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CLIN D'OEIL ART & CULTURE FESTIVAL

## KARINA SMIGLA-BOBINSKI: “I want to create art that anyone can participate in.”



BY JOHN BIG

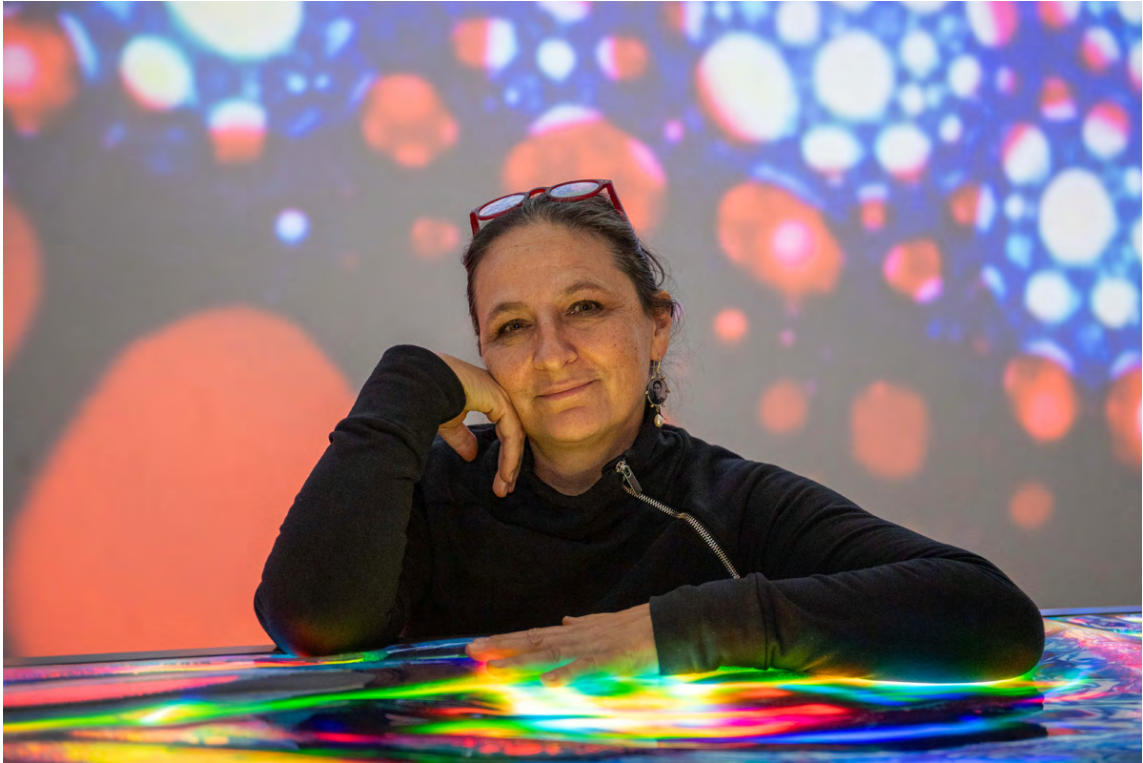


The remarkable exhibition at **the NOVA** Art and Sciences Festival occasioned the audience meeting with the innovative artist **Karina** Smigla-Bobinski, present in Bucharest with ***Simulacra***, an experimental optophysical arrangement with the help of which media technology unites with the philosophy of perception.

With interactive installations such as *ADA*, *Simulacra*, *Polyhedra* or *Kaleidoscope* exhibited in more than 50 countries on 6 continents, **Open-Media** artist is known for the unusual way in which it brings together digital and analogue technologies to create **proprioceptive art**, and the themes it oscillates between science, intuition, expression and cognition.

Her work incorporates their creative method – it is direct art that puts material, time movement and impact on the final result.

Creative spirit “transborder”, **KARINA SMIGLA-BOBINSKI** creates and collaborates on various projects – painting, kinetic sculptures, interactive installations, artistic interventions, mixed reality objects, physical theatre multimedia performances, online projects –, but her artistic research also includes theoretical works on the interaction between society, technology and cultural techniques, so we have proposed a dialogue about how it focuses on the concept.



