THE BROOKLYN RAIL
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# MAJA RUZNIC WITH ANN C. COLLINS

By Ann C. Collins

Portrait of Maja Ruznic, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Anchoring her work in deeply saturated colors, American artist Maja Ruznic channels her subconscious into haunting paintings in which figures materialize from geometric and amorphous forms. Confident in the hybrid space she has found between figurative and abstract traditions, she evokes an unsettling sadness tinged with a sense of the mystical and the cathartic.

Ruznic was born in the former Yugoslavia (now Bosnia and Herzegovina) and fled the Bosnian War with her mother when she was nine. Her practice began with a box of watercolors in an Austrian refugee camp. She and her mother settled in San Francisco when she was twelve, and she went on to earn a BFA from University of California, Berkeley and an MFA from the California College of the Arts before setting up studios in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

While Ruznic's work can be seen all over town—two of the artist's paintings are currently on view in the Whitney Biennial 2024: Even Better Than the Real Thing and her work is on exhibition at both of Karma Gallery's East Village locations—she now spends as much time as she can in her studio in Placitas, New Mexico. Unable to speak with each other in person, we decided to meet on Zoom, a format that recalled the isolation but also the close connections so readily formed during the pandemic. Walking with her phone in her hand, she showed me glimpses of her studio and the hilly landscape that surrounds her as we chatted about running, childcare, and the

ways her process yields work that ultimately upsets the binaries of art, history, and the personal.

**Maja Ruznic**: I never thought I would be a small-town girl. Never. But my husband, Joshua Hagler, received the Roswell Residency in 2018—that's what actually got us to New Mexico—and when the RAiR Foundation found out I was an artist as well, they very generously gave me a studio, too. Most artists leave New Mexico as soon as they finish the residency, but some artists decide to stay, and we were in that group. You know, there's something about New Mexico that's very harsh. The landscape is incredible, but the climate and the economy and a lot of other things are really hard. So it either pulls you in or spits you out. I don't think it's a place for everyone. But for us, there was something about leaving Los Angeles, leaving the big city to come here, that made us realize that maybe things don't have to be so competitive. Maybe things could be more gentle. We bought our home a couple years ago and built the studio I'm standing in, which felt so special, to build our own studio.

**Ann C. Collins (Rail)**: What were some of the desires and requirements you had for the studio when you were designing it?

**Ruznic**: I really believe that space affects our thoughts and our bodies, and how we've designed this space has allowed for strangeness and unpredictability, which is really important to both of us. Josh and I are very intertwined in our practices. We're constantly talking. So we wanted to be in the same building with just a wall between us, so we could be connected in a way, but also separate, which is necessary. We're high up on a hill and the ceilings are really tall, which I love. I'm very interested in verticality in my work and this kind of vertical communication with the divine or the spirit world. And so there's something about the studio that feels very tall but also kind of chamber-like. And then when you step out, you have the view of the Sandia Mountains and there are junipers everywhere.

Our house is right next to the studios, so I can just go in and make coffee. I'm a runner and enjoy the endless trails right outside my front door, and in the afternoon we go down the hill to pick our daughter up from daycare.

I never thought of myself as an introvert until we moved down here. Especially as women, you learn how to be an extrovert, even if you're not naturally, you learn to fake it. When we moved, I realized that I don't need to see people for a long time and that in fact, the solitude affects me positively. I like creating a deep and quiet mental space that allows the work to feel authentic, like it's pulled out of a genuine, rich, sort of strange place. When we lived in LA or San Francisco, where it's loud and noisy, I felt like it was harder for me to tap into that.

**Rail**: It sounds like your studio not only gives you a place to work, but that the space itself allows you to go into the state you need to be in to work.

**Ruznic**: That's exactly it.

**Rail**: Where else do you draw inspiration? Do you collect images? Is it from what you read?

**Ruznic**: When I work, I don't have images that I'm reacting to, I don't react to events,

but I am currently reading Anne Carson's Wrong Norma, which is very inspiring and I know it's making its way into my work. I see myself in her writing in the sense that there doesn't seem to be a clear distinction between what of hers is a poem or what is prose or what is a short story. All the genres blend. And I think of my work in that way too. Some of my portraits could also be seen as very geometric abstractions.

