



Untouchable and Intimate

Paintings by Maya Kulenovic

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My first confrontation with the work of Maya Kulenovic was in an Art Gallery where a wrapped painting stood against the wall. You could not see the painting very well because it was hidden in bubble wrap. Nevertheless, the intensity of a child's face was conveyed: *Listener*, a soft, intense face, with the clair-obscure quality that is characteristic of Kulenovic's work. I call it a confrontation, because it touches you with an experience of terror, tearing you out of everyday reality from a superficial world.

Where in Goya the figures are hurt and struggling with life, Maya Kulenovic's faces seem to show an innate strength transmitting that despite intense trauma people can keep their dignity.

Her work is reminiscent of Rembrandt who showed people in their human fragility with an ultimate clair-obscure; Kulenovic too shows people in their true dimension, in their inner strength: mankind overcoming cruelties and atrocities. *Listener* does not only convey a child that listens, but a child that is not listened too. She bows her head, but you feel she keeps her power.

Listener, 2008





Blight, 2009

Kulenovic's extraordinary technique gives you the impression that her characters, landscapes and buildings emerge from Ancient times, not meaning the Classic Period, but a time when these people, landscapes and buildings were whole and unhurt, that now seems so far behind them, so long ago. As if rising from the depths of waters, her subjects emerge from within their inner selves, they show what remained intact, even when surrounded with signs of the atrocities they underwent. In 'Listener', you see what looks like a little bit of blood smeared around her mouth. The same is with 'Blight', whose character experienced, you imagine, awful things and still remembers them, but did not break under their gravity.

Kulenovic uses this technique to perfection in 'Whisper' where the barrier between outside and inside becomes vague and where the person and its surroundings merge into each other; nevertheless, the strength and tenderness of the person is conveyed. The intimacy in these paintings is conveyed by a delicate inclination of the neck, a broken branch and the streaks of pollution like tears pouring down from the building.

Often with paintings the title does not help you much in understanding the work. With Maya Kulenovic, the title stimulates your mind, adding a new dimension to the story that unfolds when you look at the painting: perhaps *Listener* is not being listened to? She may be simply obeying her oppressor, without losing her personality. *Whisper* makes you think whether it is something dear she whispers in someone's ear or maybe a sigh that inadvertently comes out of her.

