Anxiety makes you lonely. Your best company becomes an object that makes you feel grounded. A chair is good company: silent, reliable, warm, relaxing. It can be a therapist, mom, throne, cradle, working spot, or simply a tiny break from yourself. If you spend enough time alone, an object can even become alive. Much like when we were children, especially in the dark, objects begin to move or have a soul. Nikolija paints this animism of objects we project on; they collect and embody our fears and dreams, and they are witnesses to our everyday death and birth. Like in Alice in Wonderland, they ambiguously show a path we know nothing about, and we are faced with no other choice but to be curious and to trust a feeling.

Here we see a revived interest by the artist in dreams and the unconscious, with surrealist-like distortions of represented objects. One of Jenny Holzer's Truisms says, "In the dream you saw a way to survive, and you were full of joy." Cartoon-like objects, with their symbolism, playfulness, and openness to meaning, represent this dream sanctuary where she tries to find a way to make a cruel reality permeable to change. Yet objects hold ambivalence: the freedom of dreams, but also a fixation on material things. You all remember well kissing all the toys before bed. Naming them, touching them, hugging, sorting, saying prayers, or else something bad can happen to your family members. There is a tiny line between a grounding practice and an elaborate OCD routine.

Once, Nikolija left a bloody trace in a gallery from the installations she accidentally stepped into, all the way to the men's toilet. I see it as a result of a childlike dissociation, but also as a symbolic call to get bloody in her own practice. It sounds like a fever dream, but her accidental act brought the installation to life; it was no longer a distant object in an ivory tower, but something to be experienced. She lives and paints as if there is a solution to life. We see her arguing with her paintings, and then apologizing, making peace. We see that she treats each one as a person, sometimes as a rigid parent imposing art rules, sometimes as a close friend she talks to until falling asleep. She sees the artwork as a shaman belonging to both worlds, connecting the personal and collective unconscious, and the material, even banal, world of objects and consumerism with the invisible yet present animism of everything around us.

She holds onto the thread of the memory of how to survive that she saw in a dream by materializing this memory in art.

The danger with dreams is their unpredictability; you never know if one is going to be a nightmare. Sylvia Plath says, "To the person in the bell jar…the world itself is the bad dream."[1] What makes a difference for a person suffering is that, in a nightmare, you let go of every illusion of control you have. You face the ultimate negative anticipation you religiously evoke in your waking life. In a dream, it goes above and beyond, through anxiety as a neurotic defense, and touches a core. It holds a key to a way out in waking life.

But between the next-life dream promises and the loop of the past repeating itself in the present, is the materiality of our bodily experience, the shedding of the skin we have outgrown. "The truth is we can survive our lives, but not our skin."[2] Deep in the body, trauma dropped a seed, and fear and anxiety grew bigger as we found new elaborate routines to deal with recurring painful themes of our lives. The motifs Nikolija addresses revolve around transience, ambivalence, and states of in-betweenness; the permanence of objects; and the consolation we find in it. It is hard to get over the routine and attachment to material objects when they are so comforting amid all the cruelty and loneliness of existence.

---

1 Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar (London: Heinemann, 1963).

2 Ocean Vuong, On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous (New York: Penguin Press, 2019).

A warm blanket covering us from head to toe, a small figurine of a piggy next to the bed, a cross around the neck, a lucky dress, a paper origami rose, a bottle of old perfume with just a drop saved. They protect us from time passing, losing things and people, unrepeatable experiences, and the transience of a single moment of feeling loved and safe. To grow out of our childhood skins, we need to leave those illusions of safety behind. To return a blanket to a parent's house, to stop wearing a dress as a guarantee of a good night, to spend the last drop of perfume on a random Thursday night out.

The exhibition is the artist's last look at the idealism and omnipotence of the self and objects in childhood, before relaxing a hand that painfully, tightly holds onto the never existent Eden we all dream of returning to. This inner tension is released onto the work, and it has finally left the body. It is still lonely, but at least quiet sadness is replacing anxiety. The dream is lost, and now she can hardly remember it. It only left a feeling that What we'll always have is something we lost.[3]

Ana Simona Zelenović
Belgrade, Sept 26.

---

3 Ocean Vuong, Time Is a Mother (New York: Penguin Press, 2022).