

Situated at the intersection of Minimalism and digital appropriation, the paintings of the Montenegro-born, New York-based artist address subjects as controversial as sex and violence, challenging the viewer's perspective and complicating binary notions of morality.

BR In *Artforum's* "Best of 2016," Keren Cytter wrote with regard to your work that "such brave and loving representation of murder, sex, death, and abuse is rare in the cloud of careful referential choices in contemporary art." In her description, there is a striking contradiction, and an underlying question: What is your intention in confronting us with this very strong, explicit imagery you use? I understand that you collect it from the Internet and have been doing that for a very long time.

DB Yeah, it would depend on the series, but I often try to present both extremes of any story in some way. What I aim for is to create a space where the viewers can be confronted with this resulting ambiguity, its complex realities, to engage with things as they are and not as they appear to us. I never supply any "answers"—it's more about *showing*. I don't believe that art should ask anything of us, other than to see and then to re-see. The diptych that Karen wrote of, exhibited as a part of my solo show at Künstlerhaus Graz, was centered on two characters, Manuela Ruda and Sophie Lancaster. Manuela is a self-proclaimed Satanic murderess who together with her husband stabbed his mild-mannered workmate who loved The Beatles sixty-six times at the Dark Lord's bidding in Witten, Germany (the couple would later say that they'd chosen him as their sacrificial victim because he was "so funny and would be the perfect court jester for Satan"); by contrast, Sophie was a twenty-year-old Lancashire, England native who was fatally beaten in 2007 by five teenage boys, inexplicably enraged by her and her boyfriend's "goth" appearance. However, upon first glance, they're more similar than they are different—they're both of the goth subculture; the composition of the images is near identical. Your initial impression may be that they're not unlike each other, but in reality, they have totally different stories and endings.

BR The subject of murdered girls is a common thread in your work, and you have mentioned several times that it is okay for a woman to feel okay with these images. In the wake of the political turmoil we are facing in the Trump era, suddenly you see a lot of activism coming up, including women's activism. From this perspective, it would be great to hear your bit about activism in general and feminism.

DB This came up a lot when I was in graduate school: the question of female representation in my practice, where I stand on things. To

be honest, that is not my interest, nor my starting position. There are other themes that I am more inspired by than the question of female representation and feminism; or more importantly, I find it to be indivisible from the question of my moral obligation, and it's not my place to moralize.

BR So where does your work start from?

DB In a sense, it's always broadly centered around the status of the image, and, more recently, focused on the duality of good versus evil, and our perspectives of it, how wavering it is or can be, and unsteady—and fortunately so, as it complicates binary readings of morality. For example, over the past year, I've been collaborating with Joseph (Joe) Druce, a former child abuse victim and anti-pedophilia campaigner who murdered John J. Geoghan, a convicted pedophile priest, in a vigilante attack while serving a prison sentence for another killing. I was struck by Joe and his artwork after seeing a drawing in which he depicted Geoghan with the text "stole the innocence of 147 children: 8–10 years" alongside a self-portrait with the text "stole the life of one pedophile: life w/o parole," with a headline reading "JUSTICE?!? no/yes no/yes no/yes." One of the first projects resulting from the collaboration was a series of paintings focusing on both victims and perpetrators of murders of a pedophilic intent, incorporating Joe's slogans—such as "Save A Child, Kill A Pedophile," or "God Bless Innocence"—as text banners. These paintings also featured images of Dominno—a now-retired pornographic actress famous for her busty, curvaceous figure—in provocative near-nude as well as nude poses, always directly looking into the eye of the camera, confronting the spectator(s) with a shameless, expressionless face. There's obviously this added tension of having her present, her highly sexualized body amongst the ephemeral photographic remnants of victimized children. Her purpose here is of a caryatid of sorts, but more importantly, what her story adds is that regardless of having a stereotypically "womanly" figure, she was consistently dressed in too-small children's clothing (with hand-drawn marker drawings of butterflies on her shoes, or cartoon characters such as Snoopy on her spaghetti-strapped tank top) and posed in a manner that alluded to her being babyish.

BR What are your plans for your upcoming exhibition at KALEIDOSCOPE's exhibition space

D A R J A

B A J A G I C

INTERVIEW
PHOTOGRAPHY

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DANKO

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These blurry, fragmented images by photographer Danko Steiner portray Darja in her Brooklyn apartment, filled with goth paraphernalia. Both Steiner and Bajagić have lived in New York for many years but are originally from the Balkans, Croatia and Montenegro respectively.



Brittane Drexel ft. Pierrot (Stuck-Out Tongue) (2017) is part of a new series of UV-printed, acrylic-painted, aluminum-framed canvases presented by Bajagić in her upcoming solo exhibition "Damnatio Memoriae" at KALEIDOSCOPE's new space in Milan, from 11 October–25 November 2017.

in Milan? How do you want to make people feel uncomfortable in a constructive way?

