

IN CONVERSATION

ALEKSANDAR DURAVCEVIC with Phong Bui

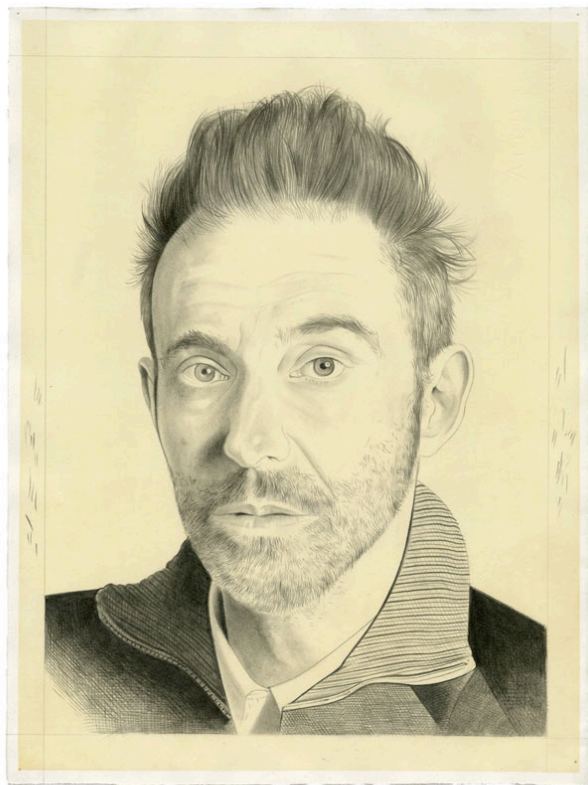
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After viewing Aleksandar Duravcevic's exhibit *Selected Works 2007 – 2014* (November 6 – 30, 2014) at the Contemporary Art Center of Montenegro, I was invited to the artist's studio in Gowanus, Brooklyn to discuss another body of work, selected for his representation of the Montenegrin pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale (May 9 – November 22, 2015).

The following is the edited version of our long conversation about Duravcevic's practices in various mediums.

Phong Bui (Rail): Before we discuss the variety of ways that you embrace different mediums—from photography, painting, drawing, sculpture, video, and installation—as conceptual tools to materialize your ideas of whatever you wish to convey as the potential synthesis of form and narrative, I thought it would be useful to provide some biographical information, about your early training at the Faculty of Arts in Cetinje in Montenegro between 1990 – 1992.

Aleksandar Duravcevic: Before actually enrolling at the Faculty of Arts, I was supposed to go to medical school. In my preparation, I did a lot of anatomy drawings, which were



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

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always a little bit more expressive than anatomical. I had uncles in my family who were artists; they were really lobbying hard against medical school. But then I did my military service in the now defunct Yugoslavian Army for a year. It was a traumatic experience to say the least, but it prompted me to apply to art schools and academia, rather than to study to be a doctor. I was preparing for my exam, which at the time was drawing from a model and painting still lifes. It was very much based on the 19th century French academic model.

Rail: What was that experience like?

Duravcevic: It was just a very confusing time with a lot of political insecurities and uncertainties. The war broke out in 1991 and moved quickly through Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia. I was drafted and then managed to leave. I was only in art school for two years, but, as things were getting worse, spiraling out of control, I left Montenegro. I found myself a refuge in Florence, Italy.

Rail: How did you manage to get to Italy?

Duravcevic: Because of the travel embargo as well as the economic and arms embargo, all the country borders were closed. My leaving was a matter of luck. I left on a ship that left to pick up medicine, pharmaceutical products from Italy. It was a humanitarian ship. My father knew the director of the port, and it was he who arranged to get the six of us, guys like me on this ghost ship. There was no one on this ship but us and the crew. To this day, I still don't understand how it all happened because there was a connection on the Italian side that was so surreal. There was a man in a military uniform that was waiting for us. He took our passport and kind of waved us through and then took us to the train station and told us "*Buona fortuna ragazzi!*" [*Laughs.*]

Rail: Do you think he was paid off? [*Laughs.*]

Duravcevic: I have no idea. All I know was that once I was in Florence, in order to continue my studies I had to become a legal refugee, and I remember there was no stamp in my passport. [*Laughs.*] In any case, I ended up first at the Accademia

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di Belle Arti for half a year, then I got a scholarship for what was considered at the time a masters program for graphic arts—essentially printmaking—at Il Bisonte, which I did for the other two years. As soon as I was finished, I actually started teaching there as an assistant.

Rail: Was your Italian good enough to talk to the students?

