

'All That We Have in Common' Addresses the Absence of Roma Visual Culture

A group exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Skopje brings together Roma artists from across Europe to explore a history of exclusion

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BY ERËMIRË KRASNIQI IN EU REVIEWS, EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 11 JAN 23

Written in three languages, the phrase 'Nothing About Us Without Us' jumps out from a canary-yellow poster at the entrance to 'All That We Have in Common'. Created by Roma Jam Session Art Kollektiv, the piece is one of five typographic works that the transnational artist collective made as part of the 2021 project Open Roma Culture, which sought to address the absence of Roma visual culture in European art history, museums and archives. Demanding ownership of representations of the Roma community within institutions, the work is a fitting introduction to this group exhibition, which explores issues of erasure, exclusion and marginality in Roma communities in different European political contexts.



'All That We Have in Common', 2022–23, exhibition view, Museum of Contemporary Art Skopje. Courtesy: the artists and Museum of Contemporary Art Skopje

For Roma artists, systematic exclusion and discrimination has necessitated affirmative strategies to counter stereotypes about their communities. Sead Kazanxhiu's video work *Mudding* (2021), for instance, brings attention to the treatment of the Roma community in Albania. The video documents Roma women as they labour to extract rocks, which they then turn into mud by hand before applying it to the artist, who is formally dressed in a suit in an office environment. By subjecting himself to what Albanians refer to as *baltosje* – or 'mud-slinging' – by members of his own community, Kazanxhiu might be seen to turn an act more commonly associated with debasement and othering into one of strategic self-affirmation.

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Ceija Stojka, *The Tumult, 1944*, 2008, drawing, ink on paper.
 Courtesy: @ the artist and Christophe Gaillard gallery, Paris

Throughout the exhibition, artists attempt to counter the repeated erasure of Roma from historical accounts. Three ink drawings by holocaust survivor Ceija Stojka depict scenes of unrest between men in Nazi uniforms and their adult and child victims. Using simple lines, these works, including *The Tumult, 1944* (2008), illustrate what has often been omitted from historical narratives: namely, the extermination of Roma and Sinti communities during World War II. Another work exploring this theme is Emilia Rigova's video installation (*Out of the Deadlock* (2016), which invites visitors to sit on turf laid out like a carpet. Intended to evoke the experiences of Roma people in Slovakia, who found refuge in the woods during the *Porajmos* (Romani Holocaust), a greyish green female form, curled into a foetal position, fades in and out of footage of a woodland glade, suggesting visibility and invisibility, presence and absence.



Emília Rigová, (*Out of the Deadlock*, 2016, video installation, live grass carpet.
 Courtesy: the artist

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Other works in the show more overtly reframe the portrayal of the Roma community. André Jenö Raatzsch's video *Rewritable Pictures* (2010), for instance, presents a photographic archive documenting Roma knowledge, organized into four themes: 'state', 'interiors', 'emergence' and 'past and future'. Drawing on private archives that bear the imprint of their Roma owners, *Rewritable Pictures* eradicates the gaze that marginalizes these communities. Shown alongside, Nihad Nino Pušija's photographic suite 'Down There Where the Spirit Meets the Bone' (1995–ongoing) documents the mass displacement of Roma people from Eastern Europe due to the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. By offering the political and economic context as to why they fled, Pušija's photographs help to undo the myth that the Roma are willing wanderers.



Nihad Nino Pušija, from the series 'Down There Where the Spirit Meets the Bone', 1995-ongoing, 30 x 42 cm. Courtesy: the artist.

Although, at times, the exhibition could have benefited from more contextual information about Roma history, mounting a group show that engages with a community that has been systematically excluded is an important moment of institutional reflection for the Museum of Contemporary Art Skopje, as well as a move towards a diversification of programming in acknowledgment of its many publics. 'All That We Have in Common' opens up the complex universe of the Roma's heterogenous identity, which has the ability to accommodate diversity and difference – vital in a country such as North Macedonia, which is still divided across ethnic lines.

'All That We Have in Common' is on view at Museum of Contemporary Art Skopje until 23 February.

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