What I love about Anne Carson's writing is that she gives you just enough to where you feel like you took a bite, but then, when you're done, you don't know what you ate, you know? And I'm like, wow, I would love to make paintings that feel like that. Amy Sillman is a painter who does that really well. You have no idea exactly what you're looking at in her paintings. The whole binary of abstraction and figuration is out the window, you're just experiencing her marks and her decisions. So I'll spend the morning reading Anne Carson for an hour or so while having my coffee, and then I come into the studio and it's as if what I've read is in my body, and it's influencing my mood and my colors and what I choose to leave out.

**Rail**: It sounds like you're describing a set of very loose rituals that kind of awaken things.

**Ruznic**: That's exactly it, yes. I feel like long distance runners are a unique tribe in the sense that it's kind of a strange activity, but it opens up your body in a way that I find very conducive to being creative and ready to receive. I show up in the studio, and I know it's cliche to say this, but I feel very guided, you know?

**Rail**: So the work is to get yourself to the place where you're in that groove. And maybe it's the cadence of the running that does that?

**Ruznic**: Yes, I find it actually very similar to a religious practice, like praying after a long fast. Running creates a kind of rhythm in the body. I often listen to shamanic drumming while I'm running and then I am blissed out when I'm done.

I think some creatives look outward into the world and then respond to what they see. I find myself more as somebody who looks inward, mining for personal truths that may transcend and be felt on a more collective level. So my process is more like excavating from within rather than reacting to what is outside of myself.

I went to California College of the Arts, which is a very conceptual graduate program, very intensive, and I'm grateful for it, but there was also an implied sense of responsibility in being an artist that I've been thinking about a lot. What does that mean? If a responsible artist makes work that deals with issues like global warming or the genocides going on right now then what am I? Is my practice, my painting, doing anything positive for the world when it's so inflamed right now? I still don't have an answer for it all. I've always known that I wouldn't make a great activist because my nervous system is very delicate. I used to feel guilty about that because it felt irresponsible, but I've realized that I can talk about difficult things most powerfully through painting and only after I create these religious and cathartic rituals. I know that I'm comfortable speaking very personally and making work about what I know best. I think of myself more as a devotional artist rather than a responsible one.

**Rail**: So it sounds like you're in a moment where you are stepping into an awareness of your purpose as an artist and kind of stepping away from maybe the educational traditions that you moved through.

**Ruznic**: Absolutely. And I think so much of that has to do with working with a gallery like Karma, where I keep getting rewarded for just doing what I want to do. This was not the case when I was in grad school. My work was never research driven, but rather, I relied on intuition. This, I quickly learned, is a big no-no in academic circles. I spent so much money on learning certain things, and now my experience of being an artist is literally the opposite. I tell young people to think of school as a form of mental training: you get really good at having constructive arguments, but it may not be how you succeed in the world. I've been lucky in that I've been rewarded for doing what comes naturally. It makes me want to be more and more honest. What that means for me is stepping more into the place of instinct and thinking more about how my paintings might affect the viewer's nervous system. I'm really interested in somatic experiences. We are flooded with digital screens and AI is infiltrating our consciousness—which I don't think is good or bad, as we have yet to see what will come of it—I feel this kind of global nostalgia for things that are real, for things that we can actually touch. I do think that the literal body that we have, that we carry, will become even more important. So I'm trying to make paintings that make you remember that you have a body.

**Rail**: I often think about how, when we stand in front of a painting and look at it, we're standing where the artist stood, and that can be very emotional. Your eyes are moving somewhat in the way their body moved, you're stepping close to see details, you're stepping back to take it in as a whole. So there is a kind of physical zone that you move into when you look at a painting.

**Ruznic:** That's a really beautiful way of describing it. It's like you enter the artist's place. And visually, you get to imagine what it might have been like to make it.

