

ISOLATION INTERVIEWS

ANA MILENKOVIC





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Continuing the Isolation Interviews: a new series of weekly artist and curator profiles highlighting current concerns, accompanied by a selection of available works.

We know that these are precarious and uncertain times for everyone and with so many people staying at home, self-isolating or social distancing, we want to be able to continue sharing some of our favourite art and artists with you. The Isolation Interviews are a weekly series of conversations with artists and curators that will explore how these new circumstances are affecting their practices, projects and productivity. We'll hear how they are finding solutions - and even opportunities - and what their plans and hopes are for the future.

Brooke Benington is committed to supporting and creating opportunities for artists. We believe that this is needed now more than ever. Most artists are self-employed, often supplementing their income by working as technicians, fabricators, assistants, teachers and a whole host of other jobs. Now, many have very suddenly lost a vital source of income. With this in mind, we are accompanying each Isolation Interview with a curated selection of work by that artist, available for purchase.

Thank you for your continued support. Stay safe and look after one another.

Lily & George
Directors, Brooke Benington



a studio - painting, reading, thinking and working. Suburban life is growing on me, and London seems to have become a gentler, more human-friendly place.

Literature plays a key role within your practice, you have spoken previously about the impact of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, and more recently Hermann Hesse. Do you feel your works are narrative or illustrative at all? Or, do you use these works of fiction as a launching point, a way of establishing a mood or tone?

Literature is crucial for making sense of the world and one's position in it. I have always been anxious about ageing and death, so Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy have a special place in my library. Over time, I've moved from their explicit obsession with death, to a more practical interest in temporality and heroism. Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* has had an immense influence on me; he argued that, in order to overcome our dualistic nature, symbolic existence must find fulfilment in a heroic project which rises above the temporality of the physical body. That is where Hesse's characters come in, rejecting social

What is your usual studio routine and how, if at all, has it been affected or restricted by isolation and social distancing measures over the past couple of months? Have you found a new rhythm and a new way of working?

My studio routine was established soon after graduation back in 2014 and hasn't changed much until recently. I would wake up at dawn, cycle to the studio, and paint until lunchtime. The rest of the day would be spent in my day job - working, daydreaming, reviewing and preparing for the next day's studio session. Once social distancing measures were introduced, I was forced to work from home, and it's been wonderful. I now spend most of my time in Wimbledon where I live and have



contracts and embarking on immortality missions relying solely on their own capacities. In my paintings I try to capture the atmosphere of existential troubles expressed in *The Gambler*, *Death of Ivan Ilych* or *Rosshalde*, but I am happy for my audience to assume the inspiration comes from a happier, more comforting place.

Alongside the aforementioned writers, there is also an apparent interest in folklore, mythologies and cultural

histories - borrowed from eastern and western traditions - reflected in your paintings. Could you tell us a little bit about this?

I feel privileged to have found my life-long symbolic mission: making art. However, this heroic project is not easily sustainable in the system which forces individuals to accept external authority to gain protection and security in return. I am particularly interested in monasticism as individual heroism, rejecting all



social contracts, and creating a highly symbolic lifestyle outside of ready-made Christianity. Since I am concerned with problems of humanity, the cultural syncretism of my paintings comes as a necessity; my recent paintings are based on Western mediaeval texts, use symbolic language of Eastern Orthodoxy, and depict shamans who have renounced expectation and comforts of society, acquiring magnetic powers. I sometimes include text and use humour to point at both vulnerability and supremacy of those immune to authority, which allows me to experiment with typography used in illuminated manuscripts from across mediaeval Europe.

Your process seems to have shifted and evolved across your recent works, from a heavily worked and over-painted style to something a little lighter and more sparing. Is this a reflection of the shift in your interest from the dense romanticism of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky to the slightly lighter lyrical prose of Hesse? Or does the impetus for this stylistic shift lie elsewhere?



You are making a very interesting point, and I think the “switch” happened for two reasons – one of them was my gradual move from Russian realism to more symbolic German writers. I accepted that I can say more in a less narrative, more indicative manner. The other reason was more personal. After leaving the safety of art school I felt I had something to prove, both to myself and the audience. My early process could be described as “endurance painting”; I used to make detailed digital sketches and translate them into paint over an extended time period. In a sense, I used painting as a tool, and my artwork was precisely structured and executed. My process now is more intuitive, and I find myself in the studio with just a vague idea of the final painting, which grows independently, developing as I go along. The technique is deferent too; I paint on unstretched canvas spread on the floor, removing layers of paint rather than building and adding them.

We seem to be living through a unique moment; history has shown us that such moments will often be a catalyst for change, both positive and negative. As an artist who takes a perspective on history as a way of understanding the present, do

you have any thoughts on this? Are these changes that you would like to see, in wider society or in the microcosm of the art world?

I am reluctant to make any assumptions or estimates for the future. I could not have imagined that reality would become transformed so quickly and extremely, slipping away from our hands and turning us into mere spectators of the natural powers. I am heartbroken for the loss of

lives and I hope we will ease the measures responsibly and gradually. At the same time, I can see terrific art being made across the world, and it comes from more profound, less anxiety-driven beings. It is art for the new age post-COVID-19. As someone who has abandoned years-long routine, I can promise I am not going back to my old ways and although my physical world has shrunk, my mind is at peace and reaching new heights.





ANA MILENKOVIC

Ana Milenkovic (b. 1988, Belgrade, Serbia) lives and works in London. She holds an MFA from Wimbledon College of Art, London, as well as MA and BA from Faculty of Fine Art, Belgrade. She has had solo and two-person shows at *Three Works* (Scarborough), *Ravnikar Gallery Space* (Ljubljana), *School Gallery* (London), *Novembar Gallery* (Belgrade), *Aqbar Space* (London), *Payne/Shurvell* (London) and *Clifford Chance LLP* (London). Milenkovic has also exhibited in group shows at *Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery* (London), *Super Dutchess Gallery* (New York), *Object Space Gallery* (Spokane), *Arusha Gallery* (Edinburgh), *The Koppel Project Central* (London). Milenkovic is the recipient of UAL/Clifford Chance Sculpture Award, Griffin Art Prize and Prize for Innovation from the Milos Bajic Fund.

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