Duravcevic: Yes, because while I was studying I was also working at the street markets with locals, so I picked up Florentine. Not so much Italian. [*Laughs.*] But it was enough. I also immediately started reading the same books that I had originally read in Montenegrin, like Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* for example.

Rail: Why, after having lived in Florence for four years, did you decide to move to New York?

Duravcevic: My family was already in New York. My parents and my brother Nikola left Montenegro in '91, when the war started in Croatia. Nikola was supposed to do his service in Vukovar. That city that was a symbol of Yugoslavian multiculturalism and was completely flattened. They came to New York while I was in Italy. The last time I visited them, I decided to stay and pursue graduate studies. I went to Pratt for graduate school and I ended up teaching there. Then, two, three years later, I started teaching at Hunter College where I still teach.

Rail: What was your impression when you first came to New York?

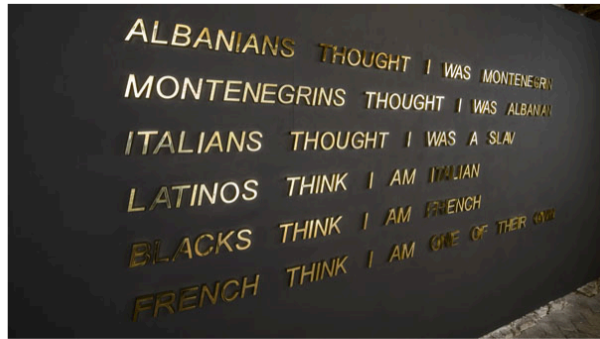
Duravcevic: The city was still recovering from the 1988 economic crash, yet it was very open and exciting. Even though several galleries were closed as a result, there were many photography and video works that were showing. Not to mention the rise of multiculturalism, which gave permission to all sorts of artists to explore their own cultural heritages and identities.

Rail: Such as Shirin Neshat, Kara Walker, Glenn Ligon, Janine Antoni, Lorna Simpson, among others.

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Duravcevic: Exactly. It's hard to believe, but the world has only moved in that direction in the last 20-something years.

Rail: It's true, although, in my experience I felt like the world began to change after Tiananmen Square, June 4, 1989. Anyway, when do you feel you did your first mature work?



Aleksandar Duravcevic, "Identity" (2015). Bronze letters. Courtesy of Centar Savremene Umjetnosti Crne Gore and the artist. Photo by Dusko Miljanic.

Duravcevic: I was a late bloomer. There was, I'd say, a small series of dry-point prints of Flies I did in 1998 that was included in PS1's first *Greater New York*, in 2000. I then had a show that same year with the now defunct galleries Bridgewater, Lustberg & Blumenfeld and Cencebaugh Contemporary Gallery in Chelsea, when it opened up on 26th street, one of the first galleries there. Also the same year I was included in a Brooklyn Museum show celebrating the art of the book. But, I don't know, I kept seeking, and I feel like it's only now that I'm doing my mature work. I still feel like it keeps evolving.

Rail: That seems to be a better way of reaching maturity, because if you peak early, where do you go from there?

Duravcevic: I agree. It's the American perspective that celebrates the black and white polarity—live hard/work hard/die young—aspirations that can be great and sad at the same time. One of the works that I'll be showing in the Montenegro pavilion is an installation of five videos, which began in '92, and only after 10/15 years did it become part of a whole. This is just the way I think. There were elements of collage, which weren't necessarily in the work itself but in my way of thinking. I think it is ultimately about creating these objects. It doesn't matter if it's painting or drawing or sculpture or installation, it always has this quality of illusion or object that creates either a temporary or permanent illusion or delusion.

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Rail: That’s probably similar, in a way, to how I would describe your work. On the one hand, it alludes to a sense of memory and, on the other, it signals a need to make memories concrete, as objects. First of all, I mean memory as Proust used it, as an involuntary catalyst or an “essence of the past”—a memory associated with a particular episode with the potential to open the floodgates to other indirectly or directly related episodes.

Duravcevic: Yes, I like those floodgates—for me it refers to the experiences that I had in Montenegro. It was such a violent society that I grew up in. Maybe the ’80s were a violent period. And in some ways I see myself as a witness. Yet I was always interested to know, did we all see the same thing? Did we all witness the same event? How did you see it differently from how I saw it? And how do our stories of the events match or mismatch? And I think that is, to a great extent, the way history gets written. It doesn’t matter if it is a slaughter of a calf or a car accident or something else of epic importance.



Aleksandar Duravcevic, “Come mi manchi” (2015). Mixed-media installation. Courtesy of Centar Savremene Umjetnosti Crne Gore and the artist. Photo by Dusko Miljanic.