**Rail**: One thing you said that I wanted to get back to is the idea of doing, following what you want to do, what brings you joy and what you're curious about. Do you think that's something that women in particular have to learn, or maybe relearn?

**Ruznic**: Oh my god, yes. I'm still learning that. I think especially as a woman. I went to school in the early 2000s when painting was dead—it's always dead—and when zombie formalism was really trendy. I was making very figurative Alice Neel-esque paintings of my family members who were in Bosnia and my super progressive liberal teachers would say, "Well, Bosnia, who cares about Bosnia?" The message was that even atrocities trend, and that I shouldn't talk about the atrocity that I came from because the world has already moved on to the next. I felt as though I had to put on brakes on all levels. There were "allowables" and I needed to learn what they were. What subject matter am I allowed to talk about? I walked out of that school as if I had tape all over my mouth. I felt really restricted. Strangely, what allowed me to speak freely was giving up on trying to make it as an artist and moving to New Mexico with my husband, who was my boyfriend at the time. We sort of gave up on the art world. We were like, "let's just go live somewhere cheap and make paintings and we'll die old and happy." And interestingly, when we did that, everything changed.

**Rail**: I think it's an ongoing process for women makers to recognize that authenticity can be our greatest strength. Your experience and your point of view are what make you who you are.

**Ruznic**: And for me it took New Mexico to do that. But I think that's changing for this generation. I think we're living in a really pivotal moment.

**Rail:** I hope so. Tell me about the show at Karma and the work you've been making.

**Ruznic**: I recently learned that the word apocalypse has Greek origins and it means to uncover or reveal. This is interesting to me because I think we're living in an apocalyptic period, in the sense that much of what we have known as true is crumbling and the layers beneath are being revealed. My show at Karma is called The World Doesn't End, after a Charles Simic book of poetry, and the title is a kind of reminder that although things seem bleak and catastrophic, consciousness will continue. Something new is being revealed to us and we must persevere to see it. Old ideologies are falling apart and new structures are erected and that is making a lot of people unhappy, but the world doesn't end.

**Rail:** It's interesting to hear you talk about the exhibition in terms of old structures breaking down and new structures building up, because that is how you have just described your career to me; there were these foundational structures that were broken down by a change in your life. Moving to New Mexico seems to have revealed these new structures that you were able to build and that has opened up the world significantly for you.

**Ruznic**: Completely. Living in LA, in the big art city, I wasn't making work that was completely authentic. I'm looking at how my world shifted and how it became haunting and emotional when we left. It's a career death-sentence to leave LA, to leave a big coastal city before you're an established artist. What we did was very high-risk, but like anything in life, high risks can bring high rewards.

**Rail**: You mentioned the genocide in Bosnia as something very present in your work at CCA. You spent your childhood in a place of genocide and a place of war, and then you emigrated to the United States. I don't want to ask you to recount that timeline as much as I'd like to understand what sources you tap into that have allowed so much creation to arise from that time and place of destruction. How do the experiences from your childhood play a role in your work?

**Ruznic**: I'm so glad you asked about that because I find it much more interesting. One of my paintings that curators Chrissie Iles and Meg Onli chose for the Whitney Biennial shows a lone figure sitting in a field and it's titled, Deep Calls to Deep (2023), which comes from a line in a Nick Cave song. The painting is based on a very specific memory from 1992 when my mother and I were living in a refugee camp in Austria. I was nine at the time. The beautiful thing about being a kid is that you don't fully understand what's going on during times of war, but I remember I was playing outside one day in the refugee camp and something happened. I call it my sandbox moment, it was such a pivotal moment. I was a weird kid, I wasn't super extroverted, so I wasn't playing with the other kids in the playground, but I had found a little area in the sand, and I was sort of playing with the sand and running it through my fingers. And I remember feeling a great sadness enter my body, and it felt like a dream. I remember looking at the sky, and I was not raised religious, I'm not religious at all, but I had a religious moment where the sun almost had a speaking voice. And it told me that horrible things would happen but that I would be okay. I think of it almost as being embalmed by God, like a glow, and I really felt altered that day, I felt this protectiveness. And I started painting. My mom got me watercolors, and I would paint, and that was when I started connecting with the refugee camp. I think I had a lot of turmoil in my body but I was lucky enough to have art supplies. And it has stayed that way, art as a way to record an outpouring of intense emotions. It's still that for me. I come into the studio and I pour out intense emotions. For me, this has always been a very emotional practice.

