

## **Fairy-tales, playground equipment, toy cars, children in uniforms, cartoons, children**

Fairy-tales, playground equipment, toy cars, children in uniforms, cartoons, children. It is obvious that Dejan Kaludjerović, a Viennese painter from Belgrade, has clearly set his theme and stuck to it for the past sixteen years. Childhood remains a constant part in his opus, and yet he does not overanalyse this gentle period. In his works – paintings, videos, photographs and installations – he has chosen to depict childhood; at first he may have chosen this intuitively, even though it is an excellent choice through which he can construct the views of the contemporary world in which he lives.

The current exhibition represents a selection of works that was created from 1997 onwards. Chronologically it ends with the new works from the artist's latest series entitled *Children's Playgrounds*. There is a great difference between these last works and the works created on toilet paper in 1997. In 1997 the children in Kaludjerović' works moved from a colouring book to toilet paper. At the time all you could do with childhood memories was wipe your arse. This was followed by the series *Atlas* in which the children grieved for the loss of security they had in their homeland. The drawn hearts were bleeding and soaking the gauze with which the artist covered their homeland in the attempt to stop the bleeding. Anybody who had not experienced the violence before, during or after the war 'in the Gorges of the Balkans' found it hard to leave the security of the homeland with which we were served in all educational institutions. We studied, studied and studied<sup>1</sup> some more and then they demanded that we forget it all. The story of the three little pigs became the story in which the country fell apart and not even the most diligent little pig could help his two brothers as the big bad wolf of nationalism raised his head and with the puff of capitalism blew off the roof from their shared home. In the series of three paintings that were created at the beginning of the new millennia waiting remained the name of the game. The series *Waiting for the Man* emerged with the help of photographs found in his archive. The image of the memory was slowly erased; until it was no longer recognisable and it was slowly covered by the artist's everyday and intimate memories.

The child rebellious period that takes place in puberty and that is almost always considered to arrive (too)early by adults, was recorded in the photographic series *Electric girl* in which the artist managed to show how the child has to forget the dark present and escape into a world of forgetting, a world of rebellion, difference, music and bodies. Following this Kaludjerović stumbled across another bitter wake-up call when he asked *What did tomorrow bring us* (2001). The digitally manipulated image of his parents merged the images of subjects when they were young, when the state was young and they are staring at us - who are well aware of how the events unfolded - with a naive belief in a better tomorrow. Time brought new interests to Kaludjerović' practice and new elements started to become important in his works, elements that marked his opus until this very day. The research into the reflections of social reality and in the late 1990s the all so popular painting practice *pittura immedia* or remediation was joined by his interest for freezing the moment and passing on the

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<sup>1</sup> *Study, study and study* was Tito's saying that could be found on the walls of every primary school in former Yugoslavia.

feeling of stillness, minimalist sophistication and in the next series also characteristic small perversions that the adult eye recognises within child games and that make him immediately feel ashamed. In the series *The future belongs to us* (2002 – 2006) childhood - which sometimes functioned as the carrier of pain, fear and anger - became an image of exploiting man by man. The artist, who in this period exchanged the fall of socialism for western capitalism, showed the latter its reflection in the mirror. In the third millennium images of children from 1970s shopping catalogues radiated sexual connotations with which they 'cutely' seduced mothers, fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers into continuously buying adult phantasies for their children and grandchildren. In capitalism childhood became a perishable, an objectivised wish that can be bought and sold, idealised, sexualised and thus one's fear of these 'small animals' can be covered up. At the end of the last decade it became clear that children are merely go-getters, who would like to change their career for a bit of fun (*Can I Change My Career For A Little Fun?*, 2006-2009). However, this fun has become entertainment for adults, entertainment in which the cute covers-up the violence that we latently experience when watching cartoons such as *Happy tree friends*. And where were the real children hiding? In the series of video spots *Je suis malade* Kaludjerović placed them in front of us in such a way that they looked at us with those children's eyes and their bodies offered themselves to us while the pain in the song emitted from their throats only emphasised their powerlessness. And then, two years ago, the children disappeared. They left behind empty playgrounds, swings, toy cars. Is this the childhood that awaits to be inhabited by a new child or are they archaeological remains of a life that can merely recollect, but no longer experience? But then the drawings of playgrounds and the painting was inhabited by words. The story of the happy prince by Oscar Wilde, in which the swallow and the prince sacrificed their lives for love, and merely an indestructible steel heart was left behind, is clearly written in Kaludjerović' newest works. The layered images in the painting *3478 words* offer an open story. In the work *Blue girls*, which was finished already in 2005 and recently repainted, the children are covered by text, while the image of playground furniture from the 1970s functions as a special steel heart that we grab hold of when we are looking for past happiness. Happiness, goodness and love. But the story of love also reveals words that remind the viewer in what sort of a world we are living. And then the steel structure, a remnant of childhood, becomes the image of fear, mud, selfishness, power, richness and even corporation. In these works childhood images are merely images, carriers of meanings as ascribed by Kaludjerović. Childhood is an empty town, a sign, a vessel, created in order to tell us about the reality of the designed contemporary world that we inhabit.

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