

Jelena Bulajić:
Untitled (after) (EN)
Kunsthalle Münster

Kunsthalle Münster, Hafenweg 28, 5th floor, 48155 Münster

Opening hours: Tue–Sun 12–6 pm (Free admission)

www.kunsthalle-muenster.de

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Opening: December 12, 2025, 6 pm

Angela Stähler, *Mayor City of Münster* (Greeting)

Merle Radtke, *Director Kunsthalle Münster* (Introduction)

Accompanying programme:

→ 14/12/2025, 3 pm, Kunsthalle Münster

Artist talk with Jelena Bulajić and Merle Radtke (EN)

→ 25/1/2026, 3 pm, Kunsthalle Münster

Public guided tour (DE)

→ 19/2/2026, 6 pm, Kunsthalle Münster

Public guided tour (DE)

→ 26/3/2026, 6 pm, Dominikanerkirche

Lecture by Dieter Schwarz on Gerhard Richters *Zwei Graue
Doppelspiegel für ein Pendel* (DE)

→ 29/3/2026, 3 pm, Kunsthalle Münster

Curator's tour with Merle Radtke (DE)

Information on further events on our website:

www.kunsthalle-muenster.de/en/

Colophon: Director Kunsthalle Münster: Merle Radtke / Curator: Merle Radtke / Curatorial assistant: Lisa Petersohn / Internship: Marie-Féline Malavasi / Secretariat (Cultural Office): Mona Markotić-Renner / Bookkeeping (Cultural Office): Ursula Kubik, Hildegard Thesing / Public relations: Artefakt Kulturkonzepte / Design: JMMP – Julian Mader, Max Prediger / Text: Merle Radtke / Editing: Lisa Petersohn, Merle Radtke / Translation: Tim Connell (EN) / Technical execution: Christian Geißler / Construction: Jaimun Kim

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Jelena Bulajić's works are both tools for exploring the mediated view of the world and speculations about the dimensions of reality. They possess an intrinsic logic of showing and revealing deriving from an intensive engagement with the pictorial, its conditions and scope. When viewed together, Bulajić's different groups of works, her game with figuration and abstraction, posit a conception of image-making per se and challenge us to examine our own, individual perception.

For the figurative paintings she presents in *Untitled (after)*, Bulajić has appropriated works by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Wolfgang Tillmans and Hiroshi Sugimoto, thereby referring to a mode of mediated reality. The 'quotations' and their translation into another medium allow the artist to dispense with subjective expression in her choice of motifs, to concentrate on the craftsmanship of her paintings and to penetrate levels of meaning beyond what is depicted. While it is the motif that initially attracts our attention, on closer inspection it is primarily the tactility and surface of her works that are impressive. She deploys a mixture of marble dust, ground granite, limestone and kaolin in her works. The paint, with all its physical properties, is the 'living material' of her works and constitutes their physicality, the 'skin' of the composition, so to speak. At the same time, it is the interplay between the original and the copy, or rather Bulajić's version of it, that stimulates reflection and thought.

For her work *Untitled (after Bernini)* (2020) (2), Bulajić appropriated a detail from Bernini's sculpture *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1645–1652), specifically the face of the angel, who, in Teresa's vision, pierces the latter's heart with the arrow of divine love. As in many of his works, Bernini brought the white Carrara marble to life for this sculpture, lending the scenario an intensely emotive expression. Passion, anger, fear, love and ecstasy characterise his works; he carved tension and drama into stone. By selecting this particular detail, one is confronted by the angel at close quarters. When viewing it, you almost forget that you are looking at a painting, a representation of the sculpture, the three-dimensionality of which being reduced to two. Bulajić transfers the qualities of the sculpture to the canvas, but adds reflections of light to the soft features of the stone, so what we see here is effectively a snapshot. Or was it rather a photograph acting

as an intermediary as it were, allowing an angle on the work that would be impossible in reality at this proximity due to the elevated position of the sculpture at its location in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome.

The small format chosen by Bulajić for *Untitled (after Bernini)*, which permits an intimate encounter with Bernini's angel, contrasts starkly with the large format of her work *Untitled (after Tillmans, Atlantique)* (2025) (3). This format allows one to imagine physically immersing oneself in the surf captured in Tillmans's photograph *Atlantique* (2016). One feels the power of the breaker cascading on the beach, the wind blowing the water and spume through the air, the current dragging the water back into the ocean, the foam being washed ashore; one is confronted with the different, constitutive states of the water. As you look at the motif, it is as if a background noise is being generated, and you can almost smell the salt in the air. You are seduced into surrendering to the scene, to the illusion that you are standing by the sea, even though you are looking at a black-and-white painting. It is a game with your own memory that photography—like photorealistic painting—plays, and one that we are only too happy to engage in. Only when one steps closer and is confronted by the technique used to make the painting is the spell broken; one emerges from these memories and sees what it is: acrylic, coloured pencil and graphite on canvas. The force of the wave contrasts with the surface of the painting, which is largely soft and blurred in appearance. Individual areas almost seem as if they have been printed, thus alluding to the original. The grandeur and power of the motif are thus markedly at odds with the decidedly delicate means of painting.

