

Stanko Špoljarić about Maja's painting



Artistic sensitivity is the basic characteristic of the work of Maja Dolenčić Malešević. Her formative years at the Zagreb Art Academy under the skilful mentorship of the artist Ljubo Babić were certainly important, but the guiding light on her creative path was her talent, her zeal and sensibility. Maja appeared on the Croatian art scene in the artistically exciting and heterogeneous nineteen-seventies, a time of many currents and phenomena, several forms of figuration, the significant role of the abstract of various schools, and creations of a conceptual character. It seemed as though there was no room for Maja Malešević's subtle sketches amongst the aggression of the prevailing trends. But it came to be seen that the enviable level she quickly reached in her early work was confirmed at both joint and solo exhibitions, for example the Zagreb Show in 1965 held in the Literary Club, as in the years to come, at ten solo appearances, and with continuity, still today in work of the same creative power, poetics with the presence of reasoned mood, but with the identical desire, seeking and finding the infusion of external and internal beauty, in apparently simple motifs to find the meaning of life and existence. Retaining her everyday task and beneath the literal appearance, Maja Malešević chose drawing, a technique of psychogrammatic openness, for the artistic transformation of experience and moods. A technique with extremes of approach, on the one hand direct execution, on the other meditative in the creation of lines. In the synthesis of the spark of ideas and consideration in the formation of the artistic scenery. In earlier works with the minute detailing of form, with objects as the guiding motifs of her work. In the interesting process of creating the surface, artistically complete and full, in the rhythm of dark and light groupings of colour, constructed with the movement of a free gesture. Her artistic opus, strongly active, is dominated by drawings. The true weave of the line of Maja's characteristic signature, able to enjoy every detail, to describe a realistic pattern which in the specific character of the playfulness of the drawing, begins to tell a new story. So the cart is full or the cupboard which has served for generations, an old chest of drawers, a step ladder, bird cages, pictures,

a chair, a clock, a vase of flowers. All packed into the movement of life, a scene in which there is also sentimentality, but also satisfaction that something is behind us. The collection of things expresses the rural, and the urban, and simply being left in the cart without a horse, they remain untouched, but are also touched by the shadow of transience. Maja is satisfied with the drawing as it is, both precise and a little rough, skilled and sometimes out of control, with a brilliant understanding of perspective shortening, and the flatness of forms, suggesting their volume. In an intriguing combination of valuable things and trash, she has created a stage on which things begin to obtain a new meaning. This is the embryo of Maja's tendency towards a gentle atmosphere of the metaphysical, her authentic variant of lyrical surrealism. The path on which the usual becomes unusual. A toy chest, with dolls in it, horses, is a return to Maja's wonder as a girl, convincing in its restoration of the artist as a young woman. So the cupboard with the separated silhouettes, the Torpedo type writer, the tape recorder, as motifs of self-sufficiency, arising from a variety of uses, are raised up onto the artist's pedestal. Maja Malešević in this reduction is part of the artistic reality of the seventh decade. With the happy use of collage, fragments of pictures to enrich its tactile character. And the endearing details woven into the line of sometimes even expressionist unrest, with shifts in the thickness, the clarity of the outline, changes to the curves and straight lines, sometimes even set out in parallel.

In 1970 Maja introduced figures to the scenes in her pictures, with characters of atypical anatomical measurements. Their bodies are formed as gigantic figures, with new proportional relations and accents in formation of the figure. A certain naivety of expression, or closeness to a child's drawing, reflects the immediacy of the artist's course, the fragility and strength of the contemporary style, bringing intimacy with the actors in the event. Through the necessary deformation of the figures, Maja breaks through the radiance of the external skin, coming closer to the vitality of the lines of the heart of their condition and situation. So a horse race is shown in freely smudged, thick surfaces, externally concentrated movements on the pulsating white of the paper. The extension of the figures and their changing positions do not completely detract from their grace, and their curves and brokenness lead to the reverse face of the narrative. Through the richness of imagination even the everyday becomes a key to the universal, for even the small subjects of the starting point become at least partially universal truths. Maja Malešević in her unobtrusive way and specific artistic temperament achieves the story line. She precisely follows the figure's breath, at the same time well chiselled and fluttering, with the recollection of organic form, but also a level of stylization, included in the construction of the artistic record. With joints and gaps in places where the figure is stable as a related artistic species, alone or with double figures. We meet in the orderliness of the series postmen, pianists, card players, boxers, photographers, politicians, traffic police, trumpet players,

