

LUMTURI
BLSHMI

FROM
SCRYCH

CURATED BY
ADELA DEMETJA



REPUBLIKA E KOSOVËS
MINISTRIA E KULTURËS, RINISË
DHE SPORTIT

THE EXHIBITION REPRESENTING
THE REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA

59TH INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA



LUMTURI BLOSHMI
1944 - 2020

This catalog serves as a window into two significant exhibitions that thoroughly explore the life and oeuvre of Lumturi Blloshmi (1944-2020), an impressive artist who left an indelible mark on the Albanian art landscape.

The first part focuses on the presentation of Lumturi Blloshmi at the Albanian Pavilion during the 59th edition of La Biennale di Venezia in 2022. Not only does she make history as the first female artist to represent Albania in Venice, but the curation by Adela Demetja, the first Albanian female curator of the Albanian Pavilion, adds another layer of significance. Their collaboration, rooted in a deep friendship that began in 2016 and endured until the artist's passing, culminates in the thought-provoking presentation titled "Lumturi Blloshmi: From Scratch." This exhibition is not just a showcase; it is a research project aiming to revisit, examine, present, and reposition Lumturi Blloshmi's work and life within the context of national and international art history.

The second part delves into "Lumturi Blloshmi: From Scratch" the first retrospective exhibition of the artist in Kosovo in 2023. Following her impactful presentation at the Venice Biennale in 2022, this retrospective at the National Gallery of Kosovo honours Blloshmi's half-century-long creative journey. The exhibition, again curated by Adela Demetja, showcases a diverse selection of her works, spanning from the 1960s to the 2000s.

Additionally, four texts by Albanian and international authors who knew Lumturi Blloshmi and her work have been specially commissioned for this catalog. These texts offer unique perspectives and insights into the life and artistic contributions of Lumturi Blloshmi.

This catalogue is made possible with the support of Ministry of Culture of Albania and National Gallery of Kosovo.

LUMTURI BLOSHMI

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**PAVILION OF ALBANIA
AT THE 59TH INTERNATIONAL
ART EXHIBITION - LA BIENNALE
DI VENEZIA**

**LUMTURI BLOSHMI
FROM SCRATCH**

**CURATED BY
ADELA DEMETJA**

23.04 - 27.11.2022

The Albanian Pavilion at the 59th edition of La Biennale di Venezia is represented by Lumturi Blloshmi. Blloshmi is the first female artist to represent Albania with a solo presentation in Venice and Adela Demetja the first Albanian female curator of the Albanian Pavilion. Demetja became friends with Blloshmi in 2016 and she was one of her closest collaborators until the end of the artist's life.

Born in 1944 in Tirana, Blloshmi was one of the most important Albanian visual artists of her time. Blloshmi's father, an Officer of King Zog's Army, was executed by the Communists when Lumturi was only two months old. At five years old she lost her hearing following an infection of meningitis. Blloshmi graduated from the Painting Department at the Academy of Arts in Tirana in 1968. Between 1974 and 1985, she was not allowed to continue her creative practice due to political reasons and she only had her first solo exhibition at the age of forty-four. Until 2004, Blloshmi worked in several institutions, including the National Gallery of Arts and Institute of Cultural Monuments in Tirana. Following this, she worked as an independent artist. Several of her works are included in the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Tirana. Her works have been shown among others in group and solo exhibitions in institutions like the Chelsea Art Museum in New York, Municipal Art Gallery of Bydgoszcz Poland, Alexandria Biennale for Mediterranean Countries Egypt, Albania National Gallery of Arts, Kosovo National Gallery of Arts. Lumturi passed away on 27 November 2020 as a result of an infection with Covid-19.

Lumturi Blloshmi has a remarkable biography, a powerful personality and most importantly, a qualitative body of work which makes her unique and a reference point for the national and international contemporary art discourse. Lumturi Blloshmi's body of work fits very well within the theme of the 59th Venice Art Biennale titled "The Milk of Dreams". The title is borrowed from a book by Leonora Carrington, in which, as the curator of the Biennale Cecilia Alemani says; "the Surrealist artist describes a magical world where life is constantly re-envisioned through the prism of the imagination, and where everyone can change, be transformed, become something and someone else. The exhibition takes us on an imaginary journey through metamorphoses of the body and definitions of humanity."

Like almost all the artists of her generation, Lumturi Blloshmi painted in socialist realism style until the end of the '80s. After the '90s, she was nevertheless one of the few artists of her generation that managed to constantly reposition and transform herself and her work successfully until the end of her life. Her works in painting, photography, installation and performance are characterized by an ironic and satiric way of reflecting and overcoming the reality in which she lived.

Blloshmi stood in the middle of her cosmos, not as a passive viewer but rather as an active participant. This allowed her to openly express her perceptions about the art world and its mechanisms and the society which she was part of. Her view was that of a strong woman criticizing and provoking with humor the power establishment dominated by men. What makes her oeuvre remarkable is the symbolic simplicity and optimism she uses when dealing with the harsh reality. Oftentimes Blloshmi depicted herself in her paintings, performances and photographs. By doing so, she clearly created, through subjectivity, a relationship between herself and the given social-political context, which allowed her and us to perceive history and reality from a self-defined and personal point of view.

By cultivating and readopting an approach that goes beyond feminism, nationality and specific art styles, Blloshmi has tirelessly resisted different regimes and developments by building her work starting from her own personal experience and transiting from a certain type (Albanian, woman, politically persecuted, disabled) to a personality and becoming one of the most remarkable and innovative contemporary artists. Nevertheless, her oeuvre has not yet been fully explored and examined and it is still unknown for the international art world. Therefore her practice informed by imagination and innovation intersects very well with the curated section of the Biennale that focuses on personal mythologies that try to imagine alternative models of coexistence and transformation that enable the re-enchantment of the world. The presentation under the title "Lumturi Blloshmi. From scratch" is conceived as an exhibition project aiming at researching, examining, presenting and positioning the work and life of Lumturi Blloshmi anew within the national and international art history.

The heart of the presentation consists of a selection of Blloshmi's works from the 1960s until the 2010s, spanning self-portraits and compositions in painting and photography that say as much about Blloshmi's aesthetic essence and personal reality as they do about the specific political and social context in which they were created. By remaining true to the unfiltered urge to express experience awareness, Blloshmi constantly pushed the boundaries of media and formal styles by experimenting with materials and combinations of media to achieve what she called "a distinct tangible universe." Formally situated within the boundaries of figuration, her oeuvre - strongly informed by imagination and innovation - at its core transmits and resonates a sense of universality and timelessness. The pavilion is conceived in such a way as to reflect Blloshmi's tangible yet simultaneously ungraspable universe and its openness to interpretations. The exhibition architecture and display is closely created in collaboration between the curator and the German architect Johanna Meyer-Grohbrügge.

Two new commissions in video and interactive media about Lumturi Blloshmi, have been realized specially for the pavilion in a collaboration between the curator and invited artists. Through a virtual constructed environment the viewer has the possibility to get an overview of Blloshmi's personal world and creative environment. The virtual archive "Lumturi Blloshmi: A personal Geography" has been created in close collaboration between the curator and the British interactive media artist Alexander Walmsley. An experimental documentary aiming at capturing Blloshmi's essence, attitude and spirit has been created by Mexican filmmaker Tin Dirdamal in collaboration with the curator.

Adela Demetja

Curator:

Adela Demetja

Assistant Curator:

Eni Derhemi

Interactive Media Artist:

Alexander Walmsley

Filmmaker:

Tin Dirdamal

Exhibition Architect:

Johanna Meyer-Grohbrügge

Legal representative
of Lumturi Blloshmi:

Ervin Blloshmi

Commissioner:

Ministry of Culture of Albania

Supporters:

Ministry of Culture of Albania
Gwärtler Foundation

Media Partner:

Digitalb

**ALBANIAN PAVILION: BLOSHMI'S
TANGIBLE YET SIMULTANEOUSLY
UNGRASPABLE UNIVERSE.**

**ERKA SHALARI AND ADELA DEMETJA IN
CONVERSATION DURING THE OPENING
OF THE ALBANIAN PAVILION AT THE
59TH VENICE BIENNALE.**

Albania has been represented by various artists in this international exhibition since 1999. However, this marks the first time a female artist, Lumturi Blloshmi (1944–2020), is representing the country. Additionally, the curation is, for the first time, entrusted to a female curator, Adela Demetja. Cecilia Alemani, the curator of this edition, has emphasized that this Biennale will predominantly feature women, non-binary, and gender non-conforming artists, marking a deliberate shift from the historically male-dominated narrative in art and contemporary culture. Demetja, curator of the Albanian pavilion, believes it's crucial to note that while the proposal received support from the Albanian Ministry of Culture, there's still significant progress required towards a more progressive and equality-focused cultural policy.

Erka Shalari: *“Lumturi Blloshmi from scratch.” How did this title come about?*

Adela Demetja: Lumturi Blloshmi was among the most fascinating contemporary Albanian artists of her time. However, due to several challenges – becoming deaf at age five, facing oppression from the communist regime for political beliefs, and being an artist woman navigating a male-dominated field – her work and life have not been thoroughly showcased, investigated, or contextualized. Tragically, Blloshmi passed away in November 2020 from COVID-related complications. The privilege of representing Albania at this year's Venice Biennale gave my team and me an in-depth understanding of her life and work. I've collaborated with the artist since 2016, and this endeavour is a continuation of our previous work.

The difference now is that we're presenting it to the public, leveraging the context of the Biennale to familiarize the international audience with Blloshmi's universe. To me, curating is a continuous journey that doesn't start or finish within the boundaries of an exhibition. Everything within this scope – the design, public talks, interviews, and more – collectively shape a reality that exists as a vortex within the broader reality. This vortex, encompassing the life, ideas, and creations of Lumturi Blloshmi, represents a fresh start, a "from scratch" approach. By embracing this concept of a new beginning, I aim to diverge, both conceptually and emotionally, from the traditional notion of a retrospective. To me, retrospectives often resonate with feelings of melancholy and sorrow. The artist was not fond of melancholy, and neither am I. Blloshmi was an energetic individual, always oriented towards the future. The term "from scratch" fittingly captures and illustrates the essence of our undertaking.

E.Sh: *Before diving into preparations for the Venice Biennale, I'd like to briefly touch on a significant period in the artist's life. Unfortunately, Blloshmi faced a professional ban for nearly a decade due to the communist regime. What impact do you think such an event has on an artist?*

A.D: The impact likely differs among various artists, but I'd presume it's a harrowing experience for any. Many artists were denied the permission to pursue their artistic endeavours during that era. For Lumturi, the ordeal was even more crushing, because given her hearing impairment, art was her essential mode of expression. After graduating from the Art Academy in 1968, Blloshmi was relegated to the role of a mere worker in the offset department of a state-controlled publishing house. In contrast, her classmates secured roles in art education or art-related institutions. The regime labelled her as having a "stained biography" because her family was deemed an enemy to the state. Her father, who served as a major under King Zog's administration, was summoned one night in November 1944 for a communist investigation and never returned. What happened remains a mystery to this day and his body has never been found.

Due to this traumatic event, the entire Blloshmi family endured relentless persecution under the communist regime. In the following years post-graduation, Blloshmi persisted with her art vocation, presenting her works to official exhibitions, facing mostly rejections. Yet, she remained undeterred. Eventually, her works found their way into exhibitions, and she was inducted into the Union of Writers and Artists for the first time. However, 1974 witnessed a clampdown as the arts, still tied to the socialist realism style, began to exhibit traces of liberalism and subjectivity, deemed unsavoury by the party. Numerous artists who lost their work, positions, and membership at the Unions of Writers and Artists faced imprisonment or were dispatched to labour camps.

Artistic expression was stringently regulated by the state during this period; for instance, one required specific authorization (i.e., union membership) to procure art supplies from the sole authorized distributor. Lumturi, at just 30 years old, was forced to halt her artistic activities and pursuits, not due to any obvious transgression, but merely because of her "tainted biography." A decade later, in 1984, she was finally "rehabilitated" and rejoined the Union at the age of forty. Yet, Lumturi didn't wallow in regret over such fate. She plunged back into her art, focusing predominantly on landscapes and portraits. She eventually managed to open her first solo exhibition in 1988 in Berat at the age of forty-four.

E.Sh: *You've chosen to showcase the artist's works from the 1960s to the 2010s. Why exclude the latter years of her oeuvre?*

A.D: Even though Blloshmi and I had discussed the idea of her representing Albania in Venice prior to her passing, we didn't get the chance to collaborate on the concept. However, we had begun reviewing her works as I documented and catalogued them. We managed to assess about 40% of her significant works before I had to continue the process alone. To best introduce Lumturi Blloshmi, especially to an international audience, it felt right to present a curated selection spanning various years.

Central to the exhibition is a series of self-portraits. The earliest is a 1966 painting from her days at the Art Academy in Tirana, while the most recent is a 2018 photograph. Blloshmi frequently incorporated her own likeness in paintings, performances, and photographs. This self-representation established, through subjectivity, a link between her personal experience and the prevailing socio-political backdrop. This allowed both her and the viewers to perceive and interpret history and reality from a self – defined, individualized perspective. The pavilion also includes two other thematic collections: one rooted in the socio-political and historical milieu of Albania, and another that resonates within a broader, more universal discourse.

It was essential that each piece stood on its own merit, and that collectively, they epitomized Blloshmi's innovative creative spirit, consistently challenging established boundaries and perceptions of her work. Given Albania's idiosyncratic art history—a leap from Socialist Realism straight into contemporary art, bypassing modernism—it felt appropriate to me to spotlight Blloshmi's work as emblematic of a distinctive artistic practice. Her oeuvre, constantly developed in dialogue with The Self, epitomizes a distinctive process focusing on metamorphosis, thus eluding easy categorization within conventional art-historical narratives. This curatorial strategy aligns with Cecilia Alemani's vision for this year's main curated section of the Biennale. To address your question about excluding her later works: in her final years, Blloshmi was branching out, collaborating on more performance and stage-centred projects. Such endeavours couldn't be appropriately showcased or presented within the Venice presentation format I had envisioned.

E.Sh.: *How was the artist perceived by her fellow artists, contemporaries and later by critics? I'm particularly interested in the period during which she began to challenge norms and experiment with a mix of materials and mediums. I recall being deeply impressed during my visit to your curated booth "Focus: Ex-Yugoslavia and Albania" at Vienna Contemporary in 2016, especially by Blloshmi's work.*

A.D: Lumturi, along with other artists, were eagerly looking forward to the transformations of the 90s and the fall of the communist dictatorship. While this period brought about newfound hope, it also presented confrontations with a rapidly changing reality. Similarly to her struggles in the previous era Blloshmi persistently carved out her space within a male-dominated professional art sphere. A photograph from the early 90s captures what was named "The group of independent Albanian artists," with Blloshmi being the only female representative. While she was generally well-received by peers and critics, it wasn't solely due to their openness or appreciation; rather, it was her tenacity in asserting her rightful place. Blloshmi consistently followed her unique path, driven by her distinct narrative, intuitive impulses, and need for genuine expression. She experimented with painting, integrating diverse materials onto her canvas—from fabrics to everyday items, filling her works with texture, relief and depth.

Remarkably, amidst her artist contemporaries, she constantly reinvented herself without becoming overwhelmed by the never-ending possibilities of expression. The basis of her work remained conceptual intention, instinctive intuition, and diligent application of her creative energy. By the late 90s, Blloshmi ventured into photography, discovering another dimension for her artistry.

Having previously challenged and moved away from the canvas's two-dimensionality—while preserving the figurative element—she realized that she herself had always been an integral part of her creations. In 2003, she presented her first official performance at the National Gallery of Arts in Albania.

Around this period, Tirana's contemporary art scene was burgeoning, marked by events like the first Tirana Biennale in 2001. While Lumturi participated in both national and international exhibitions, she often found herself side-lined from landmark events shaping contemporary Albanian art. It's crucial to recognize that, as a person with a disability (though she never perceived herself as such and neither she accepted others treat her as such), she required more intermediation than most. Despite distinguishing herself among her peers, she didn't receive wholehearted acknowledgment and support from the emerging generation of curators and event organizers, who seemed to prioritize younger talents or bringing international artists in Albania.

E.Sh: *Lately, many museums and galleries are shifting their focus to spotlight artists from older generations who have been underrepresented. How do you plan to integrate Lumturi Blloshmi into contemporary discourse, and what are your goals and ambitions for the artist's legacy?*

A.D: Presently, the art world is full of diverse talents. Personally, I'm especially drawn to artists who create from a deep-seated compulsion or view their artistic endeavours as virtually a mission to convey profound personal experiences and perceptions. Among them, some have pursued their passion regardless of their circumstances, completely bypassing the opinion of the established art scene. Their works, even if they emerge after many years, encapsulate a timeless essence, transcending specific eras or locales. Such artists recognize that they're part of a higher calling, a broader discourse and derive fulfilment from realizing their "task" at hand, bestowing immediate significance to their existence. Such a vision is priceless.

Blloshmi exemplifies this model, and her firm conviction assured her that she was on the right path and doing the right thing. She also recognized the importance of making her work visible and accessible. As curators, art historians, and gallery professionals, it's our responsibility to safeguard and support these creations, ensuring they're accessible to the public and facilitating meaningful interactions with them. I'm convinced that meaningful art with substance and value inevitably finds its way into public viewing and appreciation. Blloshmi's oeuvre deserves transnational recognition, and I aspire to see her pieces become part of esteemed collections in renowned international museums.

Lumturi's profound desire was for a dedicated museum to house her creations. I hope, with adequate backing, to fulfil this dream - her great dream - thus offering the chance to the art community and the general public to see this treasure unhindered. Blloshmi chose never to leave Albania. She was deeply intertwined with its realities, which she simultaneously valued and criticised. Establishing a museum in her honour within Albania would be fitting and serve as an inspiration for upcoming generations of artists, allowing them to delve into the life and legacy of Blloshmi.

E.SH. *The artist's extensive career and the rich legacy she has bequeathed eloquently speaks for itself. Naturally this diverse range of material needs an extensive network of people to navigate. I'm interested to know if there were individuals who significantly aided your deeper exploration of Blloshmi's artistic endeavours?*

A.D: The artist's family has been immensely supportive, particularly her nephew, Ervin Blloshmi, who also pursued painting studies at the Art Academy in Albania. Lumturi shared a profound bond with him. It's fortunate that her family grasps the significance of her oeuvre and is eager to amplify its reach. My journey was further enriched by collaborations with Lumturi's close associates and friends: writer and artist Rudi Erebara, photographer Albes Fusha, writer, publisher, and curator Krenar Zejno, art researcher and curator Suzana Varvarica, art scholar Eleni Laperi, and choreographer Gjergj Prevazi. Each of these professionals had pivotal collaborations with Lumturi Blloshmi and consistently supported her throughout her journey. Their collective wisdom has been invaluable to this project.

However, the most profound guidance to me came from Lumturi herself. She left for all of us a treasure trove of letters, notes, photographs, articles, and artworks. To truly do justice to this archive and ensure its accessibility to the public, I'll need to delve deeper into these materials—a quest I'm keen to continue post the Venice Biennale.

E.Sh: *In my research leading up to our conversation, Berlin-based artist Christine Sun Kim came to mind. As a deaf individual, she continually strives to be understood and seeks innovative artistic communication methods—such as using A.S.L., learning D.G.S., and employing charts, text, and drawings. Which communication tools did Lumturi Blloshmi adopt and use to engage with the art discourse?*

A.D: Blloshmi had early aspirations of becoming a dancer, highlighting the significance of music in her life from an early age. Tragically, following a severe case of meningitis at age five she lost her hearing—though she was fortunate to survive the ordeal. Post-recovery, she lost her speech.

Nonetheless, her mother, with plenty of courage, enrolled her in an elementary school. There, her schoolteacher, Evanti Ciko, patiently guided her to rediscover her voice and speech again. Blloshmi never took to sign language; instead, she trained her skills in lip-reading and verbal communication. Though she often leaned on friends to mediate, when necessary, she was confidently independent, going in most settings unaccompanied.

Additionally, reading and note-taking were integral to her daily life. Whenever we touched upon important topics, she'd insist on written statements or confirmations. This meticulous approach to documentation enriched her archive with a huge collection of notes, letters, and correspondences. However, her disability inevitably posed challenges in fully immersing herself in the art world. Yet, her most authentic voice was her own body—its movements and the energy it radiated. This embodiment is a tangible force in her artworks too, transcending mere form and thought, calling viewers to engage with "new emotions," as Lumturi described them.

To me, each of her pieces seems to resonate, or even "speak," in its own way and such a powerful trait suggests that art, which communicates beyond the limits of language, possesses the ability to relate across time and space. Lumturi possessed a keen awareness of this timeless dimension in her being, and much of her work seems to capture this approach. The human body held great significance for her. She viewed (her) body as both as an instrument and a vessel, aiming to harness its full potential, to animate it completely.

E.Sh: *You've also collaborated with Mexican filmmaker Tin Dirdamal on a documentary about the artist's life. Can you share the backstory of this undertaking?*

A.D: I had envisioned this experimental documentary a few years ago when Lumturi was still with us. Regrettably, the funding I applied for didn't come through. However, the chance to bring this vision to life came back again for the pavilion. The project naturally presents challenges, given Lumturi's absence and the fact that Tin Dirdamal's never managed to meet her in life. Yet, I deeply admire Tin's approach. His films are introspective and poetic, often exploring hidden or seemingly uncharted territories. He possesses a distinctive methodology, ensuring his presence isn't overlooked in the narratives he captures—an element I often find missing, especially in artworks, films and documentaries, but which holds immense personal significance for me.

The film captures pivotal facets of Lumturi's life, encapsulating moods, tones, and expressions representative of her. It starts in the present, guiding future viewers—who may be unfamiliar with Blloshmi—to get to know her gradually alongside the filmmaker's discovery journey. In essence, it intertwines Lumturi's reflections and notes with new video recordings from places and situations that were meaningful to her. Our aim was to capture and convey the essence of her presence. Concurrently, the documentary offers a direct biographical window into the artist, fostering a deeper connection between viewers and the individual behind the artwork, and not just the artwork.

E. Sh. *Could you elaborate on the pavilion and other key curatorial elements?*

A.D: The Albanian Pavilion was located in the Arsenale Artiglierie. Its architectural design, created by German architect Johanna Meyer-Grobrügge, was integral to the presentation of Blloshmi's work. Her design emphasizes transparency and receptivity, themes that resonate with Lumturi's work. Additionally, in collaboration with British interactive media artist Alexander Walmsley, we introduced an interactive virtual archive titled "Lumturi Blloshmi. A Personal Geography." This feature invites viewers to navigate Lumturi's professional and personal spaces. Eni Derhemi, who has been my trusted collaborator for years, served as the assistant curator and production manager for this project. I'm deeply grateful to her and the entire team for their untiring support.

