

Interviewer - Zolt Kovac, October 2013.

Natalija Simeonović connects in her pictures the themes of alchemical symbolism with the contemporary time. The main theme of the exhibition *An Other Two* held recently in the gallery SULUJ was androgyny. We talked about the origin of her interest in alchemy, the difference between hermaphrodites and the androgyne, the new gender identities and the position of painting in contemporary art.

Supervizuelna: What is the central theme of the exhibition *An Other Two*?

This is the second exhibition where I'm using alchemical symbolism as a basis for my work. The central theme of the exhibition *An Other Two* came from the analysis of the New Age emblems br. 33 (opus Michael Maier *Atalanta Fugiens*, 17th century). The emblem signifies the preliminary stage of the alchemical process of transformation from the original substance (hermaphrodite) to its highest form - symbolically presented in the androgyne. As the archetype of the union of male and female principles, the androgyne represents the goal of alchemy and the ultimate purpose of man's efforts to achieve integrity. The exhibition is conceived as an illustration of four stages of the alchemical operations, in the form of symbolic images of transformation or representations of different psychological processes: Nigredo "black" (the state of separation and polarity), Albedo "whiteness" (purification), Citrinatis "yellowing" (state of transition) and Rubedo "redness" (state of complete awareness and order).

Using visual interpretations of the theme of androgyny I dealt with psychological transformations within the individual, but also with the changes of postmodern society which is increasingly faced with the process of defining new gender identities. By revising the original esoteric symbols, I wanted to express the contemporary woman's experience by reinterpreting inherited male / female principles notions in the context of individuation.

The theme of the exhibition is actually summed up in the title of the exhibition - *An Other Two* which can be perceived as a different or transformed *two*; and as the *Other Two*, as something else, an integrated entity that contains duality.

Supervizuelna: Has your interest gone from alchemy to the androgynous or exploring the androgynous led to alchemical writings? Where does the need to link the two come from?

I think that the theme of androgyny was in my subconscious for a long time, and the interest and analysis of alchemical symbolism helped articulate and awake it. I believe that in the first place the need for inner wholeness started to deepen my interest in the art of alchemy.

In most spiritual and esoteric traditions of the image of wholeness is displayed as a union of opposites, primarily as opposites of male and female principles. I started to think about what is the concept of male and female principle today and whether it can still be viewed on only in a binary manner. Symbols that traditionally represent higher levels of self-knowledge (e.g. sun, day, light, gold), do not have to be tied only with the male principle, and vice versa (the moon, night, water, soil) today may not be the primarily attributed to the female principle. Androgyny for me at the same time symbolizes a greater presence of femininity in the sphere of spiritual and intellectual, on the other hand indicates the polyvalence of the male identity in modern times.

Supervizuelna: This is a very actual topic today when traditionally perceived gender identities are softening and new ones are developing. Do you think that humanity is heading towards the integration of genders and whether you experience it as a field of greater freedom?

I think we are still very far from the integration of genders, but the change of masculinity and femininity determinants is all the more evident. There is no need to close eyes before this, because it is just one of the consequences of the overall socio-cultural changes. The more is known and discussed about these changes there will cause for less fear and misconceptions, and can also result in a major progress and understanding between the sexes. For example Wolfgang Imiter (History of Masculinity in Europe) writes that we are in a historically new situation in the postmodern society where different sexual identities are offered to people as a theoretical possibility. He says that society is not freed from masculinity and femininity, but that different solutions are developing and consist in the individualization of these issues. So in these gradual formations of choice I perceive a field of greater freedom.

Supervizuelna: What is the difference between the alchemical writings between the androgyne and hermaphrodite?

Alchemy is primarily a philosophical doctrine that urges us to confront ourselves and focus on the process of unceasing development and the transcendence our material nature. The hermaphrodite is at the beginning of the process of transformation - it symbolizes primordial, unconscious unity of male and female principles, the *prima materia* from which opposites have yet to differentiate. The androgyne is at the end of the process as the archetype of wholeness that transcends division of the sexes and can be understood as the state of self-realization and awakening of the individual, but also society.

Supervizuelna: Let's return to the exhibition. In the pictures, the most frequently occurring motif is the hand. How does the hand fit into the whole story? What is the role of templates in your artistic expression?

