



DIPLOMA PROJECT DOCUMENTATION



BRNO UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

FACULTY OF FINE ARTS

FINE ART AND DESIGN

VICARIOUS

DIPLOMA PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

With this series of paintings I wanted to capture the psychological and societal fragmentation of our time, focusing on themes of desensitization, overstimulation, compassion fatigue, and collective anxiety. The main inspiration for my works are from images from occurring protests, taking examples from what the early Romanticist artists did—such as Francisco Goya, Eugène Delacroix, Caspar David Friedrich and J. M. W. Turner. The works use a dark, muted palette with vivid bursts of reds and oranges to evoke both emotional numbness and intense, raw unrest. Each painting would be steeped in an atmosphere of darkness, punctuated by moments of light or color, portraying figures isolated in crisis yet bound by a shared sense of collective turmoil.

Reflecting both personal and political dimensions, the paintings aim to echo the escalating tension seen in Venezuela, my birth country, to the mass protests in Serbia, my second home, and social unrest all over the world in our contemporary timeline. With this in mind I want to highlight the repetitive cycle of trauma, showing how these internal struggles are linked globally and affect individuals profoundly.

Through a blend of abstract, subtle symbolism, realistic elements and surrealism, with each piece I would try to encapsulate on how the constant exposure to crisis imagery shapes our empathy, asking whether overstimulation has dulled our ability to connect, respond to suffering, and to understand the threshold of human compassion in an overstimulated world.

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INTRODUCTION

Vicarious

suffered undergone, or done as the substitute for another
vicarious punishment

I struggled to define the idea of my diploma project during my last year. During my brainstorming sessions, I frequently became sidetracked, constantly monitoring news regarding the latest developments in Serbia, especially the incident involving the canopy collapse at the Main Railway Station in Novi Sad on November 1, 2024¹.

It seemed as though every headline reflected more profound patterns of instability and decline that I had observed throughout the years. Oddly enough, on multiple occasions, while I was browsing through these updates, my Spotify playlist would inexplicably queue up the track “Vicarious” by Tool. The song's verses, tackling our intrigue with calamity and remote anguish, appeared to strikingly echo what I was experiencing. This repeating occurrence lingered in my mind and slowly influenced my thoughts. It prompted me to contemplate not only the events themselves but also the way we absorb them, how continual exposure to crises can dull empathy, and how we, as spectators of disaster spectacle, fluctuate between involvement and insensitivity.

From this mix of personal experience, media prevalence, and artistic reflection, the groundwork of my project started to form.

¹ Radar. *Radar learns: At the suggestion of Siniša Kovačević and Dijana Stojković, students from Serbia officially nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize* (Radar saznaje: Na predlog Siniše Kovačevića i Dijane StojkovićStudenti iz Srbije zvanično nominovani za Nobelovu nagradu za mir). January 31, 2025.

<https://radar.nova.rs/drustvo/studenti-nobelova-nagrada-za-mir/>

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND THEMES

The main driving force behind my diploma project is an effort to express the overlap between personal psychological states and shared social circumstances, especially influenced by persistent cycles of trauma and overstimulation. From the beginning, I was fascinated to discover how ongoing exposure to crises, through personal experience or visual representations impacts our ability for empathy, resilience, and connection. The main themes that organize the series include desensitization, compassion fatigue, shared anxiety, and overstimulation. These affective or more complex mental states are intricately woven into modern existence, as a continuous flow of troubling images obscures the boundaries between individual pain and far-off disaster.

My main inspirations were shaped by historical references and artists, especially the works of Francisco Goya and Eugène Delacroix, whose art captured the chaos and moral dilemmas of their times. In a distant echo of their efforts, my aim was to create images that oscillate between vivid realism and symbolic abstraction and aim to capture the urgency of the present while also representing the broader patterns of conflict and resilience. The Romanticists sought to uncover the profound currents of human emotions amid perceived social decline and raging conflicts. Similarly, with my work, I want to investigate how modern audiences perceive and internalize their continuous engagement with chaos.