Erka Shalari is an Albanian art author based in Vienna.

Adela Demetja is an Albanian curator, author and producer based in Tirana and Frankfurt am Main.





ALBANIA
MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
GALLERIA D'ARTE MODERNA
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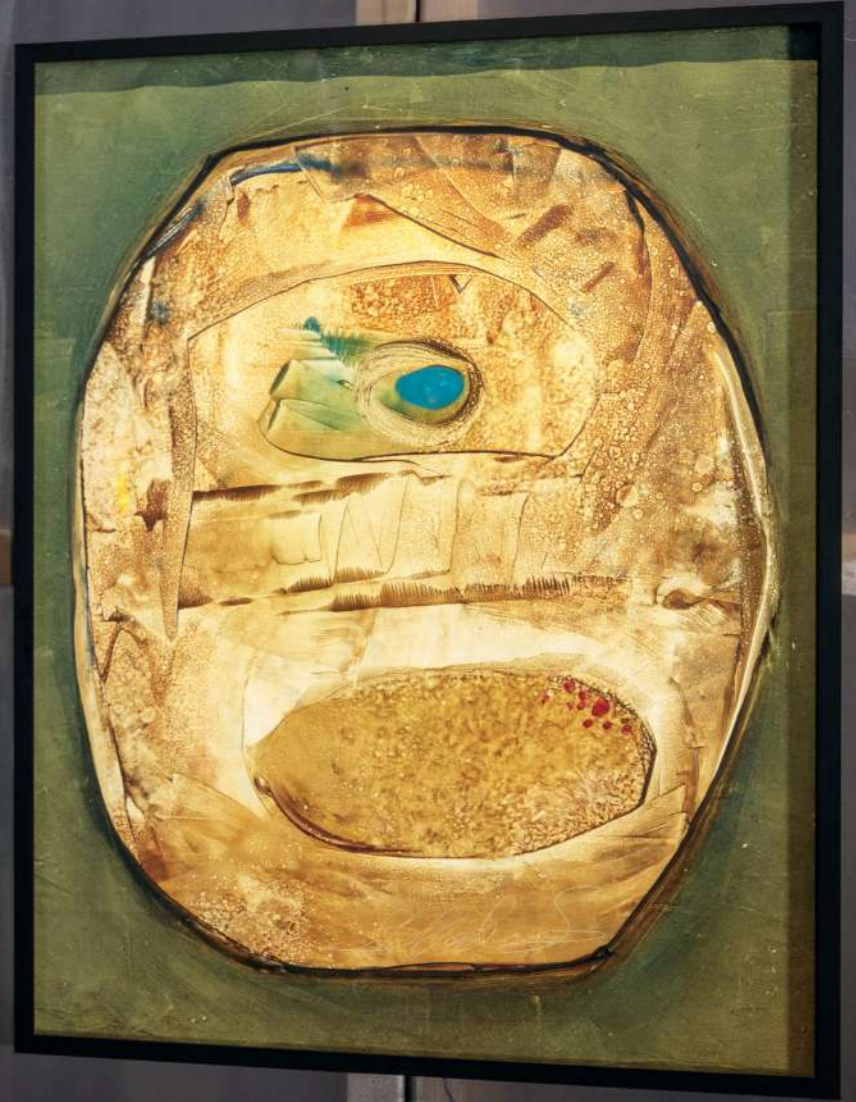








Francis Bacon
Three Figures
1983







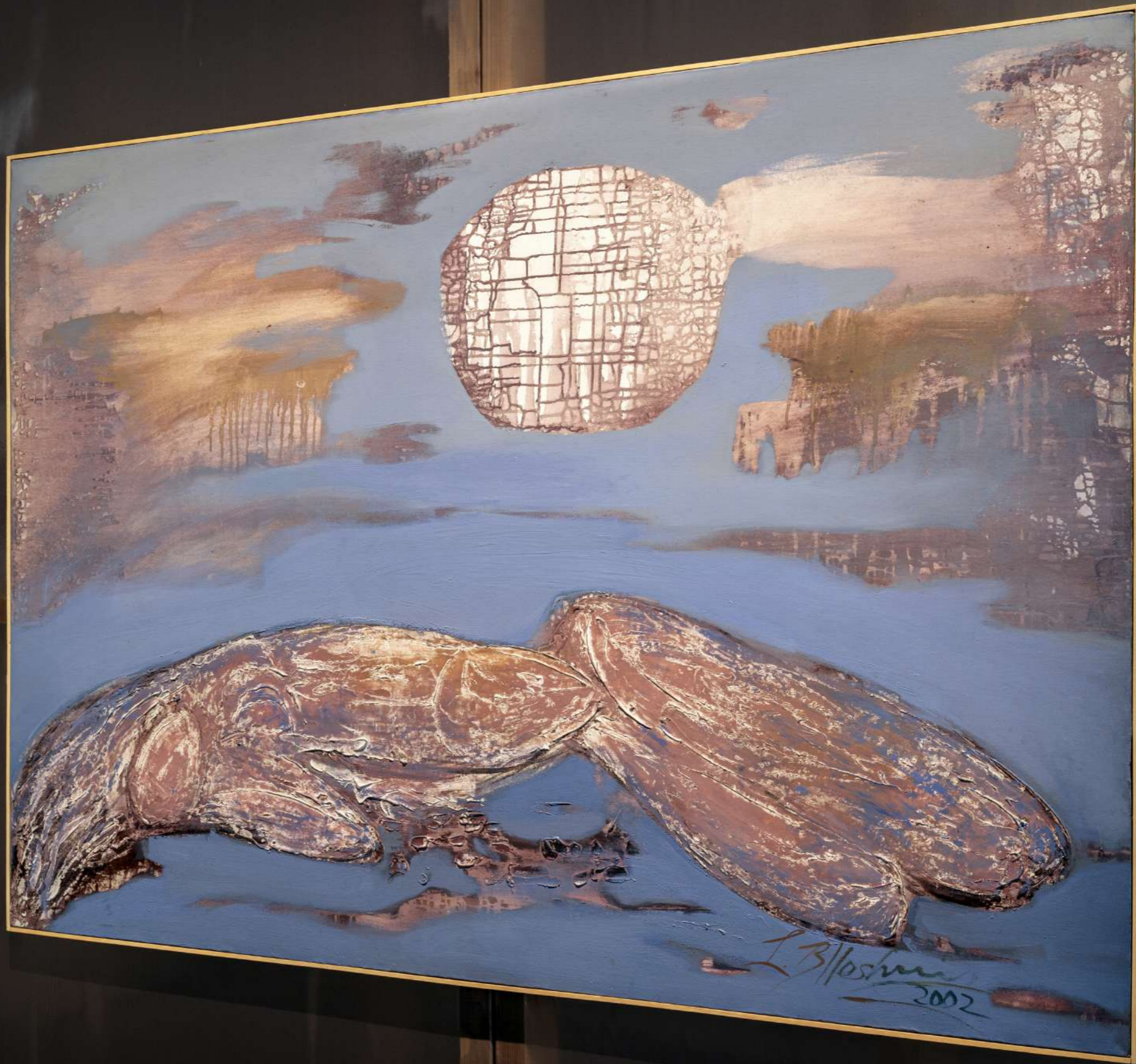




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ALBANIA
LUMTURI BLOSHMI
FROM SCRATCH
CURATED BY ADELA DEMETJA













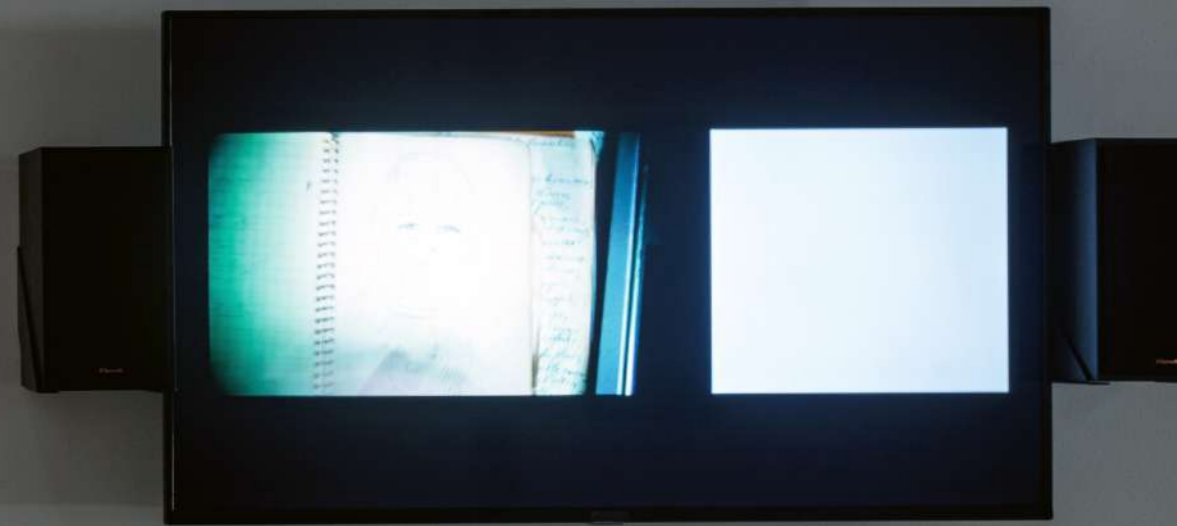






Two small, rectangular informational labels are mounted on the wall to the right of the framed artwork.









ASSISTANT CURATOR ENI DERHEMI
 FILMMAKER TIN DIRDAMAL
 PAVILION ARCHITECT JOHANNA MEYER-GROHBRUEGGE
 INTERACTIVE MEDIA ARTIST ALEXANDER WALMSLEY
 EXHIBITION SET-UP LUIGI D'ORO ARCHITECT & ARGUZIA S.R.L.
 COMMISSIONER MINISTRY OF CULTURE OF ALBANIA

Lumturi Blloshmi (1944-2020) è la prima artista donna a rappresentare l'Albania con una mostra personale alla Biennale di Venezia.

"Lumturi Blloshmi, Dall'incubo" è concepita come una mostra volta a ricercare, presentare e ricollocare l'opera e la vita di Lumturi Blloshmi nella storia dell'arte nazionale e internazionale. Blloshmi è stata una delle artiste visive albanesi più significative ma è causa di alcune limitazioni (scorte dall'età di cinque anni, oppressione dal regime comunista per motivi politici, donna in un campo dominato dagli uomini) e la sua vita non sono stati ancora completamente studiati ed esposti. La mostra presenta opere dagli anni '60 agli anni 2000, estendendosi tra autoritratti e composizioni in pittura e scultura, capaci di raccontare sia dell'essenza estetica e della realtà personale di Blloshmi, quanto del loro specifico contesto politico e sociale. Ripercorrendo fedele all'impulso non filtrato dell'esprimere consapevolezza, Blloshmi ha costantemente spinto i suoi confini sperimentando materiali e combinazioni per ottenere quello che ha definito "un distinto universo tangibile". Stretto formalmente nella figurazione, la sua opera - fortemente arricchita dall'immaginazione e dalla trasformazione - trasmette e fa risuonare un senso di universalità e atemporalità.

Il regista Tin Dirdamal ha creato un documentario sperimentale che comprende la storia della vita, l'atteggiamento e lo spirito di Blloshmi. Attraverso l'archivio virtuale interattivo, creato dall'artista Alexander Walmsley, è possibile entrare in contatto con il mondo personale e l'ambiente creativo di Blloshmi.

Blloshmi nasce a Tirana nel 1944. Affetta di cinque anni perse l'udito a causa della meningite. Nel 1960 Blloshmi si iscrive presso l'Accademia delle Arti di Tirana. Tra il 1974 e il 1985 non le fu permesso di continuare la sua pratica artistica per motivi politici e riuscì a realizzare la sua prima mostra personale solo all'età di quarantasette anni. Lumturi è deceduta il 27 novembre 2020 a causa dell'infezione da Covid-19.



ALBANIA

LUMTURI BLOSHMI FROM SCRATCH

CURATED BY ADELA DEMETJA

Lumturi Blloshmi (1944-2020) is the first female artist to represent Albania with a solo presentation at La Biennale di Venezia.

"Lumturi Blloshmi. From scratch" is conceived as an exhibition aiming at researching, presenting and positioning the work and life of Lumturi Blloshmi anew within the national and international art history. Blloshmi was one of the most important Albanian artists but due to limitations (deaf from the age of five, oppressed by the communist regime for political reasons, a woman in a male dominated field) her work and life has not yet been fully researched and displayed. The exhibition shows works from the 1960s until the 2000s, spanning self-portraits and compositions in painting and photography which reveal as much about Blloshmi's aesthetic essence and personal reality as they do about their specific political and social context. Remaining true to their unfiltered urge to express awareness, Blloshmi constantly pushes the boundaries by experimenting with materials and combinations of media to achieve what she called "a distinct tangible universe." Formally situated within figurative, her oeuvre - strongly informed by imagination and transformation - transmits and resonates a sense of universality and timelessness.

Filmmaker Tin Dirdamal has created an experimental documentary capturing Blloshmi's life story, attitude and spirit. Through the interactive virtual archive created by artist Alexander Walmsley, it is possible to get in touch with Blloshmi's personal world and creative environment.

Blloshmi was born in 1944 in Tirana. At five years old she lost her hearing following an infection of meningitis. She graduated from the Academy of Arts in Tirana in 1968. Between 1974 and 1985, she was not allowed to continue her creative practice due to political reasons and had her first exhibition at the age of forty-four. Lumturi passed away on 27 November 2020, due to an infection from Covid-19.

**“THE REALITY HAPPENED TO BE NEAR
THE DREAM”¹: PAINTING A BACKDROP
FOR LUMTURI BLOSHMI**

RAINO ISTO

¹ This phrase is drawn from a short statement (written in English) contained in Lumturi Blloshmi's personal archives. I thank Adela Demetja for the scans of documents from these archives. Signed by the artist, the undated statement appears to be Blloshmi's description of her own practice.

I. Introduction

A 1970 painting by the artist Lumturi Blloshmi shows a young woman standing tall against the background of the sea and, in the lower half of the canvas, the terraced slopes of coastal hills, with figures at work with picks and shovels. The painting—which bears the title *Aksionistja* (The Woman Youth Volunteer Worker), and which is also a self-portrait—places Blloshmi in the midst of the transformations of the landscape and the experience of a generation that came of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a time when the People's Republic of Albania sought to accelerate both its urban and rural production, to deepen the transformation of its landscapes and cityscapes in an effort to present a viable vision of a communist future at a time when that future was increasingly threatened by the ideological effects of the Soviet Union's de-Stalinization. The woman in the image—the artist here presenting herself in the paradigmatic socialist form, as the worker—looks out boldly from the canvas, her left hand holding the handle of a shovel, her eyes fixing the viewer directly. As much as the figure dominates this image, it is the background that carries the work's thematic weight: the urgency and utopian promise of socialist society, the collective movement of bodies together, reshaping reality.

A very different background appears in a work Blloshmi created 40 years later, in 2010, that bears the title *Okazion—Likuidim Total!* (Total Liquidation Sale!). An installation realized in the premises of Zenit Gallery in Tirana, the work consisted of completely covering the walls of the space with advertisements for all manner of products, from food to electronics, of the kind most often included as inserts in newspapers. *Okazion—Likuidim Total!* proposed a very different kind of utopian—or, in this case, dystopian—space, one in which the individual figure was occluded into an overwhelming repetition of advertisements. Here the subject position is not just reduced to the function of the consumer—the very function of the gallery space is completely usurped to emphasize the senselessness of late capitalist media, and particularly the alienation of that such media produced in the conditions of post-socialist society. A photograph documenting the aftermath of the exhibition shows the sheets of advertisements peeled from the walls and overflowing from a dumpster in an alley: a reflection on the transience and disposability of objects—including artworks—in the new context of neoliberal capitalism.

Somewhere between these two works, and behind them, stands the history of postwar and contemporary art in Albania, a history that has all too often been marginalized from (if not omitted entirely) from narratives of modern and contemporary art of Eastern Europe or the socialist world. It is this marginalized history that shapes and intertwines with Lumturi Blloshmi's personal and creative trajectory, and this essay aims to provide a backdrop for Lumturi Blloshmi's artwork, to understand the historical context in which her own practice developed—and, later, against which she positioned herself as a critical creative force. Its focus is not primarily on interpreting Blloshmi's work—although it does occasionally discuss her art—but instead on tracing the political and artistic histories and developments that might ground further investigations of her significance as an artist and the meaning(s) of her contribution to contemporary art in and beyond the region. Blloshmi's most significant works are doubtless those from the post-socialist years, when she experimented aggressively and persistently with new approaches to painting, performance, and installation, but her works cannot be fully understood without examining the period in which she received her artistic education. Despite the fact that she did not (and was unable to) participate in many aspects of official culture during Albanian state socialism, we can still see in her later work the marks of the social and political issues that socialist art in Albania brought to the fore, including a persistent interest in the body and its close relationship to political emancipation, as well as a critical attitude towards capitalist social alienation.

Much of Blloshmi's significance—within and beyond Albania—lies in her relentless experimentation, across many different media, which we must also read in relation to her strong personality, her outgoing confidence and dynamism—and the ways her work critiques both patriarchal society and the political developments of transition and post-transition neoliberal society. Selfhood, dream, resilience, violence, exodus, sacrifice, eroticism, the manipulation of political power, and the transformation of social and spatial relations—these, among others, are themes that Blloshmi explored in her work, and they reflect the shifting horizons of Albania in a global network: from a form of non-aligned socialist internationalism in the late 1960s (when Blloshmi completed her artistic education) to neoliberal shock therapy starting in the 1990s, the economic collapse and civil conflict of the late 90s, and finally the conflicted social and political conditions of the post-transition period. What follows aims to briefly map both the art and the political changes that took place, and to suggest some points of convergence and divergence between Blloshmi's artwork and that created in other (post-)socialist territories.

II. Postwar Art in Albania: Figuration and the Emergence of Socialist Realism

One of the reasons that histories of global and European art have so often left Albanian visual culture in obscurity is the enduring perception that the country's state socialist dictatorship (led by dictator Enver Hoxha from its beginnings in 1944 until his death in 1985 and enduring afterwards until the first multi-party elections in 1991) was too oppressive to have produced any art worthy of serious engagement. Much of the art produced in Albania during the postwar period (at least from the early 1950s onward) accorded to the precepts of Socialist Realism, a style and method that has—until recently—been excluded from modernist art history. During the Cold War, Western Europe and the United States advanced a narrative that associated social freedom with the creation of abstract modernist art (especially Abstract Expressionism),² and even as this association waned with the growth of the neo-avant-gardes in the 1960s and 1970s, dominant versions of art history continued to privilege art that explicitly reckoned with the legacy of abstraction even if it incorporated figurative tendencies as well. More recently, more astute accounts of realism and figurative art have situated Socialist Realism as a key element of efforts both to establish an engaged transnational leftist art and to explore the artistic credibility of reflecting the world as we live and experience it.³

Thus, while Albanian art history before the 1990s lacks examples of geometric abstraction or Abstract Expressionism, or of postwar neo-avant-garde developments such as Minimalism, Conceptual Art, and Performance, this does not make it some outlier impervious to analysis. Rather, its art history more closely parallels developments across both Eastern and Western Asia (and beyond), in which the growth of academic figuration in fact reflected the cultural shifts of modernity, and in which formal and thematic experimentation took place within the field of figurative art, inflected by antifascist, anti-imperial, and anti-colonial political discourses. The consolidation of Socialist Realism as the sole officially sanctioned style in the arts of state socialist Albania was not immediate, nor was it even necessarily inevitable.

² Boris Groys, "The Cold War between the Medium and the Message: Western Modernism vs. Socialist Realism," *e-flux* 104 (November 2019), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/104/297103/the-cold-war-between-the-medium-and-the-message-western-modernism-vs-socialist-realism/>. On the cultural politics of the Cold War and the importance of abstraction, see—most famously—Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

³ See Nikolas Drosos and Romy Golan, "Realism as International Style," in Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes, eds., *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic 1945–1965* (New York: Prestel, 2016); Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski, eds., *Art beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945–1989)* (Bucharest: CEU Press, 2016); and Magda Lipska and Piotr Słockowski, eds., *Was Socialist Realism Global? Modernism, Soc-modernism, Socially Engaged Figuration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023).

Furthermore, over the course of the socialist period, the precise contours of Albanian Socialist Realism varied, various taking inspiration and structure from Soviet art, global modernism, East Asian Socialist Realism, and folk culture, among other influences. As Jonida Gashi argues, in artistic discourse produced in Albania during the immediate postwar years—in journals such as *Bota e Re* (The New World) and *Letërsia Jonë* (Our Literature)—the emphasis was first on newness ("a new direction," "new method and style," "a new orientation," and so forth), and the term "Socialist Realism" was essentially absent.⁴ It emerged prominently as a clearer aesthetic entity only in the late 1940s and early 1950s, through pieces in *Letërsia Jonë* and *Letrari i Ri* (The New Writer), the latter of which published a series of articles outlining major elements of the method, such as "Literary Type," "Form and Content," "The Figure of the New Hero," and so forth.⁵

Socialist Realism is usually defined in terms of several specific characteristics or ideals, chiefly among them: a popular or proletarian character [*narodnost'*], typicality [*typichnost'*], ideological content [*ideinost'*], class-consciousness [*klassovost'*], and party-mindedness [*partiinost'*].⁶ As these terms indicate, it was not so much a style as a method, and indeed this is how it was typically discussed in Soviet contexts and in Albania. The term 'method' indicates that Socialist Realism was not simply about artists making images that looked a particular way—though of course this mattered; it was also about creating a new system, a new way of producing art, understanding it, and presenting it to the working classes of the socialist world and beyond. Thus, the administrative, structural, and political elements of socialist culture are at least as important for understanding postwar Albanian art history as are formal considerations, and this is relevant for understanding Lumturi Blloshmi's own trajectory since her exclusion from the artworld for much of the socialist era was, to a significant degree, an administrative marginalization.

⁴ See Jonida Gashi, chapter 1 of *Cinema on Trial: From the Newsreels and Documentary Films of the Communist Show Trials to the Revolutionary Vigilance Films* (forthcoming 2024). I thank Gashi for sharing her manuscript-in-progress with me.

⁵ See the issues from *Letrari i Ri* from 1952 to 1953, in which the articles were serially published.