Rail: I agree. I have had similar experiences, though I don’t choose to make them the subjects of my work. I think what you’re describing has something to do with the idea that we witness events through multiple perspectives. In one way, we experience these situations through our eyes—from that perspective, the remembering person cannot see themselves in the memory.

Duravcevic: It’s like being in a museum looking at a painting, or watching a play in a theater.

Rail: Exactly, whereas, we also have memories of events from depersonalized perspectives—from an observer’s perspective, where the remembering person is present.

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Duravcevic: As if you were acting in the play.

Rail: Yes, our sense of memory can be very descriptive. I remember reading an excellent interview between Borges and Richard Burgin (1968) in which Borges talked about how his father—who was a lawyer but hated law and loved psychology—said to his young son in regard to memory that he thought he could recall his childhood when he first came to Buenos Aires, but at the present could not. Borges asked him why not? And he replied that if he thought that he recalled something, say, his morning, he would get an image of what he saw that morning. But later, in the evening, when he thought back to the morning, he would recall, not the first image, but the image he recalled earlier. So that, every time he recalled something, he would be recalling not the image or memory itself, but an image of the last time he recalled it—meaning his last memory of it. He said that if this process were to perpetuate, than he would be left with no memories at all—no images whatsoever about his childhood, about his youth.

Duravcevic: Everything is connected to, yet remote from, the actual event.

Rail: Isn't that the sad truth? The father gave Borges another example in order to demonstrate his point through a pile of coins. He said the first one would be the first image of his house of his childhood, the second would be a memory of that same house. The third is the memory of the second, and the fourth the third, and so on. He concluded in the end that for every existing memory there was always a slight degree of distortion.

Duravcevic: Every memory is, to some extent, distorted by the successive recall. I've noticed similarly subtle changes in a series of drawings as part of an installation entitled *All of them*, in which there are images of feathers, drawn in white against a black background. They—well, each I should say—fall like snowflakes.



Aleksandar Duravcevic, *Red* (1992-2002). Five-channel video. Courtesy of Centar Savremene Umjetnosti Crne Gore and the artist. Photo by Dusko Miljanic.

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Rail: In which only 24 of them were framed. The rest are stacked up under a glass tabletop.

Duravcevic: But there is a sense of repetition there.

Rail: Absolutely, in every frame there is a slight difference.

Duravcevic: Right, and every feather is a little event. Each is recorded and obsessively drawn over and over again—as if every feather is a significant happening. I think Italo Calvino said that the life of a butterfly or the life of a president are, in the eyes of the universe, the same. But going back to Borges, he was responsible for one of the true intellectual awakenings that I had as a kid when I was 14 or 15. At that time in school in Montenegro we had to read Kafka, Camus, and Tolstoy; they were required reading and of course we had an entire class devoted to Marxism. But when I read Borges’s “House of Asterion,” suddenly there was lightness and magic in only two and a half pages. It was so rich and playful. Many years later I realized that was an economy of means, or how to tell the story in the most efficient way. Something all artists deal with. In thinking now, as a whole, as much as we’re consumed by the ever present popularity of contemporary art, we are still profoundly moved by past art, be it Piero, Leonardo, Perugino, Pontormo, or Dürer, when it comes to drawings or prints. Rembrandt and Morandi are still just as magical to look at.

Rail: I agree. We tend to forget that we also mediate images through our sensory experiences such as sights, sounds, and even smell.

Duravcevic: Absolutely. A few years ago I was at a residency in Ireland and I entered a pub. There was this strong smell, a familiar smell. And I couldn’t really place it. Then it quickly came back to me that it was the smell of fresh cow’s milk, because next to the pub was a stable and next to the stable was a church. So I said to myself, “This is the other perfect trinity: God, booze, and milk.”

Rail: It triggered your memory of growing up in Montenegro?

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Duravcevic: Yeah, I was milking cows when I was 6 years old. There is such a strong smell of earth and grass.

Rail: As much as I can hear the silence of each feather falling in the dark, I can also smell the moisture in the air, generated from the rainbow in a small yet beautifully painted painting, “Somewhere” (2009 – 2014).

Duravcevic: It’s Victoria Falls on the Zambezi River at the border of Zambia and Zimbabwe. A quasi-permanent rainbow. That’s what paintings do: they can transport you into that environment. Whether it’s familiar or unfamiliar, you sort of feel like you can relate to what you see.

Rail: What about the crushed glasses that form the shape of a star on the floor in “Working Class Does Not Vote!” (2014).

