

Notes to Sadko Hadzihasanovic's "Night Watch"

If I had to identify one overarching thread running through the work of Sadko Hadzihasanovic, it would have to be his ability to embed a maximum of meaning using minimal information. He does not waste a brushstroke on satisfying principles of design, nor on viewers' attempts to ground the content in a specific place. This may contradict our first impression of the human figure painted in perfect proportion, and faces that reveal a photographic likeness. He also bends time, with flat backgrounds recreating 18th century French decorative wall coverings, and contemporary duds clothing his subjects. A few buried labels and product placements in the Toile wall décor break any sense of continuity we might have.

The artist, who states that he identifies as a "bystander on trends" rather than a participant, carefully crafts a high context narrative into what seem like superficial visual tropes. His treatment of Toile, which time and again has functioned as a bourgeois signifier of good taste, challenges both the European façade of old class, and its concealment in North America. He plays on the ambiguity of social status symbols, such as the aristocratic hunt, with portraits of plain folk showing off their guns as if they were trophies rather than equipment. Contrary to what the title may suggest, none of the scenes take place in a nocturnal setting. The title piece, *Night Watch*, is disturbing on a number of levels given the current discourse on gun culture. Sadko states that he encountered the group in a Serbian village he visited last summer. In conversation with the subjects, he learned that they were getting ready for target practice. The group in the painting includes young children. While they appear to be boys and are posing for a photo, the little one with a double barrel shotgun seems to be more than a club mascot. There is no visual information about their location other than a linear structure behind the group, no hint at a forest or shooting range where the "hunters" might find a more suitable setting. What or whom are they watching or watching over?

The "high context" in this work is thus inevitably grounded in the conflicted history of the Balkans, and the artist's own ambivalent place between home and exile. In that sense, the theme of the series reminds me of the historical novel *The Bridge on the Drina* by Ivo Andrić. In his critique of the book, Mustafa Bal observes that, "The Bridge on the Drina reveals a major and repetitive conflict in human life, one that is between stability and change."¹ Hunting may well have been a constant for survival since humans began to visually record their mode of production. Yet, in the 18th century repeat pattern it became décor for domestic interiors. The same applies to motifs depicting war scenes. In contemporary western culture where hunting is practiced as sport, and war (taking place in other parts of the world) becomes entertainment, the violence inherent to both is sanitized and relegated to the realm of leisure.

¹ ACADEMIC JOURNAL ARTICLE Serbian Studies, 2007, *Romantic Piers of the Bridge on the Drina*
By Bal, Mustafa

To facilitate identification of action versus background, Sadko employs monochrome acrylic brush strokes to draw the flat wallpaper, and coloured oil paints for his modeled subjects. While his figures and faces are highly representational, the location of their presence is deliberately vague. The figures do not stand on an identifiable ground, and even where there is a hint at what might be a street or lawn, as for example the terra firma under the dogs in *Lesson*, their size defeats any illusion of a foreground when the large human figures seem to sink into the landscape behind. The scene of the “lesson” on how to use a bow and arrow is suggested by a landscape that appears to be pinned to the wall and is reminiscent of photographs in brochures advertising the East African Rift Valley. While the small landscape painting and the markings on the bow may suggest an African context, the instructor wears a shirt with a Mickey Mouse logo, the canvas is dominated by the drawing of a neo classical folly copied from wallpaper, and the dogs roam free like strays anywhere in the world. Other than the artist stating that, “the painting was inspired by photographs from his friend’s safari trip,” there is no evidence of where the scene might be staged.

Equally enigmatic is *Barbie*, with the only differences between foreground and background being colour versus monochrome, and a tiny shadow under the doll hinting at a position of repose. There is no floor to support either the Barbie doll or the girl in crocs. A disproportionately small and barefoot boy with a horizontally held bow could easily blend into the background’s pastoral Toile scene if it weren’t for the rendering of his figure. Instead, he appears to stand on the cupped hands of the girl, playing on the flattened photographic depth, like a tourist pretending to fill a cup from a distant waterfall.

Diana is perhaps the most “resolved” interior landscape in the exhibition. A physical rather than mythological young woman (as suggested in the title), her shadow and her gun point at a target that is located beyond the canvas, which also features a partial reproduction of a romantic Toile scene, while the wall and floor seamlessly blend into each other. Both the figure and its background employ the sculptural non-finito, which reveals Sadko’s draftsmanship and perhaps a tension in his work that tries to not only find a balance between drawing and painting, but also hints at artists’ quests through the ages. The work again sets a contrapunto between the exterior activity of hunting and the interior application of wallpaper. While some of the Toile illustrates animals being hunted, there are no such targets in place for the figurative huntress anywhere.

The only work offering some possible proof of the hunters’ efforts might be *Hunters’ Feast*. Here, we have a group of people gathered at a richly decked table. This painting groups figures around a large table in a receding foreground. At the same time, it moves ambiguously between interior and exterior views. The scene has a patio felling with the added table, a large pink plastic tub and the rustic main table without a tablecloth, playing with light and shadows. There is also overlap between foreground and background. The flat background, drawn in red monochrome suggests a reproduction of French scenic wall coverings. Rather than sitting under the table, a little black dog occupies a spot among the red figures in the background landscape, and the red drawing partially overlaps painted figures at the

back of the table. At closer contemplation of the mood, there seems to be considerable tension among the people at the table. The bread is turned on its side, nobody is actually eating, nor engaging in conversation. The plates are empty, although there is plenty food on the serving platters. An older male is drinking beer from a bottle, and the younger one seems to be scratching his head in disbelief, and looking beyond the edge of the canvas. One woman looks into the empty space beyond the table, while another one seems to be listening to a child with a slight frown. Nobody looks at the painter (or viewer) except for the child in the wallpaper. The can of “Jelen pivo” is the only possible reference to Serbia.

Sadko’s mashup of the spoils of imperialism, neo-classical follies and Disneyfied mythologies all taking place on very shallow picture planes could perhaps be read through the lens of Edward Said’s quote of Walter Benjamin, “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”² As documents of the human condition, the scenes depicted by Hadzihasanovic could be taking place in any country, but they are definitely about historical global tensions carried into the early 21st century.

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² Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p 373