harmonica players... Maja observes them with sympathy, adding objects, the key to understanding the drama of the scene. The collage quotations are in a textual sense to represent their occupation. The applications to some extent increase the chromatic component of the scene, postage stamps set in the middle of the space and in the belt around the edge of the drawing. The rhythm of the lines and printed text and pieces of photographs, give the figures firmness, they become characters and signs. The note of emotion running through all her work is emphasized in the picture of women covered in flowers, mothers with children or loving couples. Maja's brides, feminine, relaxed in their white drapery with bouquets of flowers, bring together the whole concept of beauty in themselves. With chastity in their spirituality. On the edges of the tangible and a hint of the sensual. Moving away from classical standards of beauty, Maja Malešević creates the dreamlike gentleness of a woman, setting it in an imaginary space. Without a subscript, it radiates warmth, a soft light exalting the sensuality of the figures. We imagine them in the fragility of porcelain with the charm of flowers. Listening to the world beyond the scene on the picture, with desire protected in the security of the framed space. Refuge in the restfulness of the picture has also been found by some erotic female nudes, with a moderate tone of incarnation, the body posed diagonally, with soft curves in touched sensuality. At the same time legible and lightly covered in gossamer. Maja's obsession with drawing is broader than merely recording objects and is a meditation on the lines of life, offered in exact execution and reality, even when they are only scratches on paper. When she leads us in her drawing into a labyrinth, even in the course of a simple curve, and on the other hand the complexity of a structure emerges as an example of a monologue in drawing. This is a note of the paradox in the original drawings of Maja Malešević, where the form levitates, but is fixed to the ground. This is certainly no calculation, since the drawing comes from her heart and hand, from effort and hard work. The line is also rustic, somewhat rough, with many miniature points closed in a thicker line, but it is also tense with light, like a clear slash, conquering the corridor of space. In the dynamics of the epic and lyrical drawing, the differences between the plant life drawn disappear, where our points of orientation are found in the bumps along the line. With the question, whether the lines, as well as the description are also an invention. Maja considers her creations to be sketches, but also pictures, in the full sense of the word. This is the answer to the question, because even minimal colour and shading, a chromatic shock of even insignificant detail is an entry into the world of painting. The modesty of the means of expression is no hindrance to the greatness of the impression. Maja's humility in creating by nurturing her talent has led to artistic truth. In the love of a mother for her child, in the thoughtfulness of a man in a café, in a girl's acceptance of a lover's token, in a girl lost in anxious solitude. In numerous couples in a range of positions of intimacy, embracing and kissing, with flowers and symbolic apples.

Engaged couples with a hymn of love on their lips. Formed artistically in an extended ellipse, gradually spreading in rays in a pyramid composition. The series created before the end of the seventies with figures of a man and woman, joined together, brings to an end (naturally with threads extending even into later years) the sketching period of Maja's drawing. It was without doubt amongst these examples of construction, the gradual study of stance and movement, and the elementary nature of lines, that we find the focus of her first period of creative work. The lines unite the space (by suggestion) of the mass within the body and the objects of the space outside. The boundary is between the different forms of pulsing, the tension between loudness and quiet. The lines define the artistic message on practically identical shades of paper. As colour enters the pictures with increasing emphasis, the role of the lines does not change. It remains in the function of collecting together, but also becomes a factor of division. Colour is also emphasized in its warmth in the areas not coloured, in that the line affirms the newness of colour. In the contrast of the fertility of colour and white or yellow paper, the lines, in an uneven fashion, rely on the colour, that is, the pastels of the untouched architecture of the picture. The edges of the figures seem to repeat themselves, confirming their blackness in defence against the power of the colour. The chromatic facts are liberated in complete submission to the limiting lines, then come out of the fingers of the surprised figures as autonomous forms of colour.

The self-sufficiency of the drawing appears in images with a certain amount of humour, Maja's variations of the sardonic, bringing in the animalistic in endearing situations in the relationship between a cat and a woman, and an owl and a stylized head.