Simultaneously, I find motivation in the disturbing and detailed imagery of Agostino Arrivabene² and Zdzisław Beksiński³, whose creations explore the thresholds between dreams and nightmares, deterioration and elevation. Arrivabene's mythologically charged, texturally elaborate canvases and Beksiński's dystopian, skeletal structures both provide a lexicon of eroding figures and decaying terrains that echo themes of decay and existential discomfort. Their impact inspires me to dissolve the distinctions between figuration and abstraction, combining physical forms with symbolic settings to evoke not only narrative imagery but also psychological dimensions and universal fears

In visually translating these concepts, the main elements in the paintings illustrate distorted, broken figures ensnared in desolate terrains. These sceneries, depicted in deep browns, subdued blues, and ochres, imply locations that are at once external combat zones and internal psychological landscapes. The figures themselves are unclear, they look human, but somewhat abstracted, frequently blending together or fading into the environment around them. In this ambiguity, I aim to reflect the disruption of identity that trauma causes, and how shared crises diminish the limits between individual and community.

Importantly, the project links my personal side and experience with global conditions. Having been born in Venezuela and at a very early age moving to Serbia, I have seen how persistent social turmoil erodes confidence, amplifies existential dread, and compels communities to swing between defiance and submission. The visual language of the artworks aims to express this duality: separation and intertwining, indifference and turmoil, decline and strength.

² Agostino Arrivabene, Italian contemporary painter
<https://www.agostinoarrivabene.it/>

³ Zdzisław Beksiński, Polish painter
<https://www.artnet.com/artists/zdzislaw-beksinski/>

CREATIVE PROCESS AND MATERIAL APPROACH

A vital aspect of my diploma project lies in the deliberate choices surrounding materiality and craftsmanship. In order to echo the weight of historical references and imbue the works with a tangible sense of tradition, I chose to stretch each canvas by hand using a thicker linen roll. This decision was intended to subtly mirror the techniques of the Old Masters, emphasizing both respect for painterly heritage and a meditative engagement with the medium itself. The physical act of preparing the surface became a foundational ritual, reinforcing the idea that these works are not merely images, but constructed, “full-bodied” objects steeped in human effort.

During the creative process, I used only oil paints, utilizing a restrained, muted color scheme highlighted by intentional splashes of reds, oranges, and blues. This chromatic method was created to inspire the contrasting feelings of numbness and anxiety, echoing the duality of disconnection and hyper-stimulation central to my themes. By applying layers of glazes and delicate impasto techniques, I aimed to create both visual depth and tactile tension in every piece.

In general, my selections of materials and methods serve not just as formal choices but also as conceptual extensions of the themes present in the paintings. By grounding my work in historical craftsmanship and modern experimentation, I seek to place my practice within a tradition that honors the past while confronting today's pressing issues.

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

With this series of works I want to serve as a personal and shared testament to the lasting cycles of trauma, turmoil, and resilience that define our contemporary life. During the process of crafting these paintings, I expanded my comprehension of how visual language can express intricate, frequently indescribable conditions of emotional and social tension. By referencing historical figures like Goya, Delacroix, Caspar, Turner, Max Ernst, Beksinski, and Arrivabene, my aim is to connect traditional painting techniques with themes that strongly resonate in our overstimulated, hyper-mediated society. The act of hand-stretching linen, applying multiple glazes, and carefully shaping forms not only linked me to traditional artistry but also reflected the slow, thoughtful reflection required to address such profound themes.

The project pushed me to face my own experiences, moving from Venezuela at a very young age and later observing and witnessing comparable chaos in Serbia, which can resonate on an international level. These artworks served as a medium to address inherited and experienced anxiety, transforming fragmented media imagery I was exposed to into deliberate symbolic compositions that question how repeated exposure to suffering shapes empathy and collective memory. In this process, I've learned to appreciate the delicate balance between observing and losing sensitivity, as well as how art can restore room for reflection amid overwhelming saturation.

