RETURN

Monika Milivojevic
I want to thank my family who support me in every aspect. My friends, who are all over the world and share energy, support and experiences with me. Also, very special thanks to Royal Academy of Fine Art that they gave me an opportunity to be part of this two years journey.

Thank you Filip.
RETURN

I came to Sweden, from Croatia, one year before I got accepted at Royal Art Institute (RIA). It was challenging to adapt to new surroundings. I felt I had to start painting from the beginning. It took me about a year. I need to admit that I was overwhelmed by existential problems which hindered my focus to paint. It was moiling and I felt as if I’d come in a state of total emptiness.

Previously, I’d never put my practical workings into words, maybe some notes but I see that rather as a painting diary. The difference would be that I don’t make notes or write down my thoughts, It’s more scribbling down to remember a colour combination, a detail to add or change etc. Some parts of the diary are included in this essay. In the end I feel it has been of use for my painting practice to combine both, the diary and my artistic reflections.

To find a way through the emptiness I started with an interrogation of my previous work. This new environment gave me other questions and thoughts that I had to digest and struggle with. I wasn’t facing the same problems that I had experienced earlier with my friends and colleagues. At RIA I was provided with my own studio. A new spacious solitude that I had never experienced before, but was something that I’d always wanted. A direct access and a lot of space to try things out. To my previous experience, when you share workspace you have an on-going dialogue with people around. You face a needed, criticism daily. I realize I find that setting to be very creative and inspirational for my work and my thinking. Every decision and move are bounced against
other perspectives, a way to get your work and thoughts thoroughly worked through. So, I finally realized that it was this experience bound up in two differences, an enormous work space but no one to bounce the work against that created emptiness. I felt alone and I realized I had to create a new setting to work in.

For my creation and development, space is very important. The new challenge of new geographical space, the huge studio space was something that I can bring on my empty canvases. Sometimes they are like threatening, Disturbing.

This essay is my way of summing up my reflections on my artistic work and how it has changed during my two years at RIA.

The essay is in two parts. The writing part will include my personal experience of coming back to my hometown, boredom, and some references about gambling. Through the process of painting, I will reflect upon the subject and how I perhaps found a new way, for myself, to approach painting.
Monika Milivojevic, *Bond*, 2019
“There’s another kind of language, another form of communication: by means of feeling, and images. That is the contact that stops people being separated from each other that brings down barriers. Will, feelings, emotion - these remove obstacles from between people who otherwise stand on opposite sides of mirror, on opposite sides of a door...The frames of the screen move out, and the world which used to be partitioned off comes into us, become something real...”¹

I WILL BE YOUR MIRROR

The streets, houses, today’s tasks and yesterday’s

Everything is equally the other’s

All is void-like. Everything incarnates emptiness

(Ilya Kabakov, Interpretation of words from On emptiness, 1990)

When I first came back to my hometown Zagreb, I was struck by the new thoughts and experiences I had gained. It was like I perceived the surrounding with new senses: my bus station and the short walk to my home had new colours and smells I had not noticed before. As the Russian writer Ilya Kobakov once wrote: ‘you are immediately gripped by an intense sensation which brings everything together and makes everything fall into place-this is the clear final vision of the void, of the absurdity of the place where we live all the time.’

To me his quote reminds me of the everyday challenge to observe things that could easily be neglected or put away as unimportant. The feelings that gripped me on my return felt very similar to Kobakov version of the void, in the familiar. This is something that I stared articulating in and through the canvases, how something familiar all of a sudden became absurd.

Image
Colour
Matter

Time and space

The paintings became for me a way to explore dimensions of space, space as something that also transforms you going from outside to the inside.

A clock.

Smell of the old people.

Waiting.
Pray.

When I entered that door, I felt furious. And at the same time I felt a sense of hopelessness. As if this place was both connected to something I value and something that had been taken away from me.

I walked around the house to see if and how it had changed and out of nowhere a strong sensation immediately hit me.

It was the first time that nobody asks me about him. He is one of many that has fallen into that state. The dread experience of finding yourself in a world of savagery. He will do anything to make money.

