

Andrej Marjanovic
Politickin'



Museum of the City of Skopje - Open Graphic Art Studio
November 2023

On the cover:

"The Smiling Revolutionary" (2023)
Silkscreen, 66 x 70 cm,
limited edition of 24 prints



"Observer (in a forest)" (2023)
Dry point, monotype, 48 x 38 cm

About the title

Intentionally or not, in my Politickin' cycle, I am dealing with themes from our contemporary culture that have political background or are a type of commentary on certain imposed political or quasi-political situations.

The term politickin' is used in African-American (Ebonic) slang to denote wasting time in endless political discussions while real work is left undone and the status quo is left unchanged. Its connotations include both perspectives: the external critical one about this action being a speculative manipulation of time and resources without the determination for real action toward change, as well as the internal one that recognizes this urge in people to discuss current politics and their political views.

In standard American, the same term politicking is used more proactively: it designates any self-centered activity undertaken for political reasons or ends, irrespective of moral and legal principles. In other words, the Machiavellian "the end justifies the means". It is either neutralized in the diplomatic lingo, designating political work like campaigning for votes, which may imply a wide range of activities from promotion to manipulation and coercion. Or, it is used more critically, in the sense of 'playing politics', 'pseudo-politics', or 'quasi-politics', designating self-centered activities that use scheming and intrigue for acquiring personal gain, power, or influence, instead of serving communal/civil/societal interests.

Both of these terms fascinate me with their Zeitgeist accuracy. While the public is widely engaged in the entertainment of politickin' (in the urban-slang sense), what is allowed in world politics today seems to be much closer to its latter usage—the pseudo-political politicking. Politics has somehow become quasi-politics/pseudo-politics. It has become normal for professional politicians to have their personal interest as their highest priority, instead of the interest of the people they are representing and governing.

I find it interesting that people have always been inclined to this kind of deviation and usurpation of all great ideas and ideologies in line with their own mental capacity, needs, and goals. This very phenomenon seems like a type of "politicking", regardless whether the perpetrators are uneducated individuals devoid of political ambitions or influential international oligarchs with an enormous political machinery to support their agenda.

Since we are living in a time when this phenomenon of quasi-political "politicking" seems to be undergoing exponential growth, I decided to allow myself to explore the subject as an artist. I am interested in what is left of the visual symbols that used to represent big humanistic ideas after the human politicking psyche had appropriated and recreated them into something completely different. Also, I am often worried over the similar destiny of the visual language of graphic design in contemporary marketing, web-communication, and in our global market society in general. The impression I start off with in my deliberations is the all-encompassing and intentional confusion and the topsy-turvy sense-bending and inversion of meaning in favor of someone's politicking interests. So in my artworks, I try to oppose it by using "the enemy's weapons against them" and to initiate its re-examination. Yet, I realize I might be brushing my shoulder with the sin of politickin' myself. Hence, I decided that politickin' is the right title for this cycle.

Although, in my family, politics was integral to my father's profession, ideals, duties, and everyday obligations, it was something I have always tried to avoid as much as I can. I never liked it, and all sides have always looked the same to me. Many times, I have caught myself unconsciously parodying photographs of all current politicians in the newspapers, drawing on top of them and uniting them all into the same category of collusioners against reason and well-being. Now, I have decided to play openly with this subject in my art, so that, by facing it and deconstructing it, I may shake it off one more time.

I dedicate this exhibition to my father, Georgi Marjanovic.

Ideas, Goals, Themes, and Techniques

The works in this cycle explore the following ideas and themes:

- the concept of play in art, culture, and in every aspect of human existence—the concept of homo ludens;
- the interchangeability of roles that the players accept, as shown, for instance, by the Stanford prison experiment (1971) at the Psychology Department of Stanford University;
- the destiny of the visual language of graphic design in contemporary marketing, web-communication, and in our global market society in general;
- the distortion and amortization of visual and graphic symbols that used to represent big humanistic ideas after the human politicking psyche had chewed, digested, and recreated them into something completely and oxymoronically opposite;
- the opportunities of graphic design to be the right-hand discipline to the art of printmaking, and of the techniques of serial production and mass sales to be tools for spreading and glorification—instead of devaluation—of artistic messages and values.