Whisper, 2012



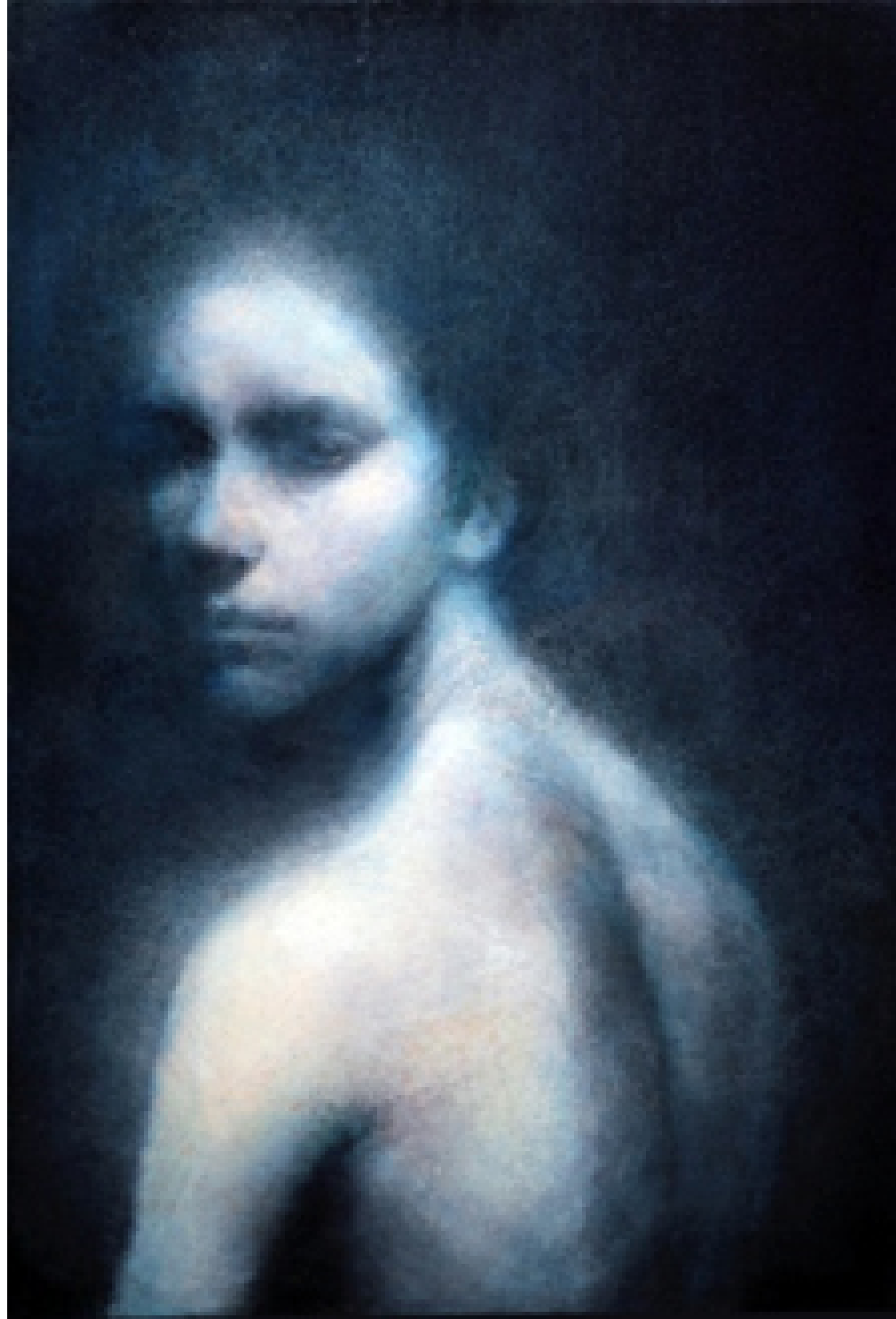
Considering her technique, it becomes clear that Maya Kulenovic is weaving the duality of life and death, of destruction and transition in an entirely coherent way. Her technique fits her intentions like a glove. She builds up her paintings in layers of glaze. At first with clear boundaries, adhering to reality. As soon as the reality is established, she 'attacks' the painting in a random way with solvents and scraping tools like a knife, a dry brush, rough cloth or sandpaper. When she described this process to me, I realized that this is exactly what I saw and felt: each subject is damaged, but not broken. Like a Phoenix it emerges from its ashes, scarred yet more beautiful than ever. In each layer of the process, the subject undergoes the fight between 'clair' and 'obscure', the pain that is conveyed together with the inner strength. She calls her technique in which the subject arises from 'water', 'mist' or 'cloud' the 'Destruction layer'. In her words: "From this struggle the character of the painting arises". This is exactly what happens when you look at the paintings: you see the character of the person, the building or the landscapes emerge. This is the fundamental struggle for life through the struggle for integrity which can only be accomplished by being assaulted. This is what conveys intensity and an intimacy that is not always easy to experience. I realize that this is exactly what happened when I saw Listener for the first time: wrapped in bubble plastic and still conveying, through that, her inner strength.