The house is completely changed. I could not see the parts I remember from when we were younger. It exudes different energy. The experiences that we left here causes discomfort. It’s so lonesome here.

The sensation that hit me was: I think we need to tear down a house!

BOREDOM

Due to the above experience I decided to write about boredom from the position of a person who resides in a world of total emptiness. A man who can’t wait or stand in the line but who can on a quicker and easiest way come to, what I think it’s today’s perception of happiness...money. I became a witness how boredom can create what I would call substitutional addictions...

This section will also contain sentences on gambling, which
I singled out from my diary. That was for me, a moment when I was trying to understand another side, the side of an addicted person that is also close to me.

The way of living in my region in Croatia, on my return, brought me back to the deepest realm of lost time. Part of those experiences, visions and dreams will take a part in my paintings, sometimes hidden and sometimes as a base for composition. In this process or perhaps therapeutical experiment trying to deal with the troublesome experience of going back home, feeling a sense of loss and anger I realized that perhaps there was a partial connection with the substitutional addiction and creative process you need to be attentive to as a painter. Both can perhaps be seen as tools of reacting to a sense of emptiness. While painting I try to stay with an intuitive mode to keep myself open to chances and accidents. As a way to remain excited with and through my work. This could perhaps relate to how a gambler works.

I started to work more on this idea about gambling, as I felt it was an interesting concept that relate to the times we are living in. A themed that more occupied me in a theory than in my work. While going back to Zagreb I realized that boredom was perhaps experienced differently now then for previous generation. For Elizabeth Goodstein, a professor of English and the Liberal Arts “boredom is at once objective and subjective, emotion and intellectualization. Not just a response to the modern world but also a historically constituted strategy for coping with its discontent”.¹

¹. Elizabeth Goodstein, Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity, 2005, p, 3.
I think that discontent experience is a by-product of a new modern vision of human existence. The bored person is trying to find some level of personal and cultural engagement that they miss or that is not present. I believe that the loss of a sustainable or relational interaction with the world has made us more culturally lost.

Moreover, I’m interested in the quality of experience and why we look to leisure time as something that should be beguilement, distract you from worries and vexation. Boredom was from beginning connected tightly with term such as leisure, sameness, melancholy, ennui, self-realization, etc. From my own experience, the modern way of living, and capitalist mode of production gives us that feeling of sameness and repetition, and we more likely choose to fulfill our leisure time with entertaining activities. So in a way, that person also deals with self-realization and self-fulfillment. For him only possible filling for the empty meaningless time was bombardment with new stimuli. I think the crises of experience and desire becomes a crises of the self.

For me, the gambling part was an important segment in my works, but I never want to go deeply into the game of gambling. I try more to show the fragments and feelings that I had in that environment. But also, I think for me that state was important and the sentences or short text on gambling give me new motifs that I can put into my work. It was creative and give some new constructive solutions that help to finish a piece.

In the end or maybe it is better to say that it was something that was constantly here. It was the fact that it is a real problem out there. A problem that we as a society need to speak about. My starting point became this problem, as
something I had to fix. This was my therapy. During this period I had one book in front of me. It’s coincidences that I have “that” book just right now when I have so many things in my head. It’s Hermann Hesse’s book *Steppenwolf*. I will be superficial, but I try to go back to that atmosphere, to my neighborhood – and I can feel it. The connection and feel for the people that live there. We are, I feel, out of space and out of time. The difference here, for me, is that certain people don’t get a chance to go on a journey through self-critical reflection, but the other side, they don’t always want to be included in the enlightened way of being a ”citizen”. That, to be a citizen here, according to my experience, is rather seen as an authorized force to resist. Probably do to our previous political history. You rather do what you do and keep the politics to an everyday-staying-alive but often with a overemphasized focus on money. I think this focus makes us less able to recognize and question our visions of the world. We can see the limitations that we require from ourselves through our ideas and definitions of reality. But what was important to me is that this problem became clearer while being here in Sweden. All those issues from my home return to my head. While reading *Steppenwolf* I felt that it’s hard to forget all that gathered memory and all those images that are collected during childhood. While I was staying here in Stockholm, I suddenly started think even more about what life is and how we should live. All of a sudden it felt like those memories came to me all the time. Through my being here but also with remembrance of home. A kind of homesickness that I both questioned but also could not get out of.
“Gambling itself is a desert form, inhuman, uncultured, initiatory, a challenge to the natural economy of value, a crazed activity on the fringes of exchange. But it too has a strict limit and stops no confusion. Neither the desert nor gambling are open areas; their spaces are finite and concentric, increasing in intensity toward the interior, toward a central point, be in the spirit of gambling or the heart of the desert—a privileged, immemorial space, where things lose their shadow, where money loses its value, and where the extreme rarity of traces of what signals to us there leads men to seek the instantaneity of wealth.1

