

Tribute to Berisha (1946-2023)

18/12/2023 – 21/01/2024

18 Rue Volta 75003

Opening on 17/12/2023

Visits by appointment

This exhibition aims to pay tribute to Berisha, beginning one year to the day after his departure to Kosovo. It will be held in his studio for about a month and will conclude shortly before the anniversary of his death on January 23, 2023.

It thus echoes the last journey he undertook to his homeland. When, accompanied by his nephews Fatos and Kastriot, he flew to Pristina, leaving behind works he continued to produce until the last minute. As if he would return at any moment to finish them.

But perhaps it's worth remembering that Berisha had no intention of returning, knowing he was doomed by his illness. Nor to complete his ongoing production. On the contrary, it seems he was determined to restart a process that would only find an end within itself. More interested in keeping producing than casting a final glance at the works he kept in his studio. As if he was rather preparing to start all over again.

I still see him in the courtyard heading to the taxi waiting to take him to the airport. I still hear the radio playing in the studio. All those scattered drawings, those paintings kept secret for so long before he was willing to show them, those sculptures hanging on the walls themselves covered with drawings, inscriptions, various objects, and images.

So many traces of his presence that we had to photograph, organize, inventory, and then pack with Fatos, Thierry, and Joseph. Thanks to the generosity of Agnès, whom we cannot thank enough for giving us the space and time to do so.

Soon, they too will follow in his wake to Pristina. This is at least what he wished, for his work to be preserved there and perhaps receive the attention it deserves.

That's why I wanted to organize this tribute, to salute our friend and his work once again by repeating the date of his departure to Kosovo. Perhaps as a symbol of the mourning to be completed, but also of the motif of return that was dear to him, as evidenced by a series of drawings and collages in this exhibition, some of which were published in a collection by the Albanian poet Sabri Hamiti a few years ago¹.

This series notably represents the figure of General George Kastrioti (1444 -1468), known as Skanderbeg, the national hero of Albania and a symbol of the resistance against the Ottoman Empire. He is depicted surrounded by winged creatures, evoking the Albanian two-headed black eagle, during a "return to the country" Berisha confided to me while I helped him digitize these documents to send to the publisher. It was the first time he showed me so many

¹ HAMITI, Sabri, *Kukuta e Sokratit*, Albas, Tirana, 2018. See also : BEQIRI, Shaip, *Hydra des Zorns, Hidra e mllleftit*, Limmat Verlag, Zurich, 2014, another book of poetry, with a drawing from Berisha on the cover.

drawings at once, and perhaps he thought I had earned it as I became increasingly interested in a subject I later realized was omnipresent in his work.

Born of an Albanian noble family, then forcibly enlisted in the Ottoman army where he distinguished himself as an officer during military campaigns in Europe and Asia Minor, Skanderbeg reportedly took advantage of a local uprising in Croïa in 1443 to switch sides before allying against the Ottoman imperial power, resisting it for twenty-three years with the help of the Papal States, Venice, and Naples². Some see him as the defender of Christianity in Europe, others a more complex figure of religious syncretism and cohesion of Albania, more broadly of the Balkans, as an Orthodox Christian converted to Islam and then to Catholicism³.

Whether in profile, three-quarters, from the back or front, Berisha reproduced the figure of the general too many times and on too diverse media for us to inventory them one by one in his studio. Similarly, he multiplied these figures of winged women, sometimes frontal, sometimes twisting, half human and half animal, blurring any reference to gender or specific sex. So much so that these two figures inspired by Albanian mythology sometimes seem to merge into ambiguous figures, like that of a rare androgynous general.

What initially appeared to me as simple studies within a production process seems to have gained a certain autonomy during the last period of his life. Beside any completion in a final work enclosing a process, regardless of techniques – pencil, pen, marker, ... – and supports – paper, tracing paper, cardboard, napkin, newspapers, ...