In my explorations, I always start with the homo ludens concept, finding play to be an unchallengeable principle in human life, culture, art, therefore in printmaking, as well. I have a stubborn need to reaffirm the artist's freedom to play with everything and anything, even with the problematic phenomena in social life. The idea for this exhibition cycle came to me, after I accidentally found a plastic toy soldier covered in the soil, while gardening in the back yard. My playful deliberations around it opened an entire Pandora's box of ideas. My artistic psyche plays with everything, and the fact that this political subject matter has imposed itself upon me, only speaks more about the times that we live in. However, my foremost intrests go beyond political messages, since I am primarily seduced by the very graphic language and its symbolism, whose unconscious analysis is my *déformation professionnelle*. The most used massmedia graphic icons of our time reach out to me and I need to treat them as ready-made material in order to express how I feel about them and to reinterpret them in my own way. By putting them into the spotlight, I am drawing attention to the need for reinvestigation and higher awareness of their use and meaning. I openly invite the public to investigate the history, the use, and the meaning of all these symbols with me. Therefore, in addition to the exhibited works, I have placed several briefings on the history of some of the graphic symbols actualized and reinterpreted in this exhibition.

Aside from this primary goal to play, this exhibition also has a secondary educational and promotional goal: to elevate the knowledge and appreciation of the general public for the complicated artistry of printmaking by revealing its behind-the-scenes making-of side. The printing-press room will be open for the public during the exhibition, displaying not only the tools and materials, an exhibition of the draft versions of the works, a projection of edited video materials that documented the process, but I will also be printing new copies during the 5 days the exhibition is open.

Influenced by the poor contemporary conditions in which printmaking artists work today, the works are produced by DIY printmaking and graphic techniques (silkscreen, dry point, monotype, relief print, intaglio with a laser etched matrix, photographic transpher, augmented ready-made, and installation), which are applied on a variety of available materials.



"Ecce Che" (2023)
Silkscreen, 66 x 66 cm
limited edition of 23 prints



The Works

One of the several visual culprits for my exploration of these subjects was definitely the ignorant intervention of a well-meaning parishioner and amateur “artist” Cecilia Giménez on Elías García Martínez’s “Ecce Homo” fresco in Spain in 2012. When I saw how powerfully and widely this inglorious event echoed with endless pop-cultural creations on the social networks as an internet meme (“Ecche Mono”), I got reminded that the grotesque parodization of ideals has always been most dear to the hearts of the masses, but also to the contemporary capitalist machinery that never misses an opportunity to capitalize, closely following the barometer of the masses. In their own right, „Ecce Homo“ frescoes have an enormous critical and subversive potential to face the crowds with their moral fall, since it is to satisfy their enraged and condemning demands that Pontius Pilate presents to them the scourged, bound, and thorn-crowned Christ, shortly before his Crucifixion. His words “Behold the Man” (John 19:5) remained a testament to the contradiction that precisely the person they demanded to be tortured and crucified is the true human being, the same one they will later proclaim their saint/savior/king after they understand. The way the untrained amateur Cecilia Giménez ruined the 100-year-old artistic inheritance, wholeheartedly believing that she is restoring her favorite fresco, bears the same meaning in relation to art.

