



GORAN BERTOK / THE OMEN

interview by Mayliss & Lukas Zpira
may 19, 2018



My first encounter with Goran dates back to early 2001. We kept missing each other for weeks. When I had a gallery in South of France, “the Weird Factory” I discovered his work. I saw a first exhibition, then another. I was impressed by his large and beautiful black and white square prints and especially his series “Omen”. As I never could be there for the openings, I couldn’t meet him, so I started spreading the word around that I

wanted to do an exhibition of his work. I tried to get in contact with him, looked on the web. No luck. Few weeks passed. Then, out of the blue, I see this tall guy at my door. He was looking pretty serious. He always does. He looked at me and just said with a strong accent from the Balkans: “I’m Goran Bertok”. He had his complete exhibition in the trunk of his car. We opened a show a few days later. It’s only when I started writing for this interview that I realised we hadn’t seen each other in 10 years. I curated an event in 2011 where I asked him to present his new work. We were few times in the same cities, never at the same time. Our path crossed again in 2013. I was travelling through Eastern Europe with my daughter Mayliss for our *Chaos Chronicles*, so decided to take the opportunity to stop by Ljubljana where Goran lives. He was there and hosted us for few days. It was hard for me to believe it was only the third time we were meeting and that we haven’t since. I think of him as a close friend, part of my clan. He came in Avignon last year and stayed at my place, but I was not there. I dropped him a message over a month ago to do a Skype chat for this interview. We made a joke about it with a reference to “Waiting for Godot”. The Skype never could happen. One of us missing the call, connection not working properly, one of us in travel. We decided to do the interview through emails.

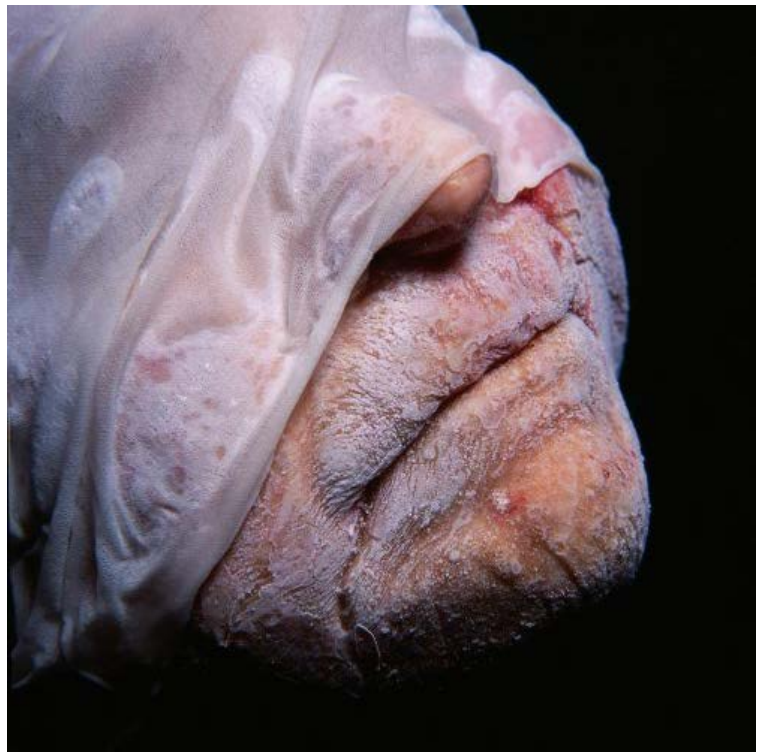
Mayliss & Lukas Zpira:

First, tell us a little bit about your background, where are you from and how did you start photography?

Goran Bertok:

I was born in Slovenia, at that time, a part of Yugoslavia. I spent nearly thirty years in the socialist system. I never felt that this was a big problem for me. We could travel around Europe and

the world without a problem and I was living on the border with Italy, crossing the border without problems, having many relatives on the other side of the border (in Trieste). Now, looking back, I could say, we lived a kind of experiment. I think it is a strong experience to feel the political system changing, passing from socialism to capitalism. And to see the country going into the civil war. But Slovenia was lucky, we just had a small, ten days war. It was 1991. In 1989 I got a degree in journalism. Some days later I had to do my military service in the Yugoslav National Army. As a matter of fact, I had a plan to get out as soon as possible. I was lucky enough to get out after one month with the diagnosis of Psychopathic personality. One year later, in 1990 I had my first solo exhibition. I was thinking about studying painting after the secondary school but I didn't have enough courage to do it (I was not sure I had enough talent); I was studying journalism when I decided to deal with photography, maybe because I was thinking you can learn faster the way to make a good photo than a good painting – I discovered later that it isn't true. I started to deal with photography quite late, I was about 21 or 22 years old. I had no wish to learn photography in an institution, but I was very ambitious when I started, setting myself high goals, studying big photographic names ... I discovered soon that it was the human body that interested me the most in photography.



