

Interview

V. M. (Vladimir Mitrović): Where did the idea of an artistic cycle *Dear Diary* come from? It's an idea that was growing for about fifteen years and was finally realized in the form of this exhibition and the accompanying book/catalog.

M. E. (Maja Erdeljanin): Seventeen years ago, I was listening to this radio station in my studio. They kept observing Awareness Days – World TB Day, Colored Buses Day, International Nurses Day, World Egg Day, The International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers, etc. I realized that every day means something to someone, that every topic is worth considering, that every day is celebrated by somebody... My only important days are New Year's, a professional deadline, an anniversary, or a planned celebration. I wondered where the other 360 days go. What happens to them? Aren't they equally important? Even if nothing special happens, if I just exist on those days, isn't that one whole day in my life which is therefore worth being thankful for at least?

I chose printed traces of such days as their visual symbols: tickets, flyers, and bills found in my pockets or drawers. I used them as a platform to make a visual diary, a list of moments I want to remember which, one by one, gradually led to unforgettable events. I wanted to unveil a realistic skeleton of existence by using ordinary everyday life, without breaking points or revolutionary changes and ideas, without highly intimate confessions or current social problems or criticism (which can still be found between the lines). It resembles this endless confession on social networks since the need to share your privacy, including both trivial and important things, is as strong as the need to peek at someone else's life. I think this cycle has become my analog profile.

V. M.: You started several projects with different titles at the same time, and they merged with time. Was it intentional or it simply happened *along the way*?

M. E.: I enrolled in my master's studies at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad in 2006. My thesis was called *Painting: Merchandise or Message*. At the same time, I started two of my biggest projects so far: *Color Therapy* and *Dear Diary*. Both of my painting cycles and my theoretic work (master's thesis) and fiction (stories I started writing at the time) shared the same thing: thinking about the system of valuing, transience, and priorities.

The first two paintings were in the gallery format (100 x 70 cm) and included in both cycles because they are both based on daily expendable material. However, since I decided to make at least one painting for each of the 366 days in the *Dear Diary* cycle and concluded that it should be a polyptych, I radically decreased the dimensions of my paintings – 24 cm (hours) x 30 cm (days). On the other hand, I enlarged the format in *Color Therapy*.

Both cycles included various painting techniques, fiction, and videos. They developed simultaneously at several exhibitions under different titles. *Color Therapy* developed through drawings, collages, and paintings called *Dream of Happiness* (2006), *Color Trend Collection: Models* (2007), and *Color Trend Collection* (2008). Using printed advertisements, I wanted to research the relationship between painting and marketing, and our (un)conscious susceptibility to being manipulated by harmonic images and the utopian need for a perfect life. The cycle got its final form and was titled *Color Therapy* in 2008.

Its grand finale took place in 2012 in the Museum of Vojvodina at an exhibition that included almost all the media used for the realization of this idea: canvas paintings, watercolor paintings, pastel drawings, collage, lithography, digital prints, transparent objects, ceramics, and videos.

Dear Diary also changed its working titles while I was looking for the best-fitting one. Some of the titles for the painting segment were *Calendar* (2006), *Awareness Days* (2015), *Good Moments and Unimportant Days* (2017), and *My Awareness Days* (2020). Starting from 2013 up to now, the fictional part of the project has been titled *Awareness Days*, *An Ordinary Year*, *Important Dates*, *366 Selfies*. I always pay special attention to cycle titles because they have the same role as newspaper or clickbait headlines. They are supposed to invite the reader to investigate their content. They should be clear and to the point, but also able to stir one's imagination. A title that promises more content can hinder the understanding of a work as much as an uncommunicative title which is difficult to remember. Even more than the proverbial *Untitled*. A fitting title does not have a crucial role in reaching out to the audience, but it is still very important. In the past seventeen years, I had many doubts and did a lot of thinking concerning this title because I didn't have a direction in front of me, just the initial idea and the goal. I could have kept each of the abovementioned titles as the title of my exhibition and story collection. But I think that the *Dear Diary* title is adequately direct, unpretentious, and, finally, suitable.

V. M.: These were your basic, first ideas. After you turned them into a work in progress, how did they grow, develop, and change?

M. E.: The cycles developed simultaneously. From 2006 to 2013, *Color Therapy* was my primary cycle which I exhibited regularly. At the same time, *Dear Diary* was created sporadically, and it hadn't been exhibited before 2015. By reaching the third of it, I didn't know if I could finish such a demanding task. But I didn't hurry, I enjoyed this journey, and from time to time I continued my unfinished works and started new ones. I was working several weeks or months in a row, and then just left everything for a year. In my studio, there's been a box I used for the material for the paintings since 2006. At the same time, the stories merged into a book based on the same concept, itself based on the long list of Awareness Days. When I put them together into the collection titled *Awareness Days* and *An Ordinary Year* for the first time in 2013, there were about thirty stories. Since then, their number kept increasing.