Indeed, if the inventory work allowed us to better understand the general organization of his studio practice, and to locate a work of sketches in a larger production of oil paintings, medium or large formats, including smaller drawings, not to mention the many serigraphy proofs, nor the entire collections of newspapers from the international press and magazine images classified by themes – reproduced works, horses, human bodies, poses, women's faces – I believe the repetition of the figures of the general and these winged creatures could have no end but in the search for this multiplicity itself.

It was not Berisha's intention to produce the last work, nor even less the perfect work to achieve fame. But to oppose, it seems to me, the very status of a work of art as a cultural object through which a history, the career of an artist is perhaps celebrated, but alienates his gesture, and freezes its possibilities. As if Berisha had been inspired by the guerrilla tactics inaugurated by General Kastrioti, a man of many facets, rather than the monolith, a symbol of national pride, to counter the anticipated fixation of his artistic work.

One might say that I romanticize excessively the practice of an elderly man, limited in his means, subject to a certain hesitation. Worse, that I give in to retrospective illusion. But I believe this search for multiplicity through the repetition of certain motifs was present in Berisha's work long before disease and old age relieved him of certain ambitions. It did not progress towards a form one would think predictable, but it was constantly intertwined, in my opinion, in the production he put in place.

² Contributors of Wikipedia, *Skanderbeg*, Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, (page consulted on 15/12/2023), <https://fr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Skanderbeg&oldid=210490734>

³ BAZDULJ, Muharem, *Et si Skanderbeg était le héros qui allait (enfin) rassembler les Balkans ?*, Courrier des Balkans, published on November 2nd 2015 (page consulted on 15/12/23), <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/Access-libre-Et-si-Skanderbeg-etait-le-heros-qui-allait-enfin-rassembler-les>

I see it, for example, in the series of serigraphs he made from the famous portrait of Che Guevara by Alberto Korda (1928-2001). An image reproduced millions of times, embodying the figure of perhaps the world's most famous revolutionary, but also its recuperation as a generic commodity. Berisha often ironized – when he did not regret – the "sweet" aspect of these images, which he declined in unique formats or assembled on canvases composed of mosaics of Che.

I also see it in this series of large paintings on blue backgrounds dating from the 70s, the period of his move to Paris, ranging from scenes of suffering and cries of strangely anonymous figures, piled in a charnel house or bursting through a garret window, to the act of painting itself represented in a self-reflexive turning motion, facing a canvas always blank, to compositions where bodies are only flesh stretched on a bed reminiscent of an operating table, when they are not completely emaciated, almost fossilized.

A thorough investigation should clarify the presence of these morbid themes in Berisha's painting. However, I think I can interpret it as an attempt to represent "this terrible ossification, this perpetual clattering of bones" (Nietzsche) of a history haunted by its dead and already the desire to interrupt its course. As if, in response to the deadly repetition of the past, there was another repetition capable of reintroducing contingency into the present, the possibility of making history, or a gesture of rupture⁴.

More broadly, I see this search for an art that now appears to me strategically minor through the repetition of the revolutionary figures of Che and Skanderbeg. A repetition that aimed, in my opinion, not only to recover something of the initial power of these great mythical figures but to accomplish a revolution within Berisha's work itself. The revolution of a man who repeated the same figures, the same gestures sometimes folded in on themselves, and perhaps found in this repetition the means to make them differ, to restore their original possibilities buried under history and stereotypes. Especially when he was preparing to make a final return, which he concluded with an enigmatic inscription on his tomb: "Berisha e Kuqe" (Berisha the Red). Ultimate Revolution?

Certainly, it would be excessive to claim that Berisha's work progressed to the trial of his return and then his disappearance in Kosovo towards the salutary fulfillment of a preconceived scheme. Nevertheless, the concrete conditions of this return to the land of his origins shed a particular light on this search. As if he had perceived, at the twilight of his journey, the "first light"⁵ of a work yet behind him, its original possibilities.

It is therefore to pay homage to what in Berisha and through his work never ceased to desire possibilities and to open to the future that I wanted to organize this exhibition. An exhibition in the form of a repetition, when it was for him a means of restoring the ever-lively possibilities of disjunction and incompleteness of a history always to be written, and which is for us a "liberating remembrance," free from any melancholic affect, the affirmation of a present open to bifurcation, to action and initiative.

