

## Dejan Kaludjerović *Realities of a Child's Mind*

The work of Dejan Kaludjerović revolves around fragments of memory reaching back to early childhood. It examines the question of growing up, the problems concerning that "coming of age", in which the hallmarks of childhood and youth confront those of the adult world. From the psychoanalytical viewpoint, the paintings, photographs and video installations of Kaludjerović portray the behaviour patterns of children and young people whose specific wishes, yearnings and instincts already act in a completely functional way, indicating Freud's theory of the imposition of models in early childhood.

The art of Kaludjerović is mostly based on pictorial motifs from the mass media or photographs from the family album. The forms these memories take derive from the constant repetition of visual markers, which take the cartoon and decorative motifs of the Seventies, and incorporate them into the photographic, realistic tradition of painting. More recent works have taken direct media illustrations as their starting point and, tossing aside their décor, recall the carefree nature of a child's behaviour pattern which, along with the directness of a child's expression and gaze, transfers social and political reality onto canvas, photograph and video.

As the point of departure for his works done in Belgrade in the 1990s, Kaludjerović offers memories of his own childhood in Tito's Yugoslavia and the repeated social behaviour patterns and rituals of Yugoslav socialism. The visual repetition of a behaviour pattern as *Objet trouvé*, is presented by Kaludjerović in the form of toilet paper, whose rough surface and structure is also associated with the pattern of repetition. Kaludjerović has also used toilet paper as the basis for his drawings and hence their subject. In this way he started an intense battle with structured perceptual models (1998).

This was soon followed by his *Atlas* cycle where the artist took as his background geographical maps of the former Yugoslavia into which he inserted iconographic moments, as for example in the painting *The Boy* (1998). For this work he chose the map of Kosovo on which a boy is painted driving a racing car. Allusions to the fantasies of boyhood, but also to the son of Slobodan Milošević,

Marko, and his love for fast cars (itself an allusion to his hedonistic lifestyle) are all intermixed in this painting. By contrast, the multi-part work *Waiting for the Man* (2001/02) derives its inspiration from a family photograph from 1977 in which the artist's mother and her workmates are waiting to greet Comrade Tito on his return from a visit to Korea. Kaludjerović exposes the familiar ritual of welcoming back a head of state as an empty platitude of civic duty by painting over the background with forest and nature scenes like a kind of camouflage and finally covering up the people in the picture, to the point where, in the third painting, they are reduced to mere line drawings. This skeletisation of memories of his own socialisation in Tito's Yugoslavia is also shown in *Pioneers* (1999). This painting deals with the social status of young pioneers acquired by children at the age of 7. Based on their good behaviour or good school marks at school, this allowed them to progress to the point where, by the age of 13, they could become members of the Socialist Youth (which did not automatically mean membership of the Communist Party). The cross in the picture is a jibe at this uncompromising loyalty to the system, but, as with the Crucifixion, also indicates its premature demise.

Youthful fixation with cultural icons and symbols and their equation with the tools of advertising are prevalent in works from the cycle *The Future Belongs to Us* (from 2002). In these paintings Kaludjerović fuses child motifs from mail order catalogues for children's underwear from the Seventies with those models that have become this artist's trademark and which take on the role of background wallpaper. At the beginning these are motifs painted on plastic tablecloths, which are later transferred onto canvas and supplemented by cartoon characters like Calimero or Pčelica Maja (Maya the Bee). The works from this cycle deal with the relationship between the loss of a child's innocence and the inevitable psychological and social development of children's behaviour patterns. The protagonists in Kaludjerović's paintings and video works, teenagers and adolescents, are forever torn between the step that takes them back into a protected childhood peopled by characters from cartoons and fairy tales, and the step that takes them forward into a consumer-oriented world of glamour in which the economic reality of everyday life and the multiplicity of choice of sexual expression define the nature of the media. On the other hand, references to the Seventies, the artist's own childhood period, indicate a change in the paintings' media content. Whereas the motifs from this period that figure in the works of Kaludjerović were once inviolable, in the present era of child pornography and its explosion onto the Internet, the position of the bodies of children

and young people assumes a quite different connotation – one which frequently evokes consternation in the viewer.



