grew up on that kind of aesthetic, Sega Mega Drive, Galaga, various arcade games, and especially drawing in Microsoft Paint. I remember that as a child, I organised drawing competitions in Paint to see who could draw a better dinosaur, castle or universe. But I also remember that we gathered to draw what boys/girls have under their clothes (exploring sexuality), which at that age we found both entertaining and funny. And on the computer it was easy to delete the drawings with just one click if the parents, God forbid, came into the room. And so, many years later, somewhere in college, I started drawing in Paint again on my old Toshiba. During those years I used Facebook, so when I was already on the computer, I kept a diary by sketching in Paint. And so, this naked girl appeared entirely by accident, or rather, she was an old drawing of mine. And she has stayed there ever since! Through her, I started to tell my own and other people's stories.

I studied at a very traditional university which required me to paint with oil on canvas. Since I had so many drawings in Paint, I found it interesting to try to replicate that screen image in a traditional way. Everything came together somehow organically.

How has growing up in Serbia shaped your view of the world and how does it show in your work?

I don't want to sound too sentimental about it. It's definitely not easy where I come from. However, I am infinitely grateful to my parents. I remember them trying to make my view of the world and my growing up beautiful, happy and colourful. To make me move forward and always be brave, with lots of support. My painting today shows such a girl. In all the greyness around us, she remains positive and seeks pink hues.

Your solo exhibition at Dio Horia Gallery, Athens is titled *Theatre of Memories*, which references 16th-century architect and philosopher Giulio "Delminio"

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Last year during the Venice Biennale *The Milk of Dreams*, at the Prada Foundation there was an exhibition titled *Human Brains – It Begins with an Idea*. The exhibition was the result of an intensive investigative process undertaken by Fondazione Prada since 2018 in the field of neuroscience, driven by a deep interest in understanding the human brain, the complexity of its functions, and its centrality to human history. At the exhibition, I came across an object – a book about philosopher Giulio "Delminio" Camillo and his idea or design *Theatre of Memories*. The theatre refers to mnemonic techniques called *The Art of Memory*, a series of methods that allow for better memorisation of information through the association of mental places with information or through the specialisation of memories to ideal places. Giulio Camillo takes a further step by imagining the actual materialisation of human memory and extending it to collective knowledge. This makes his theatre a kind of precursor to an encyclopaedia or even the internet.

I found this very interesting, and as I recently started printing my own photographs again – mostly those from my phone that I always fear will be forgotten – when choosing the ones worthy of a frame, I realised that meaningful memories include not just happy, hugging photos, but also those where I took a selfie crying in a bathroom stall, or photos my friends sent me when they were feeling down, and many other fragile moments in life. I began to think about my fragile theatre and how today these moments are beautiful and I am glad to have saved them. They have passed, and now we are stronger because of them - or at least I want to believe we are stronger, braver, and more experienced because of them. And so, my theatre was born.

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For the show, you made eight paintings and six videos, all filled with symbols. I noticed that daisies and roses appear frequently in these. Do these flowers have a particular meaning?

I have always painted white daisies. They hold deep emotional significance for me. When I was a little girl, my mother told me that I had once told her that I was a white daisy in my past life and that someone had accidentally mowed me down, which is why I am now reborn. I often repeated this story and constantly drew the white daisy. I want to believe in this beautiful flower, which has always symbolised a new birth or rebirth for me. While the rose, which you should never gift me, is definitely not my type of flower, although I do appreciate its symbolism in the Baroque period – the symbol of transience, the transience of beauty, fragrance, and colour. The rose was the flower of the Virgin Mary and only bloomed once a year, unlike other plants. These two flowers are contradictory but so are sometimes my feelings, as well.

What about water? You depict it in so many different ways in your work - as a tumultuous sea, as rain, in swimming pools. When water is in a certain state,

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always give it new meanings. Regarding the paintings in this exhibition where water appears, I once read in a dream dictionary (if it is even accurate) that dreaming of being in deep water means being in trouble, suffering or anxiety. And indeed, every time I dreamt I was in deep water from which I couldn't get out, that's how I felt. Something stuck with me. Here, I placed my girls outside the water because, as fragile as they may be, they manage not to wade too deeply into it.

And of course, there's the recurring symbol of warning tape, which is stamped with the word fragile. It's the kind of tape we usually see wrapped around boxes and artwork. When you wrapped tape around the characters' bodies, what did you hope to communicate?

I have this tape in almost every corner of my studio and apartment. A beautiful decorative item. I remember during the pandemic and lockdown, while lying on the couch, I drew myself, my little girl wrapped in tape, obviously with a fragile sign on it. When I started making sketches for this show, the tape was simply unavoidable. It says fragile because that's what we are, and that's okay. And thus, treat us carefully, just as you would treat an artwork box with a tape stating fragile attached to it.

Let's talk about your frames! They're so daring, and incredibly diverse. Can you explain why you chose these frames for your work? What effect do you hope they will produce?

I love painting. And I will always paint. The painting as an object is very important to me and I often think about where its boundaries are and how best to separate it from the wall. As I mentioned above, while printing photographs and considering which ones to put in a frame, it just happened: my paintings in frames! I love that the painting is still a painting and an object at the same time.

My idea was to use the kind of picture frames that almost every household has, recognisable ones. From the cheapest ones from Ikea to the expensive silver ones

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at my grandma's place", or "I got this frame for my wedding".



As a viewer, I loved how you showed everyday actions in your films - for example, a person smoking a cigarette - with a crowd cheering the character on in the background. What was your intention when incorporating this sound, and how do you hope it affects the audience?

In the video, on the stage, you can clearly see the person smoking a cigarette wrapped in fragile tape. In all of those fragile memories and situations, I added the sound of applause because support is so important. Furthermore, the feeling of being in a theatre, the support of the audience – I don't know about you, but whenever I'm in a theatre and I hear a huge applause and cheer around me, I always secretly cry because it's beautiful.

If you were to bring one of the characters in your work to life, what kind of personality traits would they have? Would you want to hang out with them?

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I had to tell you what I wish most for my girl, it's for her to always be loud, sincere, brave, passionate, and at the same time fragile, emotional and cheerful.

I find it so beautiful that your work is exhibited in the context of an Athenian gallery. The floor of some parts of the gallery even exposes the ancient Greek ruins below. In what ways do you see your work interfacing with these relics and the historical significance of the city?

Dio Horia Gallery is located right next to the Acropolis Museum, not far from the Acropolis itself, which is beautifully visible on the hill from the street. The gallery has a certain energy. You must come! Inside there are ruins from the 4th century. Isn't it beautiful to know your work is standing above that? Especially the painting with the broken hearts – ruins on top of ruins. Memories on top of memories. A geometric and floral polychrome mosaic from the 4th century is right outside the gallery entrance, which can easily be connected to my pixels.



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 See comments

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