**Rail**: Can you talk about your process? What sets the work in motion?

**Ruznic**: I've been looking at a little remnant of paper that my daughter painted using this particular green color. For me, this color green is not about plants or other things you think of that are green; I always associate green with the house. There's a symbolism I've created in terms of what colors represent. So these greens represent the green house I grew up in, in Bosnia before the war. When I see this color, I think about my grandpa. Green comes up a lot: green is my Bosnia color, it's the first eight years of my life.

When I start painting, I try to work very slowly and deliberately with my brush strokes, allowing for whatever wants to come out to be massaged. It feels like I'm activating chakras. It's very esoteric, very weird.

I start by scumbling with only one or two colors. With scumbling, you're not covering the entire surface. There are these uncovered white parts where you can see the canvas breathing through. They become the negative space, and you see different things in there. I call them little painterly seizures where
they're not quite syncing up. I cover the shapes in the negative space with a different color, and it becomes very abstract. Then I step back and I look at it, usually with my cup of coffee, and forms start emerging.

My figures are often engaged in rituals. I paint a lot of hands. What might at first look like a plant in the background is actually hands or feet. Often there are full bodies, but sometimes there are just body parts floating around. And the only thing I can say is that it's all part of my subconscious and I find those things beautiful. I tend to like haunting things. I love David Lynch. I love music that has a melancholy quality, like the blues. There's a type of Bosnian music called sevdah, which has a similar tonality to the blues. And it's designed to evoke deep melancholy feelings. When I look at my finished paintings, it's like I'm making the blues or sevdah in a pictorial way. I'm actually trying to make the viewer a little unsettled. And I have a strange desire or a strange belief that intimacy happens that way. I want to feel intimate with people through my paintings, and when you're a little unhinged, when you're a little sad or a little depressed or a little angry, you open up in a way that you're not when you are happy.

There's a closedness in joy, even though it's beautiful, of course. I mean, I have a kid, I try to do everything I can to give her joy, but as a creative person, I'm trying to undo the viewer in a way that kind of destabilizes them so that they're not standing on both feet. They're feeling a little like, "oh, man, that did something." Because I think the resonance that an experience like that leaves is a little bit more long-lasting than just consuming something that makes you feel joy.

**Rail**: You have two very large paintings in the Whitney Biennial, one show at Karma that features four more large-scale paintings, and another show at Karma of smaller gouaches. Are you resting after such an intense period of production or do you feel like work is something that is always continuing?

**Ruznic**: There are two large paintings I'm working on right now. The first is a piece I recently finished. It's my favorite piece in the studio right now. It's very Anne Carson-like in that I didn't spell everything out as much as I usually might. There is a central figure, and she's kind of looking at us over her shoulder, and then if you look really closely, there's another sort of menacing face looking at her from the shadows. When I

finished this painting… I don't know, I felt really sad. I identified with this central figure who I see as witnessing a great atrocity, like a war.

And that's when I knew I needed to stop painting because the sadness was so overwhelming, you know? Another painter might have covered it up or done something more, but I tried to leave the painting in a state where it overwhelmed me as the maker.

Another one that I'm working on is more rendered. You can clearly see that there are hands reaching towards a woman's neck, and yet there are also objects in it that are left floating. There's a blue shape above the woman's head and there's another green shape that's floating above her head. And this is more the direction that I'm interested in right now. I'm interested in how abstraction can be more emotional than a narrative. I think people are seduced by narratives because there is a sense of linearity even if the story is crazy, the forward momentum of storytelling is gratifying. I think that a cohesive narrative is satisfying, but ultimately a lie because stories are constructions. Even if you think you're telling an honest story, there's something that you are altering in the process because you have ears that are listening to you. Knowing that we're being watched or listened to alters our behavior. There's a sense of entertainment that I find with a narrative, whereas when you have more abstraction, it's more haunting and unnerving. It's really unsettling. So I like to flirt with that tension, to ask how much narrative is too much. Have I overfed my viewer? How much narrative is just enough so they keep coming back to the restaurant? That's the metaphor that I have.