⁶ Socialist Realism was first codified in the Soviet Union, a process that began in the 1934 First Congress of Soviet Writers and continued after the war, largely guided by the ideologue Andrei Zhdanov, the principal founder of the Cominform. Zhdanov and others developed Socialist Realism in contrast to the apparently apolitical stance of naturalism; rather than simply reflecting reality, Socialist Realism was meant to affirm and celebrate the new life of Soviet citizens (and by extension, all people living in socialist contexts) after the war. See Drosos and Golan, "Realism as International Style," p. 443.

Before the socialist era, the visual arts in Albania represented a relatively minor field of cultural production—there were few trained artists, few venues for exhibition, and the impact of painting and sculpture were primarily felt in elite circles.⁷ In the wake of liberation from fascist forces, the goal of the Communist Party of Albania (from 1948, renamed the Party of Labor) was the construction of a new society, one in which culture was more widely accessible to the working classes and in which state support for artists and cultural producers freed them from the vagaries of market forces and the patronage of elites. The success of this project at various points during Albania's Cold War history is certainly debatable, but what is certain is that the socialist state undertook a massive effort to create the institutions and to generate the resources necessary for the arts to become a vital part of socialist life, organizing and funding the training and activity of visual artists as an entire field of production, where previously there had been just a few individuals.⁸ State patronage of the arts required the creation of systems of centralized decision-making, which would both shape the development of the arts, but also determine the limitations of artistic activity and aesthetic discourse.

As in other socialist countries during the Cold War era, art and literature in postwar Albania was intensely shaped by the activity of the national Union of Artists. The Artists' Unions, across former Eastern Europe and beyond, were membership organizations, and membership within them—at least at a legal level—was what defined one as an artist in socialist society.⁹ In Albania's case, similar to other countries, membership in the union allowed access to resources (materials such as paint and canvas, and studio space); the ability to exhibit in official exhibitions; travel funding (within and outside the country); the ability to compete in competitions for public artworks; and access to krijimtari e lirë (“free creative activity”), during which time the artist was freed from other official responsibilities to complete work for the state. The Albanian Union of Writers was formed soon after the war, in 1945, while the official formation of the Union of Artists did not follow until October of 1952.¹⁰ In 1956, the two unions merged.¹¹

⁷ On the history of Albanian visual art during the National Awakening period, see Ferid Hudhri, *Arti i Rilindjes Shqiptare, 1883–1945* (Tirana: Onufri, 2000).

⁸ The beginnings of this policy can be seen clearly in the 1949 decision by the Party's Central Committee declaring its explicit support for the work of artists, cultural producers, scientists, and athletes. See “Një Vendim me Rëndësi,” *Literatura Jonë* 3:2–3 (1949), pp. 1–2.

⁹ See Caterina Preda and Raino Isto, “Introduction: Creating for the State: The Role of Artists' Unions in Central and Eastern Europe,” *ARTMargins Online*, October 2020, <https://artmargins.com/special-issue-creating-for-the-state-the-role-of-the-artists-unions-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

¹⁰ “Krijimi i Lidhjes së Artistëve të Shqipërisë,” *Letërsia Jonë* 7:10–11 (1952), pp. 118–120.

¹¹ The merger of the two unions is outlined in *Nëndori* 11 (November 1956), pp. 6–18. In Albanian, the name for the union, lidhja, could also be translated as “league.” However, since it played the same structural and legal role as organizations referred to as “artist unions” in other socialist nations, I have followed Robert Elsie in translating the term as “union.” See Elsie, “Evolution and Revolution in Modern Albanian Literature,” *World Literature Today* 65:2 (Spring 1991), pp. 256–263.

The ideas and discourses of the both groups were disseminated first through *Letërsia Jonë*, the monthly journal-format publication produced by the Union of Writers, and later (beginning in 1954) through *Nëndori* (November), which replaced *Letërsia Jonë* and covered both writing and the visual arts. Still later, in 1961 (in the wake of the Albanian-Soviet split), the joint union began publishing *Drita* (The Light), a weekly newspaper, in addition to the smaller-format monthly journal. The club of the Union—first located in the same building as the National Theater (then the People's Theater), and later in a different building on Kavaja Street—served as a meeting point for artists and writers based in Tirana, an exhibition venue, and the site of many “creative discussions” (*diskutime krijuese*), open critical forums where the merits and flaws of various works of visual art and literature were discussed (sometimes while they were in process, as with works of public sculpture). In addition to these “creative discussions,” and the critical perspectives published in periodicals like *Drita*, officials from the state and the Party of Labor visited artists' studios, and—especially during the Ideological and Cultural Revolution period, when the effort to reform the arts and bring them closer to the working masses became a major goal of the state—administrators also organized tours of artist studios by workers, who would both view and comment on works in progress. (One famous example of an artwork illustrating workers' visits to painters' studios is the 1974 painting by Sali Shijaku, *Zëri i Masës* (The Voice of the Masses).)

As artists returned to Albania from the Soviet Union after the split between the two countries, there was a need to establish a new infrastructure for continued artistic education beyond that offered by the ‘Jordan Misja’ Artistic Lyceum, which had been founded in 1946 for youth. In 1960, the Institute of Figurative Arts was founded; it later merged with the State Conservatory of Tirana in 1966, becoming the High Institute of Arts, led by painter Vilson Kilica as its first director.¹² As Ermir Hoxha notes, at least through the 1960s, the artistic lyceum was largely staffed by artists who had studied in Western Europe, particularly in Italy (including painters like Nexhmedin Zajmi, Sadik Kaceli, and Abdurrahim Buza),¹³ while the professors of the Institute had predominantly completed their education in the Ilya Repin Leningrad Institute for Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture in St. Petersburg (then Leningrad), in the Soviet Union, or else in other Eastern or Central European centers (Prague, Bucharest, Krakow). At the institute, then, the emphasis was not merely on developing artistic skills but—as Socialist Realism required—explicitly merging artistic production with ideology.¹⁴

¹² Ermir Hoxha, *Historia e Artit Shqiptar, 1858–2000* (Tirana: Albdesign, 2019), pp.129–134.

¹³ On the Italian training of this generation of artists, see Ylli Drishti and Leon Çika, *Artistë Shqiptarë në Akademitë Italiane/Artisti Albanesi nelle Accademie Italiane* (Tirana: National Gallery of Arts, 2005).

¹⁴ Hoxha, *Historia e Artit Shqiptar*, p. 134.

From an art historical perspective, the painting and sculpture produced in the late 1940s and the 1950s in Albania represents a mixture of landscapes, portraits, and genre scenes (often focused on village life) and an emerging realist emphasis on the impact of social relations on the lives of both the urban and rural working classes. Stylistically, these reflect both Realism and Impressionism, with a growing emphasis on the immediate relation between the artist and their own historical moment and social experience. Over the course of the 1960s, however, two significant changes occur, as Albania pushed back ideologically against the cultural shifts brought about by Khrushchev's de-Stalinization efforts in the Soviet Union and produced a generation of visual artists trained in socialist contexts. First, Socialist Realism began to take on the prescribed positivity that many commentators associate with the style: in a socialist society, artistic critique was primarily aimed outwards, at the capitalist West and the revisionist Soviet Union, rather than at internal social tensions. Second, particularly in painting, the aesthetics of Albanian Socialist Realism became more diverse, reflecting influences from historical modernist movements, from Fauvism to Cubism to Post-Impressionism.

Lumturi Biloshmi's training coincides precisely with this period of transformation: she studied at the artistic lyceum in Tirana between 1959 and 1963, and then attended the High Institute of Arts, where she graduated in 1968.¹⁵ Her education thus reflects the shift from a generation of artists largely trained in a classical, academic paradigm (though professors at the lyceum such as Abdurrahim Buza made works that clearly reflected the influences of modernist coloration and figurative abstraction) to a generation of artists trained in socially engaged socialist figuration, but whose experiences also reflected the shifting horizons of contemporary painting elsewhere in the socialist world. Her early career also coincided, unfortunately, with an increased attention to family histories, class affiliations, and their compatibility with Party ideology, as well as (after 1973) a particularly direct push back against the liberalization of culture that took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s. To understand how Biloshmi was marginalized from the artworld during this period, we need to look at two events: the Ideological and Cultural Revolution, and the fourth plenary meeting of the Party's Central Committee.

¹⁵ The chronology of Biloshmi's career offered here is based on copies of her CV found in her dossier in the archives of the National Gallery of Arts, as well the summaries given in two catalogues: Ylli Drishti and Gertjan Balliu, eds., *Lumturi Biloshmi* (Tirana: National Gallery of Arts, 2016), and *Lumturi Biloshmi: An Albanian Contemporary Artist* (Tirana: Çabej, 1995).

III. Two Turning Points: The Cultural Revolution and the Fourth Plenum

At the Fifth Congress of the Albanian Party of Labor in November of 1966, dictator Enver Hoxha outlined his model for the “further revolutionization of life in the country” in the form of the Ideological and Cultural Revolution, characterized by “general class warfare” that would fight against (among other things) “bureaucratic influences and distortions, against religious ideology, backwards prejudices, superstitions, and customs, against the underestimation of women and the lack of respect for their equal status in society, against bourgeois fashion and ways of living, against the idealism of metaphysics, against the ‘isms’ of decadent bourgeois and revisionist art and culture, [...] and so on”.¹⁶ While the Ideological and Cultural Revolution in Albania was a quite different phenomenon than the Chinese Cultural Revolution with which it partially coincided chronologically,¹⁷ it nonetheless produced profound political and cultural changes. Perhaps the most visible aspect of “revolutionization” was the struggle against “backwards prejudices, superstitions, and customs,” which entailed widespread anti-religious policies, including the destruction of churches and mosques.¹⁸ (We should note, however, that religious tropes persisted in Albanian Socialist Realism in both painting and sculpture, adapted to new socialist narratives.)¹⁹ At the same time, the Ideological and Cultural Revolution period saw changes in the way history—both ancient and recent—was represented. A boom in monument projects focusing on the commemoration of Albania's Partisan fighters helped consolidate a narrative of the country's role in the international antifascist resistance movements that took place during the Second World War, and these monumental alterations of public space in turn created the need for increased collaboration across disciplines and collective artistic labor.²⁰ At the same time, the construction of a civil religion centered on the national hero Skanderbeg began, and this civil religion in turn established a link between Skanderbeg's alleged role as medieval unifier of the Albanian people (against the Ottomans) and Hoxha's socialist state.²¹

¹⁶ Enver Hoxha, “Thellimi i mëtejshëm i revolucionit ideologjik e kulturor”, in *Mbi Letërsinë dhe Artin* (Tirana: 8 Nëntori, 1977), pp. 241–245.

¹⁷ See Ylber Marku, “China and Albania: The Cultural Revolution and Cold War Relations,” *Cold War History* 17:4 (2017): pp. 367–383, and Ylber Marku, “Socialism in Action: Albania's Ideological and Cultural Revolution and Lessons from History,” *Art Studies/ Studime për Artin* 21 (forthcoming 2023).

¹⁸ Egin Ceka, “Ligji i shenjtë i partisë: Ateizmi dhe politika ndaj fesë,” *Përpjekja* 20: 32–33 (2014): pp. 142–146.

¹⁹ Gëzim Qëndro, “The Thanatology of Hope,” in Vincent WJ van Gerven Oei, ed., *Lapidari* (New York: Punctum, 2015), pp. 61–68.

²⁰ Kujtim Buza, “Puna krijuese kolektive në fushën e arteve figurative,” *Drita*, 27 September 1970.

²¹ On the cult of Skanderbeg as a civil religion, and the association of Skanderbeg with Hoxha, see Egin Ceka, “Muzeu Kombëtar dhe Muzeu i Skënderbeut si Institucione të Religjionit Civil Shqiptar të Komunizmit,” *Përpjekja* 11:21, (2005): pp. 121–147.

Women's emancipation was also emphasized, through education and initiatives like temporary work exchange programs to move women out of regions of the country where more religious and conservative traditions dominated.²² The project of women's emancipation had been part of socialist development in Albania (as it was in other socialist nations) since early on,²³ imaged most directly in the pages of *Shqiptarja e Re* (The New Albanian Woman), which had begun publication during the war years and continued afterwards as the official magazine of the national Albanian Women's Union (Bashkimi i Grave të Shqipërisë).²⁴ The figure of the woman became an increasingly important element of Socialist Realist painting and sculpture, and by the early 1970s artworks (and public monuments) featuring women Partisans, rural laborers, urban laborers, professionals, and historic figures were virtually omnipresent in Albanian art.²⁵ The majority of visual artists, however, were still men. A few women artists did become well-known and widely exhibited in the socialist era—such as Kristina Koljaka (a sculptor), Safo Marko and Lumturi Dhrami (both printmakers), and Liliana Çefa (a painter)—but most of the most famous images of women were produced by men.

The changes of the Cultural Revolution period were also evident in discourses about style in visual arts. Writings published in *Drita* and *Nëndori* in the early 1970s show an attempt (especially evident in the writings of critic and artist Andon Kuqali) to elaborate a new set of orientations for socialist art.²⁶ Attitudes towards modernism also undertook a shift in the 1960s that culminated in the early 1970s because of the experiences of artists who had studied elsewhere in the Socialist Bloc. Many of the major administrators of the arts during the time had been students in Leningrad, but others had studied in Central Europe, and they brought an emphasis on color and the decorative arts to the curriculum of the High Institute of Arts, drawing upon the Bauhaus legacy.²⁷ In the early 1970s, a series of exhibitions generated significant critical attention, reflecting the embrace of historical modernism's formal strategies and a new emphasis on minor and lyrical subjects as acceptable themes for Socialist Realism (instead of just epic scenes from history or the building of socialist society). Specifically, the 1971 National Exhibition—in which Billoshmi exhibited a portrait of Albanian Partisan leader Myslim Peza,²⁸ one of the antifascist fighters who went on to establish the Albanian Communist Party—and the *Pranvera* (Spring) exhibition of 1972 represent a kind of 'new beginning' in Albanian Socialist Realist art.

22 See Luljeta Ikonimi and Shannon Woodcock, "Imoraliteti në familje: Nxatja e ankesave të grave për të përfortuar pushtetin e partisë në Revolucionin Kulturor Shqiptar," *Përpjekja* 20: 32–33 (2014), pp. 162–163; and Peter Prifti, "The Albanian Women's Struggle for Emancipation," *Southeastern Europe* 2:1 (1975), pp. 109–129.

23 Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), pp. 75, 107–108.

24 Ermira Danaj and Klejd Këlliçi, "The Magazine *Shqiptarja e Re* as a Tool of Women's Emancipation in Communist Albania," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (January 2021), <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3787072>.

25 Saide Ago, "Figura e Gruas në Pikturën Tonë të Realizmit Socialist," *Drita*, 11 August 1974.

26 On this topic, see my forthcoming article: Raino Isto, "This Exhibition Will Go Down in Our History: Art Exhibitions in Albania around 1972 and the Promise of Spring," *Art Studies/ Studime për Artin* 21 (2023). The following paragraphs summarize some key events described in deeper detail in the article.

27 Perhaps the most important figure in this aspect was Danish Jukniu, who had studied in Krakow. Painter Edi Hila has emphasized the importance of Jukniu as a teacher at the institute, noting that when he (Hila) began his studies in 1962 at the High Institute, Jukniu's teaching pushed students to explore aesthetic experience in a way that developed their sensitivity to the "aesthetics of modernism," even if books on more recent developments in global modern art were not widely available to all students. See Hila, "Paradoxical Realism," in Edi Hila: *Painter of Transformation* (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2018), p. 34.

28 Andon Kuqali, "Hovet e realizmit socialist," *Nëndori* 12 (December 1971): p. 58.

Works in both exhibitions by artists like Edison Gjergo, Edi Hila, Ksenofon Dilo, Maks Velo, Alush Shima, and Thoma Thomai showed that Albanian socialist art was expanding its aesthetic purview. These shifts recalled similar debates in the Soviet context from the close of the 1950s, where reformists had sought to posit a new, "contemporary style" that acknowledged the historicity of artistic change and the supposed novelty of socialist life. In other words, the novelty of Socialist Realism could not be contained only in theme or subject matter—it also needed to be reflected in those characteristics understood as "style," and that style needed to be syncretic vis-à-vis earlier forms of modernism, which it would "critically assimilate."²⁹ Advances in communication, jet travel, space exploration, and atomic technologies had all produced changes that had implications for citizens of the world—not just socialist citizens, and for Soviet reformists these changes implied new kinds of perception and expression as well.³⁰

The effort to produce, in Albania, a form of Socialist Realism that would synthesize other forms of modernist art, including abstraction, might have produced a very different art history in socialist Albania, had it not been for the second important turning point of the early 1970s: the repercussions of Enver Hoxha's speech—entitled "We Must Deepen Our Ideological Struggle Against Foreign Influences and Liberal Attitudes towards Them"—delivered at the Fourth Plenum of the Party's Central Committee in 1973.³¹ This speech would become the inception of a new period of centralization and ideological strictness in the country, in which many prominent artistic figures were censured and in some cases imprisoned.³² The key event of this attack on so-called "foreign influences" was the condemnation of the 11th Festival of Song (organized in December 1972). Hoxha's 1973 speech called for a renewed emphasis on militant leftism, a resistance against the idea the wars in Vietnam and the Middle East could be solved through a "peaceful co-existence" brokered by the capitalist West. It highlighted the imperialist threat posed by the collaboration of the Soviet Union with the United States. But most of all, it proclaimed the imminent threat posed by "the imitation of foreign models, [by] both old and new decadent and modernist styles, [and by] the open and mechanical copying of bourgeois and revisionist artistic trends of the day."³³

29 Susan Reid, "Modernizing Socialist Realism in the Khrushchev Thaw: The Struggle for a 'Contemporary Style' in Soviet Art," in Polly Jones, ed., *The Dilemmas of de-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 214–215, 226.

30 Reid, p. 224.

31 Enver Hoxha, "Të thellojmë luftën ideologjike kundër shfaqjeve të huaja e qëndrimeve liberale ndaj tyre," in Mbi Letërsinë dhe Artin, pp. 375–443.

32 See Fjoralba Satka Mata, "Albanian Alternative Artists vs. Official Art Under Communism," in Cristian Vasile, ed., *History of Communism in Europe, Volume 2* (Bucharest: Zeta, 2011), pp. 79–94.

33 Enver Hoxha, "Të thellojmë luftën ideologjike," pp. 379–380, 384–385.

The speech led to the 1973 trial and subsequent imprisonment of then-Minister of Culture Fadil Paçrami and the director at the time of Albanian Radio-Television Todi Lubonja.³⁴ Following the Fourth Plenum, discourse in cultural periodicals was focused on enacting reforms and bringing cultural practices in line with Hoxha's dictates.³⁵ A number of prominent figures in the leadership of the Union of Writers and Artists and the editorship of *Drita* were asked to step down, and throughout the rest of the 70s decade, artists such as Edison Gjergo, Maks Velo, and Ali Oseku were imprisoned for their work, whereas others (like Edi Hila) were sent to work in villages for re-education and only subsequently brought back into cultural production in the following decade. It is in this period (starting in 1974) that, by her accounts, Biloshmi lost her membership in the Union of Writers and Artists. Her annual membership in the organization was not renewed, which effectively cut off her ability to access materials and exhibit. Already targeted by the class war of the Cultural Revolution period (since her father had been an officer in King Zog's military and had been executed in 1944 by communist forces), Biloshmi was one of those forced to pursue a career outside the arts, though in an adjacent cultural field. She worked as an offset press operator in the 'Mihal Duri' printing press, and later as a retoucher and illustrator in the press that published textbooks for schools. Unable to receive resources or support from the state for her artistic practice, Biloshmi seems to have produced very few works (with the exception of some sketches in her personal archives) in the decade after 1974. It is not until much later, in 1984, that she had a portrait of Kajo Karafili (a member of the National Liberation Movement and a compatriot of Myslim Peza) included in another National Exhibition, dedicated to the 40th anniversary of Albania's liberation from fascist occupation.³⁶

After Albania's break with China in the late 1970s, the state socialist regime did seek to strengthen its connections with other East European socialist nations (including East Germany, and Yugoslavia, with which it had broken in 1948, after the Tito-Stalin split). Despite these efforts, the late 1970s and 1980s are generally remembered as a period of political isolation and increasing scarcity.³⁷ Lacking the support of a larger socialist nation (a role China had played), major infrastructural projects stalled and some of the most widely publicized purges within the regime took place before Enver Hoxha's death in 1985.³⁸

³⁴ As Nicholas Tochka notes, the condemnation of these two figures and the general upset around the 11th Festival of Song were also opportunities for a new generation of artists and critics to solidify their own careers and ideological credentials by effectively toppling the current leadership of cultural institutions. See Tochka, *Audible States: Socialist Politics and Popular Music in Albania* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 101–103.

³⁵ See, for example, Dritero Agolli's speech at the July plenary meeting of the writers and artists union: "Mbi disa çështje ideologjike dhe organizative të Lidhjes së Shkrimtarëve dhe Artistëve nën dritën e plenumit të 4-të të Komitetit Qendror të PPSH", *Drita*, 29 July 1973. Agolli had been named head of the union after the previous president (Dhimitër Shuteriqi) had been forced to step down.

³⁶ *Ekspozita Kombëtare të Arteve Figurative kushtuar 40 Vjetorit të Çlirimit* (Tirana: 8 Nëntori, 1984).

³⁷ See Gjergj Erebara, "Elementi Demografik në Krizën Ekonomike të Viteve '80," *Përpjekja* 20: 32–33 (2014): pp. 110–128.

³⁸ Idris Idrizi, "Enver Hoxha's Last Purge: Inside the Ruling Circle of Communist Albania (1981–1983)," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 36: 4 (November 2022): pp. 1091–1110.

Elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the 1970s were a decade in which the neo-avant-gardes rose to prominence (even if they often operated in clandestine or marginal spaces). In Yugoslavia, which had rejected an adherence to Socialist Realism in the 1940s, a complex relationship developed between (an often officially-sanctioned) socialist modernism and the Conceptualist tendencies of the New Art Practice, for example.³⁹ Across Central Europe, Conceptualism, Performance, Mail Art, and other new forms of artistic creation became the grounds of independent networks of artistic exchange, both between citizens of socialist nations, and between Cold War 'East' and 'West.'⁴⁰ Further afield, in China, a different kind of re-evaluation of Socialist Realism took place in the emergence of "Scar" art, a more direct and critical form of realism that bluntly examined the experiences and traumas of Mao's Cultural Revolution.⁴¹ In Albania, Socialist Realism persisted, although now with less openly formal experimentation. Socialist internationalism became less of a prominent theme in visual art; instead, artists turned even more consistently to nationalist themes and folk narratives, focusing on the illustration of scenes from medieval history (especially Skanderbeg's struggles against the Ottomans), and from the Albanian National Awakening (*Rilindja Kombëtare*) of the late-19th and early-20th century (such as the formation of the League of Prizren in 1878 and the rebellions culminating in Albanian national independence in November 1912).