*KARINA SMIGLA-BOBINSKI Photo – courtesy of the Artist*

***Karina, the field in which you are creatively active is proprioceptive art, which is generally associated with exploring our perception of our own bodies through the somatosensory senses. How do you view this relatively new artistic concept, and what motivated you to adopt it?***

At some point, I began working with a dance company, performing video mapping on stage for their performances. Through this experience, I learned a lot about how my art can influence dancers' bodies but also their movements, and it was this interaction that led me to this art form.

Beyond that, however, I had made a decision to share my art, or more precisely, the creative part of it, with the public. I decided that participants or visitors should always play an active role in my work of art. It's because the traditional way of creating art is to create an artwork and, once you see it, you consider the creative process to be complete. This artwork is then exhibited in a museum or gallery, where visitors can passively engage with it... to watch the artwork, and that's it.

Of course, this engagement happens in our minds, even with our own feelings. When you see a wonderful painting, the effect can be truly profound. However, for me personally, it seems most important today that people participate in the creative process through which they create a work of art and present it in a public space so that those who visit it after can develop it further. In this way, the work never remains at the level of the artistic state I have set. It is merely a framework in which the participants actually take the next steps.



*"ADA" [analog interactive installation / kinetic sculpture / post-digital drawing machine] Photo - courtesy of Karina Smigla-Bobinski*

***ADA, your artwork inspired by the mathematician who created the first computer program, seems to me a relevant example, because you have practically given life to a balloon covered with charcoal sticks, you have conceived an independent artist who creates his own art in cooperation with those who enter the space...***

Yes, because the people who visit this work are the ones who generate *the output*, in fact. They produce those drawings, which essentially represent memories of their movement. When you are in the exhibition space where ADA is located, you can follow these lines and really imagine the movements of the people who have previously passed by. Through the movement of your body, you create a beautiful drawing that remains on the walls of the room, allowing you to actively participate in the creation process of a work that is not complete and continues to evolve.

What I really like about *ADA* is that visitors, the moment they enter space. They are really surprised, because they have never seen a work of art that interacts with them in this way. Practically right away *the switch* in their mind is done automatically towards intuition.

That's why you see people smiling so often, because this experience transports you to a state of mind that takes you back to your childhood, when your mind and body were still united. Through this interaction with *ADA*, visitors are drawn into this intuitive movement mood without losing their ability to understand or perceive the work. Instead, it's their own bodies that actually tell them how to proceed.

That seems to me to be the most important and beautiful part, that what I have created as an artist is continued by you, the visitor, as your body guides you through the creation and experience of art.





As I was saying, I am interested in creating art that everyone can practice in and that why the first *layers* are very tactile, very *body-based* one. I like to say that I'm the one who digs the hole to the Wonderland, but to jump into it, like Alice, you have to do on your own.

Through interaction, through the use of your body, you surrender to the experience, but it always remains your decision, consciously or unconsciously, whether and to what extent you do so. It depends on your personality how deep and how far you go, so that you can gradually come closer to grasping the meaning of the work for you.

For example, among my visitors I have scientists from NASA and mathematicians who work on chaos theory, but also architects who have told me that this work is perfectly suited to explaining what space is.

I admit that this are perspectives that I never thought about when I created *ADA*, especially since, over time, I have collaborated a lot with researchers in various interdisciplinary projects and I have noticed that, in many combination of this kind, everyone thinks that art should illustrate science, but it is not so at all... because art must be art.



*“POLYHEADRA” [analog interactive installation / collaborative compilation / inflatable sculpture] Photo – courtesy of Karina Smigla-Bobinski*

*I return to your decision to give the public an active role in your creative process. Instead of proprioceptive art, you could have chosen the path of immersive art, which also has a participatory foundation and, likewise, has no limits in conceiving the mix of media through which the experience is defined...*

I will respond to your comment indirectly with an example related to ADA. One day I received an email from a gallery in Vancouver where I had exhibited, about a dancer who visited the exhibition and liked it so much that she started dancing there, inspired by my work.