But colours conquer the space and the figures with increasing force, colours realized in pastels. Their softness, with innumerable thick parallel lines, thin threads, right to express the tremor of the figuration, descriptive but also raising us from the ground. The organization of the space is also changed, with division into geometric compartments set in a screen of linear perspective. With a layout of fields in a mainly vertical composition, frequently in conflict with clearly marked lines of light and darkness. The different poles of the source and changes in content. Despite the recognizable logic of the construction, Maja does not own a canon nor any unchangeable foundation for her forms. For Maja develops her artistic mission through inventiveness, strongly linked to her human and religious convictions. Without iconographic exclusiveness but with symbolically expressed belcantist singing, in artistic verse, she penetrates to man's intimate being in her pictures. And probably, naturally not on a literal level, the pictures in their confessional nature also have a certain element of the autobiographic. Perhaps they are also an examination of the conscience in the exemplary nature of the picture and the hint of the transcendental. Without idealization of the selected

topics, but with peace in both the landscapes and interiors. With a suppressed sacral light, even marking those on the path of life with halos. It is not easy to determine the time of day in which the person comes to share in the light. Perhaps it is dawn, but also evening, but even the heat of noon is not excluded. The actors in the events in the picture are Maja's friends in terms of their commitment to all human virtues and doubts. Gratitude for the gift of life and joy in little values are the souls of the people addressed in the picture, with love. The characters are in a vacuum-like space, which cleans away roughness, giving sensuality artistic delicacy.

Maja Malešević is mentioned in texts as a surreal artist. It is possible to interpret her work in that way, the contemplative and timelessness, beyond the security of the realistic, arise from the need to overcome the banality and error of the time. With a question about how far the characters are emotionally and existentially firm. It is also not possible to deny the trials of Job, alienation, melancholy, courage, wisdom. With associations to the situation around it. Maja finds her inspiration in the Bible, as in the motif of Veronica's veil, displayed in a contemporary context, or in the experience of the martyrdom on Golgotha of the crucified Christ, seen as a sculpture by the side of the road, characteristic of crossroads in her native Zagorje, scenes with true piety. Her artistic concentration is inspired by the experience of faith, and the content experienced both in the actual factual content of the scene and in the breadth of the gospel message. In Maja's work relatively few motifs come from reading the Bible, but the atmosphere of the spiritual becomes almost tangible. Even when she raises human love onto a pedestal, as given from God, when she rejoices in the beauty of a flower, she always seems to be searching for Eden. In a pause before the statue of Mary, in the Stone Gate in Zagreb, we find the fullness of folk religion, probably the most sincere form of spirituality. In the series of works showing a dialogue between man and the landscape we also recognize the spark of overcoming, in relationship and harmony with nature, with the appearance of idealism in the realism of the scene. Primarily in the atmosphere of the place and the moment, the constant arriving and departing. But with the victory of internal constancy. Maja's figuration is original in the completeness of the drawing, but also the typology of the landscape with a measure of stylization. The plant life with its characteristic silhouettes, suggests in the scene the breadth but also the intimacy of a courtyard. Nature on the one hand is linked with an interior on the other, like in Renaissance paintings through windows, sometimes doors. In that boundary, man is on the border between the created and the built. Maja gives room to figures, and even an entire family, in the brilliance of the landscape, or a small piece of the panorama of the city. With communication in which figures, plant life and the facades are unified in the softness of their form. Always with a strong impression of the whole, for example in the scene in front of the church in Međugorje, blessed with

the figure of the Virgin Mary in the composition. In this piece it seems that all the pilgrim processions are registered, the climbs up the hill of the appearance, or the stations of the cross, up to the big cross. Maja Malešević shows the traveller moving towards ancient chapels on hill tops, walking to Holy Mass on Sunday. The sacral buildings appear as independent motifs too, as architecture of the historical and contemporary.

The genuine human yearning for the possibility of sanctification is found in the picture of a nun with a candle, or in the touching relationship between the handmaid of the Lord and the Heart of Mary, made concrete in the artistic interpretation of a sculpture. When Maja moves away from the altar, recording people walking along under umbrellas, or figures alienated from the immediate surroundings under a tree, set apart, she does not abandon her idea of the need for closeness between God and man. Even neutral motifs, tables, with fruit and flowers, are a reminder of the depth of the soul on the table in the Garden of Eden. The quiet presence of the sacred is not disrupted by the course of everyday life. In the shift to the metaphysical we see man in all his trials and dilemmas, we observe families, couples, individuals. Occupied with trivial pleasures, conversation, more rarely conflicts.