This journey did not emerge out of nowhere. My current visual language started to take shape during the COVID-19 pandemic, in a time defined by imposed solitude, resulting in a deeper reflection and increased awareness of global vulnerability. In those uncertain months, like many others, I struggled with internal conflict, existential questions, and a profound feeling of isolation. In that quiet moment, removed from daily habits and outside approval, I looked within and discovered comfort and order through painting. The pandemic served as a trigger, forcing me to reassess not just my artistic priorities but also the broader stories I aimed to explore through my creations. It sparked a need to express the subtle feelings of discomfort that had always been with me, yet had not previously taken on a distinct visual shape.

From a technical standpoint, playing with a muted palette highlighted by intense splashes of red, ochre, indigo and ultramarine blue enabled me to express the contrasts of numbness and visceral turmoil. The use of anatomical distortion, surreal landscapes, and complex symbolism convey feelings of alienation, decay, and also resistance. This interaction between formal choices and conceptual purpose strengthened my conviction that painting continues to be a powerful medium for addressing modern existential challenges.

In the end, this diploma project has not only polished my visual expression but has also significantly influenced the direction of my artistic work. It reinforced my dedication to utilizing painting as a means for thoughtful examination of both individual and shared circumstances. In the future, I plan to enhance this body of work even more — exploring in greater depth how intergenerational trauma, media saturation, and societal instability shape human perception and empathy. I intend to keep creating extensive compositions that blend traditional artistic methods with modern thematic issues, potentially focusing on other mediums and technologies such as with 3D modeling and printing to further enrich the dialogue. Through these images, I aim to not only make sense of the fractures I have inherited and witnessed but to offer a space where others might recognize their own reflections and feel less alone within them.

VISUAL CREATIVE PROCESS

PHOTO REFERENCES

The following photos are references and sources of inspiration that I gathered at the beginning of the project. The images are mainly from protests in both Caracas, Venezuela, and Belgrade, Serbia. Initially, aside from civil unrest, I intended to incorporate man-made ecological catastrophes, but I eventually moved away from that topic although I kept some of those images as additional references.



First image is from Anti-COVID lockdown In Belgrade, Serbia, back in 2020. The second and third are from anti government protests in Caracas, Venezuela. The last one is from Afghanistan, this one was mostly used for smoke reference.



The colours on the first photo captured my eye very interesting and kept it for future reference. The colour from the oil covered pelican on the third photo can be seen on some of the paintings, with this I wanted to try and connect the symbolism of the destruction around us. The rest are more photos from protests both in Belgrade and Serbia.

The statues which are in front of the national assembly in Belgrade have been incorporated as the main element in one of my works. It represents the continuous cycle of unrest, like back when it happened in the early 2000s, to this day.

EARLY SKETCHES

These sketches represent what was the first draft of the diploma project idea. This was a small experimentation on the possibilities of working on smaller canvas formats (A4) and a practice to be more expressive. On some, I added the acrylic white colour, to see what kind of texture would give after adding additional layers of oil paint.



PROGRESS OF WORKS

While waiting for the canvases to dry after applying the gesso, I started playing around in Photoshop, in order to figure out the composition, colours, details and to see how the final product would look like. In the end, I left the decisions to come naturally.



Digital collage of the sketch



First underlayer and sketch



First lasure layer on the central figure



First underlayer and sketch



Finished detailing the ground



Process of detailing the central figure and doing some changes



Initial steps of layering the sky and the horizon



Sky finished and detailing the ground



*Background and other elements done
First undercoat layers for the central part*



Digital collage sketch with elements taken from photo references



First underpaint layer and sketch transfer



*Background finished, detailed the central part
All is left the ground and front elements to be detailed*



First under layers for the background and figure



Background finished and detailing the central part



Surrounding elements finished, started to detail the central figure



I've decided to do this one on a larger format



Work in progress

FINISHED PAINTINGS



“STRANDED”
105 X 85 cm, oil on canvas, 2025



“ENDLESS HUNGER”
105 x 85 cm, oil colour on canvas, 2025



"LIES AND DECEPTION"
100 x 80 cm, oil colour on canvas, 2025



“TESTAMENT OF ASHES”
100 x 80 cm, oil colour on canvas, 2025