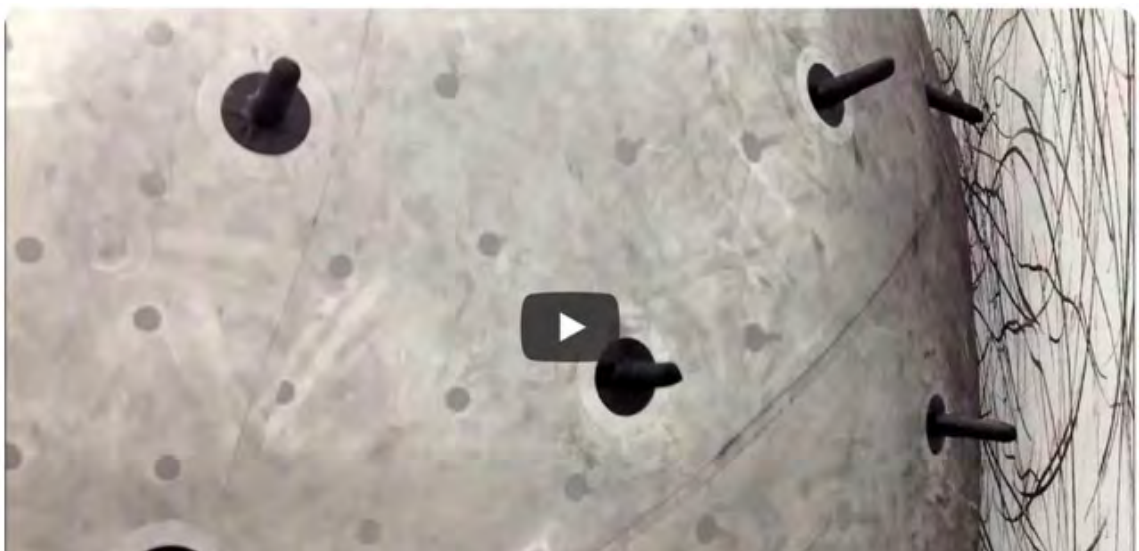
Someone had photographed that little performance and afterword they asked me if they could publish the images. I agreed, under the condition that they would not be used for commercial purposes, because I do not allow any commercial exploitation of my work.

Well, from the moment the photos were published on the Internet, until today many other performers have come to dance with Ada, to create their own shows, to develop their own ideas.



Similarly, there were also musicians who visited my work and told me how impressed they were by the beauty of Ada's sound, even though, when I created this work, I did not consider sound to be something so important or creative. ADA was exhibited in Munich when a musician asked me if he could record the sounds that the sphere produces when interacting with visitors.

This is not so easy to achieve because, beyond its large size, Ada behaves like an independent performer and you really have to know how to approach it. When that balloon moves, you can somehow hear people struggle with the physical world. Honestly, I don't think any form of immersive art could ever give me that experience. The system in ADA is the same as in many of my works and is based on the proportion between the viewer and the work.



If a work of art is about your size, you perceive art as an equal partner with whom you must interact as in a relationship.

However, if the work is larger, much larger than yourself, you feel like a visitor in its world and on you to find your way in it, somehow. You experience this, for example, in POLYHEADRA or KALEIDOSCOPE or even with the ADA room full of drawings. Here, art is omnipotent. Here, you find yourself in a much larger space where you can get lost. You can dive deeper into it or leave it.

On the contrary, when a work of art is smaller, much smaller than yourself, you feel omnipotent this time and you decide whether to reject it or use it for something. For all these experiences, however, you need to be present with your own body, which determines the way you perceive art.

Overall, these perspectives strengthen the ‘constellation’ on very different levels, and I believe that my art covers all of these levels. I introduce people into proprioceptive experiences and depending on which level each participant operates at, they can align their mind or body correspondingly.



„ADA” Foto – courtesy of Karina Smigla-Bobinski

***The public obviously occupies a special place in your creative process. How do you define your hopes and expectations throughout regarding people’s behavior when they come into contact with your work in the future?***

I never ask how people should behave, for the simple reason that it's just my way of creating. On the other hand, I think this is a characteristic of all creative minds ... to relate to the world around us with a great deal of curiosity, always interested in everything that exists or happens.

Personally, my focus is extremely visual, meaning I perceive everything through sight.

For example, right now, trying to translate my mind into words, to share it with you using this verbal form of communication, is always a very difficult exercise for me, as it's not something that comes naturally. I really have to make an effort to find the best way to make myself clear to you, and using this medium makes me feel a certain uncertainty about the result.