M&L:

Could we have a short introduction regarding your various series and the motivation behind them?

Goran:

The first series which I now call Early works, is dealing with the naked human body, mostly male, sometimes with animal heads and played (staged) violence on the human body; the idea behind the cycle was that we are just piece of meat and that our destiny is to die and that important part of our life is pain. In the second cycle, Omen (and later proceeding with cycles Stigmata, 999, 23) the violence became real, the body was really beaten, cut. The main work was done with BDSM/slave-mistress relationship couple and with some other collaborators. For many years I was looking for the opportunity to work with corpses. Visitors are photo portraits from the crematorium. I discovered the difference from one skull to another; the changing, transforming of a skull in the fire, under high-temperature

conditions. In a way, I was portraying “life” after death, something like a mimicry of a living person’s face. In Post Mortem I made a route from fire to ice. What do we see on dead persons face? I think I just make portraits of peoples´ last moments, frozen in ice. I spent dozens of hours with these human remains, alone, in silence. The results are some photos and some deep thoughts. My statement is that there is no death, there is just the end of life. For me, there is a big difference. Fire, ice and liquid. Red is about a child, dead baby in formaldehyde. For me, this corpse is like the Icarus story – but this being died before life even started.

L:

The OMEN series is the first that caught my eyes. The images are made of strong contrasts. The subjects give the spectator something really powerful. How did you meet and worked with your models and how did you get to this level of intimacy?

Goran:

At that time I was involved in the S&M scene and deeply interested by the subject. I had a long story about the relationship with my body, at some point, I used to hate it. I was at war with it. I was looking for somebody who really could resist a big quantity of violence – because I realised, I could not go further in my photo work just playing violence. Fake violence was not enough anymore. It was not the thing I wanted to show on my photos. A friend of mine started an SM relationship with a masochist who was looking for a mistress. She introduced us. We become very close to each other, spent a lot of time together. He was older than I was. He really knew a lot about BDSM, he knew mistresses from all parts of the world, but this wasn’t all. He belonged to another generation, I was very interested by his life, his experiences ... about his private life, family life ... And he was

a clever and interesting person. We made the biggest part of so-called SM series, but he was not the only one with whom I collaborated. The form was the same: I didn't pay for "posing" and I became friend with most of my models.

M:

How did you interact with the people while you were shooting, did you direct them to get what you wanted, or just took what they gave to you?

Goran:

I was directed the events, like a film or a theatre director. Before the shooting I drew the setting, chose the body positions, and even drew the wounds I could say I was a sculptor who was working with meat instead of clay. The ritual between two could take his own unpredicted way, but I had potential photos in my head. Sometimes, something unexpected and interesting happened, making me start to work on a new scene, correcting the position of the body, lights...

L&M:

Often, everything related to SM representation is either grotesque or glamorised, cliché and with "mises en scene". Your photos may be also really prepared but we don't feel that looking at your pictures. The subject feels really isolated giving a sense of loneliness, even sadness. Is it something you wanted to create from the start of the project, or did it happen naturally?

Goran:

Usually, I had my plans, my drawings, but before starting the real shooting, we played the ritual between mistress and slave, taking our positions in which I was an observer, the director and

sometimes the participator. We really went very far in the sense of the violence. The model/slave went into a sort of trans, sometimes going “on the other side”, leaving his body for minutes, observing his own body from the distance. I was studying the relationships between the actors because I didn’t want to put them in the wrong situation. I wanted to know what was happening in the minds and bodies. I was working with the slave’s mind. I was discussing a lot, asking a lot of questions ... I think the ordinary slave-mistress image is not the truth of BDSM. This is the reason you almost never see the mistress on my photos.

L:

There is something in this series that gives me a rare feeling. David Nebreda’s work is one of the few I could relate the same way. Do you feel any connection with his work, or not at all?

M:

Is there any artist you feel close or that influenced you in any way?