× *Still Waiting for the Man*  
 iz serijala/ from the series *HEDONISM*, 2001  
 akrilik na mušemi/ acrylic on table oil-cloth  
 120 x 240 cm (diptih/ diptych)  
 ljubaznošću kolekcije Siemens, Beč/ Courtesy of Sammlung Siemens, Vienna

However, the poses and styles adopted by Kaludjerović are guided towards a pre-formulation of media images, which opens up the world of children and young people, in both market and technical terms, and automatically places them, as it does adults, in the economic process of production and



× **Who's Afraid of a Big Bad Wolf?**

iz serijala/ from the series ATLAS, 1998  
akrilik i vez na platnu/ acrylic and embroidery on canvas  
43,5 x 53 cm  
ljubaznošću Aglaje Dar/ courtesy of Aglaja Dar

standing beside her. In his video installation Kaludjerović uses this poster as a backdrop against which a similar scene is played out. The performers are dressed in clothes befitting their age and simulate a grotesque scene whose sexual connotations are clearly at the forefront. In this way, Kaludjerović re-examines the mutability of the traditional motifs in the picture, and with them a state of innocence that no longer exists in the visual language of the media. The same is true of the photographic work *Electric Girl* (2003). This series of photographs portrays a heavily made-up little girl of 8 as a teenager about to go out. With back-combed hair, posing provocatively, scantily dressed, indeed, half-naked, (though not yet sexually developed), she looks straight into the camera. The electric guitar she is holding immediately transforms her into a vamp, as she strikes poses reminiscent of Courtney Love, which underlines the question of children imitating adults and playing at "being grown-up", anticipating sexual connotations that are not yet experienced.

As the title *The Future Belongs To Us* suggests, increasingly young children are allowed to make decisions and take up their own positions, which anticipates, or rather, directs their future development. In his latest works, in addition to the usual array of cartoon heroes and figures, Kaludjerović places his

consumption. On the one hand, it robs them of their aura of childhood innocence; on the other, it throws up adolescent problems of all kinds. The perfection of the media backdrop is used here as a screen on which to project identity, where traits that depend on age and the transition between different stages of growing up, no longer seem to have any importance.

The position of adolescents and the reference to sexuality are explicitly portrayed in some of the photographs and video works. Kaludjerović reveals how his perception of children as sex objects has sharpened through the broad spectrum of their media, and hence, their physical, representation in the video work *Bite a Carrot, Bunny! Keine Angst vor kleinen Tieren* (2004). The inspiration for this work is an advertisement from *Burda* magazine from 1980 carrying the slogan "No Fear of Small Animals". The picture shows three children dressed in garments with animal motifs that look like costumes. A little girl is seated in the middle and she has just taken a bite out of a carrot held by the little boy



characters in these positions and paints for them the kind of exterior that we can see, for example, in the children's fashion magazine *Vogue Bambini*. One painting in this cycle, *Can I Change My Career for a Little Fun?* (2006), presents the smooth transition from play to instant maturity, in which awareness, obsession and wishes become calculated. For instance, most of the cartoon figures in the painting *Fire* (2007) gaze in horror at children seated on a park bench spending their spare time assuming the poses of rock and pop stars. The cartoon heroes, which in earlier works usually provided the background have now moved forward in the latest paintings and, like the child protagonists, have come to life.

We can see another simulation of the various heroes and children's idols of Western culture in the series of paintings *Cowboy* (2006 and 2007) and the video work *Are You Ready for a Ride?* (2006). The boy posing as a cowboy in this acrylic on canvas places it among Kaludjerović's earlier traditional works, while the video work, with its animated cartoon characters, owes more to film and television techniques. In the combined work *-Found Footage with animation -* the cartoon hero, whose chief preoccupation, being a child, is to amuse himself, finally dies in a meteorite explosion, which instantaneously transforms the initial carefree quality of the opening scene into its fatal opposite. Only the boy in the cowboy hat sitting idly on a tree-trunk during the scene remains somehow untouched by this event. In this way, we witness a simultaneous onslaught of information with various connotations which, presented in the form of a TV picture, makes no moral differentiation between reports from the battlefield and scenes from action films, but which has a decisive influence on forming behaviour patterns in early childhood. A second version of the video, minus the asteroid attack in the background, is shown by Kaludjerović in the Salon of Belgrade's Museum of Contemporary Art. In this variation the tree on which the boy sits is actually set up in the museum space, while a video film of the boy is projected behind it. By transferring the whole scene into a gallery, Kaludjerović gives the heroes and protagonists of his pictures a three-dimensional quality, creating a laboratory of real and pictorial scenes which transport the observer back into his own childhood, but at the same time, through the behaviour of the individuals portrayed, confront him directly with some complex issues of our time.

Walter Seidl

Walter Seidl is a writer, curator, and artist based in Vienna.