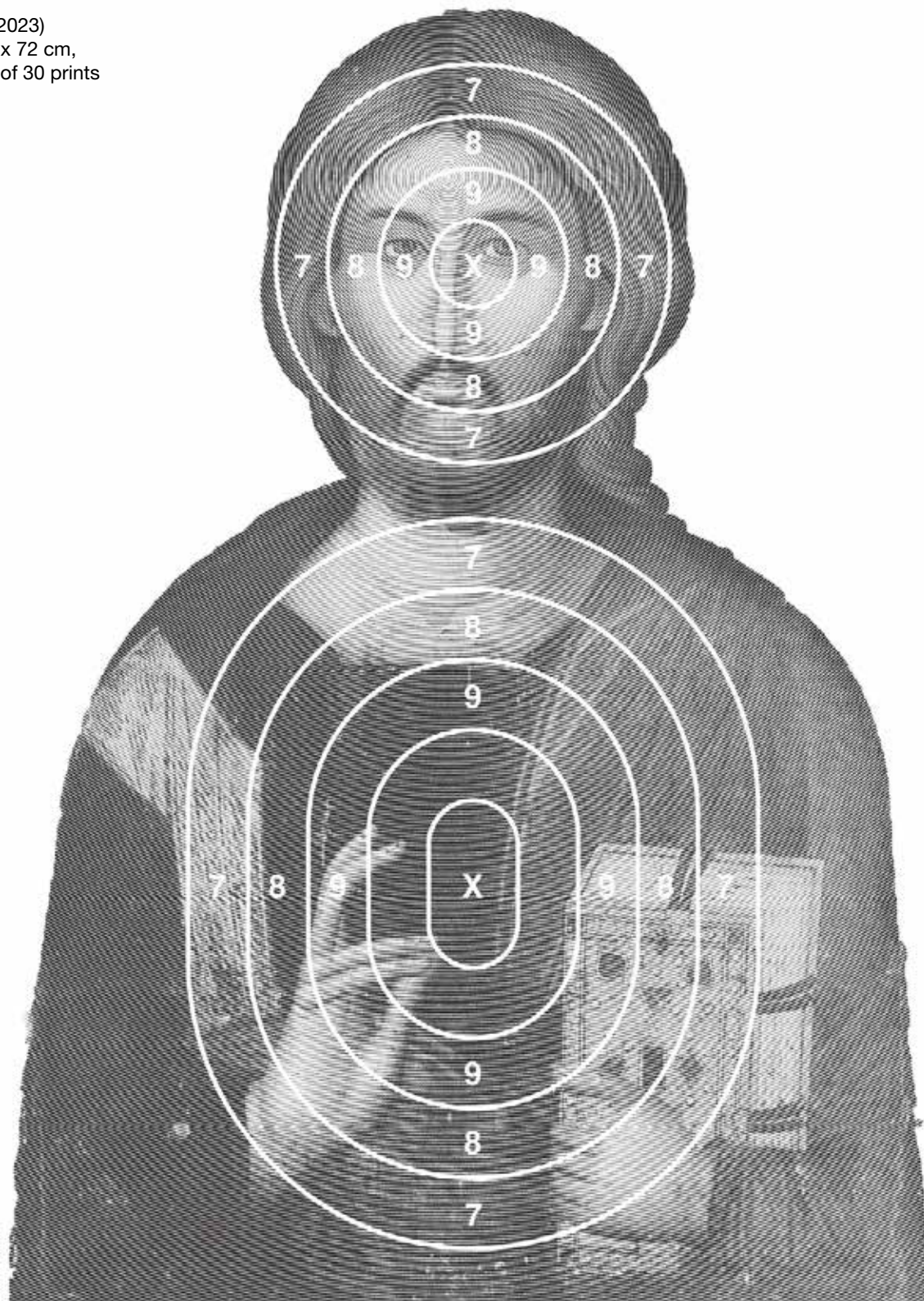
All of this visually began to merge with the appropriation and usurpation of the revolutionary and counter-cultural ideas as commercial goods by neoliberal capitalism. One of the most prominent examples of this must be the use of the image of the leader of the Latino-American communist revolution Ernesto Che Guevara, which simultaneously celebrates and distorts his political idea for a revolutionary change. Thus, the idea for creating “Ecce Che” was born first. It fused these two contemporary cultural icons: the most reproduced photograph of Che Guevara and today’s most famous art meme of amateur Cecilia Giménez’s botched “Ecce Homo” fresco. They both reveal the frightful possibilities for distorting great humanistic ideals by inappropriate use of the images associated with them, if in the hands of unskilled or less informed people, or in the hands of the contemporary pop-culture industries that appropriate symbols for mass consumerism and profit (creating hype), allegedly for fun, fashion, etc.