⁴ "Undoubtedly, repetition is already what binds, but if one dies from repetition, it is also what saves and heals, and heals first from the other repetition." in DELEUZE, Gilles, *Différence et répétition*, PUF, Paris, 1968, cited in HAMEL, Jean-François, *Revenances du passé*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2006, p.98.

⁵ GARCIA, Tristan, *Première Lumière*, dans *Kaléidoscope II, Ce qui commence et ce qui finit*, Editions Léo Scheer, Paris, 2020.

Finally, what better way to pay tribute to Berisha's perseverance, courage, and desire for revolution by seizing the opportunity of the date of his departure to announce a new era at his studio at 18 rue Volta. For this exhibition will also mark, I hope, the beginning of a space for exhibitions, publications, productions, discussions, and dialogues fueled by this desire for a present that differs.

In the meantime, let's repeat the date of his departure to better salute him in his momentum and recognize that he marked us as an irreplaceable loss.

Goodbye dear friend!

Jean Bourgois

(Translated from French with the help of ChatGPT4 on 18/12/2023)

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18/12/2023 – 21/01/2024

18 Rue Volta

75003

Opening on December 17th 2023

Visits by appointment

List of works:

Berisha

Untitled

undated

oil on canvas

250 x 194 cm

Berisha

Untitled [Che Guevara]

undated

silkscreen on canvas mounted on wood

46 x 39.5 cm

Berisha

Untitled [Che Guevara]

undated

silkscreen on canvas mounted on wood

65 x 54 cm

Berisha

Untitled [studies]

undated

various techniques on paper

dimensions variable

Joseph Bourgois

Untitled

2023

lacquered cement, steel rod, wood, brass, wire, led

edition 2/3

186 x 18 x 17 cm

Fatos Berisha

Untitled [Portrait of Berisha]

2018

acrylic on printed canvas

60.5 x 40 cm

Anonymous

Untitled [Portrait de Berisha]

[1994], [2023]

Gelatin silver print

12 x 18 cm

















MOONLATE
La grève est quasi générale
au Kosovo
Boris

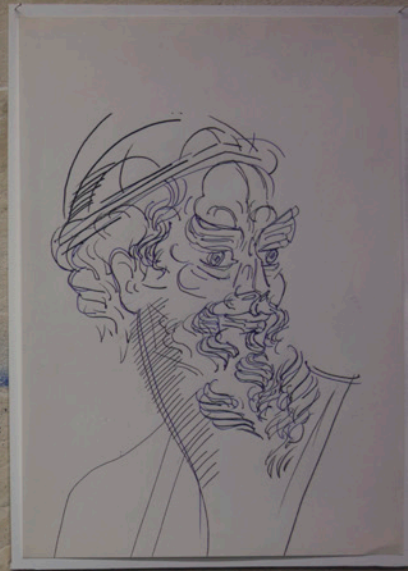
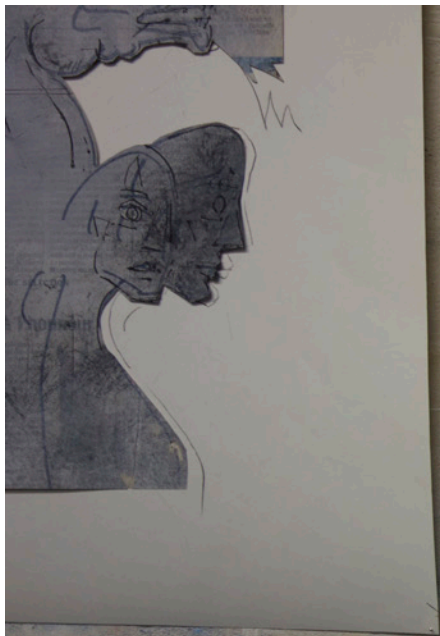