In the 1980s, especially after Hoxha's death in 1985, art gradually returned to the lyrical themes that had begun to preoccupy painters in Albania in the late 1960s and early 70s, to portraits, still lifes, and landscapes that lacked overt socialist iconography. Artists also increasingly explored these themes in more aggressively painterly and surreal forms, keeping within similar thematic categories but exploring subjects in ways that suggested alienation and confusion. If Biloshmi did not (and, from 1974 until the mid-1980s, was unable to) exhibit widely during the socialist years, the 80s and especially the 90s saw her emerge into the artistic scene, with a painting style that retained figuration and representational imagery but experimented with media, textures, and references drawn from myth and religion. Biloshmi's first solo exhibition was held in 1988 at the Art Gallery of Berat, and the following year she held one in Tirana. As Albania entered the 1990s, Biloshmi's work began to deal more directly with the problems of her time, with the uncertainties and traumas of the transition period. Put differently, we might say that Biloshmi's return to the art scene coincided with an increasing self-awareness of art's condition in crisis: lacking the secure horizon of the communist future and Socialist Realism, art in Albania would have to become something else.

³⁹ Marko Ilić, *A Slow-Burning Fire: The Rise of the New Art Practice in Yugoslavia* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021), pp. 5–7.

⁴⁰ Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe, 1965–1981* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018).

⁴¹ Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 66–72.

IV. “The ship started to sail accompanied by shrieks and tears”⁴²: New Horizons of the 1990s and 2000s

The 1990s in Albania were characterized not only by changes in artistic practice, but also—unavoidably—by transformations in the infrastructures and organizations that supported artistic creation. During the socialist years, membership in the Union of Writers and Artists had been essential, but the role of the Union dwindled in the new capitalist context, and as artists sought to create networks that were free of the ideological weight of the socialist state, nongovernmental organizations such as the Independent Association of Painters and Sculptors (Shoqata e Pavarur e Piktorëve dhe Skulptorëve Shqiptarë) emerged.⁴³ Blloshmi was a member of the group, which was founded in 1991 and held its first collective exhibition in 1992. The 90s also saw a proliferation of independent art venues (such as Te & Gi Gallery, opened in 1993, and XXI Gallery, opened in 1998) and cultural and civil society groups. The Open Society Foundation began its mission in Albania that same year, and the Soros Foundation organized and financed Autumn '92: National Exhibition of Contemporary Albanian Painting, in which Blloshmi also took part. It is hard to overstate the significance of the role played by the Soros Foundation—and specifically the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, or SCCAs—in introducing contemporary art to the region after 1989, not so much as a style as a set of administrative practices (the creation of artist portfolios, the essential character of documentation, the new ubiquity of the curated exhibition) that were intertwined, as Octavian Esanu has argued, with neoliberal ideology.⁴⁴ While Albania (unlike much of the rest of the former Socialist Bloc) never had an official SCCA, the funding from foundations—including Soros—that came into the country contributed to a similar process of institutional transformation. What came with the transition was not just ‘freedom’ for artists to explore new fields of creative production; it was also a new kind of commodification of the artistic self, and a new hierarchy that privileged curatorial narratives, often constructed from outside the country and the region, in determining what it meant for art to speak to the public.

Also significant in terms of Blloshmi’s place within new artistic communities and independent spaces was her membership as a founding member of Linda, the first association of women artists in post-socialist Albania, which was conceived in 1993 and officially established in 1994.

⁴² This phrase is drawn from an extract from a correspondence (written in English) contained in Lumturi Blloshmi’s personal archives. Dated August '91, the note (which does not say to whom the original correspondence was addressed) describes a scene of massive exodus, a “mob” climbing onto a ship in the midst of endless rain and intense heat, a ship casting off to sea, and bodies subsequently washing ashore. The passage presumably describes a scene that Blloshmi witnessed as Albanians struggled to emigrate after the end of state socialism. The quotation is also reproduced in Lumturi Blloshmi: An Albanian Contemporary Artist.

⁴³ On the institutional transformations and exhibitions in the 1990s, see Hoxha, *Historia e Artit Shqiptar*, pp. 269–301.

⁴⁴ Octavian Esanu, *The Postsocialist Contemporary: The Institutionalization of Artistic Practice in Eastern Europe after 1989* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

Led by artist and art historian Eleni Laperi, the association’s president, the group organized several exhibitions and eventually founded a center—the LindArt Cultural Center of Women Artists (Qendra Kulturore e Grave Artiste ‘LindArt’)—in 2000.⁴⁵ Blloshmi was the oldest member of the association (she also served for a time as its secretary), and Laperi recalls that during the years before the Linda association opened its cultural center, the group met at Blloshmi’s apartment.⁴⁶ As a member of the group, Blloshmi not only took part in several group exhibitions exploring female identity in art, she also took place in workshops with the Serbian performance artist Tanja Ostojić in the early 2000s, which may have influenced Blloshmi’s own turn towards performance.⁴⁷

Though independent galleries began to open, The National Gallery of Arts in Tirana (where several members of the Linda association, including Laperi, Blloshmi, and Suzana Varvarica worked for various lengths of time) continued to play a central role in Albanian contemporary art. Starting in 1993, the National Gallery organized the annual visual art prize competition and associated exhibition Onufri, which would transform—in 1998—into a curated exhibition with a theme (rather than simply an open competition), with Edi Muka as its first curator.⁴⁸ Blloshmi won first place in the Onufri competition in 1997, with a painting entitled *Një Shpresë e Vakët* (A Lukewarm Hope), which Laperi described as a work “fully committed” to expressing “the pain brought about by everyday existence” in the transition period.⁴⁹

The reference to the pain of everyday life reminds us that the 1990s in Albania were also a period of intense social upheaval and violence. The traumas of the decade find themselves reflected in Blloshmi’s work—especially her paintings of fish and fish skeletons, titled with references to the Biblical Exodus, from the mid-1990s. These paintings circle around the events of August 1991 (one painting even bears that title), events referenced in the quotation that serves as the title to this section. Blloshmi reflects on the unnerving sight of thousands of Albanian refugees climbing onto the cargo ship ‘Vlora’ on 7 August, before the captain set sail for Italy the following day.⁵⁰ After the Italian authorities blockaded the port of Brindisi, refusing to allow the ship with its refugees to enter, the captain eventually anchored in Bari, where the Italian police and military confined the Albanians to a stadium for nine days in miserable conditions, while beginning to deport the thousands of refugees by various means.⁵¹

⁴⁵ See Valentina Bonizzi, “A Secondary Calendar for a Secondary Archive,” *Secondary Archive* (2022), <https://secondaryarchive.org/a-secondary-calendar-for-a-secondary-archive/>, and Valentina Bonizzi, “The Potentials of Being Unfit: 3 Stories and a Finale from Tirana,” *La Belle Revue* 10 (2020), <https://www.labellerevue.org/en/global-terroir/tirana/linaptitude-et-ses-potentiels-trois-recits-et-un-final-a-tirana>.

⁴⁶ Bonizzi, “A Secondary Calendar.”

⁴⁷ Bonizzi, “The Potentials of Being Unfit.”

⁴⁸ I am grateful to both the Diaries project—headed by Valentina Bonizzi and Bulevard Art & Media Institute—and the Center for Artistic Documentation—headed by Jonida Gashi at IAKSA in Tirana—for access to archival documents relating, respectively, to the Lindart Center, and to the state and independent art scenes in the 1990s.

⁴⁹ Eleni Laperi, “Manifest i Kohës së Humbur,” *PamorART* 1:1 (March 1998): p. 24.

⁵⁰ For a vivid depiction of these events on film, see the film *Lamerica* (1994), by Gianni Amelio, in which the Albanian exodus plays a central role. I thank Genti Gjirkola for bringing this reference to my attention.

⁵¹ Margo Rejmer, *Mud Sweeter than Honey: Voices of Communist Albania*, trans. Zosia Krasodomska-Jones and Antonia Lloyd-Jones (Brooklyn: Restless Books, 2021), pp. 255–261.

Later in the 1990s, in 1997, the civil unrest caused by the collapse of numerous pyramid schemes signaled at once the outcome of the West's shock therapy model and the failure of capitalism as a viable economic alternative, less than a decade after the end of communism as a historical horizon.

If the early 1990s were defined by explorations of abstraction and new forms of figuration, by the late 90s artists in Albania had begun to experiment more with photography,⁵² mixed media, installation, and video work. The beginning of the 2000s saw not only the continuation of these new directions, but also the emergence of new master-narratives of Albanian art, and art in Southeastern Europe more broadly. The first years of the new decade saw the opening of three major exhibitions devoted to contemporary art from the Balkans, a region that had captured international attention because of the violence of the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Kosovo War (as well as the economic implications of the 1997 economic upheaval and social conflict in Albania). Three geographically focused exhibitions centering on the Balkans opened in just two years: *In Search of Balkania* (curated by Roger Conover, Eda Ćufer, and Peter Weibel at the Neue Galerie Graz in 2002), *In the Gorges of the Balkans: A Report* (curated by René Block at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel in 2003), and *Blood & Honey: The Future's in the Balkans* (curated by Harald Szeemann at the Essl Museum in Vienna in 2003).⁵³ The central curatorial conceit of these exhibitions, as Anthony Gardner has shown, was that contemporary art from the region was best understood as either documents of trauma or as efforts at self-therapy in order to overcome both the state socialist past and more recent conflicts.⁵⁴ This self-therapy amounted to a kind of demand that artists from Southeastern Europe, including Albania, perform democratization for a Western audience (rather than, for example, critiquing shock therapy or other socioeconomic conditions brought about by Western interventions in the region during late- and post-socialism.)

Biloshmi's work was not included in this trio of Balkans-centered exhibitions, nor (strangely) did it appear in the major exhibition *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*, curated by Bojana Pejić at the Museum *Moderner Kunst*, Vienna, in 2009.⁵⁵

⁵² In 1998, the National Gallery of Arts and the Ministry of Culture launched a prize and exhibition for photography as well, the 'Marubi' National Artistic Photography prize. See Ermir Hoxha, *Historia e Fotografisë Shqiptare (1865–2000)* (Tirana: Albdesign, pp. 207–208).
⁵³ See: Roger Conover, Eda Ćufer, and Peter Weibel, eds., *In Search of Balkania* (Graz: Neue Galerie Graz, 2002); René Block, ed., *The Balkans Trilogy* (Munich: Schreiber, 2006); and Harald Szeemann et al., ed., *Blood & Honey: Future's in the Balkans* (Vienna: Essl Museum, 2003).
⁵⁴ Anthony Gardner, *Politically Unbecoming: Postsocialist Art against Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), pp. 17–19.
⁵⁵ Only two artists from Albania were included in this exhibition (one was male): Rovena Agolli and Anri Sala. In an interview conducted as part of the research for the project, curator Edi Muka mentions Biloshmi's work briefly. See "Interview with Edi Muka on His Research in Albania," *Gender Check* website, <http://gender-check.erstestiftung.net/albania-edi-muka/>. This essay does not seek to answer the question of why Biloshmi was not included in so many of the exhibitions that took place in the 2000s decade (and after) focused on Eastern Europe. Certainly, her deafness and her eccentric personality meant that it took time to collaborate with her, to understand her creative process and her work—time that some curators, only briefly visiting Albania on trips through the region—would not have taken.

In these and other exhibitions (such as the seminal *After the Wall*, also curated by Pejić at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 1999–2000), Albania was represented chiefly by Anri Sala and Ardian Paci (members of a generation born in the late 60s and early 70s), and by Edi Hila (one of the few socialist-era artists from Albania who—like Biloshmi—made a successful transition to creating in paradigms associated with contemporary art). It was not that Biloshmi did not exhibit outside Albania in these years (the early 2000s), but rather that her works did not make their way into the exhibitions that shaped the understanding of contemporary art from the former Eastern and Central Europe—perhaps because her works did not reflect the kind of self-therapy and performative democratization that foreign curators often sought in these years.

The second master narrative in the Albanian artworld (and beyond) in the early 2000s involved the transformations of public space that took place during Edi Rama's time as mayor of Tirana. Rama—the son of one of socialist Albania's most celebrated monumental sculptors, Kristaq Rama—first entered politics as Minister of Culture in Albania in 1998, and subsequently gained notoriety as an artist-politician during his time as the mayor of Albania's capital city. Soon after being elected, he initiated a project to paint the façades of several socialist-era apartment blocks along some of the city's main roads with bright colors.⁵⁶ Rama's transformation of Tirana's public space during his first mayoral term was documented by the Albanian-born contemporary artist Anri Sala, in Sala's video *Dammi i colori* (2003). The work—which became widely exhibited in exhibitions of contemporary art from the region—begins with a night-time taxi ride through the streets of Tirana under construction, with the bright colors painted on apartment buildings visible in the background. Rama's voice explains, as the camera pans across the churned-up dirt of streets under re-construction, "What we have done is not an outcome of democratization, but more an avant-garde of democratization." In September of 2003, as part of the second edition of the Tirana Biennial, Sala and Hans Ulrich Obrist curated an expansion of Rama's initial façade interventions, inviting the well-known contemporary artists Carsten Höller, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Liam Gillick, Olafur Eliasson, Pedro Reyes, and Rirkrit Tiravanija to contribute designs for painted buildings in Tirana.

⁵⁶ For a lengthier discussion of Rama's façade-painting project, see Eriola Pira, "Tirana si Art—Nga Qyteti drejt Qytetarit," *Kosovo 2.0 5* (Summer 2013): pp. 40–43.

The theme of the second Tirana Biennial was Utopia, and it built upon what Anthony Gardner and Charles Green call the “creative industries, nation-building” approach of the first Tirana Biennial from 2001.⁵⁷ This theme, and the increasing attention devoted to Rama’s career by curators like Obrist, crystalized a new narrative: Albania was to become a sort of experimental micro-utopia, where a close alliance between art and politics was not to be criticized (ironic, after the close connections between art and power under state socialism) but to be celebrated. If the experiments failed, this could be blamed upon the weight of the socialist past; if they succeeded, this would be evidence of the vitality of neoliberal capitalism wedded to democratizing rhetoric. Indeed, this is a discursive paradigm that persists today in shaping the global artworld’s perceptions of Albania.

The protagonists of this “avant-garde of democratization” were almost entirely men, politicians, artists, and curators (Edi Muka being one of the few members of the Albanian artworld to work in the role of a curator at the time) alike. The gender imbalance of this utopian narrative was not lost on Biloshmi, who produced a series of miniature two-panel mixed-media works in the 2000s, realized on the front and back of small canvases. Some of these examined the dualities of Albanian national identity—and its relationship to the idea of the Balkans—while others (collectively titled *It’s a Man’s World* (Është një botë burrash) cleverly satirized the world of Albanian politicians and artists, including Rama and Muka.⁵⁸ These works show Biloshmi’s sense of humor, but also her skepticism about the ‘New Men’ of post-socialist Albania, the consolidation of a new political elite that was still connected to the same leaders that had controlled the country during socialism.

⁵⁷ Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art* (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), p. 214.
⁵⁸ A similar playful jab about masculinity and artistic success—masking a nuanced critique—might be found in Biloshmi’s 2013 sculpture *Homage to Damien Hirst*, a giant skull covered in cigarette butts.

V. A Silhouette on the Wall: Biloshmi’s Ambiguities

In the 2000s, up through the year she passed away (in 2020), Biloshmi also increasingly experimented with performances, installations, and the staging of events that might be called happenings. She continued to explore her interest in the body—and the ways that new paradigms of communication, consumption, and political influence played out in its social and erotic connotations and possibilities. The diversity of these works—from the frog legs at a dinner table of *Kama Sutra* to the dress and fan created from phone cards of *Invasion of Space* (Pushtimi i Hapësirës)—show Biloshmi’s consistent search for new means of expression, as well as her persistently critical perspective on her own time and context. She often sought this expression through detritus, or else through objects produced in overwhelming abundance: cigarette butts, dried orange peels (set atop heaters and to fill offices with their scent), empty plastic bottles, phone cards, or advertisements. Through her work with these materials, she never lost sight of the figure (perhaps because of her figurative training as an artist in the 1960s), nor did she lose sight of the idea of art as a sight where social power is negotiated—and can be negotiated even by the marginalized.

It was this emphasis on the figure—and specifically the artist’s self-representation in both figurative and performative works—that grounded Adela Demetja’s curation of Biloshmi’s work in the Albanian Pavilion at the 59th International Venice Biennial in 2022, the first time a woman artist represented the country (albeit posthumously, in this case) with a solo presentation at the biennial. From this exhibition, the world was given a glimpse into Biloshmi’s multifaceted oeuvre, a look at the flexibility of her artistic character. In Biloshmi’s work, from her paintings to her performances, we can see a return to the political (and feminist) concerns of the neo-avant-gardes, especially to those women artists who sought to explore the double-bind of women’s bodies caught between the expectations of socialist sisterhood (and motherhood) and the objectifying forces of capitalist consumption. But her art is more than an effort to recapitulate a ‘missing’ avant-garde in the Albanian context; rather, it represents a frank confrontation with the hypocrisies of both modernization and the promises of the post-Cold War world, a confrontation that still finds joy and expressive potential in the creative act.

A 2004 exhibition by Blloshmi (with a curatorial text by Muka) at the National Gallery of Arts in Tirana consisted of only two works in a room. On one wall, Blloshmi's three-panel painting *Dekorata (The Medal)*, featuring a nude woman (a stand-in for the artist herself) lying flat on the ground with a medal covering her genitalia and a paintbrush piercing her long braid. (This painting was later included in the 2022 Venice Biennial pavilion.) On the opposite wall, Blloshmi had another artist trace her silhouette—back to the wall, arms extended straight out to either side—in a thick red line. Entitled *Ambiguity*, the work stands as a sort of emblem of the difficulty of placing Blloshmi's work within either local or global art histories. That empty silhouette stands as perhaps the most succinct metaphor of the artist's constant transformation—a revolutionary remaking in which her own self and identity remained central, but constantly in a state of flux and becoming.

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**SHIVA IS LUMTURI,
AND LUMTURI IS SHIVA**

SUZANA VARVARICA KUKA

Lumturi Billoshmi's artistic journey commenced after she completed her studies at the "Jordan Misja" Artistic Lyceum in 1963, followed by the High Institute of Arts in Tirana in 1968. In her early years, she faced a trying illness and grew up grappling with profound hearing difficulties. These challenges moulded her into an insatiably curious individual about every societal nuance, from the era of communist Albania to its post-communist subsequent evolution. Lumturi harnessed this profound perceptiveness in her work, securing a distinguished and defying position in the realm of Albanian visual arts. Beyond her nation's borders, Billoshmi resonated as a bold and intriguing voice in the international art scene.

During the communist era persevering in the arts, posed a formidable challenge for every artist. In 1959, Albania witnessed the establishment of its first High School of Fine Art. The prevailing artistic movements of the time were primarily shaped by two distinct sets of artists. The inaugural group were the initiating Albanian artists, most notably embodied by Kolë Idromeno (1860-1939). These trailblazers journeyed beyond Albania's borders, undertaking sporadic courses, and schools in foreign countries. Upon their return, they sowed the seeds of secular and realistic art, deviating from the entrenched traditions of artisanal crafts and custom iconographic paintings designed for religious edifices and individual patrons.

The subsequent group of artists emerged during the reign of King Zog I (1928-1939) and the following turbulent epoch of fascist and Nazi occupations spanning 1939-1944. These artists enrolled and studied in revered academies across Europe, notably in Italy, Greece, the former Yugoslavia, France, and Romania. Equipped with comprehensive academic training, they manifested their prowess by astutely capturing the human form and everyday objects and scenes. These artists had the distinction of being the earliest pupils enrolled at the "Drawing School" in Tirana, inaugurated in 1931. Post their foreign scholastic endeavours, they laid the educational foundations of the esteemed "Jordan Misja" Artistic Lyceum in Tirana, launched in 1946. The artistic legacies bequeathed by these two artistic groups are the cornerstones of realist art in Albania. Most of these early works are treasured in the National Art Gallery in Tirana.

In the early 1960s, the High Institute of Arts (ILA in Albanian) inherited a system of art that was predominantly characterized by figurative and realistic expressions, with only a few romantic undertones. They adeptly taught techniques such as oil painting, pastel, watercolour, tempera, and drawing. The faculty consisted of artists educated during the 1960s.

Upon completing their studies, which were deeply influenced by academic and socialist realism imported from Soviet schools, these artists assumed teaching roles at ILA. They became the most steadfast proponents of socialist realism in Albanian art. The period from 1960 to 1990 was defined by the visual and emotional ethos of Albanian socialist realism, guiding the formation of a new generation of artists under its principles.

The period is characterized by a predominant style, but it's essential to note certain artistic phenomena that emerged during this time, setting the stage for the new artistic trends that would blossom after the 1990s. The first phenomenon relates to the modest creative output of a select group of educators, trained in St. Petersburg in the Soviet Union and academic schools in Hungary, Czech Republic, Romania, who were also influenced by their travels to France and Italy. They injected their works with personal nuances, revealing a somewhat liberal and modernist touch. This progressive attitude was also reflected in their teaching methods.

The subsequent phenomenon focuses on a cohort of budding artists, products of the new Albanian educational system, but who, empowered by their intrinsic talent and artistic foresight, leaned towards 20th-century Western art. Despite their limited numbers, these two distinct groups - comprising both teachers and young artists - managed to introduce a fresh, modern ambiance to the Albanian visual arts landscape in the dawn of the 1970s.

Through their artistry, they dared to deviate from the stringent norms of socialist realism, yet without undermining the socialist essence prevalent in the arts of that time. This diverse group featured tens of artists and notable names such as Edison Gjergo, Ali Oseku, Maks Velo, Janaq Paço, Danish Juniku, Ksenofon Dilo, Alush Shima, Arben Basha, Edi Hila, Lumturi Billoshmi, Vladimir Kaçaku and Bajram Mata. Their works were prominently showcased in the seminal "Spring" exhibitions of the early 1970s.

Thoma Thomai Dhamo, a sculptor, was tasked with crafting the exhibition's poster. Alongside Halim Beqiraj, they delved into a sophisticated, minimalistic approach to their sculptural designs. This phase, though distinct within a propaganda-driven system, highlighted the determined endeavours of talented artists striving to forge their unique identities. Their sources of inspiration were manifold: for some, it emanated from the education they received abroad, while for others, particularly ILA alumni, motivation was rooted in covert exchanges, discreet reviews of foreign art literature, and discussions held within close-knit circles in the Albanian capital.