Maja Malešević approaches her chosen and inexhaustible themes in a variety of artistic forms. She varies the positions of her figures, they are moving away from us, face us front on or en face, are emphasized in the foreground, taking central place in the frame of the picture, or shifted to the side, formed exclusively by lines or by a minor splash of colour. With examples of the mosaic density of samples from woven fabric. Identical to the ornamentation of the floor of the interior. The geometricity which precisely develops all the segments of the space, like an open box with beautifully composed sides. The exact space is in contrast to the lightness of the landscape, but it is full of the same mood. Imaginativeness in observation of the world, presence of mind in gazing at the sky. Shock and gratitude for Christ's walk to Calvary, and assistance accepted from angels. A particularly dear subject for Maja. Not so very different in artistic terms, but imbued with a special, unspeakable gift from Heaven.

The artistic work of Maja Dolenčić Malešević wins us over with its simplicity and contemplativeness. An artistic self awareness which has to inspire the observer. With continuity and expression by which Maja deserves a visible place in modern Croatian art.

Art critics writing about M. D. over the decades

Juraj Baldani

from an article in *Kulturni tjednik*, June 1965.

As the objects of her observation Maja Dolenčič Malešević chooses simple items from everyday life. She is interested in what is right next to us, what seems to us at times to be so close that we do not even notice it. She is actually a poet of little things, which she wants to drag out of anonymity and show them in their real life function and our deep dependence on them. In order to achieve this she has to move into the sphere of innocence and try to observe all those objects of her artistic interest with the naivety of a childish eye and spontaneous joy of one discovering them, unburdened by the stale standards of experience. This is best shown in the motifs of her canvases: an old cupboard, a shelf, a table, a cooker or a front door, the front of a tailor's shop, a counter, and in the end a train, tools, and a clock.

The artist bases the construction of her pictures on sketches, structures and applied elements. Joining these three factors together, she remains rustic when she wants to be lyrical, refined when she is trying to suggest simplicity and naïve when she is trying to overcome the relationship of real objects and the display depicted. And precisely out of these contrasts grows all the charm of the ease and attraction which give the displayed canvases a specific character. White is predominant, enhanced by the semi tones of the structure. The skeleton of the picture is a sketch by which it submits to the essence of the theme. The depicted item takes up the entire canvas in the foreground. Alongside graphics and artistic media, the artist also uses real elements which she sticks onto the picture. These are mainly labels from a variety of boxes or bottles, which retain their original function in the picture, since they are also here stuck onto a box or a bottle, except it is now drawn and not a real object.

Vlado Bužančić

from the foreword to the second solo exhibition in the Vladimir Nazor Gallery, Zagreb, October 1971.

Here the formal question arises in its complete indivisibility, in terms of content, expression and art: why for example give value to the internal innocence and special nature of a Licitar heart, as though the most valuable or faultlessly legible, to express the meaningless or even tragic truths of certain existence.

Without the tragic reverse face, or at least the irony of life, this art does not exist. It cannot exist even without figures, without specific objects, surviving and surplus, without situations, without a certain artistic simplicity, without “distorted” lines, what is close to ten-year olds, primitive people, a certain type of amateur and great masters of caricatures, grotesque and engaged art, George Grosz – for example.

But this is only a conditional and very all encompassing analogy. The Musicians of Maja Malešević Dolenčić, her Pianists, Harmonica players, moving house, and Easels for paintings and paintings of the imagination, Things and their destiny... this is a world which does not need artistic models and relations further away than northern Croatia, regardless of its typical central European and easily comprehensible poetic universality.

Despite all her obvious difference and creative independence, Maja Dolenčić Malešević belongs to a small “family” within contemporary Croatian art, the same one as amongst others: Krsto Hegedušić, Ivan Lovrenčić, Francina Dolenec and Nives Kavurić-Kurtović.

Perhaps no one has gone on with (and enriched) like them the tradition of Croatian (central European and European) *folk art*...

Željko Sabol

from the Foreword to the *Third Solo Exhibition*, Studio Gallery Forum, October-November 1972.