“Ecce Che” lead to a series of explorations inspired by this theme. In some of the concepts, I have a more passive (though parodizing) attitude, like in the drafts “Revolution (a bad trip)” and “Freaks come out at night”. They are both autoreferential reconstructions of “Ecce Che”, remixes of the same concept. The first one combines it with the LSD-25 blotter sheets, as a warning for the dangers of misinterpreting and altering the meaning by the implication of a bad trip. The second one combines it with the title of the 80s hit “Freaks come out at night”, which reminds of the time the remix culture was in its rise. On the other hand, in other explorations on the same concept, I see a positive possibility for change in an active and forewarning way. The positive smiley symbol occurred next in my subconsciousness and expanded the concepts further in the work “The Smiling Revolutionary”, since the smiley symbol itself is a mighty ambiguous and polisemic graphic weapon, which may well be the most enduring and most popular graphic image of our time. This was another unconscious cross-pollination between two of the most prominent icons of contemporary culture. I found out afterwards about its odyssey in the distorting labyrinths of Western iconographic cultural history: its complicated transformations from a children’s cartoon and a morale-uplifting pin for depressed insurance company workers to a cynical fake-optimism social critique, through its have-a-nice-day appropriation on Ts and all kinds of products in small-time dealerships to being sold by multimillion licencing companies, from the anti-establishment hippie and punk culture to the rave subculture, from Banksy to contemporary art gallery artists and high fashion lines, to its reaffirmation as a positive symbol through the World Smile Foundation, lead by the offspring of the graphic designer who created the ideogram, Harvey Ross Ball.

Beside the revolution theme as one great distorted idea today, I got particularly interested in the lost meaning of the symbol of the soldier and the army as the ideals of strength, courage, and protection (the ideal of manhood). In my research in this cycle, the soldier symbol is degraded to its representation as a children’s plastic toy, which is manipulatively and paradoxically installed in the most inappropriate of places (often deserted or contrastively natural), and often caught in confusing cross-fire, as if on someone’s target himself: “From play fighting to real fighting”, “Island” (an allegory of war), “In a forest”, and “Toy soldiers on the beach”. This doesn’t make him less dangerous, since his weapons are always decisively aimed, so the fact that something is obviously off with his surrounding context is even more frightening.

Nevertheless, the toy soldier simultaneously remains to signify play as an omnipresent category in my work and in life in general (homo ludens): “The great wave” and “Surfer”. Art to me has always been a field where I am completely free to play by my own rules and where play often offers unexpected solutions to unresolvable problems. The toy soldier reminded me of the relationship between the artist and his works (the continuous striving and persistent work to achieve the artistic goals you are aiming at and to hit the target as precisely as