For her series *After Sugimoto* (since 2023) (4–5), Bulajić appropriated the photo series *Dioramas* (1975–1999) by Sugimoto. The series of works show artificially-constructed environments that mimic selected habitats. Every detail is designed to represent a specific moment in time; it effectively captures and depicts—and this is something that the diorama shares with the medium of photography—a frozen moment in time and space. In the context of Sugimoto's series, Claudia Hattendorf points out that “even the assessment of the medial qualities of the dioramas can only ever be ambivalent: just as their materiality fluctuates between nature and art, between authenticity and imitation, the diorama combines two-dimensional illusion and three-dimensional reality, which is, in itself, to no small

degree fictional.”¹ Sugimoto's view through the camera lens allows the dimensions to fuse into a unified structure. As he himself commented on his series: “However fake the subject, once photographed, it's as good as real.”² Using the means of photography for his *Dioramas* series, Sugimoto effectively managed to bring the dead back to life.

It is precisely this moment of animation, this simple trick with which the photographer succeeds in pulling a fast one on us, this game with reality, this blurring of what is real and what is fiction, that impressed Jelena Bulajić at the outset and thus became the point for departure or her reflections on and appropriation of Sugimoto's work. She is fascinated by the tautology of illusions that are able to generate a sense of truth. Thus, it is not so much the *studium*, to coin Roland Barthes's term, namely the overall and average depiction of exotic animal worlds captured in the images—the wolves, condors, gemsboks, vultures, polar bears, and rays—that interest her about the photographs, but rather the *punctum* (again Barthes), i.e. the visceral, sensory effect of the individual photographs on the viewer, the stories that they impart beyond the evidence of the motif.³ It is this very glimpse of a reality that does not exist or exists differently and yet is manifestly attested to by the photograph. Bulajić plays with a kind of photorealism by implementing Sugimoto's motifs in a technically masterful way, whereby she first transforms them into a negative—at least in terms of tonality. In essence, it is a relatively swift process of copying, before a measure of tactility is added to the works by pushing the materials to their very limits. In order to do this, Bulajić subjects the paintings to extreme conditions: exposure to light, cold or heat cause the surface of the paint to crack and blister, or for holes to appear, revealing the painting in its patent physicality. Bulajić takes her cue from the format of Sugimoto's original photographs, which demand one to move closer and invite detailed inspection. Through the iconic reference associated with the properties and characteristics of photography as a medium in Sugimoto's works, Bulajić inscribes herself in a game of realities that commences with the diorama itself. It is about questions of presentation and representation, about seeing through the illusion, making us aware of the fundamental relativity and inadequacy of

1 Claudia Hattendorff, ‘Selbsterfindung und Selbstverleugung. Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Dioramas* im Kontext, in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 78 (2015), 277–291, 279.

2 Cf. <https://fraenkelgallery.com/portfolios/hiroshi-sugimoto-dioramas>. Last accessed: 2 December 2025.

3 Cf. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Harris (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 25–27. Originally published in French as *La Chambre Claire* by Editions du Seuil in 1980.

our own perception. In their repetition, their symbolic conversion and the formal, thematic and aesthetic modification of the templates, her works are part of a process of postulating difference that is inherently impossible to think through to its ultimate conclusion.

This aspect of content is also decisive for the group of works White on Black (since 2024) (6–8)—a group of purportedly monochrome works in different formats that combine in the Kunsthalle Münster to form an expansive installation filling the available space and which follows our every step. As the title suggests, Bulajić limits herself here to working in two colours only, creating something chromatic out of the achromatic. Via the application of dozens of layers of black and white lacquer on transparent Plexiglas, various brilliant shades of blue emerge. The painted surfaces absorb and reflect their surroundings. Nevertheless, a visible painterly effect obtains, for the works do not produce a perfect reflection, nor an unambiguous naturalistic image. The reflection on the shiny lacquer allows the works to connect and interact with their immediate environment. This dynamic interplay veritably inhabits the passive, reposeful silence of the paintings themselves. Everything in the here-and-now is inevitably incorporated into the works, with the result that they oscillate between the modes of painting, photography and tableaux vivants. In this series, Bulajić creates a vivid experience of reality. The outcome is a plurality of images, an infinite number of ephemeral and thus unstable images. When comparing or viewing her photorealistic works alongside her abstract series White on Black, one is confronted with the question of what medially-mediated realism actually means. In different ways, both groups of works are a commitment to the medium of painting and its qualities in the wake of photography. It is not representational realism, but rather a questioning of it. It is illusion that evidently fascinates the artist, yet it is *dis*-illusion that she herself works with: the paintings lay bare their essential constructedness.