Maja Dolenčić Malešević uses mainly lines (with rare traces of modelling) and with their help builds and composes, emphasizes or conceals. Their course is sure and unbroken, sometimes sharply cut into the surface of the paper, suggesting an infinite space.

But there is none of the unusual, the harshness or (folk) grotesque of Ivan Lovrenčić, nor the vision of the imaginary absurd, present in the work of Nives Kavurić-Kurtović, for example, but we will (in every place) discover fragility, vulnerability and the meekness of a noble nostalgia seeking to take us back into the past and our childhood. We wonder: how does this return take place and what is on its path?

In the present, what has remained of the past is above all *things*, abandoned objects which guard the memories of “days gone by” and their history. The destiny of man, for Maja Dolenčić Malešević is inseparable from the destiny of the (common) things that surround him. They accompany him on every journey or remain as the only witnesses after his flight, disappearance, evaporation...

(...)

After this there is a group of drawings in which the view has passed from objects to man. His face and internal experience. This is often the face belonging to the artist herself, marking her emotions, thoughts and doubts, fears and faith. After several completely lyrical, airy scenes in which the female figure is raised to the fantastic and unreal, we sense the first signs of drama and “darker” excitement. There is anxiety, unrest, insecurity of existence. From peace and reticence we come to tragic and unresolved questions. All at once we have seen the other side of life and come to know the futile effort of trying to keep (and save) what we love. It is noticeable that Maja Dolenčić Malešević, in expression and technique, concentrates more consistently on the important, reduces the number of utensils and “lightens” the composition, all the way to emptiness and abandonment. She is now concerned with the movement, seeking and flight, showing loneliness and despair, of those who have lost their way and their purpose. She has replaced the expression of graphics with the expression of coloured surfaces/backgrounds, symbolic values and meanings. The artist uses pastels, soft and pliable, and in the clear sound of blue, red or green shades she suggests a whirlwind, a stormy place above reality. Arms stretched out, spread out over nothingness, we follow the prophecy which addresses us in the language of destroyed beings or difficult dreams ... of all the known “information”, what remains is a man alone, a horse or a tree; a jump or flight, reaching into the distance or heights. The insoluble puzzle of life, the mysticism of the internal fire springing from the “course of the blood” and returning from where it flowed; man and his destiny. Fear and mystery, the lasting flame which shines over us.

Maja Dolenčić Malešević in her best drawings certainly and in a modern manner is writing the pages of her own biography... Perhaps this exhibition will help her drawings to find a worthy place in the world of contemporary Croatian art. They deserve it!

Željko Sabol

Speech at the opening of the *Third Solo Exhibition*, Studio Gallery Forum, October-November 1972.

... I would almost say that the female figure in the drawings of Maja D. M. is in fact a symbolic parable of Eve who is just deciding whether to offer the apple to Adam. And later she bears all the consequences of that act (...)

In all this Maja D.M. has created today, alongside Ivan Lovrenčić and Nives Kavurić-Kurtović, one of the most interesting series of drawings in contemporary art. I believe that the exhibition we are opening this evening will confirm this.

Unsigned author

Ten from the Eighth Salon, May 1973, *Večernji list*.

Maja Dolenčić Malešević: There is a noticeable and constant rise. Her hints are today her style. She nurtures painting in the “female” manner, the brush seems to stroke the canvas, and the strength of emotion does not conquer but wins us.

Darko Schneider

from the Foreword to the Fourth Solo Exhibition at the Kolarčev Gallery of the People's University,

27. 11. – 16. 12. 1974.

The general idea of this work is not difficult to recognize. It is childishly naïve and wisely experienced, it is aware of its youth and its maturity. It seems that the real truth is that we do not have time to live and the real drama of existence is that we do not have time to grow old. Few are aware of this and live in that light when they are young, and die happy and old. The subject of eternity is the subject of transience and who will be able to say (as Apollinaire once did) that the old stories are exhausted, it is time for poets to imagine new ones. I do not wish to fathom what Maja Dolenčić Malešević once wanted to become when she was a child. But she certainly wanted to fly like a bird and swim like a fish. How far does our knowledge of ourselves go back in the past? I am thinking here about an old Bavarian engraving, on which a girl is standing with a case on the edge of a dark forest and the bright clear sky. My conviction about the pictures of Maja Dolenčić Malešević comes from the 9th Zagreb Salon of 1974. An award for art is not by chance both a boundary and a signpost, of will and realization...