"Bulletproof" (2023)
Silkscreen, 50 x 72 cm,
limited edition of 30 prints

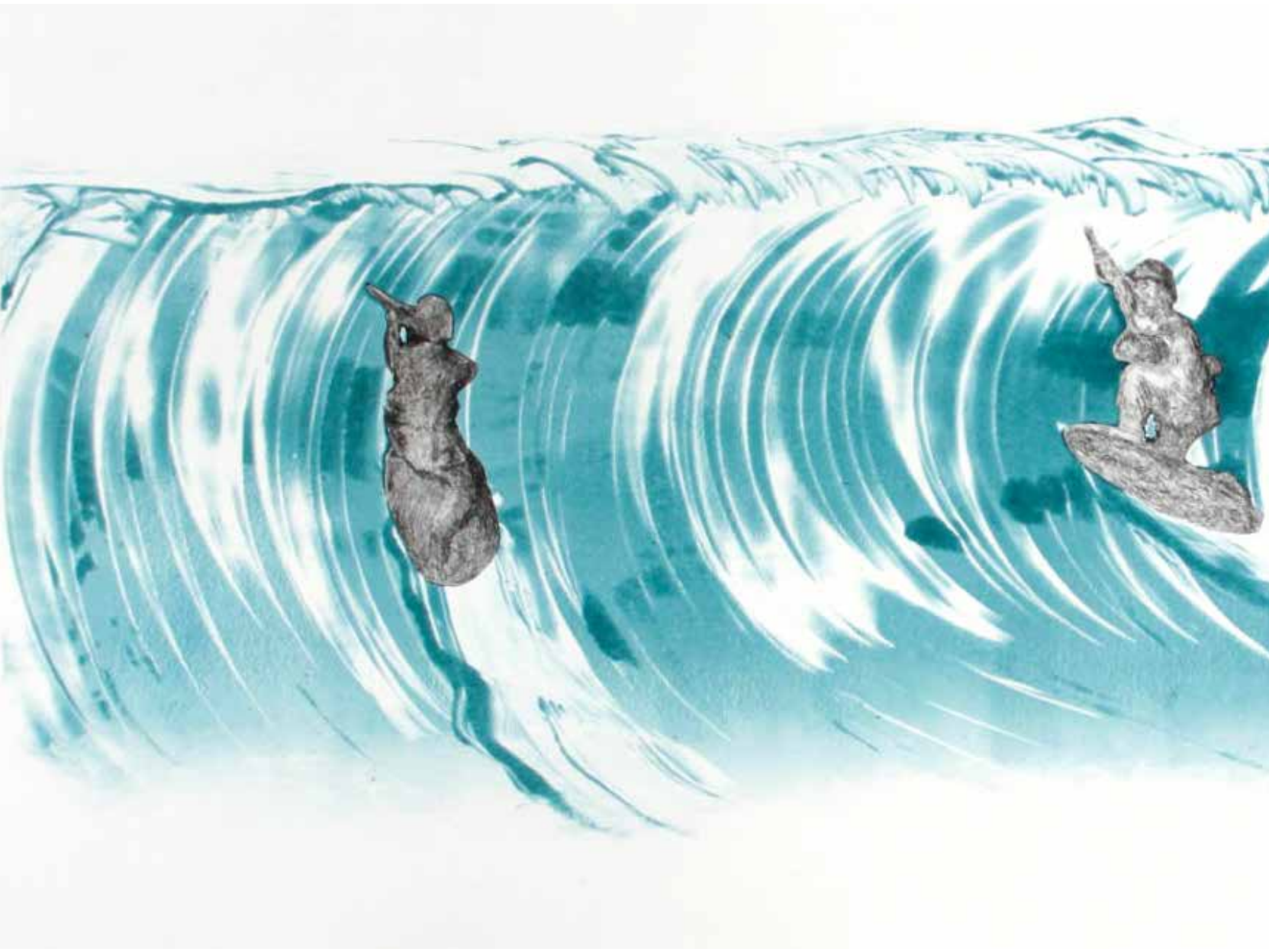


you can), as well as of the relationship between the artist and the public (who is aiming at whom, who is watching whom, who is conquering whom, and who is playing with whom): “Observer” and “When I grow up...”. I really like to play with engaging the public in this interchangeable role-play, which also reminds me of the 1971 social psychology study known as the Stanford prison experiment. I feel that we should always have in mind that in a blink of a second we could all be in each other’s shoes and on the other side of the fence. Many years ago, when I accidentally uncovered a buried plastic toy soldier in my yard, I recalled my long childhood games with toy soldiers, in which the child impersonates being God, a general, and the soldiers.

Similarly, in our everyday life here in Macedonia, I could not help asking myself how and why the art inheritance of all religions is used and perceived as a threatening political and military enemy, instead of as a symbol of the spiritual progress of all humanity. For instance, I was surprised by the destruction of churches during the war in Macedonia in 2001, just as I am surprised by all attacks on the artistic inheritance of any world religion and civilization. When later on, attacks on the Macedonian Church reincarnated from the Middle Ages, in my subconscious mind I saw an unrelated fresco visually coinciding with the target practice silhouette in a black-and-white print, and I couldn’t take it out of my head until I phototransferred it from vector graphics to paper in 2019 and later named it “Bulletproof“. The fresco is called “Pantocrator, Christ Savior and Life Giver“, it was painted in 1393-4 by Metropolitan Jovan Zograf for the iconostasis in the Church of the Holy Transfiguration in Zrze Monastery near Prilep. To me, this fresco is a visual manifestation of the Orthodox Christian ideal of love and mercy, which emanates from the overall color and form balance and the direct gaze of Christ’s eyes, as he is presented in his highest role of a young-paternal ruler and judge of all, with his life-giving and soul-saving powers, bringing forth the gift of reason, balance, and order—a book (idealized by the Byzantine reverse perspective). Love, compassion, and acceptance are at the core of what Christianity aimed to idealize by its victim God, and this Orthodox fresco art captured it.

Who could object to these symbols and why would they be attacked? Is the symbol of love and forgiveness under attack in the modern materialist society and culture because material values are placed above the spiritual ones? Are the remnants of ancient spiritual wealth an enemy? My first ideas for a title of this work were “Target practice“ and “A person of interest“, but then I imagined it displayed behind bulletproof glass, and I knew if the title would be “Bulletproof“, my point would be understood best. Most people were confused and scared off by my print when they first saw it, thinking that I am doing blasphemy by setting up the Christian Saviour on a target practice field to be shot at, but to me it was obvious that the ideal of self-sacrificing love and mercy is stronger than any bullet. I challenge all viewers to think about these questions: Who is aiming at whom? Whose hits would be more accurate? Who would get whom? Can an idea be killed by a bullet? Where does the artist aim, and where the public? Toward what purpose does artistic creation aim in religions? Toward what purpose does artistic creation aim in general? Is Orthodox Christianity on target today and why? Who threw the first stone? Why is someone shooting at the sky? Where/why/how are frescoes and icons still disappearing from Macedonia?