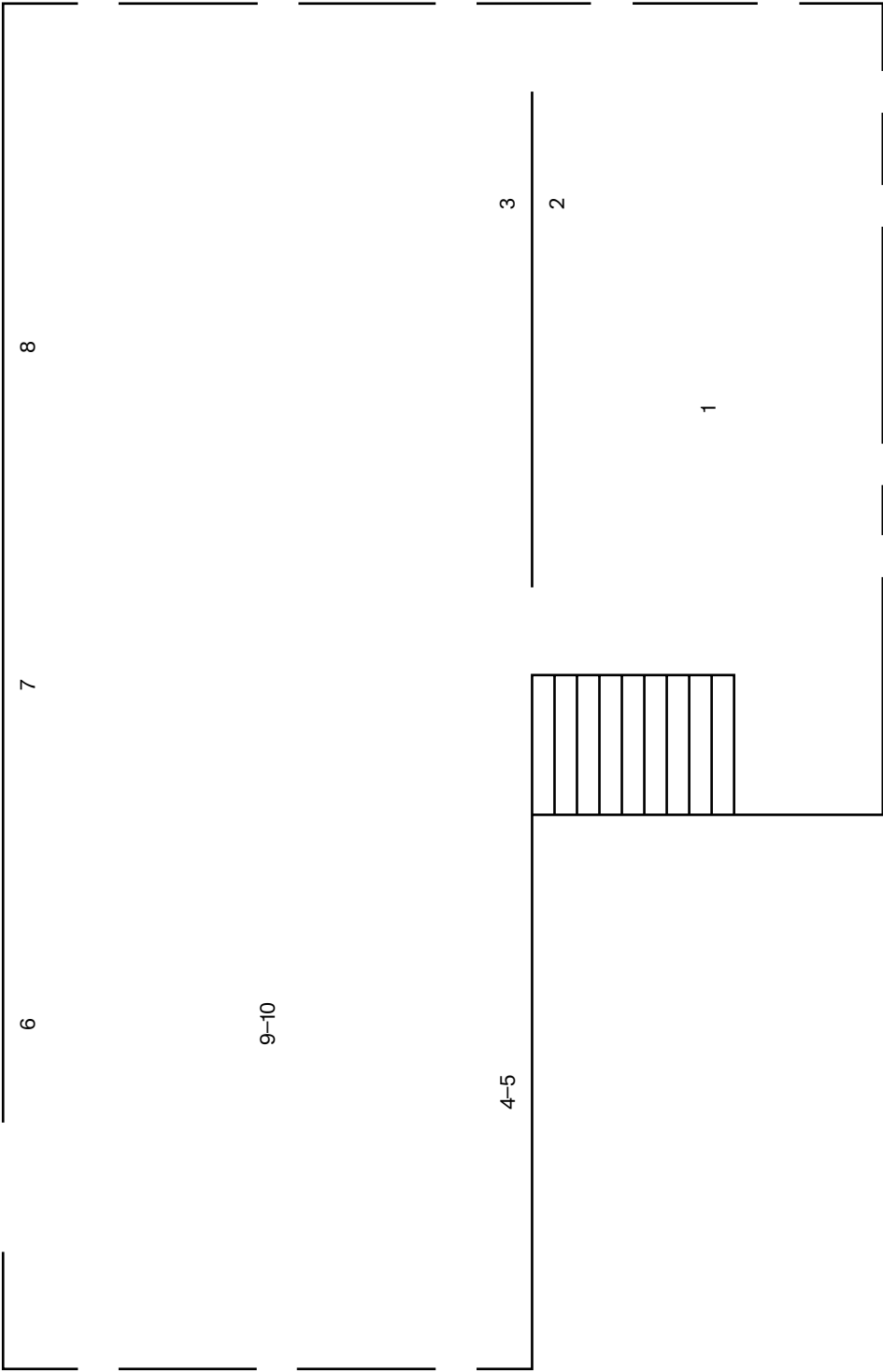
Against the backdrop of her preoccupation with the materiality of paint and the surface of painting, Bulajić's recent turn to the medium of sculpture appears to be a logical next move. Her series After Stone (1, 9, 10) reflects the ambivalence of fragility and stability and explores questions of permanence and transience. Although the stones are entirely constructed, the existential spirit of the works lies in a formal exploration of tactility and surface. One encounters structures in shades of grey with countless