Mladenka Šolman

Foreword to the solo exhibition Forum Gallery, Zagreb, 9. 9. – 28. 9. 1980.

...Activating the fertile space of the subconscious and sleep... ...Maja Dolenčić Malešević intuitively senses distant parts of childhood, “childhood greater than reality”, whereby “we maintain the poetry of the past” and touch on the origins of our being and its homeland...

Željka Čorak

Foreword from the exhibition The Blue Harlequin in the Voćarska Gallery, Zagreb, 29th March to 12th April 1983.

But all these more or less objective observations and notes do not say completely (“hot, hot”, “colder, colder”) what it is that truly unites the drawings of Maja Dolenčić Malešević. And that something – when it is recognized as an “Aha” experience, can only be expressed in a language which is not completely in art criticism terms “valid”. Through the drawings of Maja Dolenčić Malešević, that is, there is a wind blowing. The wind is what unites them. The wind is indicated by the move away from the vertical line, the diagonals of people and things, like a forest growing to show the main direction of the prevailing wind in its landscape. The wind is given space on the white of the paper....

Josip Depolo

from the Foreword of the solo exhibition of Pastels, the Gallery of the Ruđer Bošković Institute, Zagreb,
15th April. 5th May 1986.

At the beginning of her artistic life, Maja lived in a time when avant-garde ideas had filled the sails of our artistic pioneers and to accept those ideas meant, as they convinced us or as we convinced ourselves, to be on the side of one’s time, to accept its “best part”, to find oneself right in the hub of the trends of the generation. Maja did not think like this, she resisted this way of thinking and sensed in it traces of a new formalism, her ideas moved in a completely different direction. She clearly did not think that way, because she did not feel like that, her poetic sensitivity was on the side of man’s problems and fears, his endless solitude and destructive melancholy (...)

We could always be sure that in Maja’s landscapes we would find some reliable and deep shadow, that in her figures we would meet with the sadness of our world and encouraging solitude, that in her quiet being we would find ourselves on the side of those rejected objects to which our past is indelibly linked. Maja sensed that in artistic cataclysms, in which in principle in art what are known as “general ideas” are found, the most effective weapon is privacy and the world of the little man (...) It is as if the windows of her studio are closed to the street. Whilst many in her generation painted “great ideas”, Maja painted what she found beyond that “great nothing”, scenes of completely “ordinary” life. In quiet passive resistance, characteristic of her, she stood up against all pressure against her own integrity, she voluntarily agreed to excommunication from her time and consciously accepted all the consequences of her little private world.

Darko Schneider

(from the Foreword to the solo exhibition in the *Margarita Gallery* Split, November 1990)

... I believe that without horror it is impossible to even think about the future and the past. Or to turn your face towards what your eye is aimed at. And to suppress the horror in the active present, torn between the moments which have already passed and those which seem to us to be an opportunity for the future. Time is eternity fallen apart. It is a walk through a valley overshadowed by the figure of overwhelming Melancholy and recognizing the whole world in a grain of sand, a handful of which, thrown into the wind, retaliates as dust in our face.

The shapes, colours and lines of Maja Dolenčić Malešević are not time, nor space, but still they create and make them; they are not a story, nor an allegory, nor a vision, but they are "soft symbolism" (Valéry)...

Regardless of all the philosophical and theosophical introspection in Maja's pastels we see the skill of comprehension of the most abstract, the most spiritual and the most imagined (the line), the transcending of the most mysterious, the most miraculous and most unique (the soul): she introduces her creation in a child, and gratitude for understanding into each individual picture. And I wonder: am I thereby expressing greater gratitude for Maja's nature, or am I more strongly underlining her formative power. The soul, that is, is so closely entwined in man's body.

Dubravko Horvatić

Foreword to the solo exhibition by M. D. Malešević in the *Nova Gallery*, November 1992.