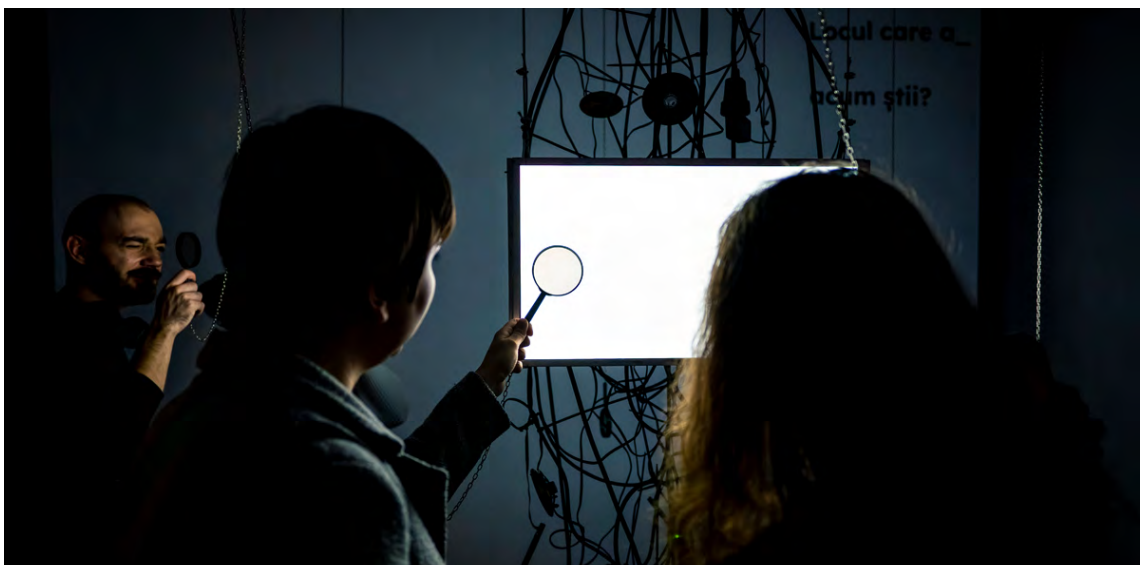
I feel secure, however, with everything that is visual, because I experience the world on a visual level of perception... I constantly collect images of everything that catches my attention—they accumulate within me and often lead to the creation of new works.



This happens regardless of whether I am directly exposed to something or whether it arises from various interactions ... as it was the case with Simulacra I presented in Bucharest, at NOVA. It was born back then out of some discussions about art when I was invited by a Festival in Ljubljana to create a work for them.

Sometimes something appears though a spark which connects things in your mental cosmos and it immediately makes sense to you. From there on an artwork starts crystallize. I see things, then I imagine something based on it, and then I try to materialize what comes to my mind ... in other words, I don't develop something based on the idea that it must be adjusted afterwards to be an artwork in which people are actively involved. No, I don't do that because it's already part of my creative process. Proprioception is for me a synesthetic extension of visual perception.

From then on, however, I find myself constantly switching between creating and perceiving – from a pure personal perspective, of course. Once I create a work, I am its author and hold the copyright on it. But as soon as the work leaves my studio – artistically speaking – it no longer belongs to me but to the whole world. From that moment on, I find myself in the same position as everyone else, with the only difference that I am closer to the ‘heart’ of this artwork.



*“SIMULACRA” [interactive video installation / mental cinema], NOVA Festival, Bucharest (2025) Photo: Petrișor Barbu*

***Karina , a while ago, you said in an interview that "art is my medium of expression, which I use to create outputs from the black box of my body&mind, and in return I receive inputs from the outside world." How does this subsequently shape your artistic journey?***

Perhaps we should start with this image of the black box in which we are constantly captured. We have a few holes – our senses – in this personal black box so that we can exchange with the outside world. This is the only way to perceive anything. With proprioception, however, I also take into account the box itself, which I refer to as a kind of membrane, meaning that I also consider what you can perceive through your body.

Depending on the situation, sometimes I focus on the outside and do art about it. Other times I shift my attention to whatever's going on inside me. Either way, I always hope that by connecting with myself or the outside world, I'll get something in return ... I get closer to reality. I'm not an artist who just create and doesn't care what happens next.

I want to get something nourishing for my next creations, because I don't want to "stew in my own juice" all the time ... you know what I mean? That's why I'm very interested in the audience and I care a lot about what people who experience my work say, I care about what they think and what they explain.