After exploring parodied ideologies and their armed forces, it came naturally to continue toward parodization of those who are parodying. The political emissary of neoliberalism, manifested in the image of the United States of America as the world’s policeman, parades with its “ideals” of freedom and justice, but their actions reveal completely opposite goals of unjust subjugation by force. Therefore, I gave my own interpretation of the visual symbols of its flag and of one of its first pop-cultural heroes from WW2 time, the comic-book character Captain America. In my interpretation, the freedom flag is remixed with toy soldiers, spiked fences, and their red-scary propaganda against the “dangers” of communist philosophy. Aside from Captain America’s military skills, the power of this super-soldier lies precisely in leadership and protection, symbolized by his shield. At the time of the comic book creation, this symbolism was inspired by the desired ideals of freedom and justice, but from today’s perspective, I find him hidden in a garbage container (a symbol of their trash culture), stuffed with phony play money and plastic toy soldiers. The big irony is that the alter-ego of this super hero, Steve Rogers, is precisely a skilled freelance commercial artist, who is complaining that he does not understand the motivation of his main character, while drawing the comic book.



"The great wave" (2023)
Dry point, monotype, 91 x 31,5 cm





"When I grow up..." (2023)
Dry point, monotype, 57 x 78 cm

Biography

Andrej Marjanovic (b. 1978, Skopje) graduated in 2004 at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University – Skopje, Department of Printmaking and Graphic Design, under the mentorship of prof. Mirko Vujisic. His first graphic arts exhibitions—related to his solo exhibition “Recurrences” (2007, Open Graphic Studio, Museum of the City of Skopje)—were remembered as a rare experimental research in the field of printmaking with their use of cylindrical polyethylene pipes and the possibility for creating unlimited formats in size (“The Tower of Babel”, 198 x 254 cm).

Although, first and foremost, he considers himself a graphic artist, Andrej Marjanovic works in both multimedia and many classic arts techniques (painting, sculpture, and drawing), but also as a graffiti artist and an electronic music artist. Over the last 25 years, he has applied art in his professional work in branding, graphic design, web design, photography, video production, audio production, and animation. Since 2011, he runs his own marketing company Kukya Creative Studio (<https://www.kukya.com/>), providing more or less commercial and artistic services to customers around the world.

With regard to technique, Andrej Marjanovic is always interested in experimentation, innovation, and intermediality. In his interartistic and intermedia fine art explorations, he is often inspired by music, comic books, street art, computer art, video art, video games, and film. Whatever the technique, medium, or application, his art stylistically gravitates toward the minimalist, symbolic, and abstract, always grounded on deeply deliberated concepts, a critical approach, autoreferentiality, and humor.

He was born and raised in Skopje, but from 2014 lives in the Prespa area. He is a member of the Association of Fine Artists of Macedonia since 2007.

Exhibitions / Performances / Releases:

- 2023 Blockheads (Objects and paintings) – Solo exhibition (Cultural Information Center Skopje, June 2023)
- 2022 Exhibition from the Open Graphic Studio’s Collection – group exhibition (Museum of the City of Skopje, June 2022)
- 2009 Macedonian Artists’ Exhibition in Sofia – group exhibition of the Association of Fine Artists of Macedonia (Gallery of the National Palace of Culture – Sofia, July 2009)
- 2008 GraphICON – group exhibition (Open Graphic Studio, Museum of the City of Skopje, December 2008)
- 2008 Slang Dictionary – installation (Museum of the City of Skopje, Open Graphic Studio, White Night Festival, September 2008)
- 2007 Recurrences (Prints) – solo exhibition (Open Graphic Studio, Museum of the City of Skopje, 2007)
- 2001 NDRJ + SAKO = Split – collaborative double CD release of experimental electronic music (Alexandria & FOSM, 2001; promotion in the Museum of Contemporary Art – Skopje)
- 1997 Live electronic music performance (Spoeni Sadovi – Multimedia Art Festival, Youth Cultural Center, Skopje, 1997)