During this period, art historians and scholars have proposed various hypotheses. These theories often stand in contrast to one another, and they eagerly await more in-depth exploration, supported by solid evidence and sound recollections.

Lumturi Blloshmi was a remarkable artist, dedicated to daily endeavors both in her studio and amidst nature. Beyond her inquisitiveness, she was a deep observer of her surroundings, adeptly capturing the zeitgeist and persevering through varying eras. Her oeuvre spans two distinct epochs, each defined by its own artistic, political, ideological, and methodological undertones, giving her art a distinctive character. Throughout both periods, Lumturi was intricately woven into the fabric of the Albanian artist community. Her work often resonated, and at times starkly contrasted, with that of her peers. When assessing the artistic milieu of the communist era and its various developmental elements, her contributions stand out as uniquely distinct. Numerous female artists emerged from formal art education during this time, many showcased their works, but only a select few braved competitions at meaningful artistic and technical tiers in a predominantly male-driven landscape.

During the communist era, Lumturi Blloshmi stood out and occupied a unique position. Two persistent realities defined her existence: her innate ability to adapt, which was distinctive and unordinary, and the ever-present shadow of her family's persecuted past. Yet, with her brand of affable defiance, she found a way to blend in. Employed as an artist across various cultural institutions – spanning publishing, restoration, and research – she built extensive professional networks, engaging with everyone from esteemed figures to everyday individuals. She needed them all. Blloshmi held a nuanced understanding of the Albanian language, both in its grammatical intricacies and its artistic expressions, evident from her letters and diaries. Additionally, she was fluent in French.

She had a deep interest in the intellectual and scholarly discourse on art, encompassing discoveries, artistic trends, and emergent imaginings. She extensively explored philosophical writings on art, but her curiosity equally extended to historical works by international authors concerning the Balkans, Albania, various empires, and predominantly the Byzantine Empire. Following the 1990s, she immersed herself in a wealth of information on art movements and the life trajectories of international modern artists from the 20th and 21st centuries. Above all, she sought insights into the socio-political shifts that Albania underwent post the 90s. She was intent on grasping the transformation of political and social individuals and juxtaposing the two distinct epochs she had personally navigated.

This driven comprehension of 20th-century art movements, coupled with an acute understanding of the socio-political intricacies of post-communist Albania, and the keen insights borne of her innate intellectual prowess, were pivotal in charting the trajectory of her artistic success. Post the 1990s, in collaboration with her contemporaries in the Albanian art scene, Lumturi illuminated for nearly three decades, effectively dispelling the remnants of the socialist realism approach. It's my firm conviction that Lumturi Blloshmi was instrumental in pioneering a qualitative milieu as contemporary art began to flourish in Albania, a progression that has evolved with intricate dynamism today.

The formidable artist, Lumturi Blloshmi, carved her space as a female artist within a predominantly male-centric artistic milieu. While she grappled with this male-dominated backdrop, it poignantly became the impetus that fueled her creative vigor. Often, her acts of rebellion seemed directed towards this very environment, which she both yearned for and even trusted. This compelled her to voice her views on art with arresting intellectual clarity—insights that, although they physically tired her in their articulation, were undeniably lucid in their essence. Aptly, she dubbed her entire creative world as "a discernible and palpable universe."

Lumturi Blloshmi boasts a vast and varied oeuvre. Every time one of her pieces was unveiled, it was as if she already harboured, in a dreamlike state, visions of her next project, brimming with artistic fervour. Such visions and her boundless imagination consumed her. She yearned to transform these vivid daydreams, which she pondered deeply, into tangible art pieces.

Her creations prior to the 1990s predominantly revolve around portraits, self-portraits, composed figures, and landscapes. However, post the 90s, she expanded her artistic mediums. It seemed that her intellectual prowess was overflowing with images that transcended the expression offered by traditional forms like painting. Though she persisted with painting, she adapted it to convey the dynamic and existential essence of contemporary concepts. As a result, her body of work manifests in a multimedia form, encompassing paintings, mixed media, mixed media on paintings, photography, performances, painting-performances, installations, installation-paintings, and sculpture-installations.

In both phases of her creative journey, the self-portrait holds a notable significance for Lumturi Blloshmi. She has crafted dozens of these, each marking distinct moments and emotional states, spanning from her student days until her final years. Emotionally charged, Blloshmi's quest appears to have been a journey of self-discovery, delving into various facets of her psychological identity. For this, she chose a myriad of mediums. Her self-portraits encapsulate a deeply personal experience, evoking emotions shaped by familial ties, yet set against the backdrop of a scattered and disorganized societal milieu.

These portraits were an imperative outlet for Blloshmi, a way to express herself and etch a legacy, harnessing the full potency of bodily expression, the depth of the portrait's psyche, the expansive gaze of the eyes, scrupulous details in attire, and the rational spontaneity evident in their conception. Her self-portraits serve as an anchor, a point of departure and return, as she embarked on making another self-portrait or the subsequent art piece. Blloshmi wasn't merely capturing her physical allure, of which she had in abundance. Instead, she endeavoured to confront and playfully critique viewers with the range of emotions of her mental state. Each self-portrait wasn't a mere rote-job or a perfunctory exploration. Embedded in each piece is a profound sentiment and introspection, crystallized into art. These artworks mirror the intricate web of her life's ordeals, her boundless imagination, and the evolutionary trajectory of her artistic expressions.

Lumturi Blloshmi's first self-portrait dates to 1962, created during her studies at the Artistic Lyceum "Jordan Misja." At first glance, it looks simple and standard fare, mirroring many self-portraits by her contemporaries, primarily constructed with the aim of presenting a model in accordance with academic canons. However, a deeper examination reveals the eyes—gateways into both the overt and covert realms of the artist's psyche. This profound gaze is a hallmark of her self-portraits crafted during the communist era.

The iconographic transitions from one piece to the next underscore her journey as an experimental artist, deeply engaging with the psychological essence of her own image. These evolutions, rich with emotional and subconscious insights, signify the birth of her aspiration to meld life seamlessly with art. The progression of these self-portraits was neither a mere exercise nor a casual endeavor; it transcended mere whimsy.

I discern in these works the artist's personal dialogues with her own advancing years, grappling with the shifting weight of ever-changing artist doubts, as well as the unfulfilled aspirations and those she covertly yearned for. In her 1989 self-portrait, she observes the waves but doesn't hear them. She lays upon these waves, aiming to sense the external world flowing through the veins of her inner realm, where her creative spirit resides. The psychological turbulence in her self-portraits is evident in her brushwork, both dominant and indicative. The 1989 piece emerges as a striking self-portrait, unique in its intensity. The oppressive political climate of the time curtailed her artistic voice, even barring her from exhibiting her creations. Yet her evident discord with the faltering communist society is captured in the forceful, expressive strokes that vigorously meander across the canvas, underscoring profound contradictions.

A juxtaposition of the innocent, smiling self-portrait of 1962 alongside the sardonic and existential depiction of 1989 reveals the transformative journey of Lumturi Blloshmi. It underscores that she wasn't merely an artistic rebel but also an incessant seeker, questing for symbols of her art's existence within an oppressively politicized society.

Lumturi Blloshmi's self-portraits after the 1990s belong to a world of contemporary figurative expressions, both in form and content. They remain as images imbued with new emotions, emerging from different social-political contexts during a time of change. In a world of unfettered individual creation, devoid of censorship, Lumturi Blloshmi understood that the spirit of every era was its contemporary art. During this period, she would not merely stand in front of her spiritual and physical mirror-realities to craft independent emotional self-portraits; instead, she would become an unrestrained conceptual artist.

Convinced by her creative potential, Blloshmi approached the phenomena that surrounded her and the situations she encountered, unflinchingly. She created a series of self-portraits by transforming her imaginative system, into an art archive, bearing witness to unique human conditions from her life. The powerful, dignified, and figurative-abstract piece titled "Menopause" from 2001 is a testament to this—only the audacity of Lumturi Blloshmi could address such a subject, challenge its taboos, and present it head-on, uncompromisingly to the elite art world, the public, and women everywhere.

In her 2003 self-portrait painting "Dekorata (The Medal)", which was inspired by a seemingly trivial yet humorous story, Lumturi Blloshmi conveyed a deeply resonant message with a potent, sardonic, and biting image. She discerned that her omission from receiving an art medal was emblematic of gender bias, which overwhelmingly favored male artists. This realization led her to audaciously affix a borrowed medal of honor onto the sexual organ of her whitish-painted self-portrait, spotlighting the triviality and diminished value of such accolades in contemporary society. While not strictly identifying as a feminist artist, Blloshmi was far from indifferent to the undervaluation of female artists. Through this piece, she voiced her irony towards an award system where seemingly no male artist went unrecognized, suggesting the enduring echoes of communist meritocracy in the post-communist landscape.

Her 2003 series "Alta Moda with AMC and Vodafone cards" delves into Blloshmi's own daily social and health experiences, and not only her happenstances but those of many. It encapsulates the essence of art's communicative power when it reveals social phenomena. The artist's innovation shines as she repurposes Vodafone and AMC phone cards, which she had been using for a long while. Her creative intelligence built upon this experience a performance piece, critiquing the financial exploitation of individuals for corporate gain, likening it to an invasive occupation of personal spaces.

Blloshmi herself designed a dress, crafting it in an interlinked pattern using these phone cards. She even integrated the cards into a folding hand fan. Her performance was captured in digital photography. In her 2018 photographic self-portrait, "Alta Moda", she used medical cards related to her hypertension treatments, drawing attention to her personal health journey. Lumturi Blloshmi aimed to do more than just display her artworks; she wanted to captivate the viewers in the exhibition hall. Her intention was to encourage interpretation based on individual perceptions, turning spectators into active participants in her performances.

The 2003 piece titled "Ambiguity," presented in both painting and performance, stands as one of Lumturi Blloshmi's most elegant and minimalist creations – both surprising and provocative. This work underscores Blloshmi's dedication to using every available medium for her artistic expression. She doesn't acknowledge limitations when striving to wield irony, reveal hidden truths, or present complex questions using sophisticated traps and challenges.

In this installation, Blloshmi chose two opposing walls of a hall, positioning the audience as direct witnesses to her performance. On the black wall, she displayed a horizontal painting of her self-portrait "Dekorata (The Medal)". On the contrasting white wall, she traced an outline of her body in striking red. During the live performance, she positioned herself against the silhouette and then dramatically stepped forward, culminating in a theatrical bow to the audience. This act of tracing her form and then symbolically detaching from it created an aura of ambiguity, urging each viewer into a profound reflection, compelling them to grapple with the interplay between reality and illusion.

As an accomplished visual artist, Blloshmi cleverly navigated a broad range of mediums. In her recent endeavours, she has been drawn to the photographic documentation and reinterpretation of dispersed objects and situations, revealing a keen perspective in her artistic progression. After finalizing each piece, Lumturi felt the urge to encapsulate what she termed her "palpable universe"—as she called her artistic experiences.

This intellectual clarity is further evident in her ideas and written observations. Within her reflective writings, the core intention behind her photographic works becomes clear: she aspires to discern the fluctuating optics between subjects and their surroundings, aiming to discern the conquering visual narrative imposed on the visual domain.

One of her most ironic and penetrating self-portraits, realized in 2010 using photographs printed on aluminum foil, is the piece titled "Untitled." In it, an image emerges: her towering shadow and head rest upon a wreath made of pet animals' excrement. Oh my! how she would laugh detailing the discovery of this image, attributing it to her self-proclaimed "crazy" imagination, as she often referred to herself. Through this piece, she critiqued those she deemed mediocre, symbolically placing upon their heads a crown they didn't deserve. She held great admiration for renowned artists, drawing inspiration from their works. Her piece "Shiva" from 2005, was inspired by her connection with the creations of Sebastian G. Hyde and Marque Cornblatt.

In developing "Shiva," she conceptualized a series of small paintings, visible from both sides, that spotlighted Albanian politicians. Lumturi patiently unearthed their (miss)deeds and actions from written media, making them her subjects. With the audacity of an avant-garde artist combined with unparalleled intellect, Blloshmi crafted a deeply incisive political satirical series, offering an insightful glimpse into the narrative of Albanian politics post the 1990s. Within this series, she boldly incorporated a nude self-portrait depicted as a merrily laughing Shiva. This representation stands out as her most poignant and definitive self-portrayal, capturing the essence of both her psyche and artistic spirit. Shiva is Lumturi, and Lumturi is Shiva.

Lumturi Blloshmi's legacy will indubitably be cemented in the annals of Albanian art history, and she will be celebrated as one of its most astute, creative, and imaginative artists. Her contributions are poised to be immensely influential in the future, stemming from a distinct and transformative mindset. Blloshmi reached new heights with her art, solidifying her position at the forefront of contemporary art both in Albania and beyond. Through her creations, she shattered pre-existing barriers and taboos. She wholeheartedly embraced the conceptual arts and seamlessly intertwined them with music and dance. With fervor in both body and mind, she consistently refined, reshaped, and transformed her visual expressions, achieving resounding success in her artistic endeavors.

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**LUMTURI BLOSHMI,
THE PATH OF A
SOLITARY ARTIST**

SAVERIO SIMI DE BURGIS

Lumturi Blloshmi (Tirana, 1944 - 2020) was a painter who bridged traditional Albanian artistic culture with new, unprecedented forms of creative expression, enabling her to achieve commendable aesthetic results beyond the defined national borders. Her recent participation in the 59th Venice Biennale 2022, curated by Adela Demetja – an art curator who passionately wanted her works in the pavilion representing the Republic of Albania and who was very close to the artist in her final moments – received notable recognition. This distinct and meticulously curated exhibition dedicated to her took place, regrettably, two years after the artist's passing in Tirana in 2020 due to the Covid epidemic. As such, she was deprived of witnessing the rightful acclaim and formal recognition she undeniably merited during her lifetime. Such is often the destiny of those who, though determined, embark on a largely solitary journey away from the official cultural establishments and the dominant narrative. Nonetheless, Lumturi was undeniably a resilient woman, already aware of her substantial contribution.

I first met Lumturi Blloshmi in August 2007 during our participation in the inaugural Porto Palermo Festival in Albania. Lumturi was showing her art, and I was attending as a critic. There, I had the chance to introduce several Italian artists, notably the Italian-German duo VestAndPage, made up of Andrea Pagnes and Verena Stenke. The festival centred around a workshop predominantly dedicated to the performing arts and was set against the scenic backdrop of the Ali Pasha Tepelena Fortress, overlooking the Adriatic Sea. Collaborating on the event were organiser Andi Tepelena and the art critic and historian, Suzana Varvarica Kuka. Suzana, having spent many years at the National Gallery of Arts in Tirana, was by then a fervent supporter of Blloshmi's work. I believe the two of them shared a deep bond of friendship and mutual respect. The event was graced by numerous figures from the art world, including artist Artan Shabani. Later, in 2013, when Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama came to power, Shabani was appointed director of the National Gallery of Arts in Tirana.

For me, it was my first visit to Albania, which, since 1990 - a year after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and five years after the death of dictator Enver Hoxha - had been regaining its freedom and was gradually moving towards establishing a stable democracy. Artistically, the country was freeing itself from Soviet influences first, then Chinese later, both of which had commonly oriented its arts towards a unilateral upholding of the artistic doctrine of socialist realism.

Certainly, throughout her artistic journey and as a free individual, Lumturi Blloshmi distinguished herself as a nonconformist, not aligning with the dominant regime's agenda. With unwavering focus, she delved deep into the rich tapestry of Balkan traditions and people, exploring its customary practices, its inherent social and individual values. These were explored from a constantly dialectical standpoint, juxtaposing them against the twin challenges of an anachronistic tendency to preserve the past and an inclination to uncritically embrace an arid, all-encompassing, globalized Western worldview. In her quest, she was resolute in preserving her genuine identity, steering clear from both compromise and pretense.

In this sense, Lumturi Blloshmi stayed true to herself, an authentic out-of-the-box artist, finding an unexpected refuge in the unique circumstance that befell her at the age of five: an illness that resulted in a medically-induced deafness during the communist dictatorship. This condition paradoxically enabled her to avoid the fierce inquisitorial condemnations reserved for opponents of the regime, as had befallen some of her relatives, intellectuals and poets. Instead, this ailment later allowed her to burst forth with all her energetic, comprehensive creativity, without succumbing to the easy temptations of a market that could tarnish the genuine essence of her artistic journey.

Lume – as she was affectionately known among friends – was an artist of unparalleled freedom, irony, and versatility. Throughout her career, she remained devoted to the language of painting that was most intimate and immediate to her, characterized by a deep-seated expressionist pursuit. This quest wasn't entirely in the conventional or literal sense, like the stark adherence to the art-historical labels of early 20th-century avant-gardes, such as the German Expressionism of Die Brücke. Rather, Lume's artistic inclinations were more of a genuine expressive manifestation of her deepest emotions and innermost feelings thus creating a profound bond between the art she produced and the life she lived. Every act, every experience from her day-to-day existence, the emotions she felt, the challenges she faced, were vividly captured and reflected in her artistic endeavors and representations. Among her many works, her self-portraits stand out, serving as a compelling record of this introspection. They are a poignant testament to her unique voice, especially in a society that might not always embrace those who diverged from the norm—be it due to physical impairments, being female, or simply deemed crazy or strange due to unconventional approaches to life. In such a context, Lume found solace in art, turning to it as a means of communication and self-expression, distancing herself from societal clichés and finding a language that became not just valid, but vital.

In this context, Lume emerged as a genuine and rebellious artist, who, through sheer tenacity and determination, carved out her distinct identity and freedom. While her accolades and recognition might not have been as pronounced during her lifetime, they have been posthumously bestowed upon her. Yet, despite these parallels, it's essential to note that her personal biographical events don't overshadow or directly influence the critical analysis of her work. There is still much to uncover and appreciate in Lume's contribution, which remains significant and deserves to be evaluated in its entirety.

After completing her studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Tirana, Lumturi Billoshmi embarked on her journey with painting as her chosen medium. However, painting wasn't the only medium through which she expressed herself, as each form of art Lumturi engaged with became a performative extension of her investigative endeavours in the realm she felt most connected with. She executed her artistic vision with uncomplicated simplicity, harnessing tools that presented themselves, moulding them into images—be they photographic installations or live performances. Her works are imbued with a potent dose of irony and self-deprecating humour, an enduring hallmark of her artistic character. This is palpably evident in her rendition of the Kama Sutra, glimpses of which were showcased in photographs at the recent Venice Biennale. I had the privilege to experience her live enactment of these pieces in Porto Palermo back in 2007. The Kama Sutra, a revered Indian tome, delves into love's core eroticism - and if we draw inspiration from Ioan Petru Culianu's essay 'Eros and Magic in the Renaissance,' it underscores that such eroticism is not only foundational to love but also to the birth of art itself. This form of expression, fuelled by passion, love, and food, nourishes humanity's vital and creative energies through what can be described as the pinnacle of aesthetic expression, marked by its complete devotion to art.

Perhaps the most vivid illustration, tinged with irony, that Lume communicates through her happenings, is seen when frog thigh bones, carefully stripped of their flesh and consumed during banquets, are metamorphosed on her plates into forms that echo the erotic postures described in the esteemed Kama Sutra. This interpretation exudes a shared pathos, an ironic yet indelibly communicative allusion, marking her most defining and unequivocal stylistic signature. For Lume, and many others, art history unfolds in a way that transcends conventional labels, often employed to better streamline the conveyance of knowledge within educational contexts. Ultimately, despite her tumultuous and often challenging life, marked by various misfortunes including the deafness that afflicted her as a child, Lumturi Billoshmi understood that the inherent transformations within the materials used by an artist become metamorphosed and elevated in the finished artwork, regardless of the techniques deployed or the intended objectives.

All of her works possess inherent significance; it merely requires observing them with intensified focus and deeper contemplation. This is reminiscent of the traditions of the Albanian people, historically enriched with profound intercultural and interreligious exchanges, which are relevant and manifest in today's contemporary setting. While artists may pass away, their creations endure, preserving the energy and expressive potency of their artistic language. This language remains indelibly tied to that alchemical substance that still has much to convey.

I earnestly hope that a foundation will be established to collate the entirety of the Albanian artist's body of work. This would not only shine a light on her personal journey but also place it in the broader cultural backdrop from which she emerged. By acknowledging her unique attributes and employing comparative methodologies, this endeavour would pave the way for stimulating transnational dialogues and deeper insights.

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**WITH AND WITHOUT
LUMTURI BLOSHMI
TANCRÈDE RIVIÈRE**

When I recall the memory of Lumturi Billoshmi, the first thing I see is her smile. A smile that was a contortion of her whole body, making her big eyes look even larger, with a black ray of irony slipping between the two rows of her teeth, while she twisted her arms like a sorceress about to speak in tongues.

I met Lumturi Billoshmi only once, in July 2018, on the humid ground floor of Tirana Art Lab. A few dozen of people might still remember taking part in a strange exhibition experience that we (Adela Demetja, Angelo Careri and I) had named the “Center of Integration”. A few years before, in Paris, Angelo and I had founded a collective of poetry and performance called “Patriotisme”. Like many of the things we initiated at the time, it gives me a retrospective feeling of stylish fuzziness, a smart and kind of what-the-hell mix of instinct, provocation, and experiment. The Centre of Integration originated in the encounter between our duo’s western, self-centred Freudian neurosis, and Adela’s more Balkanic, goal-driven Jungian energy. Of course, these words do not aim at setting identities; they refer to a narrative. In fact, identities were the core material of our little game and the reflection that came about it.

The project didn’t go without some chronic misunderstandings. It would be tempting to say that these misunderstandings mostly lay on a cultural ground, but I don’t really believe so. To a certain extent, we started as a vaguely anonymous collective and came out as individuals. Not that we weren’t before; but what we called – even with calculated irony – a “centre of integration”, became really interesting in that it turned out to work as a centre of individuation. What was conceived as an impersonal and even abstract collective, an integration machine blindly launched towards an equally abstract “art world”, rather operated as a becoming machine: it was fed by the energy coming from every individual’s desires and changes that could happen around a centre of relations. The individual is never the beginning, nor the end. The relation comes first. The individual is the process.

It seems that there was always a mix of joke and seriousness in what we were doing. Joke in the principle, serious in the making, or vice versa. In this respect, Lumturi Billoshmi was way ahead of us when she held the dinner that was to close the “Centre of Integration” performative exhibition week, at the end of July 2018.