I find it encouraging that, although I never write to seek or provoke reactions to my work, I receive many emails and messages from people who want to share their opinions or experiences related to my work.

For example, after I exhibited ADA in Rome this year, a visitor wrote me that he had been unable to even touch ADA. The set up reminded him of his father, who had lost all ability to communicate coherently due to Alzheimer's disease.

Well, this poetic association that came to the visitor's mind when he saw Ada stuck in my mind now, and I am sure that, in one or another way, I will use it in my future work.





On the other hand, I enjoy observing people's reactions on the internet, even when heated discussions arise, although many of them have never seen the artwork in real life. For example, some may say, "Yes, it's beautiful, but it's not art," or even "Oh, that's nonsense!" but others say, 'No, actually it is art!' and get into an heated debate. It's wonderful to see people who would never go to a museum get into a discussion about what art is or about the significance of expressing your inner world through art. I find it fascinating and flattering when that happens. I also find it interesting that when people discover a video of ADA floating in her space, they initially believe they are watching an AI-generated film. But beyond that, what really matters is that the real artistic experience that comes through my work can't be faked with AI, because that's you who generated it being present.

My art does not exist without you and the other visitors. It is as if my body and your body are both necessary for this work of art... we need our body experience, imagination, and intuition, everything that makes us human, in order to create and perceive this work.



*“ALIAS” [interactive video light installation] Photo - courtesy of Karina Smigla-Bobinski*



*We talked about the layers of your art, which is defined perceptively and proprioceptively at the bodily level, but your works usually have deeper meanings, rooted in philosophy, culture, science, or mythology. For example, at first glance, your interactive installation KALEIDOSCOPE refers to perception from a sensory perspective, but beyond this layer, it questions the very concept of aesthetics and beauty. How do you evaluate whether these meanings really reach the audience?*

I understand what you mean. Painting is my artistic “home”—I started painting in Krakow, Poland, and then continued in Munich, Germany—so I always get frustrated when I see people misunderstanding colors. It took me a while to find my way around them through practice and research.

Through experimentation, I have realized the enormous potential colors have to describe the real and the virtual. So the first impression viewers have of KALEIDOSCOPE is one of beauty. There is a multitude of beautiful colors in this space where you can lose yourself. However, our brain is driven by the desire to understand, and this is where perception comes into play.



Remember what I said about “artwork being very small”? In KALEIDOSCOPE, you have the opportunity to interact with a light box and move a small air bubble or a splash of paint. This makes you feel omnipotent for a moment by being able to influence its state. Up close, you notice strange color changes and wonder how it is possible that the colors do not mix, but through our interaction they can be separated or combined to new compositions.

Participants discover that there are probably only three paints and ask themselves for example: “How can I only see the color red when there is no red color in it?” And when they look into it and dig deeper, the big adventure begins. ... However, when they move away from this small field they get the very colorful experience I mentioned at the beginning, where they lose themselves in the beautiful colors of the projections. This is where KALEIDOSCOPE becomes omnipotent.

Ultimately, everything depends on the perspective people have on the artwork, whether they are actually present in the space engaging with the artwork or whether they are just watching a video clip on a screen about it.



***I return to your creative roots, because their variety is remarkable, from the "divine proportion" of the Renaissance in the interactive installation Polyheadra to the myth of "Trümmerfrauen" in the light triptych ISLANDS. How do you come to invest time and energy in exploring an idea or story in depth?***

I would say that life pushes me to ask questions because I want to understand what is really going on inside me, but also outside of myself. I live in this world and my stories are always influenced by what is happening around me or by where I am at any given moment.

If I were to refer to the legend of Trümmerfrauen as an example: back when I lived in Munich, I was invited to develop a work for the Olympiapark. I went there, interested in those perfect artificial little hills, which visually reminded me of a kind of Teletubbyland. Out of curiosity, I asked how they originated, and I was told that they were made from the ruins of World War II, during which Munich was destroyed, I think by 80 or 90%... I don't remember the exact number.

In order to begin rebuilding the city, they had to remove all the rubble, so they dumped it outside the city, on a piece of wasteland. As a kind of propaganda, the myth of "Trümmerfrauen" was created to encourage women to do this heavy work for little money. There weren't many men left, because almost all of them had been killed in the war and so the workforce, including manual labor was mostly done by women. That's how this story was born and it's still around in Germany today.



