

Art and life: an interview with Dragojla, an artist from the former Yugoslavia living in France

Description

Dragojla (1936) is a painter who arrived in Paris from Yugoslavia in 1954 with the writer and artist Radoje Vukadinovic. Since then, Dragojla has explored painting and the materiality of color on different surfaces (metal, wood, paper, fabric, etc.). She also works on the relationships between the infinitely small and large universes. In this way, her paintings and drawings are both an exploration based on views from microscopes and telescopes while simultaneously highlighting the similarities between the dimensions of the world.

Dragojla studied first at the Academy of Arts in Belgrade, then at the École nationale supérieure des Arts décoratifs (ENSAD) in Paris. She has exhibited in numerous art galleries in France, Germany, Croatia, and Serbia.

Regard sur l'Est: When did you arrive in France?

In 1954, I went with Radoje Vukadinovic, a writer and artist, first to Venice and then to Paris. Before we left, I had been working on a large mosaic for the Sports Museum in Belgrade, which had just been completed. Radoje aimed to do a doctorate in literature at the Sorbonne, and I followed him. In 1965, he defended his thesis on the Russian literary critic Vissarion Belinski at the Sorbonne. We married and had two children who grew up in France.



Has Paris and the Parisian art scene influenced your artistic work?

When I arrived in Paris in 1954, I had some paintings on paper and a few canvases with me, with the idea of showing them, but when I arrived, I immediately felt like painting. At that time, my painting was figurative. I did a lot of realistic portraits. I grew up in a family where art was very important. My father painted, and I took up painting very early.

My father encouraged me to create monumental frescoes and copies of the great painters Raphael, Francisco de Goya, and François Boucher... After that, I could see these artists' original works by visiting the Louvre Museum.

In 1954, the École de Paris artists were in vogue, as were abstraction, informalism, and tachisme. I made friends with French abstract painters, particularly Simone Paud. The Paris art scene did not immediately directly influence my work; that came later.



Dragojla in his first studio in Paris (1961).

In recent years, art historians have been interested in women painters from the Renaissance to the present day. What are your thoughts on this?

For art historians and researchers, the place of women is often analyzed as that of men in a given social and historical context. I make no distinction between men and women when it comes to art. You are, first and foremost, an artist, in my case, a painter. When I arrived in Paris, some of my female friends who were painters asked me to exhibit at the Salon des Femmes Peintres. I found this curious and preferred to show my work in exhibitions where this distinction didn't exist. For me, painting has no gender.

Did you know the other artists who came to Paris from Yugoslavia then?

As a Belgrade Academy of Art student, I was in the same studio as Ljuba (Ljuba Popovic), who also came to France. We were in contact in Paris in the 1960s and 1970s. As for Dado (Dado Djuric), he lived in Normandy. My husband Radoje and I were in contact with Petar Omcikus and Kossa Bokchan. Bata Mihailovic and Ljubinka were also in Paris. Vladimir Velickovic arrived in the 1960s. He was very present on the artistic scene. There was also Djordje Ivackovic, Milos Sobaic, Radovan Kragulj and others... Some writers, including Danilo Kis, arrived a little later.

A new generation of artists arrived in the 1980s and 1990s. Collective exhibitions were organized in Paris until the 2000s, and we were able to meet up there. We all knew each other and went to see each other's exhibitions, but everyone worked in their corner, in their studio.

In recent years, the disappearance of several artists from the former Yugoslavia living in France and of my generation has left a void. But other generations of artists are arriving. Even if the world's artistic centers have moved to other countries, other continents, and other metropolises, Paris remains Paris and still attracts.

How did you experience the disintegration of Yugoslavia?

I was born in Prizren, Kosovo; I lived in Nis and Belgrade, then in Zagreb with my family before coming to France. So, I have ties and memories of the former Yugoslavia. I've exhibited in Croatia and Serbia. I painted a lot in Rovinj, Croatia. So, the disintegration of Yugoslavia was a painful period. My husband, Radoje, took part in the resistance during the Second World War as a Partisan. He fought and helped create the Yugoslavia we know today. We were attached to Yugoslavia, even though we lived in France.

How did you go from figurative to non-figurative painting?

My painting has gone through periods that are logical continuations. There was a first figurative period with portraits. Then, there was a second period, which was also figurative and surrealist. Radoje met Surrealist artists and writers in Paris in 1954. Even though I was interested in abstract painting, I tried not to reject figurative art.

Radoje and I sometimes drew together. We formed a couple, and drawing and painting were part of everyday life. We also collected posters from the underground to draw and paint on. These posters have a glue that holds very well, with several layers forming a good support.

My truly abstract paintings came in a third period, with drawings and paintings that could be classified as informal, lyrical, geometric, or even expressionist abstraction. I did a lot of research into the materiality of color.



Dragojla, "Untitled," painting on metal, 1959.

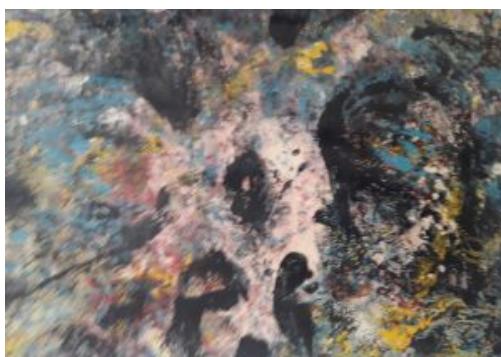
You've chosen to paint on different surfaces. What role do these media play in your work?

I explored the materiality of color by painting on paper, wood, canvas, fabric, and metal (zinc). In the case of metal, I painted on this medium, testing the quality of the color with heat and fire. I have received several awards for my work, including one from Niki de Saint Phalle at La Cordée Gallery. Media can also surprise, create unexpected situations, and allow you to explore new ideas.

After I arrived in Paris, I exhibited my abstract paintings in group shows, including my first solo show in 1966 at the Duncan Gallery on Rue de Seine. I then had exhibitions in other art galleries: the Annick Gendron Gallery, the La Cordée Gallery, and the Vercamer Gallery. I have also shown my work in numerous group exhibitions.

You have also produced scientific drawings and carried out research for the National Museum of Natural History in Paris. Does this influence your work?

I did a lot of scientific drawings for the malacology laboratory at the Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle and carried out research. Observation with an electron microscope introduced me to the universe of the infinitely small life at the bottom of the oceans. I saw a link with research into astrophysics and planetology. It questions the importance of visual observation and the emotions felt when confronted with these universes. In the malacology laboratory, I was surrounded by all these species from the deep. I have exhibited my work, highlighting the relationship between art and science, at the Cité des Sciences in Paris and, more recently, as part of the Science-Art-Technology/Interface project.



Dragoja, "Untitled," painting on prepared paper, 1959.

What advice would you give to a young artist?

I work with young artists, and my advice to them is: be yourself! You can fall under influences during your studies, but you must detach yourself from them, constantly explore your creativity, and persevere.

What are your plans for the future?

Continue to paint and draw. It's essential! I'm currently preparing a retrospective exhibition. I also examine my paintings from different periods while exploring new media and techniques. I'm still very interested in color and materiality. This allows me to move forward.

Vignette: Dragoja, "Untitled," painting on metal, 1961.

[Link to the French version of the article](#)

Translated from French by Assen SLIM ([Blog](#))

* Nicole Pernet is a student at Dragoja.

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Auteur-article : Nicole Pernet*