



HESTIA

ART RESIDENCY &
EXHIBITIONS BUREAU

COPPER ON FIRE

LALA RAŠČIĆ

12.3.- 28.4.2023.

Circle 1 – panning

Oj, tepsijo kalajlijo...¹

*In hissing flames huge silver bars are roll'd,
And stubborn brass, and tin, and solid gold;
Before, deep fix'd, the eternal anvils stand;
The ponderous hammer loads his better hand,
His left with tongs turns the vex'd metal round,
And thick, strong strokes, the doubling vaults rebound.²*

The sound of a patinated mechanical pan turning resonates at Lala Raščić's exhibition *Copper on Fire*. The sound of the turning metal is hypnotic and meditative, and is connected with the tradition of panning maintained throughout most of the Dinaric zone, Sandjak and Kosovo, and is rooted in the Ottoman era. It is an old style of singing, mostly practiced by women, accompanied by turning a shallow and round copper pan, which, like most copper dishware, must be tinned.

People sang and made music accompanied by a pan, they told stories and shared secrets since the pan was used to make pies. Not least, people ate and digested accompanied by a pan, as is still done today. The entire cycle of life – suffering, indifference, happiness – is reflected in that round object. The turning and twirling achieved by a strong swing could also be associated with the Sufi tradition, that is, with the symbolism of the rotation of the Earth itself.

A copper pan as a symbol of panning is one of the circles, more vividly, it could be said it is one of the tondas which form this multimedia exhibition. Censorship imposed on women by patriarchal social norms and models is related to each of them.

Public performance of music by women was not part of the normative behavior within the patriarchal

¹ The song *Oj, tepsijo kalajlijo* (*Oh, tin pan*) is one of the most common melodies performed during panning.

² <https://poets.org/poem/iliad-book-xviii-shield-achilles>

community, nor could women afford instruments, so they created idiophonic instruments from the kitchen utensils that surrounded them – spoons, cups, pans.

Panning can be interpreted as an act of resistance, a release of a woman's voice along the rhythmic noise of copper dishes, which through rotation metamorphose into magical instruments just as the pan singers move into a parallel world, a world of the freedom of expression, through rhythm and song. While creating this exhibition Lala Raščić refers to literature, among others the essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* written in 1975 by the French feminist and philosopher Hélène Cixous, in which the author sets as the goal of the theoretical concept the creation of a feminist voice, that is, its release, which is only possible through the act of writing. However, women's writing is closely related to body existence, and throughout history both were suppressed by the patriarchal society. Cixous' words (...) *and I, too, didn't say a word, didn't show anything; I didn't open my mouth, I didn't repaint my half of the world*³ (...), through the act of panning turn into: *I said, I showed, I opened my mouth and repainted the whole circle of the world....* Cixous' words relate to a woman, on one side of the circle a panning singer, on the other Medusa herself, the woman, *who surprised and horrified by the turmoil of her instincts (for she has been led to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman possesses divine peace) accuses herself (paraphrase) of being a monster.*⁴

Circle 2 – Gorgo

*On all sides, through the fields and along the road, he saw the petrified forms of the people and animals who looked Medusa in the face. However, he did not directly see that horror of faces, he saw their reflection on the smooth surface of the bronze shield that he wore in his left hand: and while deep sleep held both the snakes and the one who was carrying them, he cut off her head in one blow, and from the mothers blood sprang the swift-winged Pegasus and his brother.*⁵

Cixous rejects Freud's interpretation of the Medusa myth, where in the short essay *Medusa's Head* (written in 1922, published in 1940) he interpreted Perseus' beheading of Medusa as a fear of castration, that is, a fear of a man of becoming a woman.⁶ For Cixous, it represents men trying to silence women's voices. Let's remind ourselves that the story of Medusa, the only mortal of the three Gorgon sisters, begins with her extraordinary beauty, in which her lush hair stood out. Like her sisters, Medusa was a priestess in Athena's temple where, according to some versions of the myth, she was raped by Poseidon. Athena punished her for desecrating the temple and turned her into a winged monster with bronze arms whose hair became a nest of poisonous snakes, while her terrifying gaze would have the power of petrifying people. Later, after Perseus had killed Medusa, he presented her head to Athena, and the goddess would carry it on her chest to frighten her enemies.

³ Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*; Keith Cohen; Paula Cohen, *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4. (Summer, 1976), pp. 875-893, p. 876

⁴ Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*; Keith Cohen; Paula Cohen, *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4. (Summer, 1976), pp. 875-893, p. 876

⁵ milosavpopadic.wpcomstaging.com/ovidijeve-metamorfoze, translation of Serbian version of *Ovid's Metamorphoses*

⁶ Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Keith Cohen; Paula Cohen *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4., 1976., pp. 875.-893., p. 884

In accordance with the previous multimedia research approach to work and long-term projects that often deal with the re-contextualization and subversion of myths, mythological characters or literary works, this time Raščić investigates this unfortunate female character. Although a script is usually the basis of her works, which is usually spoken by the artist-performer herself, in this case the video performance *GORGO* (2019-2021) is based exclusively on physical-visual expression with background sounds and music. The artist appropriates the (archaic) *gorgoneion*, the depiction of the androgynous and monstrous Medusa, which appears in the archaic era as an apotropaic motif on temples, graves, tombstones, houses and money. It was used against spells and bad luck, and it has its origins in the aforementioned legend according to which Athena had Medusa's head on an *aegis*-shield on her chest.

Just as the representation of Medusa's head from the archaic to the classical period of Greek art was transformed from a grotesque (apotropeic) to an aesthetically intoned representation⁷, the appropriated archaic grotesque gorgoneion by Lala Raščić takes on different forms and media – mask, glass objects, drawings, video and finally her form itself – the form of a contemporary woman-performer with a wide-set stance. She becomes a medium for restoring Medusa's voice, for the reformation and remythization, of her character.

Circle 3 – shield

*Then he forged a large and heavy shield for Achilles,
then made him armor that shone brighter than fire,
he made the helmet so heavy that it sat firmly on his forehead,
he placed a beautiful helmet and on it arranged a golden tassel
and he made gaiters of soft tin.*⁸

The Hephaestus who holds all the circles together in this exhibition is Nermina Beba Alić – the only woman coppersmith in Sarajevo, responsible for producing the pan and Medusa's armor – the shield, the mask, the gaiters, bracelets, the breastplate. Alić is also the rare craftswoman who has preserved an operational forge in her shop at Baščaršija, with some of the tools she uses being over five hundred years old. Medusa, naturally, did not have a shield, so in the exhibition it represents the male principle. At the end of the video work *GORGO*, bare breasted with a gorgoneion mask on her face, the artist carries armor for arms and legs on a shield in her hands. Similar to the principles of theater scenography, different meanings can be attributed to the shield in that scene, so it can also represent a tray – from the one who defends herself, Medusa becomes the one who gives. The defense of the shield grows into the openness of the pan. The video ends with the tray and armor being thrown to the floor. Medusa is liberated.

⁷ The most famous example is the Roman *Medusa Rondanini*, Roman, imperial, 1st-2nd century AD, a copy of the Greek original from the 5th century BC. Material: marble. It is kept in the Glyptothek in Munich.

⁸ Translation of Serbian version of Homer, *Ilijada*, Knjiga komerc, Belgrade, 1997, p.114

Circle 4 – eye

*There earth, there heaven, there ocean he design'd;
The unwearied sun, the moon completely round;
The starry lights that heaven's high convex crown'd;
The Pleiads, Hyads, with the northern team;
And great Orion's more refulgent beam;
To which, around the axle of the sky,
The Bear, revolving, points his golden eye,
Still shines exalted on the ethereal plain,
Nor bathes his blazing forehead in the main.⁹*

Homer's description of Achilles' shield showing the entire universe is the first example of ekphrasis – a description of works of art or craft in a literary work. A work of art is being described by another work of art, just as in this exhibition one circle, one artistic medium, describes and evokes another and just as the description of a shield written by one writer evokes the description of a shield by another writer. Perseus' shield's front side, given to him by Athena, resembled a mirror – when he approached Medusa, Perseus turned his gaze away from her so that she wouldn't petrify him and then he cut off her head using the shield-mirror. That shield, unlike Achilles', absorbs the scenes and elements from the real world – Medusa's gaze bounces off it, losing its power. The work *The Dig* (2019) consists of a series of *verre églomisé* (gold leaf and paint on glass) abstracted objects derived from the canonized representation of the archaic gorgoneion, which cast shadows and reflections on the wall. Among them are different versions of Gorgon's eyes, her "delayed glances" that made her disembodied. *Because there are so few women who have recovered their bodies¹⁰*, writes Cixous. Medusa is reborn only after returning to her body, after surpassing woman-herself as a decoration inscribed in a circle and, in accordance with the etymology of her name (from the Greek *medeion*), becoming the one who protects and rules.¹¹ At that moment, the gorgoneion will be rescued from the shield-aegis of Zeus and numerous mythical heroes, and an age of a modernized, reformed matriarchy will begin.

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⁹ <https://poets.org/poem/iliad-book-xviii-shield-achilles>

¹⁰ Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*; Keith Cohen; Paula Cohen, *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4., 1976., str. 875-893, str. 886

¹¹ www.etymonline.com/word/medusa