“Boredom calls upon us, inciting us to look into this meaninglessness that refuses to give a purpose or a final goal to life, leaving us at the mercy of our own subjective causality”

“Gambling isn’t exactly a passion: the pleasure one derives from it is too crystalline. It is a cold ecstasy which deals with money not as meaning, value, depth or substance, but in the pure form of appearance or disappearance.”

Monika Milivojevic, sketch from diary, 2019

“Isn’t art always, to a certain extent, therapy for the artist?”¹

Monika Milivojevic, sketch from diary, 2019

¹ Ingmar Bergman, from film *Searching for Ingmar Bergman*, 2018.
“In a work of art, different acts, episodes, occurrences melt and fuse into unity, and yet do not disappear and lose their own character as they do so--just as in a genial conversation there is a continuous interchange and blending, and yet each speaker not only retains his own character but manifests it more clearly than is his wont.”

Painting is a process. It is a method in which I as a viewer trying to observe and form my beliefs and experiences of living. Observation is just one part of creative achievement. I believe in that I constantly suspiciously checking. It takes time to experiment, and to experiment with the material until you find something that you feel is ‘finished’. It is collaboration between what I am trying to express and what is expressed through or by the material. I build an idea from my own experiences and with the situation of painting. I usually start off with an intuition, an abstract idea that I transfer and transform on the canvas. It is in the process of adding and discovering that the painting finds its ‘subject’. I have always been interested in colour, shapes, and texture. Painting in the studio and on the white
wall is not the same. Sometimes the occasion and the space provide the painting situation with more. Often I work on more than one painting at the same time. It gives me new ideas and sometimes the differences can provide solutions. Something I would not get, I think, by painting a painting one at a time. Also, when I have my routine, I catch myself on doing the same movement all the time with the same material, so once in a while I need to unlearn myself from technic and material. I want to shake off the expression of impurities that were collected by the automatic implementation of the convention. In this cycle I try to reduce material and work through a kind of melancholy in texture and colour. This is a new technique for me that I have acquired through my experiences here at RIA. In previous work I did not want to express state of emotions I rather searched for what could be called a realistic setting. Today I would say I am trying to get the process of paining to remain in the ‘finished’ work. Being in the situation with the materials, colours textures and shapes that the experiment creates through time is something I try to focus on. In a way every piece has a kind of resemblance to gambling, or at least a throw of a dice, every painting situation creates its own needs and my work is engaged in staying attentive to this setting and how it changes and changes me.
Monika Milivojevic, *Family talk*, 2019
I will finish my essay with one croatian writer who wrote in his essays a lot about cultural and political themes of our region. This is something that I learned in Sweden. The new life in a Swedish suburb. People from all over the world help me to change myself, my thinking, my behavior.

"People are lazy, people are afraid, people are hiding behind principles, morals, beliefs, interests of the herd, pack, people, god, church, people are being deceived by political parties and different words, in one word, barking at things they understand and do not they understand, because without self-deceptive chatter, without bells, without big speech, without careers, people would be reduced to themselves, to their own loneliness, and to nothing fear as much in front of their lonely character, before their own person, before their own emptiness." ¹


Monika Milivojevic, sketch from diary, 2019