



Collecting

Balkan artists step into the spotlight

Aside from big names such as Marina Abramović, the region is little known globally, making it ripe for collectors

Naima Morelli 5 HOURS AGO



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In the winter of 1994, during a moment of ceasefire in the Bosnian war, a mother and her daughter went to the market in their Bosnian hometown of Bihać. To return home, they had to cross a bridge covered with human bodies and dogs' carcasses. They did so, walking for three minutes which felt like half an hour, as the mother covered her daughter's eyes.

This episode, which happened to artist Selma Selman's mother and sister, is the premise of her video "Crossing the Blue Bridge", the centrepiece of her solo exhibition at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, opening in June. "I feel that bridge represented all the bridges we have to cross in life to get where we want to go," says Selman.

Of Romani origin, Selman is known for her multimedia art, drawing from autobiographical experiences of discrimination and violence. She is part of a generation of artists who lived through the war as children and who are exploring personal and collective memories with their work. Now moving beyond the Balkans and reaching international markets, they are drawing renewed commercial attention to the region.



Still image from 'Crossing the Blue Bridge' (2024) by Selma Selman



Still image from 'Crossing the Blue Bridge' (2024) by Selma Selman © Courtesy Selma Selman (2)

Perhaps best known today is Kosovo-born Petrit Halilaj. [Fresh from a commission at the Metropolitan Museum](#), he will be present at Art Basel with an installation on the facade of the Merian hotel of stylised five-pointed stars, symbolising hope for a better future. Successful artists include Brilant Milazimi, a Kosovan whose haunting paintings are populated by distorted human figures; Bosnian Lana Čmajčanin, who connects historical events with the current European geopolitical landscape; and Pristina-born artist-activist Dardan Zhegrova, whose work centres on gender and human rights.

“Many of these artists want to contribute to an open democratic society with their art,” says Antje Hundhausen, responsible for the Germany-based Art Collection Telekom, which includes young Balkan artists such as Radenko Milak, Šejla Kamerić and Halilaj. “They are attentive observers of the political changes that occurred after the fall of the Iron Curtain.”

Sociopolitical concerns and a constant interrogation of borders, geography and belonging are common interests for artists from the Balkans, a region which has never been easily definable. While the countries of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and European Turkey are usually included, to some the region also extends to Romania and Slovenia.



'Cease' (2024) by Šejla Kamerić is a call for peace unveiled during the opening week of the Venice Biennale © Aleksandra Vajd

Italian collector [Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo](#) says that art from this part of the world often addresses a complex and multi-faceted social history, reflecting on identity, displacement and violence. “Artists like Mircea Cantor and Andra Ursuța do it from a perspective of social critique,” says Sandretto Re Rebaudengo. “Others, like Anri Sala and Bojan Šarčević, are interested in exploring these themes through political and cultural transformations; and others like Victor Man and Djordje Ozbolt, through an original reinterpretation of art history.”

While Balkan art as a whole gathered attention in the early 2010s with shows at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the New Museum in New York, it remains under-represented internationally. To Art Collection Telekom’s Hundhausen, this constitutes a good opportunity for collectors who want to look off the beaten track: “What is bought today with reason and heart will be of increasing cultural and financial value tomorrow.”

Works are still competitively priced. For Serbian artist Vuk Ćuk, who examines capitalist logic, trends and technology, prices are €2,000-€30,000. Doruntina Kastrati, who represented Kosovo at the Venice Biennale this year, has works priced €2,500-€35,000, while Kamberić has a range of €2,000-€25,000.



Installation view of 'A picture of pistachios destroying the railroad tracks to cut off the path of delights' (2023) by Doruntina Kastrati © Courtesy Eugster. Photo: Ivan Zupanc

Jan Eugster of Eugster gallery in Belgrade has witnessed great curiosity towards the Balkans at international art fairs, but the most frequent comment he receives is still: “I don’t know any artist from ex-Yugoslavia, except Marina Abramović.”

As the grandmother of performance art, Abramović has brought the most attention to the region. Even so, she has always felt like an outsider, she says: “Our basic problem is that talented people are seldom acknowledged in the country. It took me 45 years to get a show in Belgrade, when I was in every museum in the world already.”

She describes her 1997 Venice Biennale work “Balkan Baroque”, where she washed cow bones, as a total political disaster: “The minister of culture of ex-Yugoslavia said that a work that smelled so bad couldn’t possibly represent the country.”

Kamerić, whose work “Cease”, addressing belonging and national identity, was exhibited in Venice during the Biennale, describes her native Sarajevo today as a city whose intellectual and artistic power endures despite the lingering trauma of war. But she reckons that to be acknowledged internationally, Bosnian artists need to live and work abroad, something that is more common for younger generations.



'Should I tell you something?' (2023) by Brilant Milazimi © Courtesy the artist

Perhaps in part thanks to this diaspora, Balkan galleries are finding greater demand abroad; Plan B (Romania), Eugster (Serbia) and LambdaLambdaLambda (Kosovo) have expanded internationally with galleries, fair participation and more. To Mihai Pop of Plan B, the reason Balkan art is so appealing is that it represents the pulsing heart of a culture that has been lost in western Europe, flattened by consumerism. That, and a pervasive Slavic black humour.

“We all have been several times to Paris and London and Berlin and all the usual suspects,” says Jan Eugster. “The Balkans are not so westernised, not so conventional. That makes their art dramatically interesting, and a little bit undiscovered.”

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