*„ISLANDS” [triptych/light installation in public space] Foto – courtesy of Karina Smigla-Bobinski*

When I was invited on this show, I thought that this is what I would like to talk about, but I also thought about the fact that Munich was a place where fascism flourished, and we shouldn't sweep that under the rug... under the hills. I just wanted to extract it from the hills, especially since my mother is German and my father is Polish, so my family was on opposite sides during the war.

I initially started imagine what would happen if I somehow brought three hills onto the water, using its surface as a mirror to reflect the myths hidden inside. I didn't want to limit myself to a single insight, so I decided to elevate this work to a poetic level, from which we could develop something that would inspire us in a meaningful, positive way. This led me to these "islands," which were just green islands during the day, but after dark, you could see sleeping, breathing, naked women appearing under the water, like nymphs.

To render them alive I included the concept of how picture motion is created. Usually in order to create a motion, you need 24 or 12 images running very fast before your eyes – so that your brain is not able to see them all one by one – and create an illusion of movement. However, my idea was to use a single image, and it was the movement of the water that generated all the other 23 images.





*KARINA SMIGLA-BOBINSKI Photo – courtesy of the Artist*

***Prior to medium video, the beginning of your artistic journey was marked by painting, which, as you mentioned, you studied in Krakow and then in Munich. How significant was moving to the West in your subsequent decision to abandon creating spaces on canvas in favor of real ones?***

It is a real pleasure to talk to you, because you are very well prepared and have a clear idea of the direction you want to take with this interview... this is defining for the generation we both belong to, which was formed in the Eastern countries, the former socialist ones, let's say.

As far as I am concerned, I say this because my artistic education in Poland was very good and profound [Karina Smigla-Bobinski was born in 1967 in Polen and attended the Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow – ed.]. We had to learn art history, we had to learn technique and composition, we had to learn color theory in art ... in short, all these things were considered essential to know this once we became painters.

Looking back, my entire knowledge of conceptualization and art techniques is based on this educational foundation, which later opened up a multitude of opportunities for me. However, from my point of view, the problem was that, at least in Poland—I don't know if this was the case in all Eastern Bloc countries—too much weight was placed on knowledge and too little on the courage to perform as you felt, or wished to.

There, I didn't often hear: 'Have fun! Just do it and see what happens!' and that wasn't so good. Yes, back then I learned what colour is and how I can establish a connection between the outside world, my eye, my brain and my hand, but at a certain point I felt that I wasn't really making any progress anymore.

I had learned all that, but only could recreate something. I was too young to commit to that. It wasn't enough for me. I thought there must be many more ways to develop as an artist, and I wanted to explore them. So, I decided to try something completely different, and I chose to do that in a new environment of the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich.



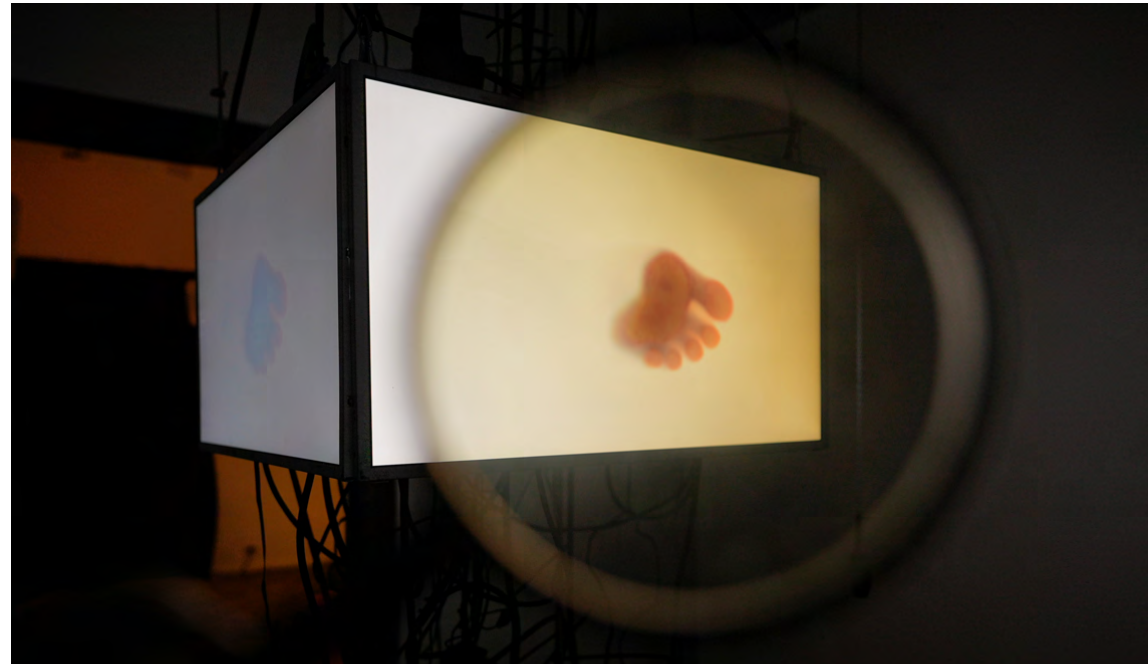
*How did your integration into the academic and artistic environment in Munich unfold?*