Duravcevic: It was made a year or two ago. The slogan was an early communist one from my grandfather’s generation about the inability to vote. It rhymes “Radnicka klasa ne glasa.” But thinking about it 60 years later, nothing really changed. Voting, what is it really about? This idea of voting—what it really means over time—transforms so strongly that it can be absurd. I grew up in a communist country that went socialist in the ’70s and ’80s and we had a very mellow dose of communism, but it still essentially altered its ideology within a one-party system. I think that I will be doing that work a few more times in different formats using different materials. I really wanted to do it in Venice for La Biennale but couldn’t find a right space for it.



Aleksandar Duravcevic, “Room no. 2” (2015). Charred wood. Courtesy of Centar Savremene Umjetnosti Crne Gore and the artist. Photo by Dusko Miljanic.

Rail: How would you describe your struggle with issues of identity, your sense of dislocation, which I suspect in one way or another is the underpinning subject of some of the works that will be shown at the Montenegrin pavilion?

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Duravcevic: I would say that the most demonstrative piece in the exhibit is “Red,” the five videos that I made between 1992 and 2002. Each, you could say, represents a specific fragment of memory. For example, the first one is of a basket filled with pomegranates sitting on a table, very painterly.

Rail: Like a Zurbarán Still Life.

Duravcevic: Or Caravaggio’s “Basket of Fruit.” There is nothing that really happens except for the changes from light to dark. The second video shows hands obsessively and repetitively cleaning the pomegranates, removing the seeds. The third video is of the squeezing of pomegranates from a press. The fourth one is of the slaughter of a calf in a public market, which makes a strong reference to Rembrandt’s portrayal of the brutal fact of life.

Rail: Do you mean Rembrandt’s “Carcass of Beef” that inspired Soutine’s “Side of Beef?”

Duravcevic: Yes, exactly, although it also refers to the life and manner of the peasants without any of the sentimentality that’s apparent in Bruegel’s paintings. And the fifth, the last video, is a scene of a dogfight, which was taken when I was a kid—13, 14—in Podgorica where kids were fighting dogs all the time. In other words, instead of fighting amongst themselves, which they also did, they would fight dogs. It was kind of part of an old fascination with animal fights that goes back to Rome. But then later, just before the Bosnian war, it became significantly perverted. It turned into betting: people making money off of death. In any case, the five videos are installed in the first room, and they all share the color red in common, which can be read from the perspective of a religious or everyday ritual, to the violence that is conveyed through any form of sacrificial offering. Yet the underlying motive in each is also banal and everyday.



Aleksandar Duravcevic, *Red* (1992-2002). Five-channel video. Courtesy of Centar Savremene Umjetnosti Crne Gore and the artist. Photo by Dusko Miljanic.

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Rail: How about the second room?

Duravcevic: The second room is two fragments of a burnt interior—“Room no. 1 (Things Are Not What They Seem),” which is something of a surreal environment in a cinematic sense, not painterly. It is made out of wood, carved, and then burned.

Rail: Would you say that the motif of the doors is a composite of what you saw among the cathedrals in Florence, as well as those in Montenegro where you grew up?

Duravcevic: Yeah, it’s a hybrid of both memories. It’s a collage, or a juxtaposition of things that are adorned, yet seem fragile. A surface, a façade: a façade versus the interior. It’s an inversion: the interior of the room is burnt, and the outside of the room is just plywood. There is a sense of artifice: this building, this artisanal element. Again there is this sense of smell that comes from the back, the raw surface of the wood, which you had mentioned earlier when you spoke about seeing, feeling, touching, and smelling. It’s a memory of a room not very different from an erased drawing or squeegeed painting.

Rail: And the third room?

Duravcevic: The third room is a love letter in the form of graffiti, a frottage rubbed from a Renaissance palazzo that I saw when I was a student in Florence and going to sell silk in Venice, not far from the Rialto Bridge. I remember seeing this remarkable inscription, in which the text, chiseled into the stone surface, is a love letter to a certain unknown Maria, that I once passed by boat. My first experiences of Venice, for many years, were actually from a boat. We would bring merchandise from a boat. So I moved through Venice in the canals, before I knew the roads even. The work is about a 500-year-old love letter, which I thought related to the theme of the Biennale, “All the World’s Futures.” I thought there was a profound lack of love in that instance. Actually, it will be covered with postcards because Venice is a big postcard. And, in the last room, is “Identity” (2010 – 2014), which is remade in bronze.