During the whole week, Tirana Art Lab’s venue, on the ground floor of a typical building of the communist-era housing, had been converted back into what the place used to be from the beginning: an apartment. We lived there. We had rented some pieces of furniture from an antique dealer on Qemal Stafa street. Every evening, we opened our living-room to the public and performances were held by the Centre of Integration participants. On that very last night, Lume’s performance, the dinner itself, was also to be the closing act, the final curtain. Lumturi was the artist and the host. We were Lumturi’s accomplices, public, and dinner guests. In the middle of the room, a large table was set, and when we sat around it, the first course was already on display in the plates. And the first course consisted of an intercourse.

Frogs. Frogs, the kind people believe we enjoy eating in France. In each plate, a couple of fried frogs were involved in a coitus, according to various positions from the Kama Sutra. We stared at them. Nothing appears more human-like than fried frog legs having sex. Naked, pale, sweating, with all the limbs and muscles and joints very visible; and no face. Anonymous couples, some of them fat, some of them skinny, bathing in the oily sweat of their sophisticated fuck, and not for a second bothered to be watched from above. Strange couples whose erotic skills were frozen in a floury coating before being exhibited to the public.

Lumturi was sitting in front of me. I looked at her. She was laughing, a large and bizarre smile spreading across her face, and she was – not exactly silent, but uttering strange sounds, sounds resembling croaks. Her eyes were extremely big. She was bending her elbows and wrists and phalanxes in such a way that the whole upper part of her body seemed abnormally flexible. Nobody was speaking. Nobody was eating. Everybody was looking at one another. Then Lumturi, still smiling, began to move around the table, and her moves looked like little leaps, and for a minute, anyone’s attempt to speak would produce only a deep and harsh sound. The amusement didn’t dare to break out. We felt weak and vulnerable, likely to be squashed by a big foot at any moment.

It didn’t last though. A loud, collective laughter finally burst around the table, and we ate and drank and enjoyed, and the frogs were very tasty.

“With Blloshmi, it is always a ceremony”: this is what I thought when I first entered the exhibition “Lumturi Blloshmi. Nga e para” at the National Gallery of Kosovo, in September 2023.

It’s not exactly true. The very first thing I thought was: “How didn’t I understand?”. I had in mind the feeling of strangeness that I had experienced at the Venice Biennale, one year ago, when I visited the exhibition “Lumturi Blloshmi. From Scratch” in the unwieldy space of the Albanian Pavilion, laboriously trying to link what I saw with the woman I had once met – as if I was to matter. After that, I wrote a text in which I tried (in vain) to account for that experience.

In Pristina, I realized what had been my mistake as soon as I entered the larger space of the Kosovo National Gallery. Among the wider display of a lifetime of work and far from the Biennale’s ability to break your focus, I found myself surrounded by signs and images that were gradually disbanding my ego, and God knows this is a pleasant feeling. The works from the Venice exhibition were back, but along with lots more, which filled the blanks that my own experience had been perfectly unable to fill. To connect the works with my own, a personal and so deficient memory of Lumturi was not the matter at hand. The matter was to let myself be part of Blloshmi’s ceremony. How didn’t I understand...

On the first floor of the Gallery, in the middle of the main room, a large table is set. Plates from the Menu Kama Sutra are arranged on the table – with pictures of the fried frogs depicted in various sexual positions directly printed on the plates. The table stands on a big, old-style rug. Behind it, on the wall, two large prints display archive pictures of the performance itself. On the left-hand picture, one can see a long rectangular dinner table, on which the actual “Kama Sutra” fried frogs’ menu is served on a white tablecloth, with several bottles of wine standing solemnly in the middle, between the plates and glasses. The chairs around the table and the rug beneath it resemble those in the gallery room. The seats are empty, as if the guests had gone, leaving the dinner untouched. The right-hand picture is identical (to the first on the left), except that all the elements of the dinner have disappeared, and Blloshmi herself is lying on her back on the table. On both prints, as in a mise en abyme, photos of the frogs in their frying pan are affixed to the wall behind the table.

“The authority board and how to shake them” could be the title of the entire installation formed by the table and the two pictures. It suggests something like this: every dinner can be political. For it seems to me that a question is asked by the empty seats: who is to sit around the table? Who is to share the Kama Sutra menu, or witness its transformation into the artist’s body? The cold, official look of the chairs suggests an answer. They aren’t home chairs. They are the kind of chairs you find in the meeting room of a big office, at an institution, at the headquarters of a political party. But also, because they are empty and we are looking at them, and because the food is served and the bottles opened, the seats seem to await for us. And gradually you get the trick. In Blloshmi’s ceremony, we are threatened to be put at any moment in the position of the executives: we are the decision-makers, the party leaders, the rulers. And she is mocking us.

Indeed, the entire exhibition tends to make it clear that we are in the presence of a highly suspicious mind, as well as a very iconoclastic one. Beyond the laughter, Blloshmi’s work seems to be observing us, probing our relationship to power and conformity. The Medal, a large horizontal painting composed of three panels, is a disturbing portrayal of a female body with a medal pinned to her pubis. The place of the painting among Blloshmi’s self-portraits suggests that it could be one of them, and the position of the body closely resembles that of Blloshmi herself in the picture from Menu Kama Sutra.

Sex, honour, power, and a peculiar mise en scene of the artist’s apparent self-sacrifice in the centre should not be taken at face value: the mise en scene is not made to be believed. It is, in the truest sense of the word, a provocation. By affixing the medal to her lower abdomen, Blloshmi conveys her disdain towards the social code of honour, but, at the same time, she seems to invoke some deeper connection between her own ethos as an artist and her identity as a woman. This is also evident on the same painting, in the woman’s long braid that ascends vertically to the sky, as if someone or something, is attempting to pull her head by the hair; a paintbrush, used as a hair grip, conspicuously separates the woman’s head from what’s going on above her.

There will always be men seated around the table and making decisions. Is it because, when she was young, Blloshmi was expelled from the League of (Albanian) Artists, so she became wary and cynical towards that kind of people? In 1970s Albania, one can bet that too obvious a lack of conformity was frowned upon in such institutions. Or could it relate to the year of her birth, when her father was executed without a trial by the country’s new rulers? Anyway, it is not by taking her seat with them that Blloshmi shakes the system: rather it is by climbing on the table.

Blloshmi's aspiration to belong to "a distinct tangible universe" becomes evident quite early. One needs only to see the three self-portraits from the 1960s and the evolution among them, from the smiling, well-behaved young girl against a clear sky-blue background, to the self-aware, seductive femme fatale in black and red, and finally the greenish, black-eyed Medusa. A special kind of smart girl in the back of the room, she appears to have looked for a way to both belong and not belong to a certain space-time. The ground floor of the exhibition reminds us that she was, above all, a painter – as one had to be in the times when she started. However, in the way she didn't bother much with style, one also reads a certain literalness in her painting approach, a solipsistic attention to the combination of things and moment that could help her build or reach that distinct universe, which, in the end, is a definition of style. At times, it was places—as evidenced by the stirring collection of landscapes on the ground floor—and often, it was women who from the beginning might have been her main allies in such a project. Herself included.

Maybe she wanted to go all the way, from landscape to portrait, from myth to history, from epic to minor, in order to free herself from any ties to any form of academism. In most of her work, there is this feeling of separation, as if there were something in the voice of the world that she wouldn't – couldn't or didn't want to – hear. It is something else, another call, that she was listening to. On the ground floor, an archive video shows Blloshmi at work in her studio. She is a middle-aged woman at the time. She is sitting in front of a canvas, but many more are hanging all around, making it seem she's working at a dozen works at the same time. Yet her hands are less active than her eyes, calmly and restlessly looking all around, as if in search for something that is not present in the room. The videographer keeps circling her, walking back and forth behind her back, zooming in and out; but Blloshmi's gaze remains elusive. She's somewhere else.

While the ground floor of the exhibition shows an artist rushing headfirst into a certain artistic safe space (not to be confused with a comfort zone, which is the opposite), the first floor feels like an explosion coming from afar – lightning and rumbling reaching us from a place she had finally arrived at, at a moment when her world was turned upside-down. Explosion happens to be the title of a painting from 1999. Whereas this term is usually associated with shapes that expand themselves all around in chaotic, eccentric circles, Blloshmi's explosion is more of an elongation, a pressured, horizontal shape like a stretched silver bird. It is an explosion, but it moves from one point to another, and it is suspended in the air; it is almost an arrow. The meaning of such a shape is given by two other paintings from the years: Ithaca (1992) and August 91 (1995) – in both works, the elongated bird is revealed to be a boat. Not just any boat. Anyone who, like Blloshmi, had seen the Vlora raise anchor from the port of Durrës on August 7, 1991, knew that it was no less historical than Noah's Ark.

Nothing less social-realistic, however, than these works from the first years of post-dictatorship Albania. At the same moment, Blloshmi's painting, in both technique and vision, has become highly personal. It possesses this quasi-esoteric mix of myth, magic, and ingenuity that creates its specific aura. Eventually, even history itself can become personal.

To simultaneously belong and not belong to her immediate surroundings: this experience, possibly forced upon her initially by the loss of one sense, evolved into an artistic project. As time progresses, Blloshmi seems to increasingly achieve that paradoxical goal. But from where she stands, she's sending signals that have only the appearance of contradiction. On the one hand, she's mocking us. On the other hand, it's an invitation – to join her in the ceremony.

It's not contradictory for what she's laughing at is the constant mingling of greatness and absurdity of existence. This special kind of contradictory spirit is what allows her to produce works that are both social and mythological, like the August '91 series. Or sacred and blasphemous, like the wonderful series of miniatures Lume and the Masters (2008), in which she reinterprets scenes from classical religious painting with orange peels. Or absurd and political, like in the "fashion" photo diptych, where she poses, fifteen years apart, in front of her studio, wearing a handmade, extravagant dress made from emblematic everyday objects – phone cards the first time, medication blister packs the second time. In between these two pictures lies all the irony of Blloshmi's relationship to the contemporary. Time has passed and what was harmed? Health, she answers, with the same mysterious and communicative smile. It is the same smile I saw on her face during the Menu Kama Sutra performance held at Tirana Art Lab in 2018, only two years before she died.

*

How do you become close to someone you've never met? a voice asks at the beginning of a short film, presented in the exhibition, in which Adela Demetja goes in search of Blloshmi's life and legacy, shortly after her passing. I could have made that question mine. Although I had met Lumturi once, the Pristina exhibition made me realize how much of a missed meeting it had been, and the lingering obsession about that missed opportunity during my visit to the Albanian Pavilion in Venice. The crowning achievement of "Lumturi Blloshmi, nga e para" is to answer the question it asks, by making that legacy available to all – or, in other words, by letting Lumturi's ceremony, to continue.

Tancredè Rivière is a French poet and author based in Paris.

II

**NATIONAL GALLERY
OF KOSOVO**

**LUMTURI BLOSHMI
FROM SCRATCH**

**CURATED BY
ADELA DEMETJA**

01.09 - 15.10.2023

“Lumturi Blloshmi. From Scratch” presents the first retrospective exhibition of Lumturi Blloshmi (1944–2020), an esteemed Albanian artist, in Kosovo. It follows her successful presentation at the 59th Venice Biennale as part of the Albanian pavilion in 2022. The National Gallery of Kosovo is the first institution to host this extensive retrospective, showcasing a significant part of her half-century-old creative journey. The exhibition aims to present and reposition Lumturi Blloshmi’s work and life within the context of national and international art histories. The selection comprises Blloshmi’s works from the 1960s to the 2000s, including self-portraits, landscapes, portraits, painting compositions, photographs, and installations. These works reveal her aesthetic essence and personal reality and bring insights into the political and social context in which she created.

Like many artists of her generation, Lumturi Blloshmi adhered to the constraints of socialist realism until the late 1980s. However, in the 1990s, she distinguished herself as one of the few who successfully repositioned and transformed her work until passing. Her works in painting, photography, installation, and performance are marked by an ironic reflection and overcoming of the reality in which she lived. Her dynamic and self-aware personality, nourished by philosophy, poetry, sensibility, and spirituality, shaped a distinctive body of work.

Drawing from previously unexhibited works, the exhibition aims to introduce the multidimensional practice and individualized metamorphosis of Blloshmi to the public. The display traces her artistic trajectory chronologically, highlighting the main themes: the individual context through Blloshmi’s personal experiences that have become the main inspiration for the many Self-portraits; the Albanian context which she systematically analyzed, commented, and captured be it through the landscape paintings of the 1980s, the Exodus of the 1990s or the political transition of the 2000s; and ultimately the universal context as a concern with philosophical and spiritual aspects which her latest works deal with. All these expressions that nurtured her artistic practice reveal how Blloshmi continuously recreated the figure through imagination and experimentation in various mediums, achieving what she aptly described as “a distinct, tangible universe.”

Blloshmi’s impressive artistic practice, extraordinary biography, and powerful personality make her a unique and portentous figure in national and international contemporary art. Despite facing various limitations, such as being deaf from the age of five, enduring oppression under the communist regime due to political reasons, and being a woman in a field dominated by men, Lumturi Blloshmi did not receive the recognition she deserved during her lifetime. The exhibition aims to shed light on her work and life, which have yet to be thoroughly researched, displayed, and contextualized.

CHAPTER I SELF-PORTRAITS

Lumturi Billoshmi originated from a persecuted Albanian family and had to deal with what the system defined as a "tainted biography," which rendered the pursuit of an artistic career exceedingly challenging. While her creativity can be segmented into two distinct periods – before and after the 90s – the self-portrait remained a genre to which she devoted continuous attention throughout her life.

Most of her self-portraits prior to the 1990s were crafted in secrecy, never seeing the light of exhibition. These artworks unequivocally broke away from the constraints of Socialist Realism, which staunchly opposed artistic subjectivity. They served as potent tools for the artist to reimagine and recreate her sense of self.

Following the 1990s, Billoshmi depicted herself within diverse scenarios across her paintings, performances, and photographs. In doing so, she openly expressed her perspectives about the art world, its mechanisms, and the society she inhabited. Her viewpoint was that of a strong woman who critiqued and provoked the male-dominated power establishment with humor and satire.

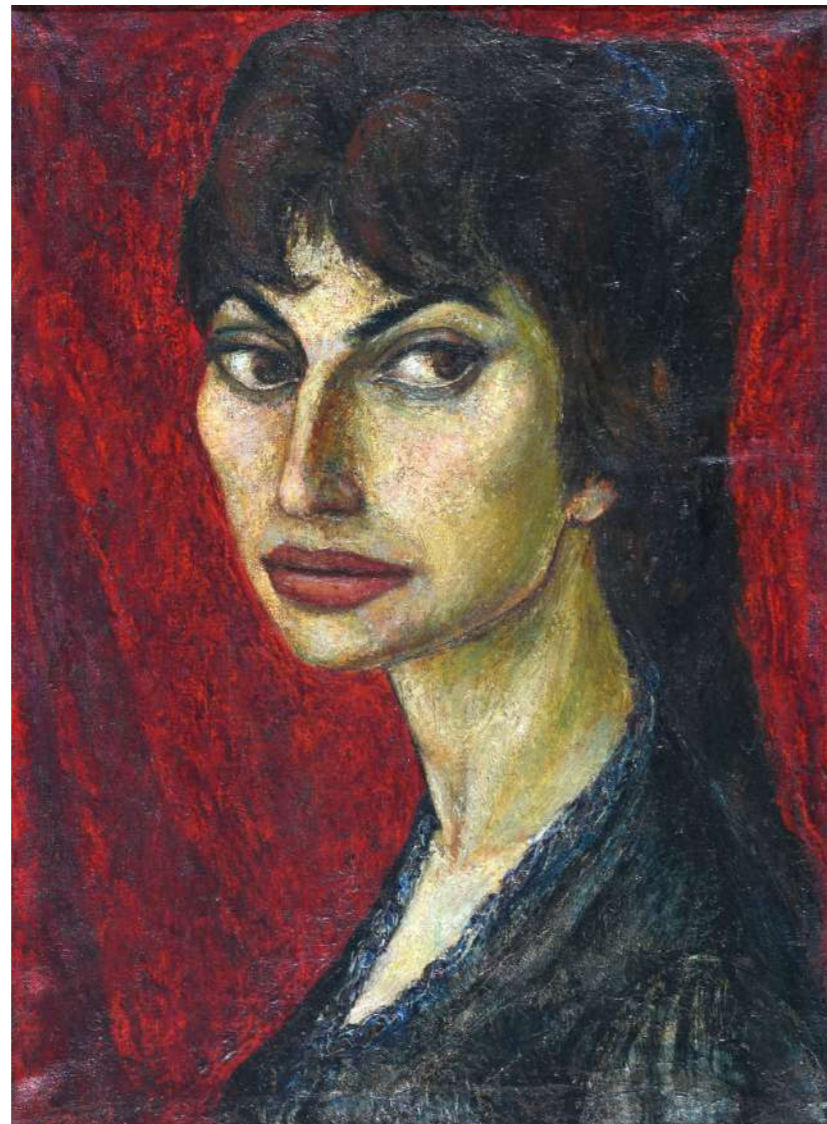
Considering the significant role biographies played in shaping individual trajectories within Socialist Albania, Billoshmi's deliberate acts of inclusion, reinvention, and transformation in her exposés clearly asserted and reinforced her position in the national art history, from a self-defined standpoint. Her persistent efforts to challenge rules, transcend limitations, and defy conventions earned her the name "The Rebel Artist."



Self-portrait
1962

Oil on cardboard
26 x 20 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate



Self-portrait
1966

Oil on canvas
65 x 48 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate



Self-portrait
1967

Oil on fiberboard
50 x 33,5 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate

Self-portrait
(Influenced by the dream)
1968

Oil on paper
38.5 x 27 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate



Shiva in the village
1980

Pencil on paper
29 x 21cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate



The sound
of the waves
(Self-portrait)
1989

Oil on fiberboard
37,5 x 47,5 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate



Shiva, I
2005

Mixed media on canvas
20 x 30 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate



Menopause
1999-2001

Oil and offset
paint on
photographic
paper

67.5 x 50 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate

The Medal
2009

Oil on canvas
112 x 260 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate



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FROM SCRATCH

CHAPTER II

LANDSCAPES AND WOMEN

In 1973, she became a member of the Albanian League of Writers and Artists, but her membership was revoked from 1974 to 1983. Being a part of the union granted individuals access to materials such as paint and canvas, as well as studio space. Moreover, membership provided the opportunity to showcase artworks in official exhibitions, secure funding for travel, participate in competitions for public artworks, and engage in "free, creative activity." As a result of this restriction, very few works, mostly drawings and sketches, emerged during those years. Despite the difficulties, the year 1983 marked a restart for Lumturi. Fully energized, she travelled to various Albanian cities and villages, producing numerous landscapes. Throughout these years, she painted a few portraits and still lives, but she preferred working in nature due to her lack of a studio and her residence in a very small apartment with her brother's family. Before 1974, she primarily focused on compositions depicting epic scenes from history or the construction of the socialist society, as well as portraits. A few of these works are part of the collection at the National Gallery of Art in Tirana, while unfortunately, many other works have been lost.

This chapter traces the evolution of her painting style throughout the 1980s up to the early 1990s. This period can be categorized into three groups of works: landscapes showcasing various distinct locations across Albania, portraits of women from the artist's inner circle (mother, niece, friends), and paintings in which landscape and female figure intertwine. As the 1990s approach, the female figure gains prominence and becomes the sole subject of the compositions. All the works are characterized by a strong colour contrast. The interplay of light and dark shades imparts depth to her paintings. The background has always held significance for Biloshmi, and these paintings reveal how it transforms alongside the figures, gaining a transparency and multi-layered quality that would later become distinct hallmarks of Biloshmi's canvases. She held her first solo exhibition in the city of Berat in 1988, at the age of 44, where many of the works in this section were on display.



