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# contents

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Cover:  
**Liu Hong**

**in focus**

10-13 Shisha  
 The International agency  
 for contemporary South  
 Asian crafts and visual arts

**artist of the issue**

14-19 Liu Hong

**theme: art & technology**

20-21 Lost in technology  
 The Work of Art in the Age  
 of iPhone and iPad

22-24 Art & Technology

26-27 When art met technology

28-29 The dialectic relationship  
 between art and beauty

32-34 The digital puzzle and  
 the invention act

New art for new time

40-41 The Art of Digital

42-43 In the presence of Love

In the presence of Art

44-46 Art And Technology

48-51 Can Art and Technology

Drive Social change?

**articles**

35-37 Crossing Borders at the  
 THE BIENNALE GIOVANI  
 in Monza

52-53 After the war:  
 Young artists from former  
 Yugoslavia in Italy

54-58 Last Drop

**in every issue**

3 Editorial Board

Contents

5 Editorial

6-9 Art News

# After the war: Young artists from former Yugoslavia in Italy

By Gabriella Bologna



**S**INCE THE RISE OF YUGOSLAV CONFLICTS IN THE 1990S, EU member states are targets of migrations from Serbia, Bosnia, Kosovo and other now independent countries. Italy, for its proximity to the Balcanian area, has been a privileged destination not only for people who escaped from wars but also for people in search of better study and work opportunities. A number of immigrants from former Yugoslavia have now been living and working in Italy for almost two decades. Some of them, born in the early 1980s, have attended Italian schools, universities and academies. A few of them are now young and promising artists who started exhibiting in Italy and abroad in recent years.

Tarik Berber born in Banjaluka, Bosnia, in 1980, moved to Italy with his family when he was eleven and now lives and works in Bozen and Florence where he studied at the Fine Arts Academy. At twenty years old he started exhibiting his paintings and attracted the attention of several private galleries. "Spectral naturalism" is the term used for his works by Marialivia Brunelli, curator of his first one man show at Villa Pisani, Stra, in 2006: dark, disturbing but

somehow mystical portraits, often made after "études d'après nature" of friends and acquaintances. What hides behind the staring expression of his figures is a complex interaction of experiences. Uneasiness of a migrant from a country devastated by a conflict, reminiscences of Italian 15th century Florentine painters, psychological analysis of the contemporary man and the human condition. "When I make a portrait" says the artist "there is a moment when

the model diverts his attention. In that moment I find the intimate truth of his essence and I try to fix it in my canvas". The search of identity is a peculiarity of another Balcanian artist, Nebojsa Despotovic. Born in 1982 in Belgrade, Serbia, he graduated at the Fine Arts Academy in Venice, where he is currently artist in residence at the Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa. In the last years his paintings have been on display at several group and solo exhibitions, and in 2011 he has been selected for the section of young artists from Fine Arts Academies at the Padiglione Italia of Venice Biennale. His portraits are populated by ghostly figures which share with Tarik Berber ones a similar uneasiness and solitude. His landscapes seem to be the portraits counterpart: empty spaces with indefinite lines and grey tonalities, sometimes evoking abstract forms more than real places. Human solitudes, bare interiors and common use objects are created from newspapers and old photographs to build an image both of the individual and pop culture. His work is not confined only to paintings, but he explores collage, photography and drawings through different techniques: "it is an art which continually seeks the meaning of the personal identity which summons emotion from the spectator whilst challenging him intellectually" says the artist. "I try to analyze an image at different levels of perception: form, composition, psychology. I believe painting is still a medium able to explore and reach contents through form".



In Belgrade was born also Iva Kontic in 1982. Graduated at Milan Fine Arts Academy, she currently lives and works between London, Milan and Belgrade. Painter and video artist, she has a straight documentary style which focuses on iper-realistic, sharp-focused portraits on one side, and different spaces (interiors, cities, landscapes) on the other. Memories and stories of her native country, former Yugoslavia, appear in 2009 videos such as Blue train, focused on the luxurious train of the former president Tito, and Balkan Flambé, an allegorical work that combines the "symbolic quality of objects and food together with the performative aspect of physical action to comment the recent conflicts in the Balkans" says Iva. Her recent video A Urban Story explores the relationship between personal memories and their interaction with the urban spaces of different western European cities. Invited to show the sights related to their personal experience of the place, rather than those representative city-sights of historical and cultural importance, three people introduce the urban landscape through mixture of general information, anecdotes and comments.

Iva Kontic's work is the sign that a political and historical heritage may be the starting point to search a new cultural identity in contemporary European borderlands: a challenge that several migrant and second generation artists are taking.