elevations and depressions, smooth and rough textures. In spite of their endeavour to replicate nature convincingly, the stones are primarily the result of an artistic project. Bulajić uses relatively fine clay, which acts like a thin membrane. Only upon closer inspection and with an awareness of their materiality do the objects reveal themselves to be fragile, yet they still represent timelessness. Materiality and form drift apart and yet remain aesthetic bedfellows. In their attempt to convincingly replicate nature, Bulajić's stones are both natural and artificial at the same time. She uses clay, a product consisting mainly of weathered, disintegrated rock and minerals, to replicate stones. In this way, she inscribes herself into a game of realities by expanding the iconography of stones and the medium of sculpture itself. Beyond the obvious interpretation that a reproduction is not identical to the original object, one is forced to think about what one understands by the reality of an object in itself: what do we see when we are looking? Moreover, especially in the context of fine art, her stones appear as containers, virtually carrying within them all possible forms that can be fashioned via a sculptural gesture.

At a time when we are constantly overwhelmed by digital images and confronted by the same old reception of all manner of images on our screens, Bulajić avails herself of the conditions of painting as a mode of seeing, to gain a sense of materialities, repetitions and differences. Thus, her examination of what we call images would appear to be particularly important with regard to the ubiquitous tsunami of images we are confronted with daily. It is about schooling the senses. Her game with reality requires concentration, a precise act of looking and a questioning of the images. Using artistic means, Bulajić questions the remarkable power of evidence, examining perception and the role that the constructedness and nature of images play in this.

Merle Radtke, Translation: Tim Connell

Jelena Bulajić was born in 1990 in Vrbas, Serbia; she lives and works in Belgrade, Serbia and Herceg Novi, Montenegro. Her works have been shown in numerous international solo and group exhibitions: Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade (2024), carlier | gebauer, Madrid (2024), Dots Gallery, Belgrade (2023), Museum of Contemporary Art of Vojvodina, Novi Sad (2019), The Saatchi Gallery, London (2016), Workshop, London (2016). Among the awards she has received are the GAM MA Fine Art Prize, City & Guilds of London Art School (2013), the Niš Art Foundation Award (2013), the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant (2012) and the Grand Diploma for Drawing, XIV INTERBIFEP (2011).



Raum 1 / Room 1

- 1 *After stone 1-1-3*, 2025, Porzellan / porcelain, 12 × 12 × 10 cm. Courtesy the artist
- 2 *Untitled (after Bernini)*, 2020, Acryl, Marmormehl, Farbstift, Grafit auf Leinwand / acrylic, marble dust, coloured pencil, graphite on linen canvas, 28,5 × 28 cm. Privatsammlung Berlin / Private collection Berlin

Raum 2 / Room 2

- 3 *Untitled (after Tillmans, Atlantique)*, 2025, Acryl, Farbstift, Grafit auf Leinwand / acrylic, coloured pencil, graphite on canvas, 250 × 380 cm. Courtesy of the artist
- 4 *After Sugimoto, Alaskan Wolves*, 2024, Acryl, Farbstift, Grafit auf Leinwand / acrylic, coloured pencil, graphite on linen canvas, 32,4 × 58,2 cm. Courtesy of the artist and carlier | gebauer, Berlin/Madrid
- 5 *After Sugimoto, Gemsbok*, 2023, Acryl, Farbstift, Grafit auf Leinwand / acrylic, coloured pencil, graphite on linen canvas, 42,1 × 54,4 cm. Courtesy of the artist and carlier | gebauer, Berlin/Madrid
- 6 *White on Black 1-4 (1)*, 2024, Acryl auf Plexiglas, Glanzlack / acrylic on Plexiglas, gloss varnish, 22 × 14 cm. Courtesy of the artist
- 7 *White on Black 1-5 (40)*, 2025, Acryl auf Plexiglas, Glanzlack, Set aus vierzig Elementen / acrylic on Plexiglas, gloss varnish, set comprised of forty pieces, je / each 22 × 14 cm. Courtesy of the artist
- 8 *White on Black 1-1 (6)*, 2024, Acryl auf Plexiglas, Glanzlack, Set aus sechs Elementen / acrylic on Plexiglas, gloss varnish, set comprised of six pieces, je / each 22 × 14 cm. Courtesy of the artist and carlier | gebauer, Berlin/Madrid
- 9 *After stone 1-2-1*, 2025, Porzellan / porcelain, 16 × 30 × 23 cm. Courtesy of the artist
- 10 *After stone 1-2-2*, 2025, Porzellan / porcelain, 16 × 30 × 23 cm. Courtesy of the artist