Shote Galica
"Renaissance"
1983

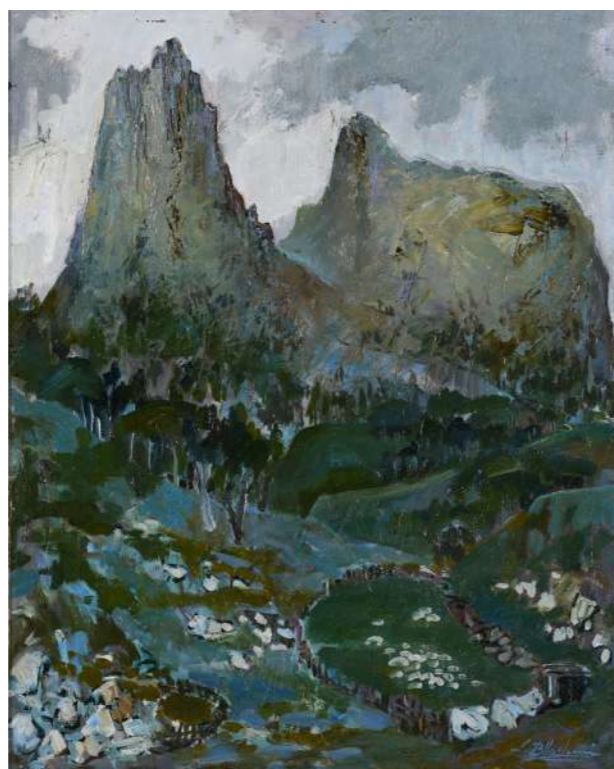
Oil on canvas
100 x 137 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate

Dry Peak, Tropojë
1985

Oil on canvas
68 x 55 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate



Red Kruja
1985

Oil on canvas
65,5 x 75 cm

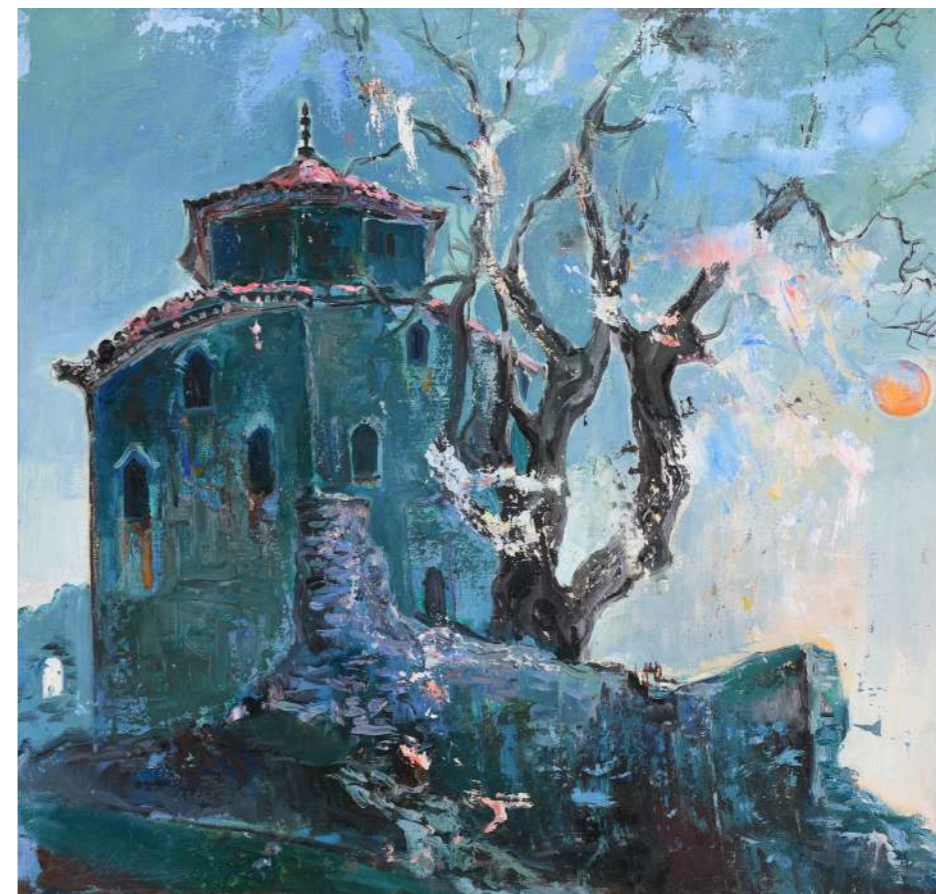
Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate



Sanctuary
of Kruja
1986

Oil on canvas
67,5 x 63,5 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate





Portrait of a Woman
1982

Oil on canvas
54 x 41 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate



Portrait of mother
1986

Oil on canvas
47 x 34 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate

Nude, Saranda
stone slides
1990

Oil on canvas
66 x 74.5 cm

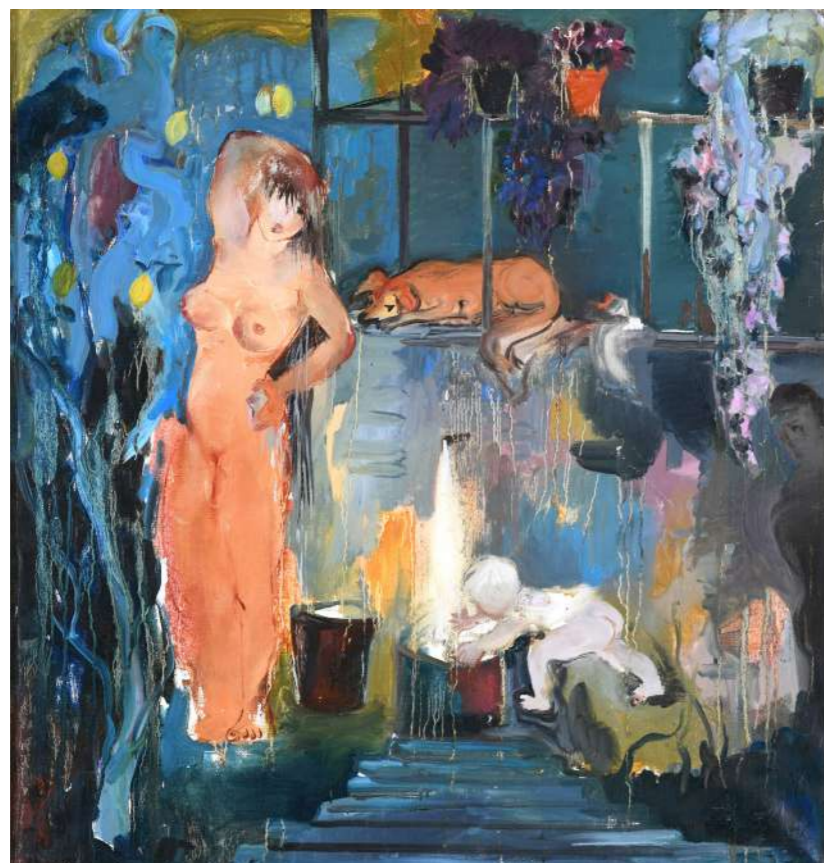
Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate



Lukovo,
Washing clothes
1991

Oil on canvas
69,5 x 61 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate



Silver Nude
1995

Oil on canvas
96 x 120 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate



CHAPTER III THE RETURN OF GOD

In 1967, the socialist government declared Albania an "atheist state." In December 1990, the ban on religious observance was officially lifted. The symbolic fall of the dictator's statue [Enver Hoxha] in the center of Tirana marked the end of communism in Albania. For many, including Lumturi, who suffered under that regime, the 20th of February 1991 marked a significant turning point in their lives. Two key historical events influenced Lumturi and her work in the first half of the 1990s: the fall of the communist regime, which also marked the resurgence of religion, and the Albanian exodus to Italy.

In a letter to a Greek artist dated November 25, 1992, Lumturi describes the most powerful day of her life: "The happiest day of my life was the day of the Dictator's fall and the return to God without distinction of religion. I joined the protest that led to his fall, without thinking that at any moment I could encounter death." Several of her paintings from the early 1990s incorporate religious imagery and delve into spiritual themes.

Albania also witnessed mass emigration from the country, epitomized by the August 1991 exodus. Thousands of people boarded ships and forcefully set sail from the harbours of Durrës and Vlora to Italy. Lumturi experienced this exodus in Durrës, and in an excerpt from her correspondence, she recounts the scene: "... rain, endlessly, intense heat, and all at once the furious waves of exodus in great numbers. I noticed all this, there at the harbour. It was an infernal view which I can never forget. The ship was drunk and damaged, as if painted in glue and the impatient mob tried to climb up the ship at a terrible speed, without consideration for anything else, not even death itself, for the better life beyond the sea. The ship started sailing accompanied by shrieks and tears. Amid the sea the ship looked like an object, decorated with shells, scales, until it disappeared into infinity. Every day the sea brought corpses to the shore..."

This experience and those haunting images deeply affected Billoshmi. She stood among the few artists of her generation who extensively addressed the events of the exodus and other pivotal moments in contemporary Albanian history through her art. During this period, her paintings underwent a transformation towards symbolic figuration, best exemplified by the recurring fish/boat symbolism, appearing in various forms across many of her works from the 1990s and 2000s. It was during this period that she began incorporating additional materials such as silver pigment, aluminium foil, fabrics, bones, and everyday objects into her paintings.



Mother Teresa "Exodus"
1991

Oil on canvas
86 x 95,5 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate

Tomorrow
1991

Oil and mixed
media on canvas
75 x 63 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate



Ithaca
1992

Oil and mixed
media on canvas
80 x 121 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate



August 1991
1995

Oil and mixed media on canvas
93 x 84 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate



Biblical Mysteries
1995

Oil on canvas
74 x 95 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate



Ladder of Freedom
1998

Oil on canvas
120x 85,5 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate



Explosion
1999
Oil and mixed
media on canvas
85 x 120 cm
Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate

Pregnancy
1999
Oil on canvas
96 x 94 cm
Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate



The universe
always rotates
around the dot
1999
Oil and mixed
media on canvas
120 x 85,5 cm
Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate



Untitled
2002
Oil on canvas
112 x 150 cm
Courtesy of
Lumturi
Blloshmi
Estate



CHAPTER IV INVASION OF SPACE

During the 2000s, Blloshmi embarked on a series of new artistic endeavours. She became one of the first artists to venture into the realm of performances, installations, and the orchestration of events that could be categorized as "happenings." Notably, "Menu Kama Sutra" constitutes a body of work containing 15 photographs of frog legs, captured by the artist while she was cooking them at home. These images, resembling human bodies during intercourse, prompted Lumturi to capture this accidental likeness through her analogue camera. In 2003, she orchestrated a happening/performance at the National Gallery of Art in Tirana, featuring an actual dinner serving fried frog legs. This event invited journalists and art personalities to engage in discussions about sexuality and sensuality as integral aspects of everyday life and art. The recurrence of this work and performance, staged in various locations, has solidified its position as one of the artist's most iconic works.

Throughout this period, Blloshmi delved into her fascination with the human body and how communication, consumption, and political influence converged with its social and sensual connotations. She generated artworks using discarded materials or items manufactured in substantial quantities, such as cigarette butts, dried orange peels, empty Coca-Cola bottles, phone cards, medication packages, and advertisements. Amid these explorations, she managed to maintain a sharp focus on the human form, a reflection of her training in figurative art. While she explored spatial artworks employing diverse materials, she persisted in creating paintings with oil and mixed media on canvas until 2003.

Her later paintings took on a more conceptual and philosophical nature, addressing themes related to human nature and existence.



Menu Kama Sutra
2003

Analogue photography

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate



Photo documentation of
"Menu Kama Sutra" at National Gallery of Arts Tirana
2003

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate



The Invasion of Space
(Alta Moda with phonecards)
2003

Analogue
photography

Courtesy of
Lumturi Biloshmi Estate



Alta Moda with
medication packages
2018

Digital photography
Photographed by Albes Fusha

Courtesy of
Lumturi Biloshmi Estate

CHAPTER V IT'S A MAN'S WORLD

In 2005, Billoshmi crafted a series of small, double-sided miniature mixed media works titled "It's a Man's World." Through this series, she delved into the gender disparities present in Albanian contemporary society and the art field, as well as the dichotomies within Albanian national identity. Infused with humour, the series offered commentary on influential politicians and art figures in Albania, all of whom were men. This exposure highlighted the intricate ties of the contemporary political elite to those who held power during the socialist era. To achieve her desired effect in this series, she freely employed painting, collage, Photoshop editing, and canvas printing.

Orange peels moulded into human figures appeared in her photographic work "Zarabanda" in 2007. In 2008, she repurposed these photographs from "Zarabanda" to construct the work "Lume and the Masters." Within her photographs, she integrated small fragments from paintings depicting scenes by celebrated Great Masters of art.

She unearthed visual parallels between her photographs featuring orange peels fashioned into human-like forms and pivotal works in art history. She identified fragments from paintings by esteemed male artists that echoed her own photographs. The titles of the Masters' works became the titles of Lumturi's creations. Through this series, she extended her critique beyond the confines of Albanian reality into the realm of art history, effectively constructing a "critique of art history." In doing so, her work proposes multi-layered narratives and interpretations, as a contemporary way of existence.

In the subsequent years, particularly in 2010s, she continued to engage with images of orange peels, creating works for the stage in collaboration with the Albanian choreographer Gjergj Prevazi.

All chapter text by Adela Demetja



**It's a Man's World, 2005,
Mixed media on canvas**

Albanian Portrait
(double sided)
2005

Mixed media on canvas
20 x 30 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate



Visual space
(double sided)
2005

Mixed media on canvas
15 x 40 cm

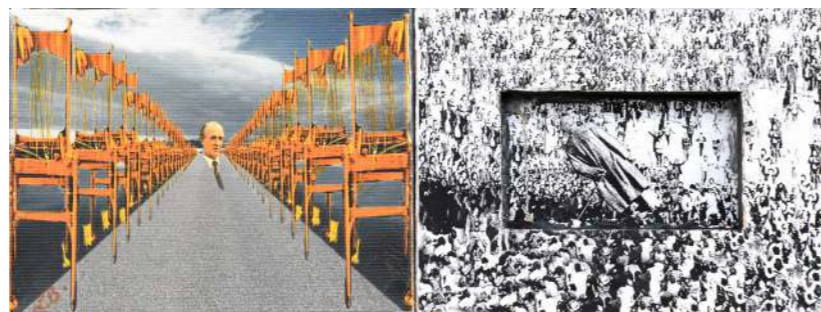
Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate



The last of the dictators
(double sided)
2005

Mixed media on canvas
15 x 40 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate



Balkans, delayed desire
(double sided)
2005

Mixed media on canvas
15 x 40 cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate





The chair
2005
Mixed media
on canvas
20 x 30 cm
Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate

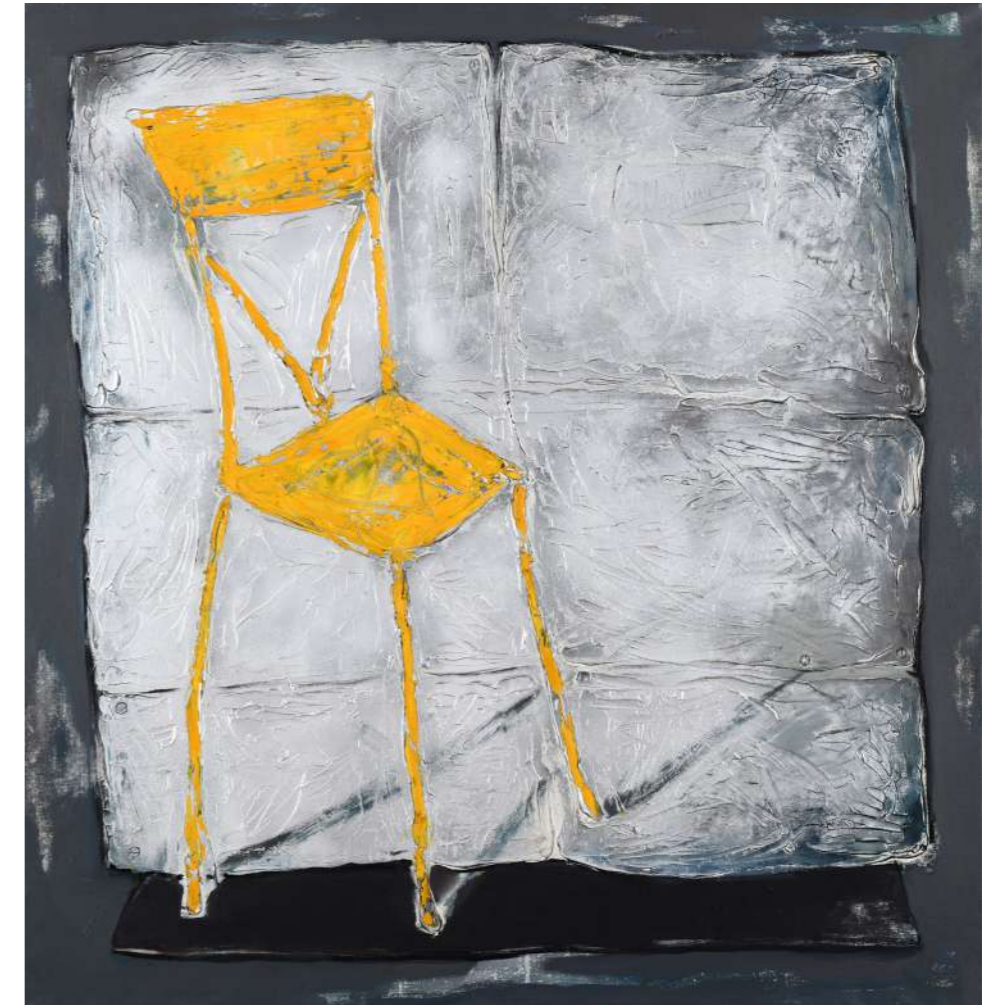


Love and Hate
2002
Oil and mixed media
on canvas
104 x 100 cm
Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate

Obsession
2002

Oil on canvas
115 x120cm

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate



Obsession
2002

Analogue
photography

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate

Lume and the Masters, 2008,
Mixed media on canvas,
Each 30 x 40 cm



Kostandin
Shpataraku

Crucifixion
(fragment)

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate



Dieric Bouts
Hell

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi
Estate



Hieronymus Bosch
The Triumph of Pleasures
(fragment)

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate



Raffaello
The battle of Ostia

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate



Giotto
Crucifixion

Courtesy of
Lumturi Blloshmi Estate

Curator:

Adela Demetja

Filmmaker:

Tin Dirdamal

Interactive media artist:

Alexander Walmsley

Exhibition Architect:

Dea Buza
(Apparat Studio)

Design:

Joreld Dhamo
(Parallel Studio)

Legal representative
of Lumturi Blloshmi:

Ervin Blloshmi

Commissioner:

National Gallery of Kosovo

Supporters:

**Ministry of Culture,
Youth and Sports of Kosovo**









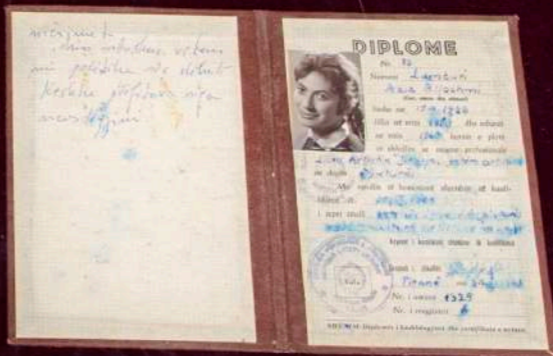
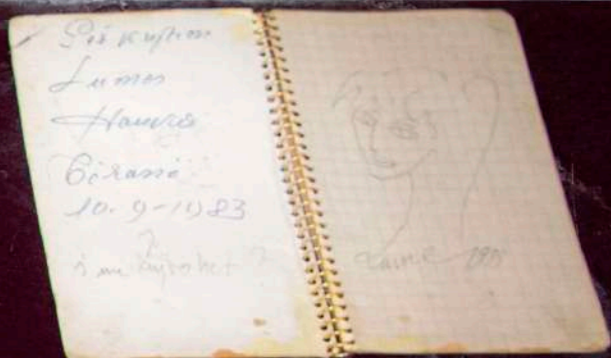


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Dokumente, dorëshkrimet dhe skicat të portretëve nga arkivi i artistit Lunteti Blloshmi.
Documents and portrait sketches from the archive of the artist Lunteti Blloshmi.



Piktura, me shprehje simbolike, është themeluar
te kalimit permes veshtrimit.
L. Blloshmi

"My painting is a struggle of retrieving time through gaze."

mësimit
ishin mbushur veher
në politike. Në ditët
keshke përfitova nga
mësuesit.

DIPLOME



Nr. 79

Nxenesi Lumburi

Aziz Biloshmi

(Emri, atësia dhe mblemri)

lindur me 15.11.1944

filloi në vitin 1963 dhe mbaroi

ne vitin 1963 kursin e plote

te shkolles se mesme profesionale

Liceu Artistik "J. Fishta" vetëm artistike

ne degën Dikturës

Me vendim të komisionit shtetëror të kuali-

fikimit dt. 20.12.1963

i jepet titulli Artist i Merituar

Artist i Merituar

Kryetar i komisionit shtetëror të kualifikimit

Drejtori i shkollës

Tirane

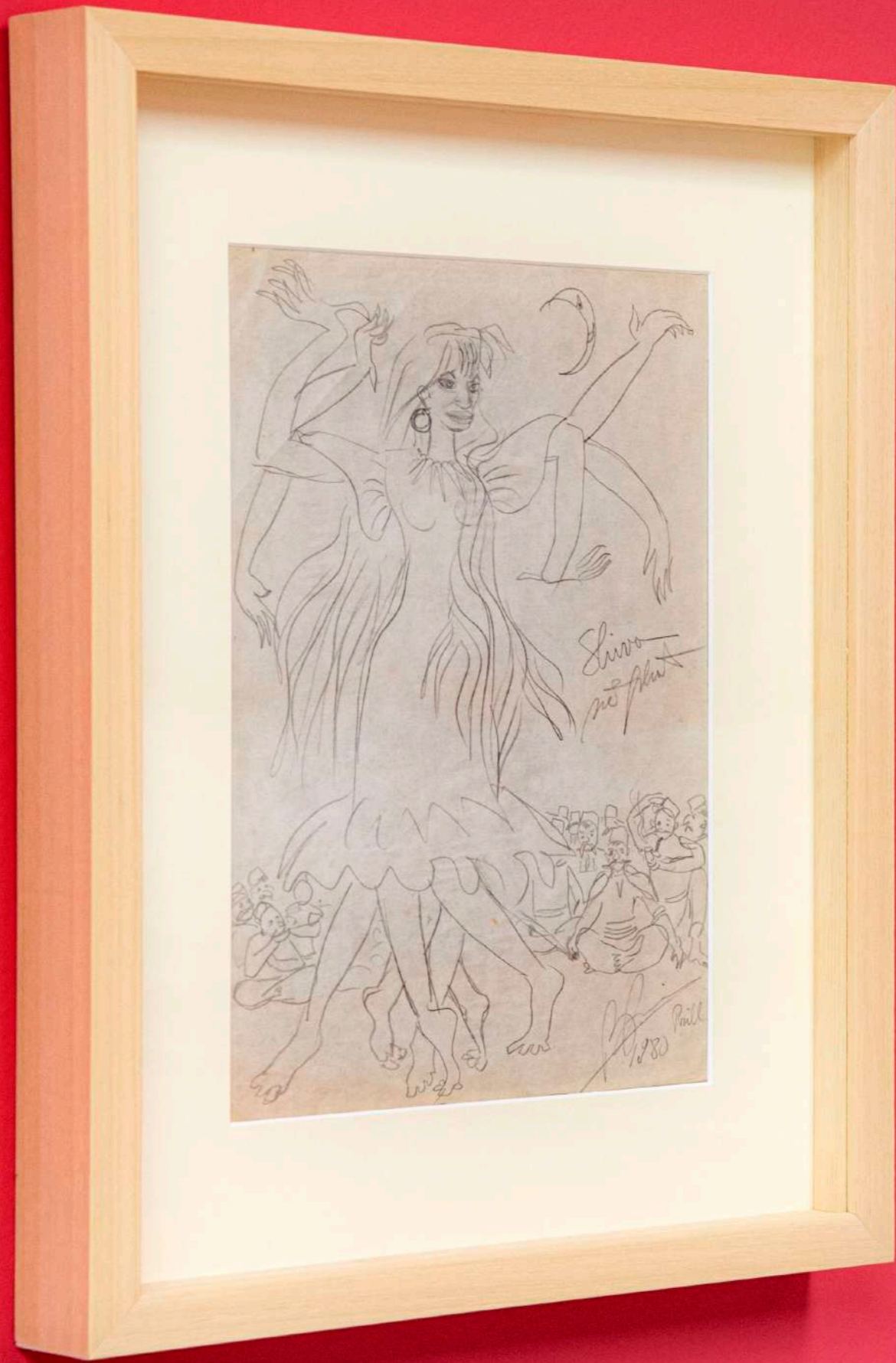
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Nr. i amzes 1325