Hands are for me a reflection of the soul, they feel, touch, pray, give and open. For me the appearance of one's hand is actually more important than the face and often expresses what the face manages to hide. The hand motive is perhaps the most striking symbol of human presence which the reason I use it in my works, where different arrangements and compositions of the hands symbolizes the status and stages of psychological processes. I started to use templates (stencils) in my previous cycle *A-part-ness*, in which the artistic process rose from the concept of the exhibition which was to deconstruct an original alchemical composition of ideal harmony. The figures of Sole and Luna were separated and created into life-size prints while the elements of these compositions (hands, feet, sun, moon, etc.) made the templates that I reintegrated into other images. The use of templates combined with aerosol spray was interesting for me because they set limits, opening at same time a vast number of possibilities. By deliberately limiting the shapes and reducing the number of templates, I managed to achieve a greater richness of artistic expression. I liked how the same template created images that looked and even radiated completely different depending from the colors, positions and even the different moods in which I worked. For example, by using the template from my own hand in the cycle *An Other Two* I wanted to symbolically show the transformation of the individual - the same hands, but each time with a different meaning. In this way, the artistic process came closer to the theme of the exhibition.



Dark heat, acrylic and spray paint in canvas, 90x110 cm, 2013

Supervilleina: In the paintings we can see the visual development of the alchemical concepts related to the topic, as well as the joining of opposites (*Cold Fire, Dark Heat*). What is the role of self-portraits that appear on the two paintings?

I considered that the exhibition would have a too general nature character if it did not have a personal component. Self-portraits illustrate my own individuation, they are a meeting and comforting place with the Anima / Animus, and a image of the searching process for a new equilibrium. Jung points out that precisely in the life phase between 35-40 years, which is exactly the period in which I was while making the exhibitions – is the "preparation of a significant change of man's soul". Using the self-portraits in the role of both genders I wanted to emphasize the idea that the transformation of society is based on the transformation of its individuals.

While I painted self-portraits I remembered a forgotten anecdote from my childhood. I was about 6 years old, short hair and wearing mostly inherited clothes from my brother. One day in the schoolyard a girl came to me one and said almost angrily: "Oh, you pretend, and we know that you're not a girl, you're a boy!!" After some time I decided to be a little girl, let my hair grow, my mom sewed plaid skirts for me and everything was "all right."



Still In, acrylic and spray paint in canvas, 90x110 cm, 2013

Supervizuelna: How do you connect visually alchemical concepts with the present moment?

Alchemy constantly emphasizes the duality and that within duality is unity and oneness. The accumulation of different roles in one individual leads to a process that can be seen as the androgenizing of society. When I was thinking a few years ago about the concept of the exhibition and an androgynous symbol appeared in the newspaper article with the headline "End of Manhood Before the End of the World" with a photograph of Andrej Pejic. Although I had already heard of Andrej/a, that is the moment I decided that he/she would become a part of my exhibition. Portraits of famous androgynous models (paintings *Still Two*, *Two Still*) consider the idea whether aesthetic manifestations and changes may eventually pave the way towards different forms of being. Andrej's phenomenon on the media scene is provocative and far surpassed any fad of the fashion industry by stirring discussions: whether the promotion of such an ideal of beauty is actually the announcement of the collapse of the natural balance, a hint of the comprehensive changes in social consciousness or just a greater society curiosity for members of the so-called third gender.



Supervizuelna: Such current topics could be thematized in other media, where you thinking about it or the painting media suits you? How do you see the position and role of the image today?

I'm already in talks for a cooperation with a group of artists with whom I could continue to develop this theme in a multimedia setting. I'd love to "move" the cycle *An Other Two* in the space of the book from where the idea for the exhibition originated. The painting media still suits me most, but I'm not closed for any other forms of visual expression.

In recent years painting here has emerged from a field of marginality and passivity. Messages and ideas that paintings communicate bring together artists, as well as artists and the audience. Although a traditional form of art, painting leads contemporary and new art concepts of communication in our society. The role of painting today is mostly educational and political, and should activate people to consciously participate in improving both personal and social life.

Supervizuelna: This theme occupies you for some time. Do you plan to continue after these two exhibitions or move onto something else?

This theme will engage me primarily in writing now, but I believe that I will keep coming back to alchemy and the connection of it's symbolism with contemporary issues. As for as the exhibition activity I have a series of new ideas and unlike the previous exhibitions where I started from historical and general towards the individual and personal, I will now move in the opposite direction: from intimate, concrete and lived situations towards a broader, socio- historical concept.