

# BLAU INTERNATIONAL SUMMER 2022

## PERSONAL CHURCH

By Qianfan Gu



Finding the sacred in silence, MAJA RUZNIC has somewhat paradoxically set off a ruckus around her recent work.

Standing in front of Maja Ruznic's *Mother & Father (Purple)* (2021), I become lost in fields of cobalt, violet, black. It's so overwhelming that I almost miss two figures in the painting: a female body, vague as a cloud of pale blue mist with cascading hair—reminiscent of Millais's *Ophelia*—floats in the orange hand of a man, his face rendered in the same hue.

At Ruznic's solo exhibition at Karma gallery, *Consulting With Shadows*, her first in New York, viewing her work is like adjusting to a nocturnal environment. It takes a few seconds for my eyes to recognize what might be going on. The paintings unfold over time, demanding the beholder's attention.

In talking to Ruznic about these works, she candidly mentions her struggles with insomnia and postpartum depression following the birth of her daughter, Mila. It was a new, fraught time for her, one that, given her new waking hours, condensed around a simple curiosity: what would color look like trapped in night? The resulting works are nuanced and extraordinary. *Father (Forrest)* (2021) hints at a wilder-ness, washed and muddy; the fluorescent yellow hand in *Mother (Blue-Yellow Hand)* (2021) recalls a lingering burn removed from the flame; and the large area of red and pink in *Father (Consulting Shadows II)* (2021) seems to analogize the residual impression of light behind closed eyelids. Colors, Ruznic says, can feel "confrontational or intimidating"

depending on their use and alignment. However, unlike classical color studies by artists such as Josef Albers, for whose compositions the paint came straight out of tubes and was applied on flat surfaces like butter on bread, Ruznic keeps “all the tiny little marks that allow the colors from underneath to vibrate”—a more impressionistic, pointillist approach. Such in-depth vibrations free Ruznic’s colors to form. They quiver, throb, and dissolve into each other, extending to emotions and memories beyond the visual.

In the rear room at Karma, a group of smaller oils on linen, hung in a row, manifests the rhythms of the artist’s palette. Under shifting daylight, the jewel tones seem to suspend reality, transporting viewers somewhere dreamy and surreal, while slowly revealing difficult truths. One small-scale painting depicts part of a ribcage that looks like tree branches, set off by a background of brownish yellow. *Titled Dusk/Mother* (2021), the piece is a portrait of how motherhood might weigh on a woman’s spine. Here is an indomitable matriarch, an unsung hero who, in the face of hardship, has maintained a household physically, financially, and psychologically, and been changed for it. Ruznic’s associating “dusk” with “mother” is bound up with her own experience of growing up with a single mother and living through war. Fleeing with her grandparents from Orasje, Bosnia-Herzegovina, in April 1992—at nine years old—she moved from shelter to shelter. Wracked with worry and fear, she only reunited with her mother two weeks later. “I remember seeing her coming like she was emerging from the kind of fog that you’d associate with dusk,” Ruznic says, recalling the way they hugged. The memory of that intense and warm embrace, being pressed against her mother’s ribs, the surrounding foggiest—all has stayed with Ruznic. The forced journey from Bosnia ultimately led the artist to San Francisco, and she did not return to Orasje until 2008, after 16 years.

There, she found that her hometown was no longer as she had known it but was rather “a wounded site.” Ruznic’s work attests that trauma is not easily erased. Remnants, in memory, tissue, or land-scape, make these events even more present and tangible, and give evidence to the subtle, vulnerable, yet-to-be-named senses—of an escaped war, of an absent father, of shadows and nocturnes, of the tremendous pain and uncertainty in becoming a mother.

“I was worried that being a mother would make me unproductive,” Ruznic says. The emotional and physical labor in the first few months after her daughter’s birth drained her, but looking back, the artist revels in the unexpected and fruitful changes the period brought to her practice. From lean, almost faint visual haikus, her paintings have become saturated and layered—especially the works on paper, completed after the other paintings in *Consulting With Shadows*. Ruznic treats paper in the same way as linen and canvas; these works are in no way small studies for larger paintings. Using Acryla, a Japanese gouache, Ruznic accumulates richness with multiple thin but solid washes of paint. The edges of the paper thus end up with powdery, matte, talismanic textures.

Ruznic has a working process that might seem backward to some. Scumbling and scratching without clear intentions are important parts of her practice—manifestations, perhaps, of mumbling “um” or “mm” or “I don’t know.” Working eight to ten hours a day, the artist manages to keep her palette coherent, considering the canvases containers for color and shape. Only after they are completed are the works titled. Distanced from masculine and feminine clichés, *Father* evokes a sense of being lost and not

knowing one's roots; *Mother* pushes energy forth and forward, and *Daughter* conveys innocence. Partially inspired by her family members, the figures are metaphorical archetypes, roles that are interrelated and interchangeable.

"The family unit depicted in the show deals with me as a child, the observer," says Ruznic. "Even the 'sons' are me." During pregnancy, she found out that her testosterone levels were much higher than that of the average woman. "My body thought that it was being attacked by Mila and the placenta," she jokes. In her eyes, she contains a certain "masculinity," attributable to her past as an athlete. Once hopeful of becoming a world-class runner, her dreams were dashed by severe injuries in her final year of college, after which she decided to major in art and soon found a second passion in painting.

Art has become a way to author her identity, a physical practice and mode of political resistance that, after a period of doubt, has allowed her to reclaim her subjectivity. The "time to be silent" is what she values most while painting. As the world spins madly with news of war and climate change, the commitment to be intimately involved with nothing more than a paint brush is sacred. Painting, Ruznic says, "really feels like my personal church."

Although she's an atheist, Ruznic nevertheless holds a belief in art's religiosity. It was Rothko's works at Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art that first brought tears to her eyes, the master's dark wall paintings striking her just after she stepped into her early 30s. Later, Ruznic recounts, she was inconsolable while encountering Rothko's red paintings at the Tate Modern.

Ruznic is not shy about the influence of art historical figures, and she is fluent when referencing different theories. Her bold use of color recalls Pierre Bonnard; her shapes, especially the triangles and eyes, speak to Paul Klee's geometric forms; and her mix of figuration and abstraction could be considered a response to Bracha L. Ettinger's concept of "co-emergence," a third position that arises from the collision between identity and non-identity.

In one recent work, *Truth Carrier* (2022), Ruznic portrays an "adolescent shaman" in blue and purple. A spider-shaped glow weaves through his body—bringing to mind Louis Bourgeois—symbolizing hard memories and spirits. "Why would a shaman carry a spider-shaped 'truth'?" I wonder. Our conversation, occurring on the first day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, was colored by anxiety, making such matters as trauma and truth seem both urgent and helpless. "Truth," Ruznic muses, "is all those little things that are often really difficult. Every day, we choose to look at the truth, or to turn away so we can 'have a good day.'" After a pause, she adds, "The spider in the painting represents the opening of the heart to say yes to the truth, and not turn away."