SNEZANA PETROVIC: AMONG MEDIA, AMONG FORMS, AMONG WORLDS

By Peter Frank

To be an artist is to resist specialization. Just as they reject or distance themselves from stylistic labels, artists think of themselves as adept in, or at least reliant on, more than one medium. Any one artist may display a particular fluency in a particular art form, but we regard their practice at our peril if we pigeonhole them into painters or printmakers or photographers or performance artists. The diverse media provide means of access to ideas and visions through different doors, and, of course, the ideas and visions, not the doors, define the artist.

Specialization is for academics – that is, for academics to study, not even for them to practice. Snezana Petrovic, like so many of her peers a product of and now employed by art education facilities, defines herself not as a professor but as a maker. “I have always had a continuous practice,” Petrovic said in an interview, “working in different disciplines… and trying to break through the experience of being a trained artist…” This experience, originally in her native Belgrade, found her moving away from traditional painting early in her career to the parallel, but markedly different, practice of set and costume design, for both theater and film. This sprang from her abiding fascination with time-based visual art, a fascination that aligned Petrovic with several avant garde groups in then-united Yugoslavia – themselves local reactions to worldwide trends.

Petrovic’s attraction to the written and spoken word was (and remains) no less fervent. Her engagement of poetry in her work is as much concrete as it is metaphorical. Furthermore, her ongoing dialogue about her work and art in general, maintained with an ever-expanding circle of colleagues, relies on highly articulated thought and inquiry. Yet – or perhaps as a result – Petrovic has maintained and even sharpened her own immigrant status, an at-least partial alienation from the verbal medium of her adopted tongue. The embrace of poetry and language in general in her work, for instance, signals not only her dedication to *parole* as such but also the fact that the language Petrovic employs is not her own. Thanks to the reach of first the British Commonwealth and then the American empire (especially American popular culture), many who come to the United States have been familiarized with its official language. But Petrovic, even as she may have studied English in high school, was not raised on it. To employ it now, especially in the service of poetry and art, is to employ a still-exotic tool, one whose myriad subtleties and even internal contradictions can prove stumbling blocks – and at the same time opportunities for new levels of meaning.

Petrovic does not need to rely solely on language to uncover new levels of meaning, however. The superposition of divergent modes and media in her work, the juxtaposition of live and static materials, the diversity of her subject matter, of means to conveying that subject matter, and of techniques to support the means – all these factors allow her a breadth of expression, a range of visual (and extra-visual) experience, and even a command of unpredictability. What will Petrovic do next? we wonder. What space will she occupy? What materials will she employ? What subject will she address or sensation will she convey?

This sense of wonderment and surprise suffuses throughout Petrovic’s oeuvre. It does come close to manifesting a sense of spectacle – the “spectacle” of Guy Debord, that is, engulfing all other sensation and numbing and addicting its audience, a bread-and-circus distraction from social ills and imbalances. But, for all the sensuosity and glister of her assemblages, installations, and even paintings, Petrovic quite consciously, even demonstrably, stops short of providing entertaining diversion. Her social concerns lie at or just below the surface of her works – even the ones without apparent reference (some of her best work) critique the suppression of meaning in contemporary life: they propose that form itself is a valid, even potent, expression, and that no composition, no matter how abstract, is without meaning within itself or resonance in the larger discourse.

It is this commitment to meaning – that is, to the *act* of meaning, not to the articulation of a single idea nor to portentous self-referential gesture – rather than to any single thing or idea that permits, even prompts, Petrovic to wander far afield in artistic media and practices, from video to sculpture, from weaving to performing, from assemblage to poetry. She professes to a prevailing engagement with “a few issues that are permeating,” specifically displacement and gender. Indeed, we find these two themes recurring at least inferentially in much of Petrovic’s art, from her use of store mannequins to her celebration of many goddesses among the gods she honors in her recent series of paintings called Avatars; or – as discussed above – in her scavenging the detritus of the culture around her for effects and artifacts symptomatic of that culture’s alienating qualities. But Petrovic’s oeuvre does not find its *raison d’être* in the apotheosis of the feminine or the psychic plight of the emigré; these are through-themes, broad contextualizing conditions that flavor everything Petrovic does while allowing her to investigate so many more concerns as well.

In adopting and adapting so many different media and even métiers, from assemblage to architecture, batik to biology, Petrovic would seem to be rejecting the very concept of personal style. She is not. She is simply ignoring the art world’s insistence on style-as-brand, taking a conceptual – that is, exemplative and experimental – approach to the employment of materials and methods. Every work and every series Petrovic realizes is an exercise in discovery, not in production. Even seemingly polemical positions like the Avatar series or like various of the video-embedded installations actually serve as vessels for elaboration, for the expansion of associations around the chosen subjects. Petrovic indulges both her subjectivity and ours this way, assuring non-fixed interpretation while still directing our attention outward to quotidian reality. And in this way, with everything at her disposal, Snezana Petrovic maintains a vital give-and-take between the studio and the world.

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