I have to smile every time I think about how I arrived at the academy with my small, beautiful still lifes and landscapes. When I saw all the other candidates, most of whom were older than me and had brought large abstract paintings. I got nervous: ‘Oh damn, they're already artists!’ Especially since they acted like it too. However, that feeling quickly faded because then something important happened. You have to talk to some of the professors you want to study with and let them see some of your work, so they can see what you do.

I thought my nude drawings were just brilliant. Yes, brilliant, very classical and very advanced. The professors liked my paintings, but they found the nude drawings... very poor! As a student from the East, my first reaction was to immediately identify the mistakes... What's wrong with the drawings?

Then I was told, "No, it's not about any mistake in the drawing, but the fact that there's nothing of you in it. This drawing can be done by anyone. Where are you in the drawing?"

That's what Prof. Berger told me, who didn't teach painting at all, but visual communication. I was interested only in becoming a painter and wanted to study painting under Prof. Hollmann. Unfortunately, he was already old and couldn't accept any new students at that time. He recommended that I attend Berger's class as a temporarily solution until I could switch to his, what never happened.



Karina Smigla-Bobinski | “SIMULACRA”, NOVA Festival, Bucharest (2025) Photo: Ryu Furusawa

*Looking back, how influential was the encounter with the artist Gerhard Berger, who was also vice-rector of the academy for a time, in changing the perspective of a young student from Eastern Europe?*

Back then, at the beginning, Professor Berger told me he was delighted to have me in his class because, finally, there was someone who could teach the other students how to prepare the canvas and also some things about technique, and I was left wondering:

*"What? What is he talking about? It's impossible for an art academy student not to know how to put the canvas on the easel or not to know how to use paint!"*

For me, that was impossible, but anyway, let's move on. The important thing is that Berger told me that I could paint whatever I wanted and that I didn't have to do anything related to visual communication - which was a very good deal - and I would have a small studio for myself.

It was a small space at the Academy, and later I took another students into my studio, as I didn't want to be alone all the time and needed people to talk to. I want to keep developing, and for that I always need other people around me to get that external input I mentioned earlier.

Although I was alone in that studio by looking for something to change in my art. I began to seriously question where I should go from there. I thought then that, after all, painting is color and form on the surface of a canvas, so I could examine the two elements independently to see which one had more potential for me.



*"KALEIDOSCOPE" Photo - courtesy of Karina Smigla-Bobinski*

Before that, I was doing realistic paintings, so now I started with the form and gave up color in my work. Basically, for two or three months, I only painted in black and white, trying to figure out what new forms I could create. However, I realized that this was not what I was looking for and that realistic form did not inspire me.

