

EXHIBITION REVIEW:

Ioana Olăhuț: *Fata docilă a lu' mama*, Meron Gallery, Cluj-Napoca, 20.10–08.11.2023



A new exhibition space has opened in Cluj-Napoca, and it seems that its new appearance fits in very naturally. It came up in a junction place, specific to the new vibe of Cluj: at the café. And not just any cafe or coffee shop but at MERON. The old roastery Meron, but new in this form, on Horea street, nr. 5. It was to be expected that someone in Cluj would say at some point: “Well, while I sit here and drink my caffeinated ‘specialty’, I would very much like to find myself looking at something, but what? Ah yes, art!” and then Meron Gallery was made. In square meters, things are simple, half cafe—half art gallery. The design is semi-industrial, minimal but inviting, in which one visually interferes with metal, concrete, brick, level elevations, and chiaroscuro, in other words it appeals

to the art communities of Cluj, so it was only fitting that the gallery’s debut on the city’s cultural map was marked by a solo exhibition of the artist Ioana Olăhuț. As I expected, the literary-dramaturgic propensity of the artist is announced from the title, she has always been very inspired in “naming” cultural events: *Fata docilă a lu' mama* (*Mom’s Docile Little Girl*).

A personal and deeper title than you might be tempted to believe at first glance. Usually, I am not at all fond of psychological introspections to unravel the secrets of artworks, in this case linocuts, ceramics, and drawings, but this time the invitation is thrown out at the outset. It's about a girl and a mother, and the girl is docile and is mom's girl. A relationship as old as time and complicated even before that. Daughter and mother are two versions of the same being: woman. You are a daughter, then you are a mother, whether you have children or not. This frontal position with one's own mother into which life inevitably plunges us, transforms us, in the end, into mothers. Either into one's own mother as a mold in which we are placed willy-nilly, or into the mother who brings a daughter into the world, and the daughter who will end up being like the mother, who was like the grandmother in turn. I am not talking here about the much overused 'transgenerational trauma' but rather about this invisible and indestructible bond. There is no method or force that can break this bond that fulfills and destroys at the same time. Two identities that cannibalize each other through love or hate, in a cyclical current in which the two versions of a woman flicker like the flames of an eternal fire.

So here I am, giving in to the temptation to value the exhibition also in a psychoanalytic key. Being inevitably immersed in this duality, I looked at the works with increased empathy. A sincere exhibition, and like any sincere statement, you cannot argue with it, because what can you put in exchange for honesty? How can you argue with 30-something ceramic cocoons, wrapped in dough like souls, with stunted and inexpressive eyes, as first volumetric forms for first unexpressed or misunderstood desires? The whole visual theme of the exhibition develops around these seed loaves, seeds of doubt or hope, dough that has risen but not soaked, aspirations, frozen in the hard crust of terracotta. Backed with drawings glazed in black paste, black gesture on white canvas, struggles and repetitions to say as clearly, as densely, as acutely and rhythmically as possible, that the girl is docile, because she is her mother's, that if she were not docile, she certainly could not be her mother's.

Is a mother's soul a kind of Procrustes' bed for her own children?

All this was unsuspectingly going through my mind as I looked at the works in this new coffee-shop-gallery space. So, when you want to have a coffee in a coffee shop without knocking up your head on daily trepidations, you'll probably get more than a flat white at Meron Gallery. Just as it happened to me one fall Thursday, looking long and hard at artworks made as simply and as efficiently as hammering a nail into a wall.

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