On Dissevered Dreams: Sonya Dervic in Conversation with Mazzy-Mae Green

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by Mazzy-Mae Green

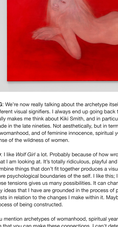
If Jungian archetypes consist of psychological categories – story and image patterns – that we inherit, thought to be the underlying makeup of myths, dreams, and folklore, then what happens when these are disrupted? In reforming these collective figures, contorting and combining them, Sonya Dervic (b. 1994, Moscow) creates uncanny renders of colliding events, figures, and temporalities, worked into thinly-veiled canvases. The artist observes and filters the simulacra of everyday living, writing humanity in her figures that stare devastatingly or be peacefully before the viewer.

For Curatorial Affairs, Dervic discusses painting as reality, distortion, and the surreal, ahead of her solo exhibition with Sherbet Green later this year.

Mazzy-Mae Green: I want to start with your process. I know you lean on a combination of found imagery. How does this mould the way you paint?

Sonya Dervic: These images come from a variety of sources. Usually, they're photographs, and they're often found images, like illustrations, paintings, film stills, etc. For example, last year I looked at Yugoslav Naive paintings. I was attracted to the representation of perspective in many of these works. I also looked at some images of ice skaters and older images of weddings, and so many portraits. I only really care about their specific elements, I'm not really attached to them, and I always find new images that interest me. Most of the time, I use them as starting points in paintings.

MG: Why do you think you like starting with images like that? Because you're starting with something quite figurative…



MG: We're now really talking about the archetype itself that you're constructing from different found sources. I always end up going back to this reference in your work, which really makes the think about Kiki Smith, and in particular her Wolf Girl (1998) that she made in the late nineties. Not aesthetically, but in terms of touching on the archetypes of womanhood, and of feminine innocence, spiritual yearning and sexual identity. That sense of the wildness of women.

SD: I like Wolf Girl a lot. Probably because of how wrong it feels. It makes me doubt what I am looking at. It's totally ridiculous, playful and somehow violent. I think that to combine things that don't fit together produces a visual experience of limitations – the more psychological boundaries of the self. I like this; I think that an ability to recognise these tensions gives us many possibilities. It can change perspective and expectations. Any ideas that I have are grounded in the process of painting. And the archetype only exists in relation to the changes I make within it. Maybe it needs to always be in the process of being constructed.

You mention archetypes of womanhood, spiritual yearning and sexual identity. I really like that you can make these connections. I can't determine the representation of this archetype outside of its process. I am interested in the possibility of these things. This is why this sense of wrongness is interesting to me, in terms of perception, how it can expand the way I consider something. It's always in do with subjectivity, and a kind of fiction. The work of Miroslav Tichý makes me think of these relationships. He generally photographed women without them knowing, and also sometimes screens. He was not a naive artist, and his work was in many ways subversive to a totalitarian regime.

MG: What interests me in [Tichy's work] is the softness, the fragmented and angelic forms of the image. They aren't exactly overexposed, but there's something strange in how the camera is reacting to the light. So how did the *Wise young girl* series develop from these beginnings?

SD: He captured privacy in a way that I haven't seen before… The first *Wise young girl* was painted really quickly. It took me about an hour, and it just kind of happened. It was a face that didn't really fit in with everything else. This face remained with me for four years after, and eventually consumed other motifs I was using. Perhaps what was interesting about this face is that it could contain qualities whose combination felt impossible to me before, a space for less defined emotion or characteristics, a less fixed appearance. It's weird, but focusing on this one thing — this face — has opened me up to knowing how to paint any other visual element, because the way that you treat these tensions is the same.

MG: I enjoy how they morph and defy definition. On a formal level, the way you apply paint is something I find interesting. You're using thin oils, right? There are even areas of the work, sometimes, where you can see the canvas through the image. How do you use paint in your practice?