DB [Laughs] The series is focused on Brittane Drexel, a teenage girl who was abducted and repeatedly gang-raped in a "stash house." She was murdered after her disappearance had generated "too much media attention." There will be four paintings, each using an image of Brittane and her friends disseminated on various news media sources upon her disappearance. In an effort to retain her family and friends' privacy, all faces except Brittane's were concealed with black censor bars. Sometimes, to cover a large group of friends, the bars were multiplied to create awkward black shapes. So, they're very strange, sad, and eerie images, of Brittane smiling and looking to be having fun, essentially alone. Each image was then painted over and printed with various faces of Pierrot—the naïve, ever-trusting, tragic clown—disrupting and burying whatever's left of Brittane's alienated face. They're more quietly ominous than they are "in your face," I'd say. There is also the framing element, which is important—these gated door frames that will cover various lengths of the canvases, existing as additional partial-barriers, or entryways, depending on how you see [it].

BR Your earlier, flap paintings referred very clearly to minimalism. Can you talk about the con-

flicting relationship between formalism and content, and how you're using it in your work?

DB I do think I am a minimalist at heart, you know? For the early paintings, a lot of the "layouts" were borrowed from the structure of magazines, flipping through pages, as well as Web pages, scrolling, clicking. And, as a teenager and through graduate school, I had a serious obsession with Ad Reinhardt's "black paintings," together with his dry sense of humor—the cartoons and the texts.

BR You mentioned the word "borrowing," and of course the term "appropriation" has also been used several times in relationship to how you use images and text drawn from the Internet. I'm wondering, how do you decide what to borrow? And are you happy with the word "appropriation" when it comes to the practice of a younger generation of artists, and their changed behaviors in relationship to the accessibility of images and information as the Internet provides it?

DB I prefer "borrowing," because it's more accurate to me. I feel as though I am "temporarily" using materials to tell or retell stories in my own way, always retaining and referring to the original context, as it's crucial to my practice. When I was at Yale, I went to a Thomas Hirschhorn talk, as he's someone I really look up to and admire. It resulted in one of the most awkward and uncomfortable Q&As. A

THERE'S A SUBVERSIVE POWER IN PORNOGRAPHY—SIMULTANEOUS DESIRE, FEAR. I'D ARGUE THE SAME FOR VIOLENT IMAGES.



Installation view of *She's more obsessed than Dahmer, she's more calculated than Bundy, and certainly more faceless than Bateman and The Girl Who Wouldn't Die, starring Brittanee Drexel*, both 2017, as part of the exhibition "89Plus: Americans 2017" at LUMA Westbau, Zurich.

student stood up to ask him where his images came from—did he know, did he care? It was clear that she had already made up her mind, that he didn't have a responsibility to his materials, and that that was revolting to her. His reaction was to laugh at us and shame us for being privileged Ivy League students, and then to angrily condemn us for believing that knowing anything about the images, including where they came from, somehow makes them more acceptable.

BR Well it's interesting how you pair Thomas Hirschhorn and Ad Reinhardt as your influences. That's sort of reflected in your work—there is a merging of overabundance and minimalism, you know?

DB Yeah, there is. You know, I think that I have pretty tacky tastes, too. Since moving to the