Contact:

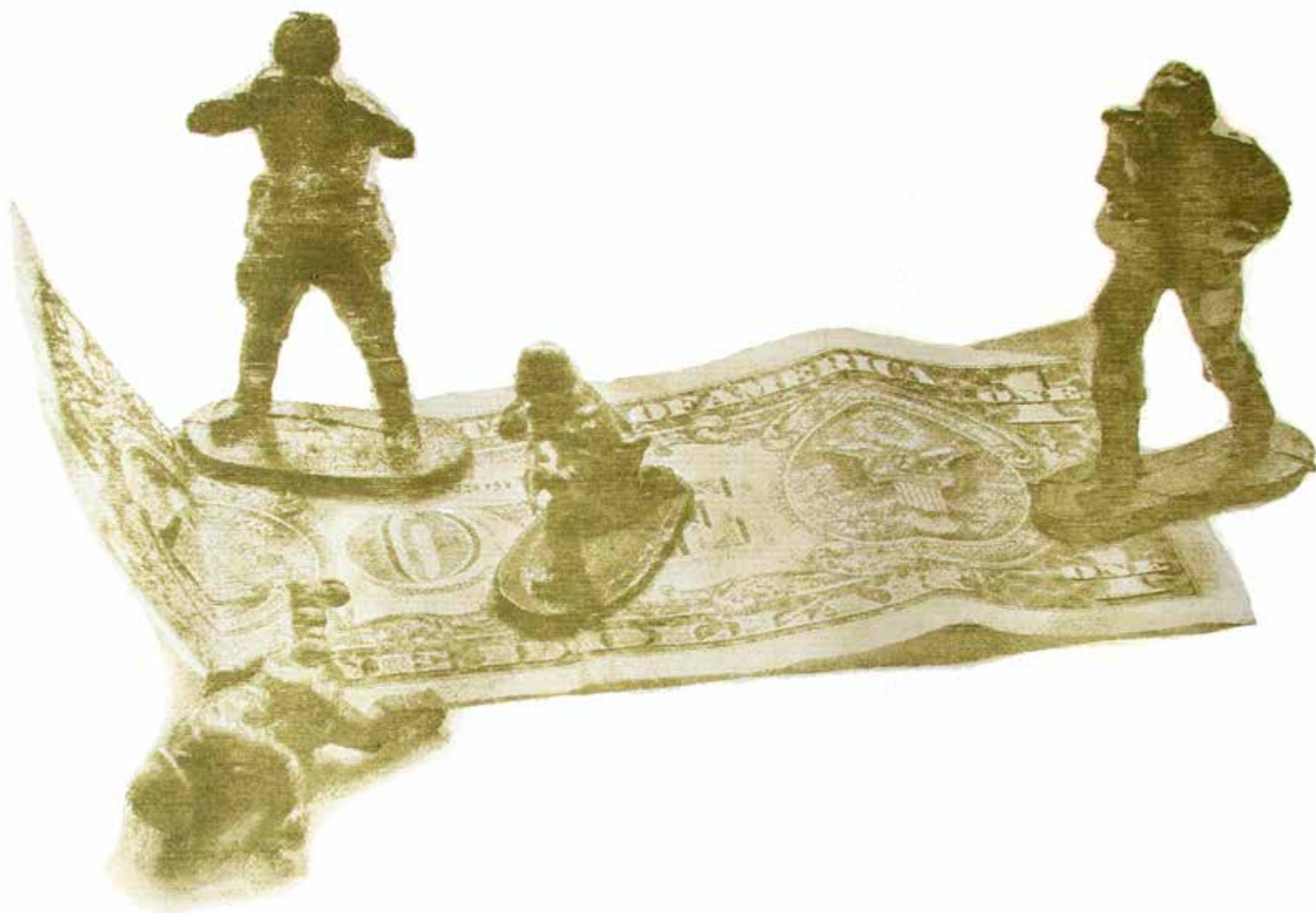
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"Surfer" (2023)
Relief print, monotype, 50 x 70 cm



"Observer (in red)" (2023)
Dry point, monotype, 48 x 38 cm



"Island" (2023)
Intaglio, laser etched matrix, 61 x 49 cm

"Sur la plage" (2023)
Dry point, 50 x 40 cm