SD: Yes, it has to be really thin. It has to allow for the emergence of certain details. It kind of has to do with intention, in the sense that I need the possibility of the emergence of the most minute detail, and at the same time an undefined space or area. There is more risk in this difference. Formally, it challenges composition and focuses various tensions. All of these qualities and decisions are physical – the weight and movement of colour form any expression I am capable of achieving. Colour is not separate; one colour evolves from the one before. These qualities form the limits of the artwork and I think the best paintings extend such qualities. Drawing is becoming a lot more important. I am interested in how it relates to colour, using it more directly in the process.

MG: Like in *Sweet fall* (2023), which retains some drawn lines through the paint?

SD: Yeah, that painting contains lines, and is also importantly about that thinness and sensitivity. I paint in this way, and I feel that I have to accept this. There is another depth otherwise. It's also important to create a relationship to the charcoal elements in the work. I have used drawings for a while. They usually are those marks that I have on the side. Now, with the charcoal elements in paintings, I think I still treat them the same. It's easy to do that because charcoal isn't fixed.

MG: Another element that interests me in these figures is that they often adopt the form of a traditional, head-on portrait. They create this tension between viewer and subject that's about the directness of this figure looking out at them. There's an unmediated sense of connection and intensity to the faces. How do you play with emotion in the work?

SD: Portraits and self portraits are the types of paintings that have always been the most interesting to me. Even with the less defined motifs in my older works. Maybe it's a kind of fiction, but I think that you get being able to expand something so subjective, or a kind of "constructed" representation. In a face, everything matters. And everything is emotion. The slightest change alters the whole expression. This process negotiates different elements and is really connected to the possibility of a wider emotional scope. This can really challenge and extend my ideas and more logical thinking, which needs to always evolve. So it's not about a decision to make a painting feel a certain way, but more about decisions that develop the painting in the process, that in the end create the way that an image feels. Maybe it's about the act of feeling through the painting. There are so many emotions that can be described in words, and there is definitely a set of feelings that we accept as components of reality and that we judge things against, and with painting, I don't know… You can see something new there.

MG: There's an uncanniness to feeling these new associations and emotions play out across the canvas. They evoke a visceral reaction that feels instantly to be about emotion and the sensory.

SD: Yeah, exactly. I think when I talk about intention, I'm thinking about that as well. You can see it in a painting, like why it's made – the possibilities of an image. And you don't always know how to define it in words. I think that uncanny feeling functions as a kind of extended presence; there is wrongness and possibility. Think about the layering in Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (c. 1503-1519). It's a face that toys with the exactitudes and specificities of what makes a face. Now the face can move and all the different kinds of emotion it contains, and then you get a face that is relatively still, but could also be smiling. I think he was crazy.

MG: I've never heard anyone call him jokes before. [Laughs]

SD: [Laughs] No because he painted it for so many years, and I think he never released the painting. He died with that painting, so he had to work with him. Anyway, it's a good painting. It's also such a simple thing, the face.

MG: I must admit that I grew up hating the *Mona Lisa*…

SD: She felt like a celebrity when I was growing up.

MG: …… but in the last couple of years I've grown to understand the frenzied fascination with it. It's emblematic of the labour and science of art, as well as the mystery. For me, it's about him, and the ritualistic act of applying mathematics to painting.

SD: He was a scientist and an artist, and these things don't feel like separate categories in his work. I love his *St John the Baptist* (c. 1513-1516). It kind of makes me wake up when I see it. The *Burlington House Cartoon* (c.1499-1500) at the National Gallery in London is one of my favourite things. There is so much invention and freedom in the way that parts of his paintings are made up. The faces, figures and their surroundings don't need to be determined.

Arnold Schoenberg is another artist that I have learned to really value. I was introduced to his work by my tutor at the Slade. He is better known as a composer and music theorist. There's a kind of exchange between the material and intent, where the painting is a temporary endpoint. He achieved this with mostly one motif: his self-portrait, over and over again. His work shows a balance between freedom and limitations, where anything external or comprehensible can never be so momentous as that which comes from the inside.

MG: Going back to your own portraits, many of the figures appear to operate in this subconscious space, perhaps a dreamscape. Either an interrupted dream or a nightmare. I was interested in what the unconscious figure does for you in the work, in terms of what the lack of consciousness allows you to work through in the painting.