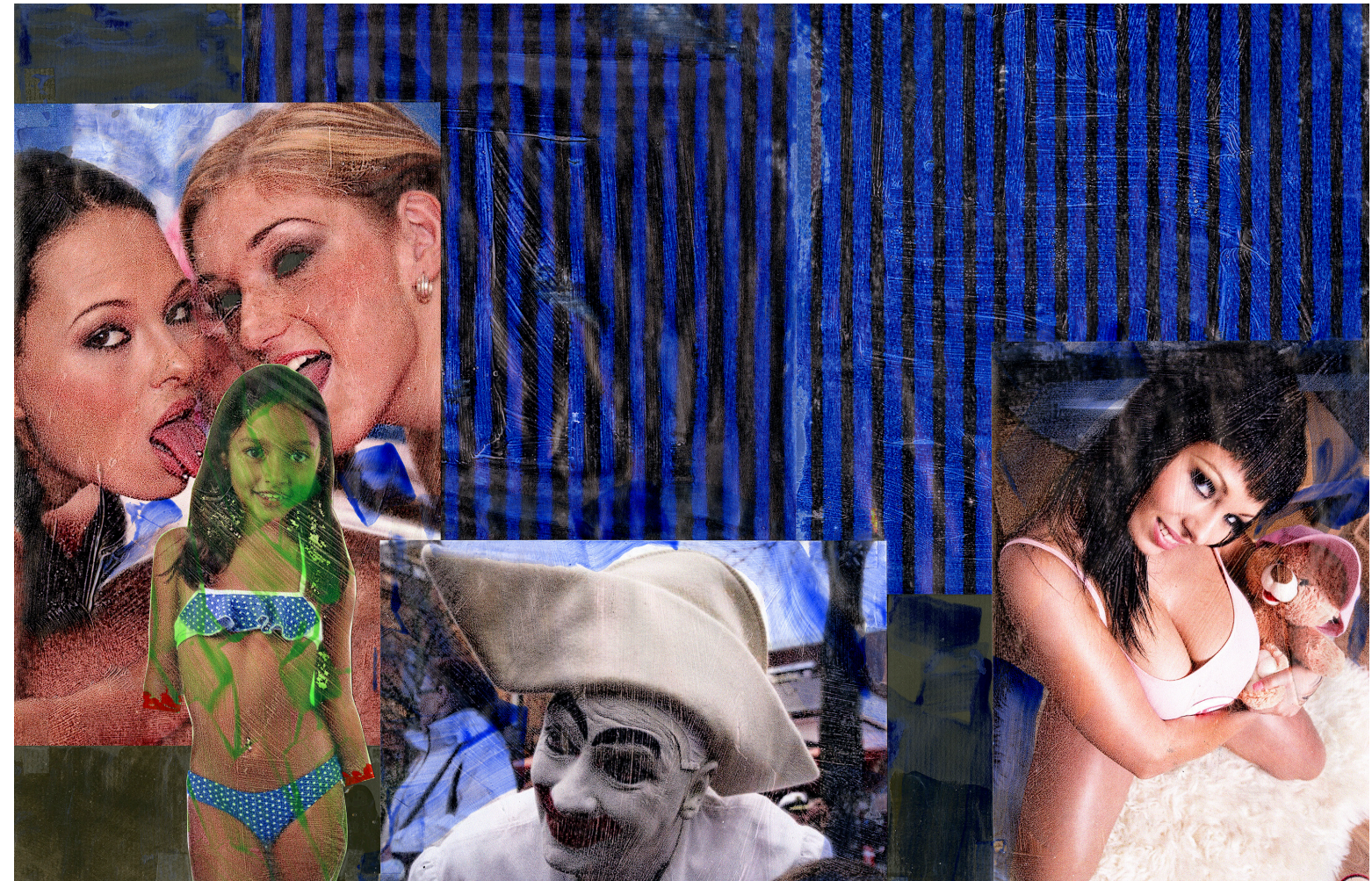
States, my dad became a truck driver. He looks like a Hells Angel—he looks insane, in the best way. All of those patches I used in my early paintings were ones he'd gifted me before I even began integrating them into artworks. "Thanks for looking," for example. It's tongue-in-cheek in the context of a painting. So, there's definitely this Americana tackiness thing present in my work on various levels.

BR Going back to the notion of radicality, which provides the frame for this interview, do you see a subversive potential in working with these materials? When you choose to borrow these particular materials, do you think about the impact of art on societal conditions? You once said that pornography for you is a signifier for subversion and transgression, and of course there is a lot of potential there

in terms of... emancipation is definitely the wrong word, but maybe of resistance.

DB Yeah, I wouldn't say pornography is my focus, but it's definitely present. One thing that interests me about pornography is its potential to possess as well as estrange. There's a subversive power in that—simultaneous desire, fear. I'd argue the same for "violent" images.

filling Chloë's role. She shows nothing but the showing itself. Like Chloë—who can be seen looking brazenly into the camera whilst getting double-penetrated and petting a cat—Dominno doesn't simulate any pleasure, nor does she affect any complicity with the viewers. But it's this nullification that "opens" her—she's emancipated her-



Dominno's Playground, 2017, acrylic paint, ink, inkjet prints and tape on paper. This and similar collages taken out from the artist's private sketchbooks, dating from 2014 to today, have been collected by KALEIDOSCOPE in a new artist book released on the occasion of the Milan show.

BR Well, you refer to a very philosophical approach, even someone like Agamben, in defining pornography as a place of subversion.

DB Yes, Agamben wrote about that '90s French pornographic actress, Chloë des Lysses (who also happens to be a photographer)—her absolutely inexpressive and indifferent display, and how it rendered the whole apparatus of the pornographic image inoperative, inviting new, freer uses for the eroticism otherwise captured. *Profanations* deeply affected me. I'd say that Dominno's appearance in the Joe collaboration is ful-

self from a relation to an end.

BR Both characters seem to talk about a detachment from individuality, or replacement of individuality.

DB Yes, it's true. It's something I think about in relationship to the images of the victims and perpetrators I use, and their "facelessness" in news media. There is always an insatiable hunger for more. In the end, they're [treated as] neither generic nor individual. We've been reduced to images. It is only in unraveling the image that we can free it and ourselves. **K**

Darja Bajagić (b. 1990, Montenegro) lives and works in New York. Beatrix Ruf is Director of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Images courtesy of the artist; Carlos/Ishikawa, London; and New Galerie, Paris.