At the beginning of 2014, I started a self-therapy cycle called *Good Moments*, which intertwined with my visual diary since it also dealt with the preciousness of the present moment. That's why I exhibited them together. The *Dear Diary* kept developing visually and fictionally, so it turned into my primary artistic activity. It encompassed all the topics and media I had worked with by then. The following year, in 2015, I started posting finished paintings on social networks to congratulate a particular World Day to my Facebook friends. They mainly assumed that those days were important to me and that I disguised them behind their generalized names. Based on my posts, custodian Radmila Savčić invited me to have a solo exhibition in the *Meander Gallery* in Apatin. Since there were days left to process and the whole project was still in progress, the exhibition of the ongoing work was interactive, and it lasted from 2015 to 2019. In 2020, in isolation during the pandemic, each day of the year finally got at least a painting, 24 x 30 cm, and I ended up with 418 paintings altogether. That's when I chose bigger formats, 35 x 50, all the way up to 215 x 70 cm. I gave up on the format uniformity because it wasn't necessary anymore after I'd finished the polyptych.

V. M.: At one moment, as if you needed more than all the techniques you used and the accompanying texts, you reached out for movie shots and videos, created by means of modern devices. How and why?

M. E.: My short videos (1-2 min.) were shot between 2011 and 2014. They share the themes from both cycles: contemplating colors, the art of painting, and the hidden treasure of everyday life (blizzard, a cat in an office, makeup, swimming in the sea, talking in a café, etc.). A few longer documentaries are running from 4 to 7 minutes. Their goal was to chronicle passing moments (artists' hand talk at a symposium in Hungary or at an exhibition opening in Novi Sad, making and symbolical *sacrificing* of a wedding gift, election campaign on billboards, etc.). In the sense of visual arts, the videos are like collages: short cuts, distorted images, overemphasized colors, a quick succession of frames, black and white frames against color frames, quotes from online videos (educational program on physics, study of clothes colors, recordings of human voices (fake narrators), audio from videogames, music, films). Some frames combine different kinds of collages made of paintings, photographs, videos, and music. I photoshopped painted landscapes into photographs from travels, and then I collaged them into a video.

V. M.: What's the connection between your paintings, accompanying stories, and videos? To me, it looks like a synthesis of painting, literature, and film or video art, which is a combination of similar artistic disciplines that talk about the same events in different languages.

M. E.: The paintings are not there to illustrate the stories, and the stories do not explain the paintings. They don't follow each other, except in the conceptual sense. Only at times do they thematically overlap. What the painting cannot contain spills over into the story and the other way around. These two languages complement each other, and video is just their logical continuation. It's a medium of visual communication with linear narration. However, video allows you to use sound, which was a new tool for me and an especially interesting concept. I concluded that the suggestive power of sound can completely change the narrative flow and overcolor facts with emotions. Above all, I had fun. I was not burdened with the idea to create an artwork although I did commit fully to the videos. Some works have genuine noises in the background, and some only have music (ranging from classical to folk). Some use sound effects I found online or produced on my own. Just like the paintings and stories from this cycle, the videos describe daily routines, urban movement directions, traveling around Europe, or my sporadic homages to fellow artists, from here or abroad. These miniatures were an attempt to present my view of my surroundings and the dynamics of visual sensations and thinking processes.

V. M.: It looks like the (sometimes really wacky) world days you mention are chosen by some kind of a program. However, it seems they're in the background too, like they were merely used as the underlying motif or the cause for the continuation and duration of the project.

M. E.: These works do not illustrate important world issues. The fiction part of the project is thematically connected with the International Awareness Days, but that connection appeared later. I moved the dates in the stories so that my topics, at least by implication, overlap with global topics, like their naïve, if somewhat ironic, replica. The notes or stories look like they belong to a diary, but the

date when they happened is not important. Those *events* (helicopter seeds of a linden tree falling and rotating, sounds from a neighbor's garden, or reading a book at breakfast) could have happened anytime. In fact, this is a quasi-diary. In contrast, the fiction part of the project describes one year of breaking points in my life. Each of them could be a separate book. However, just like with Awareness Days, I almost just list them because, while we're lamenting over the past that we can't change, it seems like a lot of things that we can change pass us by. Apart from these unimportant and crucial days, my awareness days include several dreams since they have the power to make us aware of things if we give them a chance, even though they originate from the unconscious.

In the painting part of the project, awareness days appear only in the titles of my works. I collected them for years from several websites and other media, just like you would collect pins or paper napkins. Besides making me think about their purpose, origin, and how they're marked, each of those days also made me ask myself how aware I was of my own reality, what I did on a particular day, and what I thought about. We can only try to understand other people through our own perception. I came up with this cycle supposing and hoping that the observer would do the same if I told them my story, inspired by a bigger and more important story. I wanted the observer to ask themselves about their reality. The dates on the paintings are true to the described events (going to an exhibition, a bus ride, buying curtains), so the absence of a direct connection with the awareness days emphasizes my/our lack of interest in them, my/our preoccupation with the daily routine and personal problems. Each of those days is destined to be forgotten if it does not give us enough drama or satisfaction on a personal level. We forget that we don't see the seeds of a plant, we don't see its growth before it turns into a Lombardy poplar. And then we think it's been there forever or that it grew so big on a particular day.

