

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

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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 Derviz (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 lie peacefully before the viewer.

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

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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 Derviz: These images come from a variety of sources. Usually, they're photographs, and they're often found drawings, 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 recent 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...

SD: Using a combination of found images allows me to consider things in terms of their visual qualities; the process becomes more focused on developing expression than trying to represent an idea. It also frees me from having singular ideas. The *Wise young girl* paintings, which were isolated faces at the beginning, developed in this way. I was interested in different expressions, and that's why I started using images. This process could challenge what I already had in mind. At that time, I would use ten to fifteen different images of faces for one painting. Using found imagery is kind of like a visual tool, only suggestive of a situation. And I am more

interested in possibility than definition with painting. It's also interesting because I am working with memory and imagination, and to have something there that is so defined and external challenges things. The *Wise young girl* only makes sense within this process.

MG: We're now really talking about the archetype itself that you're constructing from different visual signifiers. I always end up going back to this reference, but the work really makes me think about Kiki Smith, and in particular her *Wolf Girl* (1999) 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 a lot of possibility. 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. In the same way as painting is perhaps less to do with decision-making and more to do with recognising what the image needs, being OK with not knowing. It's more about courage than confidence.

You mention archetypes of womanhood, spiritual yearning and sexual identity. I really like that you can make these connections. I don't think I can question the representation of this archetype outside of its process. I am probably more interested in the possibility of these things. Constructing something to believe in can be so powerful, and so isolating too. What is the relationship between this and our sense of freedom? I am grateful to have been introduced to the work of Miroslav Titchy last year, which to me expresses such relationships. He generally photographed women without them knowing, and also sometimes screens. He wasn't a naive artist, and his work was in many ways subversive to a totalitarian regime.

MG: What interests me in these 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 this point?

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 anything else. This face remained with me for four years after, and eventually took over all other motifs I was using. Perhaps what was interesting about this face for me is it could contain overlapping qualities, where coexistence felt impossible to me before, in terms of painting – associations with someone young and someone old, for example. This face doesn't need to be determined. It's weird, but focusing on this one thing – this face – has opened me up to knowing how to paint any other visual elements, 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 tension. All of these qualities and decisions are physical – the weight and qualities 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 image and I think the best paintings extend such qualities. Recently, I am also more interested in my relationship to drawing when working with colour, using it more directly in the process.

MG: Like in *A dissevered dream* (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 like I really need this. There isn't enough 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 function more like explanations or notes that I have on the side. Now, with the charcoal elements in the 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: 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't 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, and 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. How 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 jokes.

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

SD: [Laughs] No because he painted it for 15 years, like so many years, and I think he never released the painting. He died with that painting, like it was next to him. Anyway, it's a good painting. It's also such a simple thing.

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 external and internal, where the painting is a temporary endpoint. He achieved this using mostly one motif: his self portrait, over and over again. He created a language of 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, one can imitate any kind of emotion in a visual way, but I am not interested in that process.

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. However, there is also a sense of doubt in the archetype. I think this is also to do with negotiating so

many images. The very core of the face is – in a way – its process of change. A sense of space is also present in every work. I like the idea that in nature everything can be seen as connected, but it can all be seen as divided as well. Space always has expression, and can direct the way we relate to one another, form behavioural patterns, and make us feel a certain way. Painting is a language and figurative is not the opposite of abstract. So, over time, my paintings developed focus tensions – rather than a different subject. Separation and connection exist in relation and I think I have always been interested in the limits of these things. 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.

MMG: How do you feel scale plays a role within this?

SD: The faces used to be very large. Recently, they are closer in scale to life. However, they also break that sometimes, for example in *A dissevered dream* (2023), the scale of the pregnant figure is really distorted. But I think this is also to do with perspective. Maybe it's almost the nature of painting to challenge it, and to determine focus. In this sense, qualities of scale have a connection to this process of abstraction, and I'm interested in the possible distortions and the way I imagine something. I'm less interested in how things actually look.

MG: The last thing I wanted to ask you: I've noticed, and we've touched on in our conversations before this, a meditative aspect to your practice in the way that you approach 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, or 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 OK 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.