**Rail**: It sounds like the narrative sews up a lot of questions and the abstraction rips open a lot of questions.

**Ruznic**: Yes.

**Rail**: And we're really uncomfortable with that, aren't we?

**Ruznic**: Yes. You're getting to something really interesting for me. I find that we're living in a moment of good guys and bad guys and that binary is so uninteresting to me because everything becomes homogenized. Everyone starts joining the chorus and then we all sound the same. I find that art really suffers when you're telling people something they already think. We already know that we should eat less meat because meat industries contribute to global warming. I don't know if a painting that tells me that is a successful work of art but I do think that something really abstract, for example, a Helen Frankenthaler or a Mark Rothko, could make me feel the world's sadness without even knowing where it's coming from. All of a sudden I'm more sad about the state of the world than if you told me about global warming. And so I'm trying to make paintings that affect the nervous system in a very direct way. If I can change the emotional landscape of the viewer through formal qualities like form and color, I've succeeded in my quest.

**Rail**: It's interesting that instead of saying, "I'm an abstract painter," or "I'm a figurative painter," you commit to neither. It's uncomfortable, and it's wonderful to say it's not either/or. It's both. Which is not what the world is saying right now.

**Ruznic**: And this is exactly what I worry about, how polarized things are right now, because this is exactly what happened in Bosnia. My mom recalls that right before the war, people started policing each other's jokes—and now we're doing it with our comedians. There's no safe place for what Carl Jung calls "The Shadow". There is something very dangerous about this kind of intolerance. Both the left and the right

talk about tolerance and intolerance, but let's really unpack those words. Tolerating someone is not good enough. What might it feel like to invite someone from a different political position over for brunch? I am really interested in that as a possibility, as something to play with. You know, we tell our kids if you can imagine it, you can do it, but we don't practice that. This is why I am, at times, a little perplexed but also amazed that my work is taken so well by the public because it is actually poking at a lot of these things. Perhaps that's because it's painting and it's seductive, but a lot of my philosophical messages and questions are snuck in.

**Rail**: Absolutely.

**Ruznic**: When I was painting The Past Awaiting the Future/Arrival of Drummers (2023), which is in the Whitney Biennial, I was thinking about all things existing at once, like the genocide in Palestine, the war in Ukraine, but also something like an immigrant that is now thankfully housed in America and having a sixteenth birthday party, being allowed to be happy while another sixteen-year-old kid is dying. That's mind blowing to me. And I think about this all the time, the fact that at every moment there are so many atrocities that we don't even read about or see. Everything we are is never completely good, it has its other side, and I think we need to leave room for our good behavior to have its shadow.

**Rail**: I guess the question, then, is what kind of world do you think you're sending your work into, and what kind of change is this work creating? What future do you think this work is moving into?

**Ruznic**: As you're asking that, I'm looking at the figures in my paintings, and they all look like witnesses. I'll often paint these little feet, like little Ls, walking all along the edge of a painting. I realized I've put them in a lot of my paintings absentmindedly, but that they represent time, time marching on. Everything that we are seeing right now has happened before. A similar story of a different war. Those feet are sort of like the dot, dot, dot, and humanity goes on. There's great sadness in this fact, but also recognition of our design. Humans have always done this to each other. I have this tiny little blip of time on Earth, and I'm making these paintings that are witnessing the things that I'm witnessing. And the paintings are saying, you are allowed to cry, you are allowed to laugh. This will happen again, and therefore you should go to that wedding and dance your butt off. There's this constant chaos, constant celebration. So we need to try to find a way to be alive in fullness while knowing that.