Goran:

If I like somebody’s work I am always interested in his statement, his way of life, how he looks like and how he really lives. Maybe this is the question of sincerity. When I see David Nebreda photos I can really feel pain, my pain, and something really strong and extreme on the other side, an act of a saint, martyr. If we are talking about madness or an illness, it is really good, nice, aesthetically represented. I would call his work really powerful. I would like to mention another photographer or in this case a cycle of photos, and it is Leigh Ledare cycle about his mother, Tina Peterson. I feel a kind of closeness to all photographers and

artists who pushed their imagination over the limits, my limits. There is no quality without exaggeration. In this sense, I could probably find more names in the world of literature and painting than among photographers.



L&M:

Can you describe your different series since “Omen”

Goran:

Omen, 999, 23, all these cycles are dealing with SM, BDSM ... but for me, BDSM is more an excuse to talk about violence, the fragility of the human body, pain, passion, pleasure. This is the “fil rouge” for me. I was using some Christian motifs in the same way. The other half of my work – Visitors, Post Mortem and Red cycles – is connected with corpses and death. Death for me means violence, complete destruction of human body and personality. I do not see death as a natural thing like it is for

animals. We live in constant awareness of our mortality, denying this fact, fighting against fear. Sometimes the response is stupidity. Survivors cycle is a small device from my ordinary way but on the other hand, it fits well into my work, I think. The violence is hidden behind the faces of ex-inmates, but where can you find more ultimate violence, more bodies in extreme condition, more madness than in concentration camps? I started to work on this series with an idea, that this is not a question of remote past but the question of human nature.

L&M:

We are curious about the technical aspect of your work and different approach; from square b&w to rectangular colour, etc ... what is the link between these aesthetic choices ? do you voluntarily break the pattern to create something totally new adapted to the subject or do you simply experiment?

Goran:

For years I was working exclusively on square format, on the 6x6 B&W negative, using the whole, intact format from negative, without cutting anything in the darkroom. I felt that the square is a bit boring and limiting and I enjoyed to put something interesting inside the boring package. I made some photos of the Omen cycle in both techniques – B&W and colour. B&W worked better. I've done the same for the Visitors – and I choose the colour ones. I started to shoot Survivors in the rectangular format, in colours, but after some portraits, I had to make a radical change, because I was not satisfied with the results. With the B&W, in some way, it could be seen as if it were an old photo from remote times. In this cycle we are dealing with old memories. Memories about facts that happened 60 and more years ago. The people

on the photos are very old and they are going to die soon. Some of them have died since the project was shot. My final decision was dark grey on black, portraits disappearing into the black. It was not a decision from the beginning but the result of a long work, trying to find the best solution.

L&M:

It seems there is not much productions (in terms of a number of series). What drives you to develop a new series? Tell us a little more about your creative process?

Goran:

Yes, I must sadly agree there is not much production in my work. I am lazy, I am nihilistic and my illness is called inertia. I am interested in subjects that really touch me profoundly, which hurt me, shake me. Why produce photos that won't bring me on the edge? It is a waste of time for me. I was waiting for ten or more years to have a possibility to take photos of corpses. It seems I am interested in the subjects which are a bit difficult to find and to start to work on them.

L&M:

What do you do you work between the series?

Goran:

Between the old and new series, I am rotting. I don't produce from the joy – I must start to rot, ferment, to hate myself, to get really angry. I need anger, rage, fury to wake me up and to start to work. My work is a pain and I probably don't like photography. When somebody says that producing art is a joy for him, I'm suspicious that the person is not going down deep enough.

Photography for me is work and a kind of fight – against imperfections, against errors, against my own limitations, my cowardice, my stupidity, my dishonesty.

