

Objects might be closer than they appear

The artist Julia Scher once remarked in an interview with me that the devices surrounding us every day—our iPhones or tablets, the ones we hold in our hands far too long or, worse, hand over to our children when they won't sit still—are far too smooth, their edges too round. Scher believes their form should somehow reflect the latent danger they carry within. Ideally, they ought to be able to cut us, their edges razor-sharp—things you would never hand your baby or risk falling asleep with.

A shift in perspective: We look at concentric forms and surfaces arranged around a center. Like a flower, the core seems to flicker; try to focus and you will get dizzy. We are so close to the object that at first our gaze only perceives abstract forms; the central valves recall delicate ornaments. Their disarming resemblance to something domestic and harmless collides with the latent menace they embody—at the latest when we read the title, *Landmines* (2024–). Julija Zaharijević's large-scale series of realistic oil paintings are landmines and we are already caught fatally close.

"The image is not a closed field of knowledge; it is a whirling, centrifugal field," writes Georges Didi-Huberman, describing the dynamics of images as something open and unpredictable, unsettling the viewer and setting perception itself in motion.¹ Here too, viewers must become active; they must fill in the gaps, reconstruct the violence in their own minds, and thus enter a silent complicity with these images. What we look at is not a closed field of knowledge but a centrifugal space that shifts perception and drives us towards movement. In their abstraction, they mirror the unspeakable; they open a zone, with us in it. We do not simply see the world but renegotiate it. To look into these images is to enter into a complicity with a history that is not past but continues to resonate in the present. Violence does not need to be visible to be present: form, figure, and abstraction become carriers of experience. In the space between painting and language, we make sense of what we see. The abstraction in the representation of violence—or of the potential for violence—is, for Didi-Huberman, not a shortcoming but an aesthetic strategy that makes it possible to represent the unimaginable. Through abstraction, images can preserve the complexity and trauma of the events they depict without flattening or trivializing them. He emphasizes the responsibility of the viewer: "The question of images stands at the heart of the great darkness of our time, the 'disquiet of our epoch.'"²

A shift in time: Many winters ago, Julija Zaharijević was a child spending holidays in Kopaonik, a ski resort in southern Serbia near the border with Kosovo. Of vacations with her family, one memory keeps resurfacing with an almost comic absurdity. She recalls ascending on a button lift, a steep slope teeming with skiers to one side and, to the other, pale pink signs that read "Beware, mines". As a snowboarding child, the lift was already a precarious undertaking; the prospect of falling to the

¹ Georges Didi-Huberman quoted in W.J.T. Mitchell, "Method, Madness and Montage: Assemblages of Images and the Production of Knowledge," in *Image Operations: Visual Media and Political Conflict*, eds. Jens Eder and Charlotte Klonk (Manchester University Press, 2017): 79–86.

² Ibid.

wrong side carried a kind of operatic horror. The moment crystallized a contradiction so sharp it lingered for years: the privilege of leisure set against the casual proximity of violence. The snow, pristine and dazzling, held both—the idyll and the residue of war—folded together in one blinding expanse.

It is unclear just how many landmines still lie in the ex-Yugoslavian territories. It is known that most are in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the numbers are assumed to be in five digits. These hidden death traps are an embodied legacy of the Yugoslav Wars, which from 1991 to 2001 killed thousands and displaced countless more. All sides employed landmines as a weapon, but it is crucial to acknowledge that Serbian forces bore the greatest responsibility for their use and for the destruction these wars inflicted. This asymmetry shapes how the history of violence is remembered, and how its legacies continue to weigh unevenly across the region. Once planted, landmines make no distinction of nationality or religion. They injure and kill indiscriminately, harming whoever steps on them, and in doing so both expose and obscure the realities of war.

Landmines reveal—or rather conceal—invisible structures of past and present power. They paralyze the land itself, making it unusable for agriculture, travel, or habitation, resulting in ecological and infrastructural devastation. They are therefore not only weapons of wartime but legacies of violence in peacetime—devices whose harm extends far beyond the moment of conflict, shaping landscapes and lives for generations. The minefield becomes an invisible architecture of war, bearing witness to the fact that wars cannot simply end: they take on a life of their own, inscribing themselves into the landscape and into the people who inhabit them. The mines become an unseen grid of control that permeates space. In Kopaonik, the signs almost certainly referred not to landmines but to cluster bombs dropped from planes rather than planted in soil. Still, the word "mine"—mina in Serbian, which is also a common female name in the region—was likely chosen for its euphemistic and less threatening ring. What matters for Zaharijević's *Landmines* is the mine's defining feature: its invisibility, the way it disappears into the ground until it is violently revealed. *Landmines* returns us, in a sense, to the ambivalent realm of childhood, where objects are at once fascinating and frightening, familiar, cute and endlessly mysterious.

For Zaharijević, landmines appeared less as tangible weapons than as an abstract force of evil—a constant reminder of powerlessness, first as a child and later as a woman in a society ruled by nationalist men. In this light, the paintings adopt a paradoxical tone: irreverent, almost playful, as though reclaiming a form of agency once denied. By rendering these lethal objects in the language of the cute—rounded, domestic, toy-like—she exposes the deception of their concealment and reverses it. In *Landmines*, the tension between figurative and abstract forms shapes the way violence and powerlessness are experienced. Rather than offering a consoling image, abstraction resists easy consumption;

it insists on the difficulty of making suffering visible without reducing it to spectacle. What cannot be depicted in direct terms is not thereby excluded from visibility but transposed into a form that unsettles, that troubles the viewer's expectations of clarity or closure.

These works therefore position abstraction not as absence but as an active force: it interrupts recognition, creating gaps where meaning falters. In these interruptions, we are asked to inhabit uncertainty rather than resolve it. This is not simply an aesthetic choice but an ethical one, for it acknowledges that certain histories cannot be made fully present without being distorted. The mine, rendered abstract by its monumental enlargement and the absence of identifying inscription, holds its violence in suspension. It opens a temporal dimension where the singularity of recollection meets the density of shared history. By attending to the passage between visibility and menace, the series discloses the paradoxical intimacy of danger, the gravity of looking, and the ways in which the world's threats hide in plain sight.

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Julija Zaharijević

Julija Zaharijević was born in Belgrade in 1991. She is interested in the symbolic value of objects, and how their appearance informs their canonization. Her work investigates what constitutes reality and the conditions for its collapse into abstraction. She recently presented work in the exhibition *Thriller*, with Behin Roozbeh, at Autokomanda (Belgrade) and has a solo exhibition at Medium P (Berlin) in 2026.

Maurin Dietrich is a curator and current director of Kunstverein München. Before that she was part of the curatorial team at KW Institute for Contemporary Art (Berlin) and the 9th Berlin Biennale.

Poster Julija Zaharijević, *Landmine (TS-50, Yellow)*, 2025, oil on canvas, 190 × 170 cm
Courtesy the artist

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Text by Maurin Dietrich