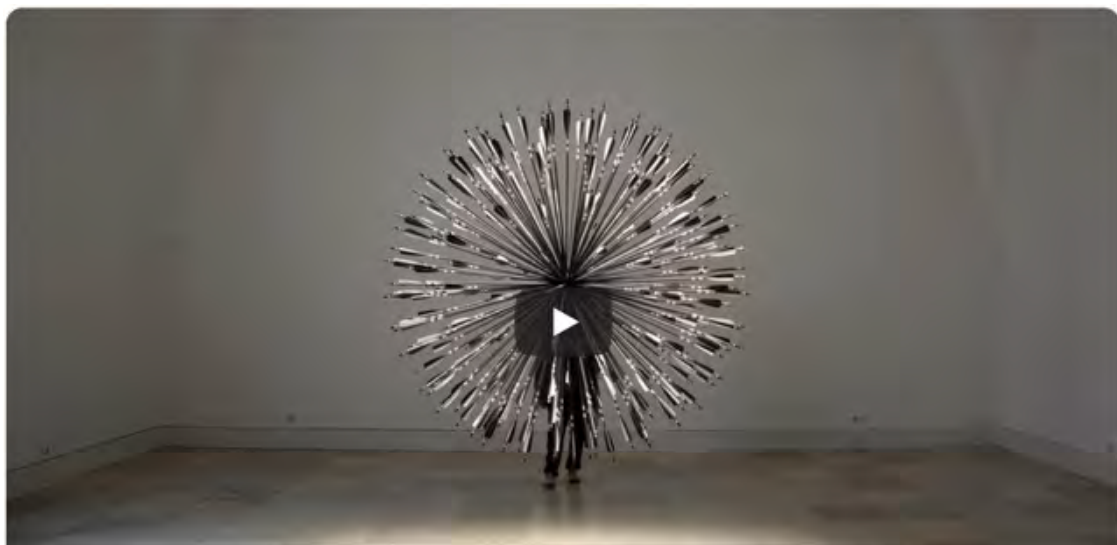


So, I changed the focus of my exploration: "Okay, now I will only use colors and see what comes out of it." You can't imagine how difficult it was for me at the beginning to use only color as the only medium. Each time I tried to paint abstractly, it still looked like a landscape or something and not a manifestation of color itself.

I struggled but when it finally happened, it was as if a big door to a new world had opened for me... I was completely liberated and I dove deep into this world and made my own discoveries there.

At the end, the decision to go to Munich turned out to be wonderful, because, in fact, they didn't care if we knew about painting techniques and art history, but they were interested in you feeling free and creating something uniquely yours, so that they could help you bring out the best art.

By the way, my teacher told me: "It's up to you. You are 100% responsible for what you are doing. Nobody here is going to tell you what to do or what to learn. ... You can do everything, so try different things, choose wisely and don't complain."



***But can a school or a teacher teach someone creativity? I ask this question knowing that you have been running workshops and conferences around the world for 20 years.***

No, it can't teach you to be creative, but instead, it can help you break free, worry less, and not be so anxious about outcomes of your art.

I remember my first critique, so called "Bilderbesprechung". In art school, you get this kind of feedback. It happens at least once a week when someone presents his/her work to the class and the professor, and discuss it.

At first, I took it very personally, but over time you realise that all these things are not about your ego, but about the idea, the art, the process. I also learned that art it's not about people knowing my name, but my work.

Aside from that, since graduating from the academie in Munich, I have stopped relying on art critics, because every time they wrote something about my art without talking to me, it resulted in terrible misunderstandings... Thankfully, nobody really cares about it. It's like a text in a catalogue that you never read or only flip through before turning to the pictures.

The most important thing, in my opinion, is to learn your own artistic language along the way. This is how you perform your work. Just like many other people learn to express themselves. We are not as different as we think.



*Photo – courtesy of Karina Smigla-Bobinski*

On the one hand, for me personally, it is ideal to develop my own ideas, so I definitely do not want to create art just for the art's sake. I want to develop ideas and express them. When I create a work of art, I want it to go deep, and not only to scratch the surface.

On the other hand, I don't want the audience to be slaves to my vision. I don't want to impose my art on anyone and say, 'Now you have to think and feel like me.' I only offer people a variety of possible pieces that they can combine, set aside, transform or reshape into something else.

*Interview by **IOAN BIG** | **CLIN D'OEIL***

Photo header – courtesy of Karina Smigla-Bobinski

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Ioan Big este jurnalist și analist Pop Culture. Este autor al volumelor „Blue, Black & White: Povestea Rolling Stones”, „Sexul... crucea lui Ken Russell”, „Eric Clapton”, „Era Punk” și „Zombies în secolul 21”. Din 2019 este Director al Dracula Film Festival și Senior Advisor al Brasov Jazz & Blues Festival.

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