Reading and interpreting a work of art, whether it is a picture, a piece of music or a literary creation, necessarily depends on the time when it is read and interpreted. As each newly created work changes the complete constellation of a particular branch of our (national) art, so, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot, it also changes each individual event of general importance; for this reason our relationship towards the artistic heritage and the current work of artists is also changed accordingly by social events, especially those which deeply change the environment of our lives and our life in general. In a time of war, for example, we will read a text, which we have known for decades, differently than how we read it before the war. In this sense, the *entire opus of Maja Dolenčić Malešević* is given new meaning: her solitary figures in empty spaces came to our world before the real refugees and displaced persons; the brides with no groom, with bunches of grave chrysanthemums, have been present in her art for years, with lonely houses around which everything seems to have been flattened, with windows opening to emptiness, and we only now recognize them, although they have been present in

her art almost since the beginning. The solitary trees, the isolated poplar tree or cypress, emblematically conjure up our eternal resting place. And empty chairs in empty rooms symbolize those that are no longer with us. Long ago I understood the connection between the bleak mood of our old folk laments and the pictures of M. D. Maja, as she signs herself, but only now, at the height of the Croatia-cidal war in Croatia and Herceg-Bosna, this comparison imposes itself in all its fullness. Only now are we becoming completely aware that Maja Dolenčić Malešević in her pastels and oils, has been impressively composing the mourning song about this war for a quarter of a century, suggestively recording the sad, hard fate that accompanies it.

Bogdan Malešević

text from the Foreword of the exhibition *Angels of our time* in the Ulrich Gallery, Zagreb, March-April 2002

It has to be said that in the case of the series of drawings on the subject of angels, this is not a case of “iconography” or what art historians call “iconography”. In this sense it is not a matter of “returning to the middle ages” about seeking the “iconography of angels”, which left the scene of art history in the 19th century, as Camille Corot is very frequently quoted, who once said, “Why would I paint angels when I have not seen a single one in real life?”. What we have here is *the truth of mankind*, anthropology. Angels have more strongly expressed personalities than people. Simply because of the fact that they “are completely found in God”, that they cannot err in carrying out the will of God. Therefore the *fact of figuration in modern art* is worked out precisely through them, Angels, since figuration means capturing reality, an idea, personality....

Lilijana Domić

from the text *Angels of our time*, Hrvatsko slovo, 29th March 2002.

Precisely, founded in the history of art and the history of art criticism, Bogdan Malešević explains scene by scene the central figure of angels, angels which appear on the white background by Maja Dolenčić Malešević, but he goes on to explain the concept, removing it from the context of pure figuration, from the context of everything into which the figuration is built, from the context of contemporary art. Angels truly do not belong to the starkly defined area of figuration, they belong to Anagogue, the place of mystic visions. And this, Anagogue, or mystic vision, is written in the aesthetics of heaven, it is from light and symbols, visions and signs, therefore history, art in the Western way – from the Gothic to 1830, is determined by the Aesthetics of Heaven, so we can say that

the 20th century is a century without angels. Who was it that took Anagogue away from contemporary art, gave us the picture without the mystic vision? The spokesperson for the change was Camille Corot, and his statement became famous, a kind of watchword to combat the aesthetics of the pre-Raphaelites, Corot says, *Why would I paint angels when I have never seen one in real life...?*

Cardinal Vinko Puljić, Archbishop of Vrhbosna

(from a letter to Maja Malešević):

I received with joy the recently published book *Angels of our time* in which your drawings are published on the subject of angels. It is a great gift from God to be able to express such an important topic in drawings. God has given us angels, and you have brought them close to us in your drawings. I thank you most sincerely for the gift of the book and sincerely wish that it would be an incentive and encouragement to all men...

Lilijana Domić

interview with B. Malešević before the exhibition *Angels of our time* in the Franciscan gallery in Osijek

(*Zlatno pero*, January 2003).

I have never found in one of your mother's scenes any possible description of evil. Art itself excludes that. She does perhaps deal with concepts such as nihilism/art, anti-aesthetics, but I have never found Evil in art, because evil is destruction and that is not art.

Therefore let us return to your mother's picture. I see an active angel in relation to a passive prayer. But it is not always like that. This prayer, or the person the angel is close to, may be in a state of contemplative peace, may be turned towards heaven, these are all the iconographic shifts which she introduces to her picture, perhaps repeating them, consciously or unconsciously, from what she has seen in her life, going to church, studying art, sketching. Whatever the case, this active angel is what fascinated me in this picture...

Dr. Ivo Šimat Banov

(Maja Dolencić Malešević, from the text for the future monograph, 2006.)