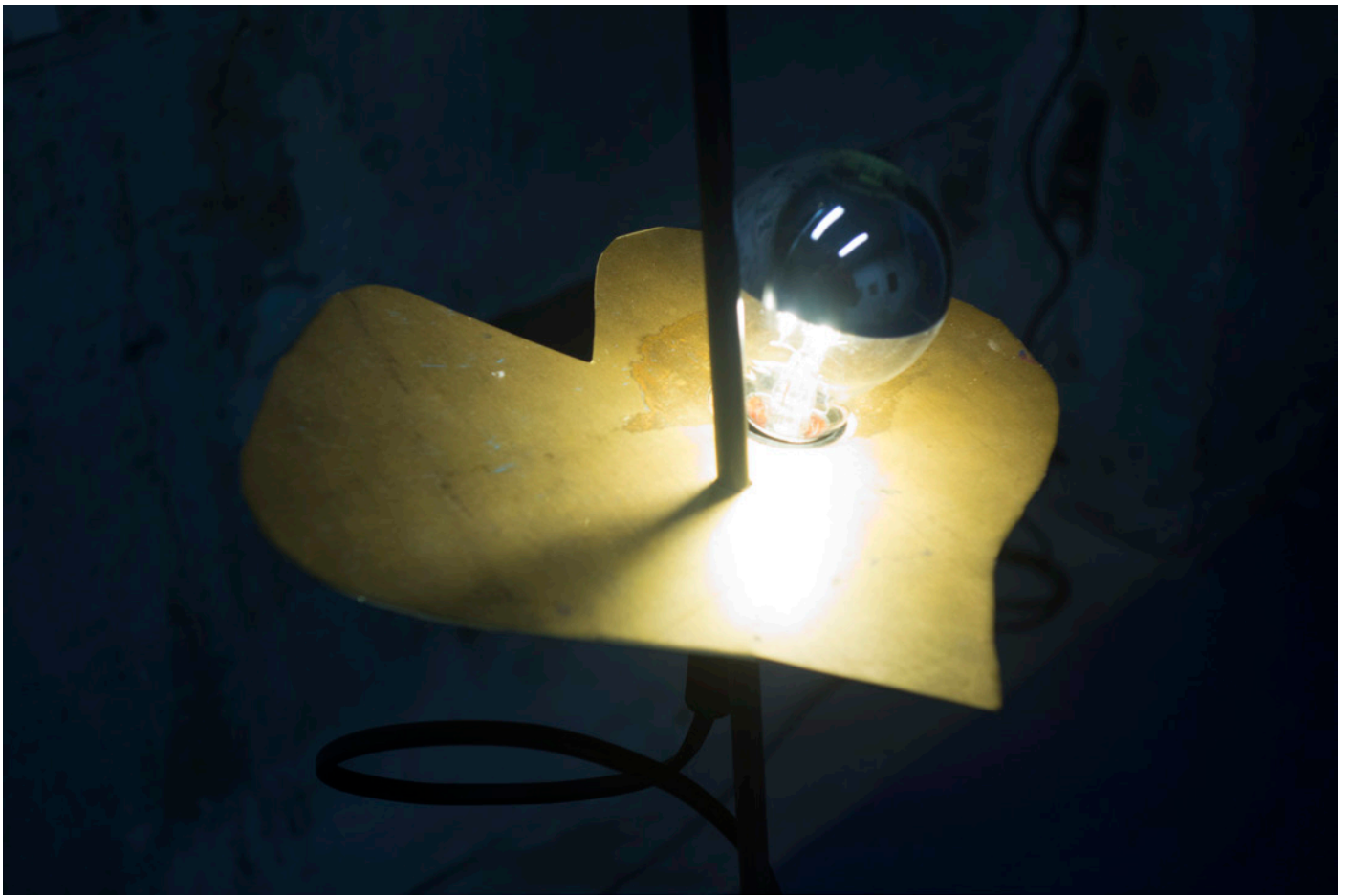












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Portfolio edited by Jean Bourgois

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