V. M.: You occasionally published the exhibited parts of the project and visual and dairy notes, to a limited extent. Initially, your audience took a more active part in the parts of the project. Consciously or not, how did you present them and how were they perceived?

M. E.: After ten years of preparation for an exhibition, when I finished more than half of my works, I started having solo (Apatin, Novi Bečej, Ulm, Novi Sad) and joint exhibitions (Novi Sad, Austria). I also published some of my stories in magazines and on portals - *Kovine*, *Polja*, and the *Art Box Internet portal*. At exhibitions, my paintings were accompanied by written notes. To complete the bodies of polyptychs, I put blank papers of the same size with the collaged dates at the spots where I hadn't managed to allocate my *events* to the international Awareness Days dates. The audience was offered to complete them with their own impressions of important or unimportant days in their lives. Some took a long time before they wrote something, while others took that as fun and reached for colored pencils momentarily. It turned out that the interactive level of the exhibition was an even more particular call for the audience to think about their days, priorities, and the ways they would present them. Cakes were prepared and guitars played. There were red stars and birdsongs. Basically, they also turned to personal days rather than to world days because everybody finds their own thoughts the most interesting.

V. M.: How did you choose particular dates to which you devoted your written and printed works? Was the choice based on your feelings or on the mere fact that the chosen day is already proclaimed to mark something?

M. E.: The flood of information in our age relativizes reality. To me, all those international *awareness* days, however important, are part of that flood, just like the fight against it. Our mind forgets yesterday, and it erases the past so that it can function today, unrealistically relying on a spectacular future. That's why I wanted to contrast big topics with some unimportant ones, which give up on the rat race because of their banality. They become a vacuum, silence, the soundless eye of the tornado. I suppose that the exhibition in the MCAV will produce another flood of information from this abundance of visual, fictional, and video souvenirs from everyday life in the polyptych, like every time something is multiplied. But this time this information will be from my life.

V. M.: **Did you plan from the start to round up your project with a retrospective exhibition that would include your *conquest of days of the year*?**

M. E.: My final idea was this exhibition that's taking place in the MCAV, but I knew that I couldn't influence how it was going to happen. I wanted it to contain twelve polyptychs, i.e., a single big one. I didn't know when it was going to be finished, or where it was going to be presented, but I was clear that such a modular exhibition could be adjusted to any kind of space in more ways than one, even if it was unfinished. It's maybe still not finished. This freedom to create, the unpredictability but also the self-sufficiency of the whole project, and the possibility to start, continue, or stop it anytime – that's what I find the most exciting about the project.

Cycles usually impose certain restrictions. However, this one eliminated most of them due to its scope and concept. It eliminated the restrictions regarding the artistic approach, materials, motifs, or even format. It opened the doors for different solutions, for the surprising cooperation of techniques and themes: watercolors, acrylic painting, human body, drawing, collage, landscape, impasto, clouds, assemblage, frottage, constellations, color therapy, photo transfer, abstraction, figuration, narration, combination, and more. It's an endless cycle that changes its topics daily and requires me only to yield to it. It's similar to those New Year's party buses that whisk you away to unknown destinations.

V. M.: **Let's go back to writing and painting again. How did it feel doing them at the same time?**

M. E.: When I was a child, I loved comics so much that I believed I'd draw them when I grew up. I was probably attracted by the combination of words and pictures. While doing *Dear Diary* and other projects, I always faced the dilemma of whether to choose one of these two languages and dedicate myself to it. Each language aims to communicate an idea, but the universal nature of creative thought is often deformed by its translation or reduction into a particular language. Thoughts seek the most direct way of expression, through a phrase, slang, coined or loaned words, or a gesture. A phrase that describes a notion, feeling, or phenomenon better is soon imposed onto another language where it takes root. It might transform a bit due to the grammar or pronunciation of its new host, but it remains clearly recognizable: *новопушаму* in Russian from French, *frajer* and *gelipter* in Serbian from German, or *downloading* from English in almost all living languages that are used online today.

I think the languages of art complement in the same way. The same goes for the languages of painting and writing. I'm trying to speak both fluently, but simultaneous interpretation is practically impossible because it demands proficiency, and manners don't go together with inventiveness. I don't

know if one language must suffer while the other is developing, but I wouldn't like to falter in both all my life or to have to give up on one to improve the other. I didn't plan to write a story collection, particularly not one that complements paintings and videos. When I realized about ten years ago that I'd been dealing with the same idea for a long time, just in different media, I decided to use all available languages. To yield to them, even if I spoke weirdly because I think that pronunciation is not so important compared to the possibility to become aware of a thought and express it.