...For if the world is God's miracle, and it is, there cannot be any theory that is stronger than any sign of divine nature, nor nature itself. And although all this

gives the impression of great interest in objects (faces, landscapes, bouquets and vases with flowers, still life...) it is actually the purest search for sensation and spiritual substance, although through the individual selected items the symbolic emanates (bread, wine, flower etc) and moreover there is a gentle allusion to the mystery of the Eucharist. The artist is interested in poetics and spirituality, feeling and divine grace streaming through her work. In her work she closes the circle of conviction and belief. In the end she strengthens the weakened appearance of humanity.

In her entire opus I see consistency and fidelity to style and motifs, but also the transcendence of the ordinary, the everyday, the simple. And the spirit flows in the drawing through things, through squares and streets, touches passersby and couples, trades, vocations and professions. And the feeling of celebration charges and does not leave the artist's world, in which angels are the mediators of her work and the angels of the world are visible in the latest series. In the beginning the world was a miracle, in time it increasingly became the work of God. Earlier the postman, the toys, the cyclist, the girl, the café, the world of mobile property, the world surrounding us in its intimacy; then angels, the family, saints,

Style, especially their own, has been avoided by the best, as the sculptor K. Angeli Radovani would say, meaning thereby the slightly naïve and stupid idea of "originality". But still, Maja has built her own language and style. Not in speech, but in a whisper, not in shouting and noise but in humility, not in a hard but a gentle voice. Quietness wraps itself around all her characters and all her scenes. She did not create a "style". It has been with her since the earliest days. Style directly flowed from her nature. It is not – as wise men would say – either *à priori* nor *à posteriori*. It was an ontological and not a gnoseological problem...

Dr. Tonči Šitin

Speech at the opening of the exhibition *Angels of our time* Margarita Gallery, Split, Dioklecijanova 5, June 2006.

The figures of angels, or rather drawings, created in chalk and pastels on paper, appear to be “spiritual sketches” as B. Malešević so finely expresses it. When you take a closer look, all the angels have the task of starting a dialogue, to direct us, lead us, show, save, ennoble, they are “programmed” to bring us joy in communication with us, an almost concerned caring... look, there is no great laughter here, as though they have grown up on duty to do us good...

Maja is above all an artist of colour, but at the same time a very sensitive artist of the intimate, who records the world around her and inside herself, she knows what we need, she guards the medicine of comfort, her own angels and ours. Everything here is gentle and painless, rich in colour and lyrical gift as though the artist is defending the right to dream, to beauty, peace and happiness. It is sufficient to close our eyes...

Maja DolenčićMalešević – biography

Maja Dolenčić Malešević was born on 23rd March 1936 in the small town of Zlatar (Zagorje, to the north of Zagreb), where she spent the first ten years of her life in a happy childhood, despite the war, which would later be reflected in her artistic work. Her mother, Irma Stolcer Dolenčić (the cousin of the famous Croatian composer Josip Stolcer Slavenski) ran a well known bookshop in the centre of Zlatar, which was nationalized by the Partisans in 1945. The family then moved to Varaždin, a Baroque city, where Maja attended music school and grammar school, receiving training in painting, especially in watercolours. In 1955 she came to Zagreb to take the entrance exam for the Art Academy, which she failed the first time (the drawing element) but she met her future husband Duško Malešević, who passed first time, as one of the best drawers, and who was to help her prepare for the following year, when she passed. Maja graduated from the Academy in the class of Prof. Ljubo Babić, and after marrying Duško (also an artist), and the birth of their children (Bogdan, a future writer, and Tanja, a future artist), she held her first solo exhibitions, in the middle of the sixties and in the early seventies, when she received several awards for her art and a scholarship to study in Paris (with the sculptress Marija Ujević).

In the second half of the 1970's the Malešević family moved into a house with a studio on Šalata (Zagreb), where they would be living in an area with many art studios of famous Croatian artists and sculptors, where Maja worked on her Stations of the Cross in enamel for the church, and where, in parallel with her calling as a wife and mother, she completed her own opus, right up to the series of Angels, in the Jubilee Year of 2000.

In 2009 a monograph on her life will be published, together with one on her husband (who died in 2008), after more than ninety collective and twenty-three solo exhibitions in this country and abroad.