

Nela Tonković

Art historian, curator, The Contemporary Art Gallery Subotica, Serbia

Exhibition review

The Invisible Burden. An Artistic Dialogue on Transgenerational Trauma

(The Contemporary Art Gallery Subotica, June 8 – July 20, 2024)

Transgenerational trauma is not a new phenomenon. The recognition, perception, and understanding of this phenomenon, however, date back to the relatively recent past: the late 1960s in Canada. During that period of time, there was a noticeable increase in requests for psychological assistance from relatively young individuals whose parents had survived the Holocaust. Although these individuals did not directly experience the trauma themselves, its effects were evident in their lives, becoming internalized and passed on to the next generation. Since then, psychology and related fields have been exploring patterns in the transmission of transgenerational trauma, viewing it as the formation of inner reality and its expression across multiple generations, stemming from the original trauma experienced by an ancestor or close relative. Trapped in the cycle of transgenerational trauma, entire social groups continuously reenact the past, which hinders the present from being a secure space. Burdened by inherited trauma, individuals are deprived of the opportunity to develop their authentic voices and provide their perspectives on various aspects of the world and the society they are part of.

The exhibition *The Invisible Burden. An Artistic Dialogue on Transgenerational Trauma* is a project by three artists: Goran Dragaš, Zorica Milisavljević, and Selman Trtovac. Their shared interest and multimedia approaches have enabled them to explore this significant topic from two key perspectives: social and personal. Trauma can often be a burden for a broader social group, yet families and individuals within them are not immune to its effects. However, the recognition of the transgenerational nature of trauma unites these artistic expressions, positioning them as unique voices on the contemporary art scene in Serbia. They view their art as a platform for dialogue on a topic that has long weighed on society as a whole and numerous individuals within it.

Although composed of works by three artists, the exhibition is perceived as a unified whole. Behind its creation were several months of intensive reflection and communication among the artists. The rhythm of presenting works and themes in the challenging space of the art nouveau Reichl Palace, home to the Contemporary Art Gallery Subotica, was managed by identifying key connections in the fundamental concepts of the artists' works. At the outset, in the central hall, the audience is

introduced to various media treatments of the topic: from Goran Dragaš's paintings, and Zorica Milisavljević's sound installation, to Selman Trtovac's spatial installations. Progressing through the exhibition, each artist is highlighted individually, exploring the specifics of their responses to profound questions about transgenerational trauma.

The work *Spiral of Fear* by Selman Trtovac, isolated in a circular space and realized as a floor installation, explores ways to break free from the cycle of personal and social multigenerational traumas. The artist utilizes lead in this piece, referencing the traditional magical-ritual practice of *salivanje strave*¹ that was common in the Balkans centuries ago. Numerous lead shapes come together to form a spiral representing shared fears and traumas, creating a powerful vortex with an almost infinite pull. This artwork establishes the foundational theme of the exhibition as it prompts viewers to reflect on their perspectives regarding the potential consequences of transgenerational trauma.

Two other works in the same room – a sound installation titled *One Day You Will Remember My Words. The Field of Trauma* by Zorica Milisavljević and Goran Dragaš's painting installation *The Destruction of Time* – concretize the theme through evoking feelings of empathy. Zorica Milisavljević's work consists of a series of spoken sentences that have left a trace of trauma in those they are directed towards. These personal, painful, and numerous sentences sound so familiar that they trigger memories of encounters where words were casually spoken, leaving a deep imprint on the subconscious. The flurry of sentences can be heard in two other locations within the exhibition, serving as a constant reminder to the audience to be attentive and encouraging them to empathize – both with others and with themselves. An installation comprising small-format paintings by Goran Dragaš, like much of the artist's work, focuses on the media's representation of reality. Dragaš selects images of trauma, such as the destruction of home, war, and refugee experiences. Particularly in an environment where such images have resurfaced and been lived through multiple times over the past few decades, the decision to present and group the theme around the transgenerational trauma of home loss elicits the same effect of seeking empathy.

These few examples, we believe, illustrate quite well the approach to the theme that extends throughout the entire exhibition. The goal of the exhibition was not only to showcase the transgenerational transmission of trauma through visual art but also to encourage audiences to actively participate in revealing the layers of social trauma and engage in self-reflection to raise personal awareness. Whether the viewer focuses on the electrifying drawings by Selman Trtovac, attempting to unravel the knot of transmitting trauma within the intimate world, or shifts attention to Zorica Milisavljević's installation composed of photographs and overheard sentences in the streets, which delves into deep realms of sensitivity within each of us, or pauses before the paintings of Goran Dragaš that require a second, longer look, they will perceive our world as a place intertwined with multi-generational traumatic experiences. The collection of works that delve into trauma so profoundly in one place creates an

¹ Ritual practiced to remove fear, insomnia, depression, and anxiety.

environment that encourages immersion in its most prominent characteristic – preventing the lives of those who carry trauma to be fully immersed in the present. In this regard, the exhibition *Invisible Burden. An Artistic Dialogue on Transgenerational Trauma* achieves its goal of sensitizing individuals and society to issues that could render both the individual and society in a state of lifelessness if left unresolved. The awareness advocated by Goran Dragaš, Zorica Milisavljević, and Selman Trtovac is an important initial step towards the goal of resolving and reclaiming life for every new generation.



The Invisible Burden. An Artistic Dialogue on Transgenerational Trauma, installation view (pieces by Goran Dragaš); photo: Edvard Molnar; photo copyright: The Contemporary Art Gallery Subotica



Selman Trtovac, *Drawings*; photo: Edvard Molnar;
photo copyright: The Contemporary Art Gallery Subotica



Zorica Milisavljević, *Seen*, 2015–2024, photos, drawings, writings;
photo: Edvard Molnar; photo copyright: The Contemporary Art Gallery Subotica