

## **The Power of Red Artist Ona B.'s Exhibit Is Haunting, Powerful and Amusing**

**by Serena Lei**

At the opening of the new art exhibit at the Austrian Embassy, a woman tentatively lifted the hem of Ona B.'s red dress and then, to the artist's amusement, disappeared under the great folds of fabric.

Granted, Ona B. was not wearing the dress at the time, although she has before as part of a performance piece. The oversize red dress, fashioned from discarded communist flag fabric purchased in Prague, stands in the middle of the all-white main room. The installation is titled "Dressed to Kill."

In past exhibits, the dress was displayed along with a bow and a target. Ona B. described the piece as a Buddhist koan, an unsolvable riddle. This is best illustrated when she wears the dress and practices kyudo, a form of Japanese archery. Kyudo, she explained, is no longer used for killing, rather it is a form of meditation. So when she wears the dress and is "dressed to kill," she is actually practicing an art that is no longer used to kill. Intimidating in its size and color, the dress has also been called feminine and nurturing.

"Dressed to Kill" will be on display only for the first week of the Photographs that Ona B. described as documentaries will remain at the Chancery of the Austrian Embassy until July 13.

The exhibit is titled "Mirrored," a name that comes from a series of distorted self-portraits. Ona B. painted in red, took nude photographs of herself in a flexible mirror. The effect is haunting. In one photograph, she bent the mirror in such a way that her hair is only visible—her face and the camera swallowed up by the distortion. In other photographs, it is difficult to determine what body part is shown because it is stretched like rubber.

One piece, she said, reminds her of a plant. Her arm is a growing vine, loose and disjointed. Ona B. said that she wanted the audience to feel they were being "mirrored." The cover photo she chose for the exhibit's invitation illustrates her point. It is a photograph of the artist turning the camera back on us, a bright white flash in the background.

Another photo-documentary covers an exhibit called "Only Ona," which was displayed at Art Frankfurt in 1999. Ona B. painted large canvases in acrylic. Blues and greens work to create depth in the painting, but the overall effect is a backdrop of red. The canvases were put up like wallpaper in a makeshift home where Ona B. lived for a week.

She painted four chairs and a table and slept under a red blanket next to candy-red stiletto shoes. The color red is predominant in Ona B.'s recent work.

It started when my mother died," she said. "The color red gave me such a good feeling ... a feeling at home in my painting. It is power and energy and joy. Like the sun and blood ... but in a positive way. I never felt aggressive with this color."

Visitors were encouraged to purchase sections of artwork and cut the canvas directly off the walls. Ona B. then marked the blank squares

"sold." At first, she said, because "people didn't like to hurt [the art]" by stripping the canvas. It was such a well-received exhibit that pictures of the installation landed on the front page of a Frankfurt newspaper. Unfortunately, photographs of the original exhibit are not nearly as compelling as the real thing.

Ona B. is a pseudonym that the artist chose, as she said, "to create a new life." Ona means "woman" in Japanese and "she" in Czech. "I want to show that I am a woman," she said. "This is very central and clear. Many of the women artists don't like to be seen as a woman.... I am what I am."

This is clear in a photograph of Ona B., nude and painted red, holding a bow and arrow. She is Diana, a symbol of feminine strength and power. Other feminist artists that came out of Austria also used their bodies as statements in their art. Ona B. does not intend to shock; it is not exhibitionist art. Her nudity is honesty and a deeper immersion into her art.

"All people are very vulnerable," she said. "You need to be strong if you allow ... to show yourself nude. To work with the body is not so easy, but I have a certainty that I have to do it."

"I do many things." Ona B. said. "I do photography and installation and painting, but if someone asks me what I do, I usually tell them that I am a painter. This is how I identify my work: I paint. I am nude here, I painted myself, and I am a part of the painting."

She is present in much of her recent work, often nude or dressed in red. Perhaps this is why the woman who crawled under the oversize dress amused Ona B.. The crowd waited for her on the outside, peeking under the fabric, whispering. This woman was immersed in the art, swallowed in red, experiencing the complete power of Ona B.'s world.

"Mirrored, Installation and Photography by Ona B." is on display at the Chancery of the Embassy of Austria, 3524 International Court NW, Washington, D.C., Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. through July 13. Call (202) 895-6776 for more information.

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