SD: So you know how there's a difference, it's not what the painting is about, it's more what the painting is. And I think that this kind of space can be seen as more connected to abstraction, in terms of imagination and the language of painting. Consciousness is always connected to the subconscious, and essentially it's all about bringing things into relation.

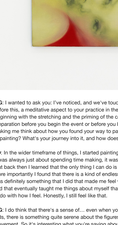
MG: I read something you said in an interview you did a few years back. You were talking about painting not being about depicting life, but being about depicting living and the humanness of it, and all the parts of living that aren't immediately visible in real life.

SD: I think that I might even go further now, and say that it's not even about it. That's what it is. It's really a process of freedom. I like the feeling that the painting is kind of breathing or moving, and has become that itself. Of course, a work can imitate any kind of emotion in a visual way, but I think that also becomes its limit.

MG: We touched on this before, but your earlier works are looser in form, more abstract, and your newer works carry more figurative forms and shapes. Was this a conscious move towards figuration?

SD: I think it has always been about the presence of a person. For me painting is something that develops outwards, and there is real vulnerability in that. I think the archetype also carries a sense of doubt, which is probably to do with negotiating so many images. The very core of the face is, in a way, the process of change. A sense of space is also present in every work. Space always has expression, and an undefined element like this creates a relationship to the recognisable. I am not sure how to express this kind of sensitivity or precision in a work that does not allude to the recognizable. It has to be human form. It has to also be kind of undefined or extended. It can lose its logic.

So, over time, paintings developed focus tensions, rather than a different subject. I think this is what the earlier paintings needed and they kind of existed in this space of wanting to create these tensions, and separations. Which I think is only possible if they are comparable or carry hooks of known characteristics. So it was always to do with my methodology.



MG: I wanted to ask you: I've noticed, and we've touched on it in our conversations before this, a recreative aspect to your practice in the way that you develop making. Beginning with the stretching and the priming of the canvas as a ritualistic period of preparation before you begin the event or before you begin the painting. But it was just making me think about how you found your way to painting — or did you find your way to painting? What's your journey into it, and how does it sit within your sense of self?

SD: In the wider timeframe of things, I started painting when I was probably about four. It was always just about spending time making, it wasn't to make anything good. I think that back then I learned that the only thing I can do is focus on my own interests, and more importantly I found that there is a kind of endless richness in this. I think painting was definitely something that I did that made me feel very grounded when I was a child, and that eventually taught me things about myself that are not obvious and were more to do with how I feel. Honestly, I still feel like that.

MG: I do think that there's a sense of… even when you're painting with these deep reds, there is something quite serene about the figures. They don't carry much movement. So it's interesting what you're saying about it being a grounding process.

SD: Yeah, I think that's what I need from painting, and what I need has also directed the way I paint. And with painting, you also just need to be okay with not being fully in control, which is good. Then there are conditions around painting that I like to pay attention to, the images, the technical parts of it. I can be here in the studio painting for a week, and I'm learning without being conscious of it. And I only find out with time what that means. I could have made a painting two years ago, but only now am I able to recognise certain qualities that I couldn't see at the time, but they were already there. In the way that that happens… Do you know what I mean?

MG: Yeah, I do.

Image Credits:

Image 1: Sonya Dervic, Sweet fall, 2023, oil on canvas, 28 x 30 cm. Photograph Courtesy the Artist and Sherbet Green.

Image 2: Sonya Dervic, Wise young girl, 2023, oil on canvas, 120 x 160 cm. Photograph Courtesy the Artist and Rennie Head, © Dervic Sonya

Image 3: Sonya Dervic, Untitled, 2020, oil on hessian, 220 x 200 cm, photograph courtesy the artist and Matthew Shaver, (c) Paul Sakowicz

Image 4: Sonya Dervic, Wise young girl, 2023, oil on canvas, 25.5 x 35.5 cm. Photograph Courtesy of the Artist and Sherbet Green