

## *Fame*

Thus far, Jurica Pušenjāk has focused on what might be called icons. In his monumental painting tribute to all bearers of the Order of the People's Hero of Yugoslavia, he depicted these figures to remind us of the importance of remembering the anti-fascist struggle. He then turned his attention to the ideology we inhabit today—liberalism. Using a Pop Art style, he reproduced banknotes and their segments, making subtle semantic interventions to alter their messages. Now, he has returned to portraiture, painting the faces of people who shape our understanding of the world we live in – politicians, dissidents, high-ranking clergy, entrepreneurs, and spiritual leaders. Simply put, those we recognise as famous.

This can be seen as a commentary on how the media shapes our awareness, our views, and our daily lives. Some of the figures in Pušenjāk's portraits are more familiar to us than others, yet each represents narratives we encounter through the internet, television, or newspapers. In all this, we are not merely passive spectators. One of the biggest tricks of civil society, an illusion that sustains it despite its many contradictions and injustices, is the illusion of choice given to its subjects. This manifests in democratic elections, where a political option is legitimised by a relative majority of votes, as well as in the (supposed) freedom of the press. In narratives surrounding those in power, play along, like spectators in an amphitheater or viewers of a Western, picking our heroes and villains and rooting for them. By reading left- or right-leaning publications, listening to podcasts, and reading books, we adopt the arguments of a particular stance and build our own ideological identities. We then attempt to defend those views when political debates move from parliamentary halls to our local cafés. Yet all these conflicts are illusory, for, ultimately, decisions are made by those who hold real power in society, that is, those who control capital (or – the means of generating it).

Jurica Pušenjāk does not settle for superficial activism that merely highlights the nature of the system—in this case, the illusion of democracy created by mass media—only to appease one's conscience with a mildly sarcastic commentary from an intellectual high ground, declaring society a circus while placing oneself above it. Instead, he wholeheartedly embraces his role and attempts to act within it—he wants to participate in the spectacle as the loudest fan in the stands. His smallest act of defiance involves hanging upside down the portraits of people he regards as

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destructive and detrimental to the future of the world (a gesture inspired by the scene in Zafranović's *Occupation in 26 Pictures*, where Mussolini's portrait is hung upside down). This gives us a sense of his political temperature. Among the good guys, for instance, are those who have sacrificed their freedom to expose war crimes, thus becoming the moral beacons of the 21st century—Julian Assange, Edward Snowden, and Chelsea Manning. Included here, too, is Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, demonised by the West for achieving prosperity for his citizens by resisting the economic colonisation of the petrodollar. Upside down are his assassin, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate and U.S. President Barack Obama, as well as Obama's alleged ideological opponent Donald Trump and the unfortunate star of ecological activism and capital, Greta Thunberg.

Yes, maybe all this seems childish and inconsequential, leading only to futile debates over personal beliefs, agreements, and disagreements, in some provincial café after an exhibition opening. But at least Pušenjak has had the nerve to put his convictions on display so boldly and provocatively, exposing them to coffeehouse criticism and mockery, to those last, miserable bastions of freedom left to us as subjects of capital. The depicted personalities use their fame as they see fit, primarily for their own benefit and that of their inner circles. Such is the nature of politics, business, and art. At first glance, it might look like Pušenjak has used his "fifteen minutes of fame" for intimate, ideological exhibitionism. However, his exhibition is also an attempt to question the responsibility with which public figures use their powerful media position.

The act of rebellion is insignificant. Pušenjak's, or anyone's, condemnation or endorsement of a public figure will not change anything. Still, one has to start somewhere, and then keep going – moving beyond galleries and getting up from the café tables.

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