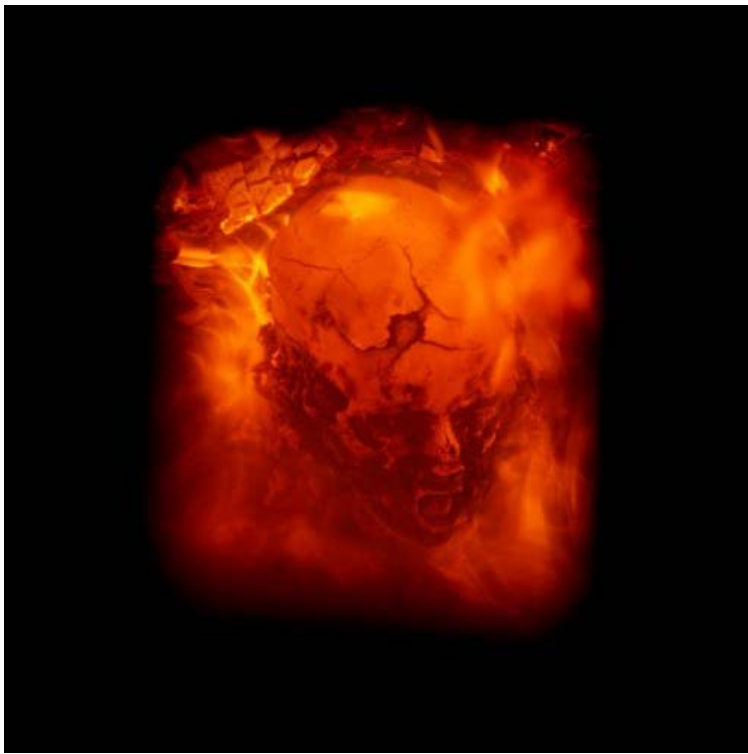


L&M:

A technical wonder: How did you make the series Crematorium?

Goran:

From the technical view, it is not so difficult, there are two ways or more to look inside the oven. I am not the only one taking photos in the crematorium, of the process, but it seems I am the only one I was looking for something more personal; my crematorium photos are in fact portraits and not just a heap of human bones in the fire.



L&M:

What do you think// What does it mean for you to “make a ‘good photograph’”?

Goran:

I see a lot of very quality photographs, technically good photos, especially photos of naked bodies, perfect female bodies. I am using and consuming these photos, but I have no wish to

produce them. I believe in art, in elite art. This is my goal – to make a photo on the same art level as best novels and best paintings and best songs and compositions are. Some people say that there are no art or documentary photos, there are just good photos. I don't agree with this statement. I believe in "order of levels" (F. Nietzsche).

L&M:

How are your photographs usually perceived?

Goran:

I think people usually feel some kind of pain. They feel hurt, wounded. People usually don't like to be confronted with topics like death, pain or just with the s. m. unusual sexual practices and with the way other people find enjoyment. On the other hand, people recognise the aesthetic dimension of my photos. I want to be provocative and I don't want to be vulgar or banal. I hope you can see I respect the people on my photos, the living persons and the dead ones. But, probably, for some observers, I am just a psychopath.

L&M:

Is there a quest in your work? If so, of what?

Goran:

I want to hurt myself, first. I see myself as a sensible, sensitive person. I found the ecological problems of today very important, but they don't touch me intimately. Probably the problems of migrants also don't touch me enough personally. I am dealing with things that touch me – my body, my sexuality, the death of persons close to me. I want to transform pain, death, rotting, nothing, nihilism into something positive, into something I could call meaning. Last but not least, I want to transform my work into

a small piece of glory and some money, too. I hope my work will be my ticket to immortality.

L&M:

How do you perceive the world, and how do you feel in it?

Goran:

I find the world banal, vulgar and fascinating. I think I live in a stupid world and I feel myself like a shitting divinity, a divinity condemned to die, a God-Pig.

L&M:

What is your most recent work? What are you working on at the moment? You just published a book. Can you tell us more about it and perhaps if there is a gallery or a publisher supporting you?

Goran:

My last series are Survivors, portraits of the Slovene survived inmates from nazi and fascist concentration camps of the WWII, and a video, sound, space project made from two videos from crematorium oven (Fire, Red II). At the moment I am working on new series which is dealing with the human body in its extreme condition. I am in the phase of negotiation, looking for models – if I can call them models. I am dealing with a disease, illness. I hope to start to work on it this year. In 2015 my book Requiem was published by a small Slovene publishing House, The Angry Bat, which is specialised for small series, collectors photo books. Requiem is composed of the photos from Visitors and Post Mortem cycles. It is dealing with death – or with corpses, depends from your point of view. I see it as a collector piece rather than just a book – with a big investment (work) from the editor, Matej Sitar, who made the design, and with just a small or no intervention on the design from my side. There are 300 signed

copies, 30 of them in s. c. special edition series, with original photography etc. I am collaborating with Gallery Photon (for the last 10 years) which is one of the two biggest private galleries in Slovenia, specialised for photography (other is Gallery Fotografija). Gallery Photon is doing a good job, not only in Slovenia but in the Central Southeast Europe organising the Photonic Moments – Month of Photography festival. My main supporter in the last twenty years is Ministry of Culture of Republik of Slovenia which finds a lot of meaning and quality in my work. At least enough to cover my social insurance ... If we are talking about selling my work I must say the exploitation of death and human pain in this moment is not a commercial success. I somehow ignored this important sector of art activity – selling strategy, working on collectors, advertising myself. Probably Because I'm lazy or maybe just because I really hate this part of the job.



GORAN BERTOK'S WEB SITE