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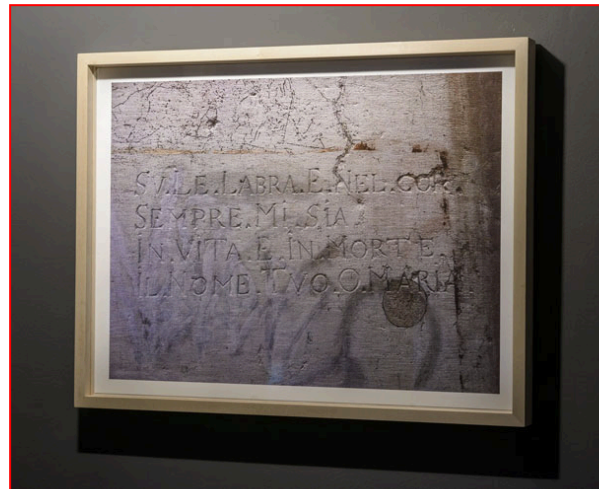
Rail: “Albanians thought I was Montenegrin / Montenegrins thought I was Albanian / Italians thought I was a Slav / Latinos think I am Italian / Blacks think I’m French / French think I am one of their own.”

Duravcevic: Which is self-explanatory. It’s also playing with stereotypes and with the ways that we see each other in the 21st century, as well as with the notion that Europe is going through this process of unification and possible fragmentation through losing members like Greece, we don’t know. But, these political ideas again go back to these strong beliefs that I’ve gained from experience—things do eventually fall apart. I grew up during Tito, and Tito was an absolute communist dictator, who lasted from World War II to 1980—a long time but one that ultimately ended. And then we had Milosevic who was in power as a socialist/nationalistic dictator from 1989 to 2000 who, with other Nationalistic leaders, led the region into a war of fragmentation which now we call Balkanization. And that also went away.

Rail: Can you describe the inclusion of the video “Waiting” (2015)? And why you installed it outside?

Duravcevic: From Spain to Greece, the Mediterranean seems to be populated by old women standing and looking through the windows onto the street, or sitting in front of their houses waiting for someone. It is a somewhat Beckett-like absurdist theater of life, of a basic human condition: hope. The Montenegrin pavilion is on a small deadend street.

I thought it would be great to have the video projected on the outside wall. She becomes a watcher, a guardian, one who possesses wisdom and knowledge.



Aleksandar Duravcevic. Courtesy of Centar Savremene Umjetnosti Crne Gore and the artist. Photo by Dusko Miljanic.

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Rail: Yes, one feels she is half Estragon and Vladimir combined, and half “the Oracle” in the Wachowskis’ film *The Matrix* without the need for dialogue of course. At any rate, in the context of where you are as an artist, how would you describe the space between the past and the present?

Duravcevic: Past and present lead to future. I have always seen it that way. It is inevitable that the past seems to be infinite, the future unknown, and the present murky and unclear. But the element of time or one taking time has changed. I don’t think you can do *Festina lente* any more. I just don’t think we change that much. The appearance of things change, but the social ills are still with us. Yes, we always have the inevitable disparity between haves and have nots, and whatnot, but those conditions define us, directly or indirectly. Perhaps I was informed by my upbringing in Montenegro, which was a tribal society, that therefore conceived of every man as a free warrior. He didn’t have lords or owners. He didn’t really respond to any laws but the tribal ones of blood. Imagine the transformation of that society to communism, which again claimed equality by pushing folks from the mountains to work in factories, to embrace technology, to learn how to suddenly produce for public good. Of course, I’ve come to realize that the Marxist ideas were used by tribesmen in a very different way than, say, how they were applied in Hungary or Bulgaria or Romania or Russia or other parts of the Soviet Union. Then suddenly, it all collapsed, and we in Montenegro witnessed, aside from the war, the first accumulation of capital, which began right after the war started. Killing and grabbing. This is mine now. I think of John Ruskin and *The Stones of Venice* (1891) which was written, in a way, as a protest of the Industrial Revolution. So it’s like you are witnessing something and simultaneously fighting against it. He was fighting for arts and crafts that would ultimately lead to the Bauhaus and those ideas. And I wonder if we are going through that now, with our technological miracles and constant changes, and obliteration of human social interaction.

Rail: The only way is for us to resist and fight against the seduction of technology, which can erode our ability to communicate to each other.

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Duravcevic: Technology seems to be the new god—maybe one of the reasons for the rise and spread of religion, especially in the Middle East. In Montenegro there are these beautiful monasteries, once relics of the past, that are becoming places of worship again. While in Italy these places of worship seem to be empty, in the United States we have politicians who talk about god and religion endlessly. Again, in Montenegro we have a multiethnic population. Everybody seemed fairly secular, non-believers. But when you're at war, all the ghosts of the past are resurrected, which is what happened during the Balkan war. And one of the reasons why people resist technology, or push for homogeneity, globalization, and obliterate boundaries is by asserting themselves through the names of their gods. It's still here with us.

CONTRIBUTOR

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