Nr. i rregjistrimit 8

SHËNIM: Diplomës i bashkëngjitet dhe çertifikata e notave







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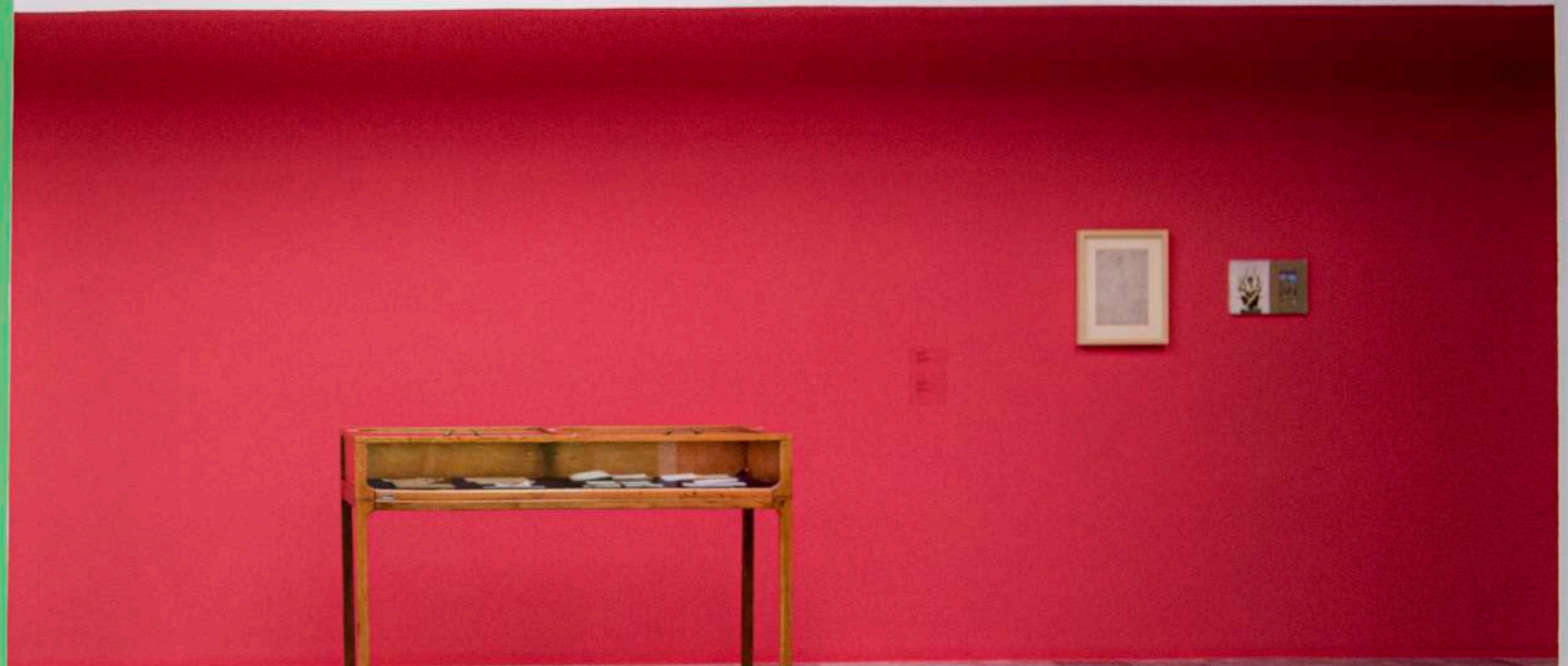
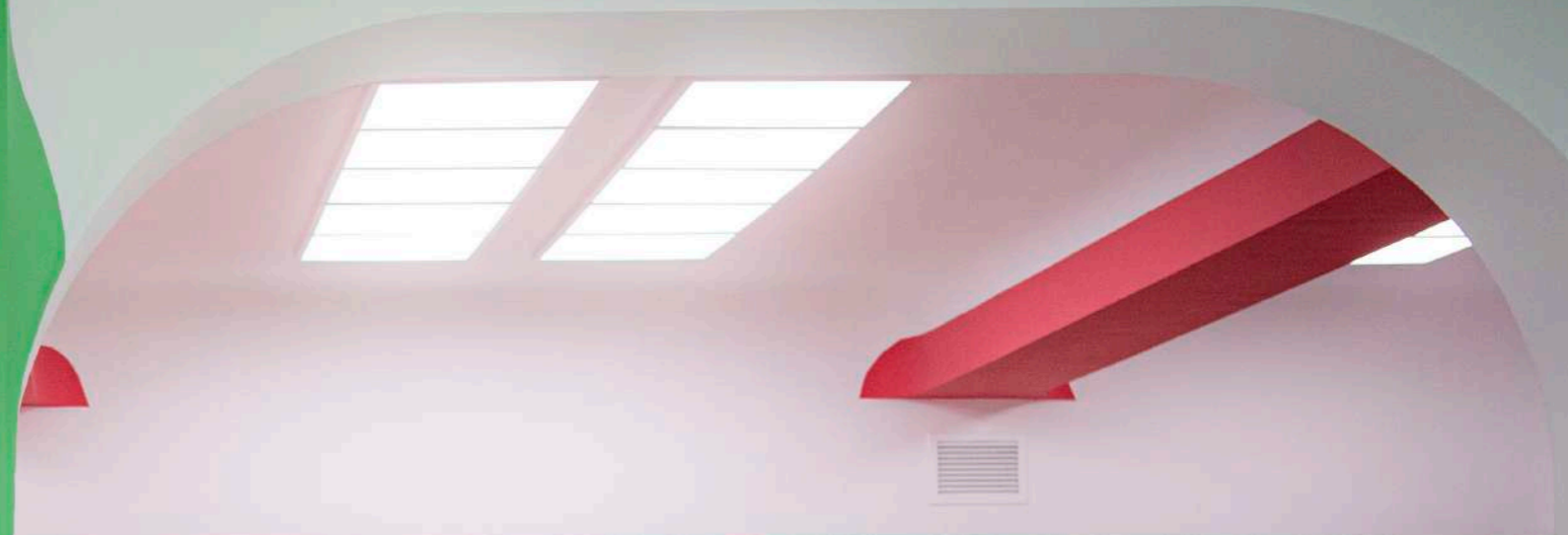


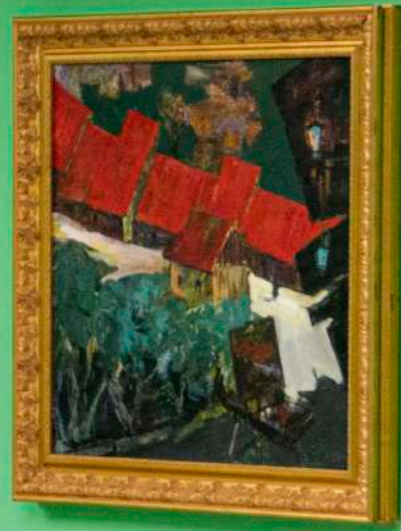


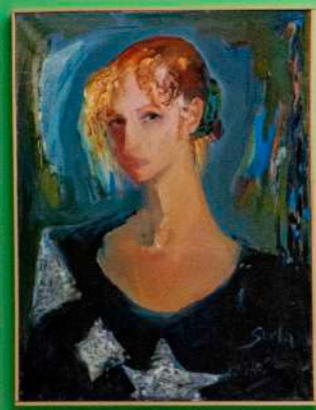




Small green informational label on the wall.







Portrait of a woman with red hair and a blue halo.



Portrait of an elderly woman with dark hair.



Portrait of a woman with long, curly red hair.



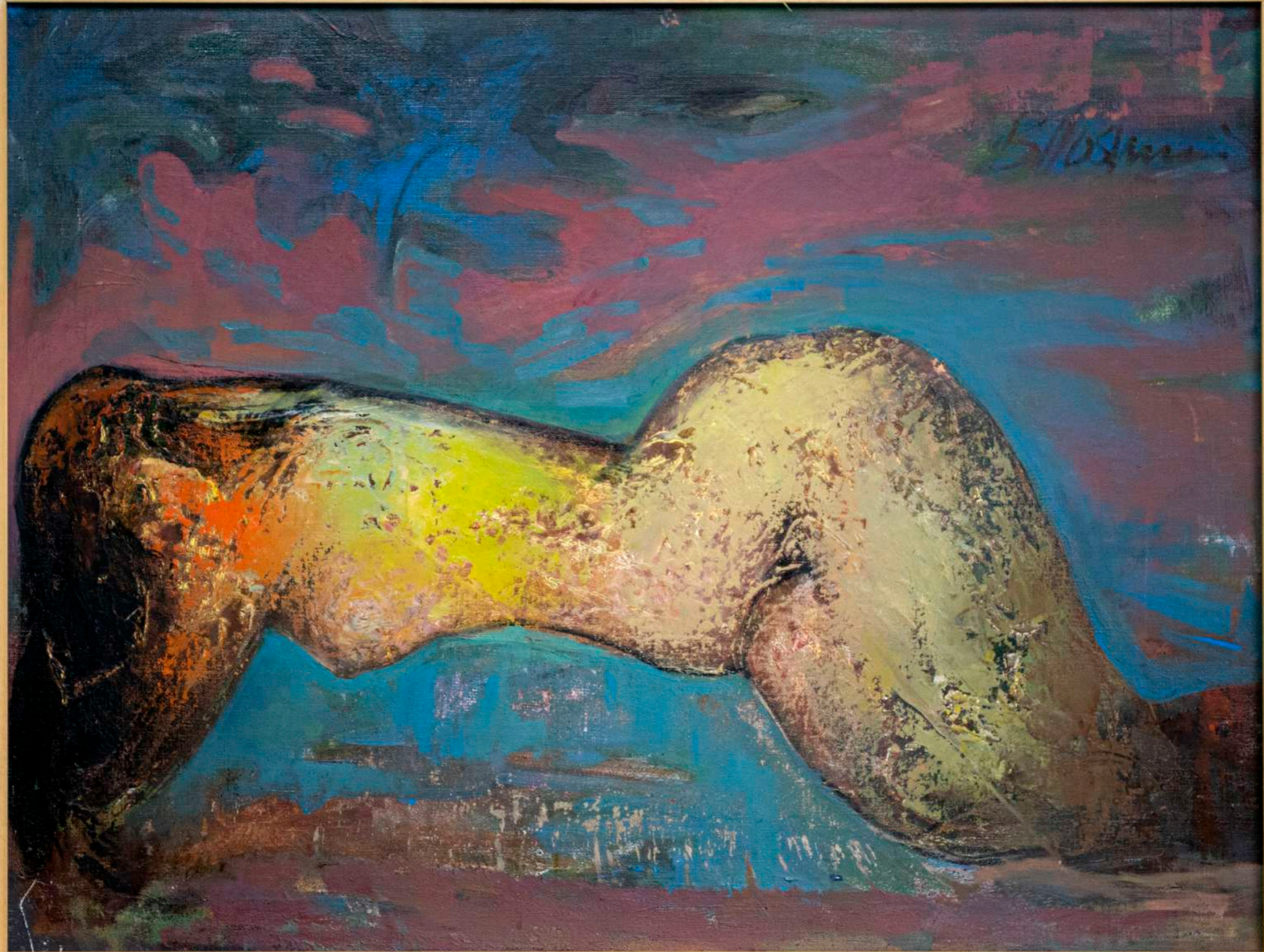


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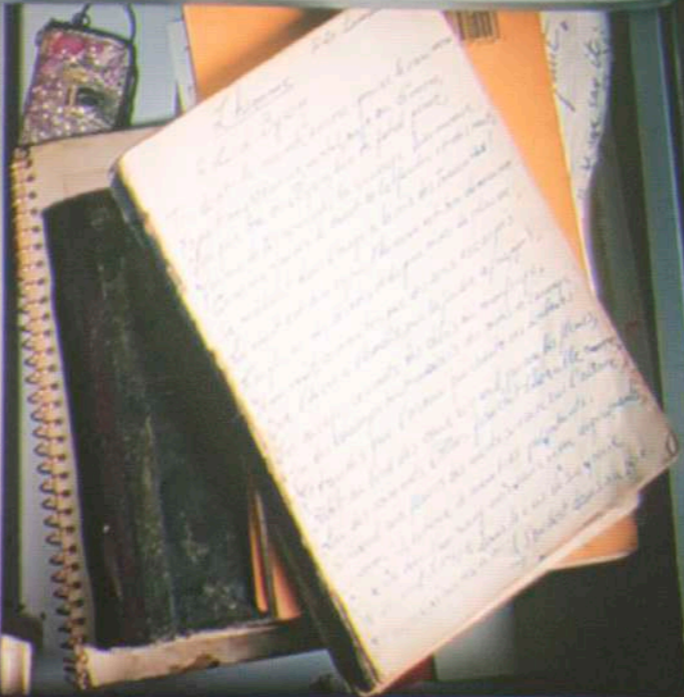
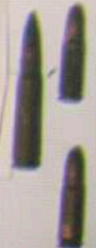
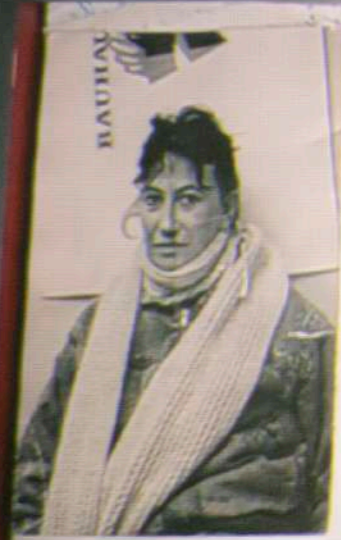
Small white label with text, likely providing information about the artwork.



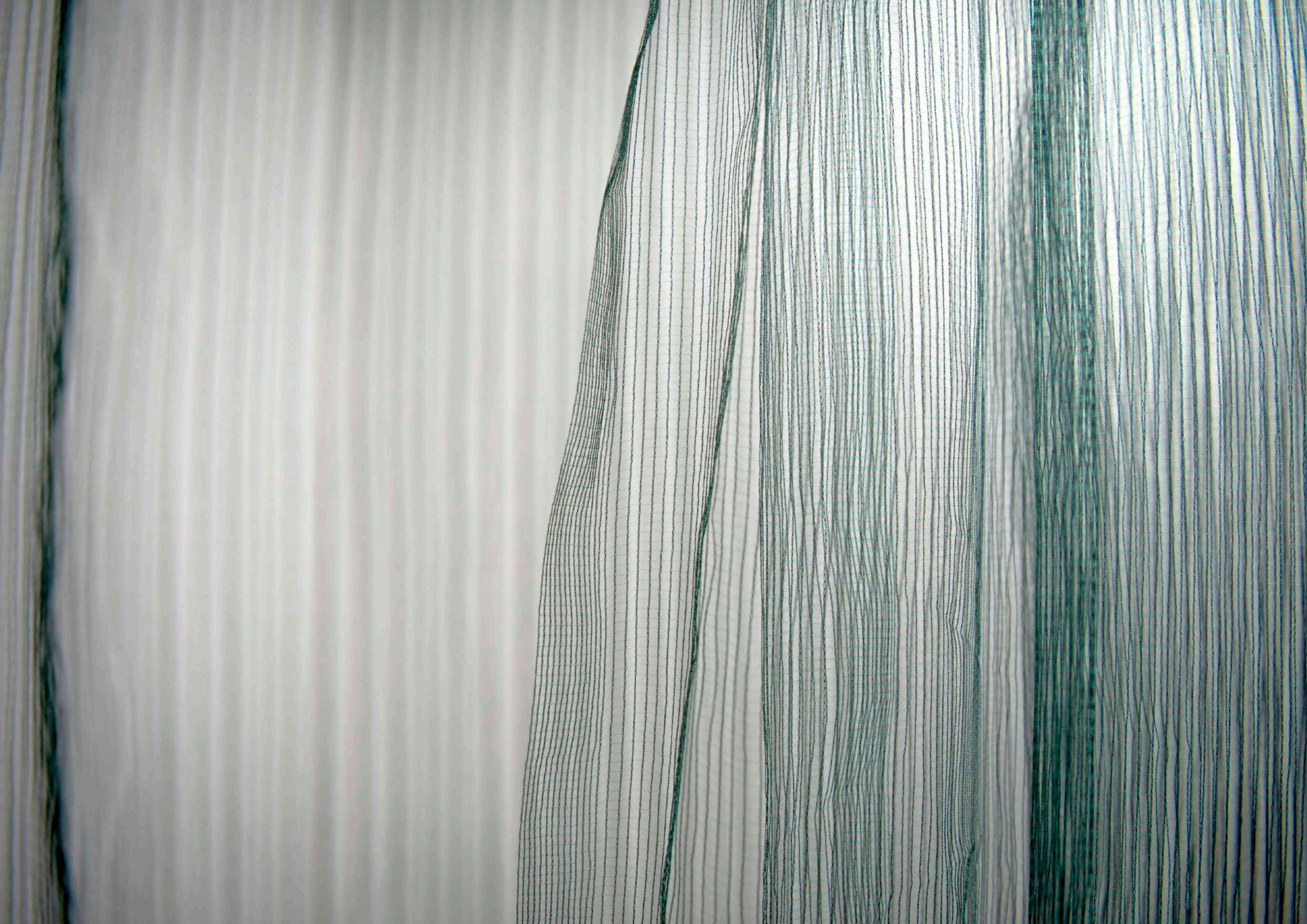








I was committing an act
of transgression,





11



12





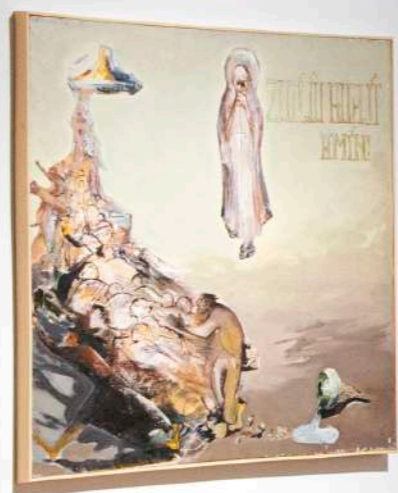
1111





Explosion, 1981
Oil and mixed media
on canvas
95 x 122 cm

Explosion, 1981
Oil and mixed media
on canvas
95 x 122 cm



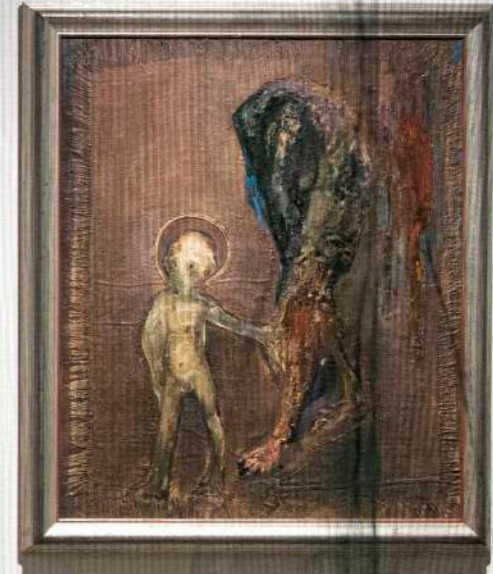
Small white label with text, likely providing information about the artwork.



Small white label with text, likely providing information about the artwork.



Art 101



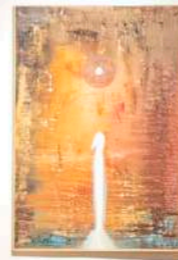
Art 102







PUSHTIMI HAPËSIRËS
INVASION OF SPACE





PUSHTUN HAPESSES
INVASION OF SPACE







Artwork title and artist information.



Artwork title and artist information.

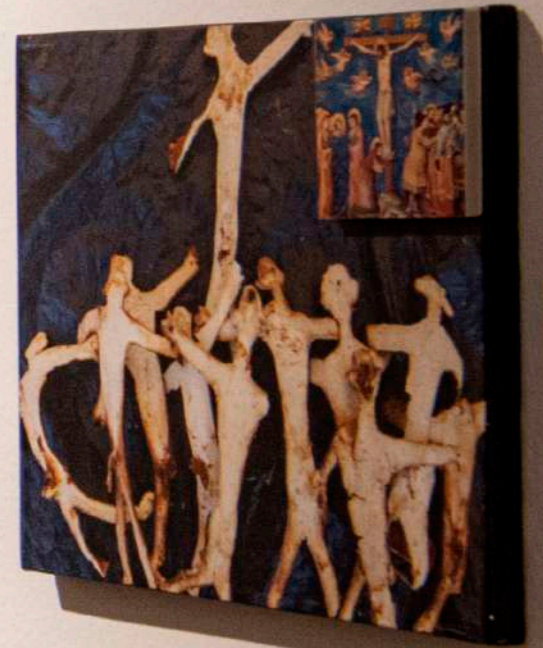




ËSHTE NJË BOTË BURRASH

IT'S A MAN'S WORLD









**LUMTURI BLOSHMI
FROM SCRATCH**

Artist:
Lumturi Blloshmi

Curator:
Adela Demetja

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Genti Gjikola & Adela Demetja

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Exhibition
**LUMTURI BLOSHMI
FROM SCRATCH
23.04 - 27.11.2022**

**ALBANIAN PAVILION
ARSENALE**

**59TH INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA**

Commissioned by:
Elva Margariti / Ministry of Culture of Albania

Artist:
Lumturi Blloshmi

Curator:
Adela Demetja

Assistant Curator & Producer:
Eni Derhemi

Filmmaker:
Tin Dirdlamal

Interactive Media Artist:
Alexander Walmsley

Pavilion Architect:
Johanna Meyer-Grohbrügge

Pavilion Adviser:
Vivien Trommer

Legal Representative of Lumturi Blloshmi:
Ervin Blloshmi

Exhibition Set-up:
Luigi D'Oro architect & Arguzia s.r.l.

Design:
Parallel Studio Tirana

Conservation & Restoration:
Olsi Laska

International PR:
**Kathrin Luz
Nadia Fatnassi**

Transport:
A.S.G sh.p.k

Insurance:
Gebhardt Versicherungsmakler GmbH

Pavilion Interns:
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www.albanianpavilion2022.com



Exhibition
**LUMTURI BLOSHMI
FROM SCRATCH**

**01.09 - 15.10.2023
NATIONAL GALLERY OF KOSOVO**

Artist:
Lumturi Blloshmi

Curator:
Adela Demetja

Filmmaker:
Tin Dirdlamal

Interactive Media Artist:
Alexander Walmsley

Exhibition Architect:
Dea Buza / Apparat Studio

Design:
Joreld Dhama / Parallel Studio

Legal Representative of Lumturi Blloshmi:
Ervin Blloshmi

Exhibition Producer:
Engjëll Berisha

Conservation & Restoration:
Olsi Laska

Insurance:
Gebhardt Versicherungsmakler GmbH

Commissioner:
**National Gallery of Kosovo /
Alisa Gojani Berisha**

Supporters:
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National Gallery of Kosovo**



National Gallery of Kosovo

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Ina Lisi
Eleni Laperi
Valentino Marangi
Alma Mile
Marin Nikolli
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