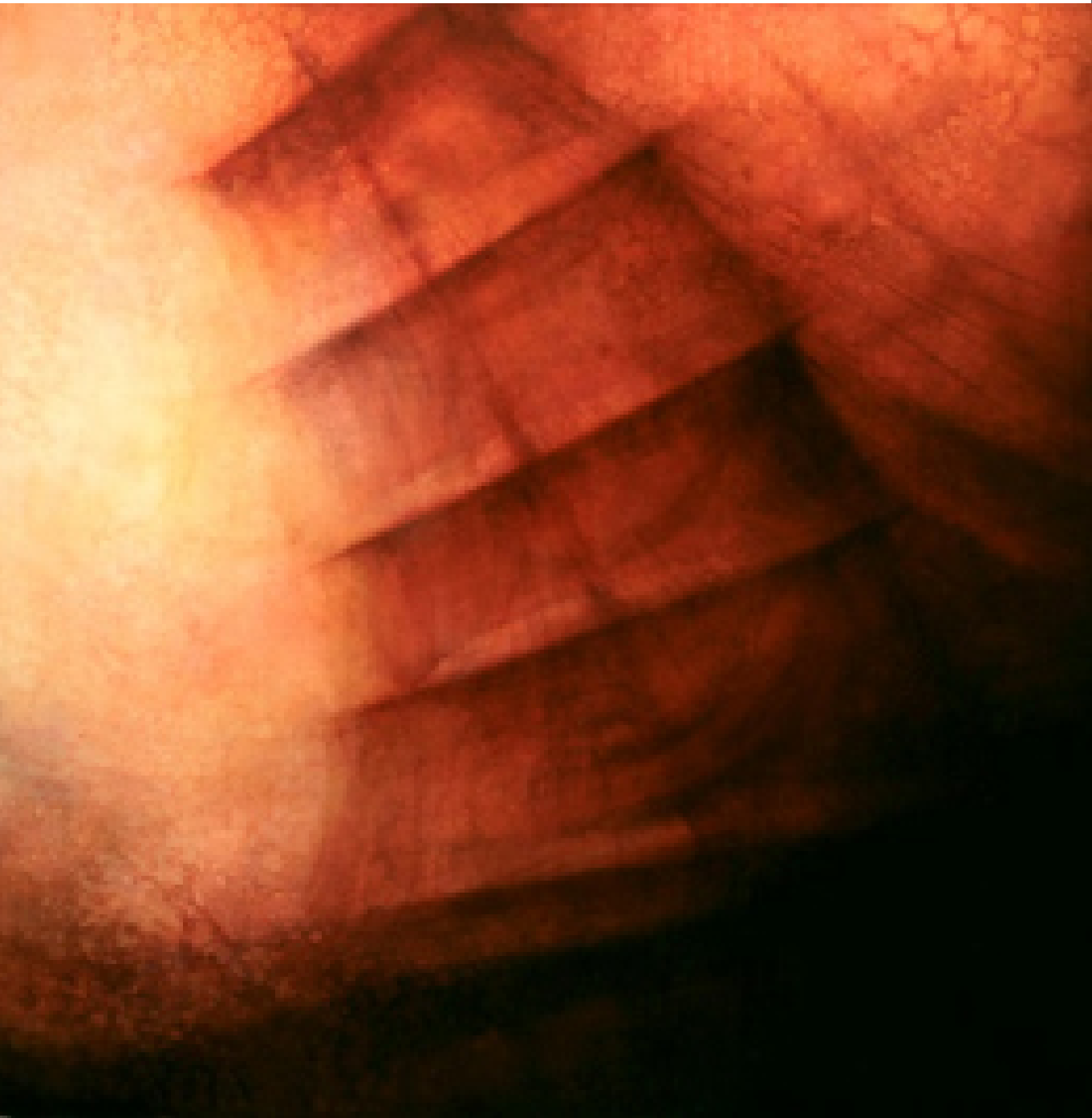


Kulenovic's technique comes to an ultimate perfection with the androgyne 'Anaesthesia II, the Fugue'; emerging, surrendering, and connecting at the same time. Kulenovic used more than twenty unique pigments of red to be able to make this universal human being emerge from the life she lived, or from the life that lived her. Each pigment holding a unique light with a unique emotion. Vulnerable and strong, Anaesthesia comes out of the mist.

From Kulenovic's paintings you can feel that humans have much to overcome. The painting *Glass* reminds me of the poet Gerrit Achterberg's beautiful phrase about vulnerability: "I'm made of so much glass that each harsh voice is a stone and a crack."

Glass, 2012





Reef, 2013

The multi-layered contrasts form the strength of Maya Kulenovic's work. Contradictions are always present. With "Reef" you feel the danger coming and at the same time you feel that the ship will overcome the danger. Or is that your hope – which is a constituent element of her painting – whereas the intense color red reminds you of blood, death and terror. Strangely, it is the ship you feel that struggles, not the sailor. This is characteristic of Kulenovic's paintings.

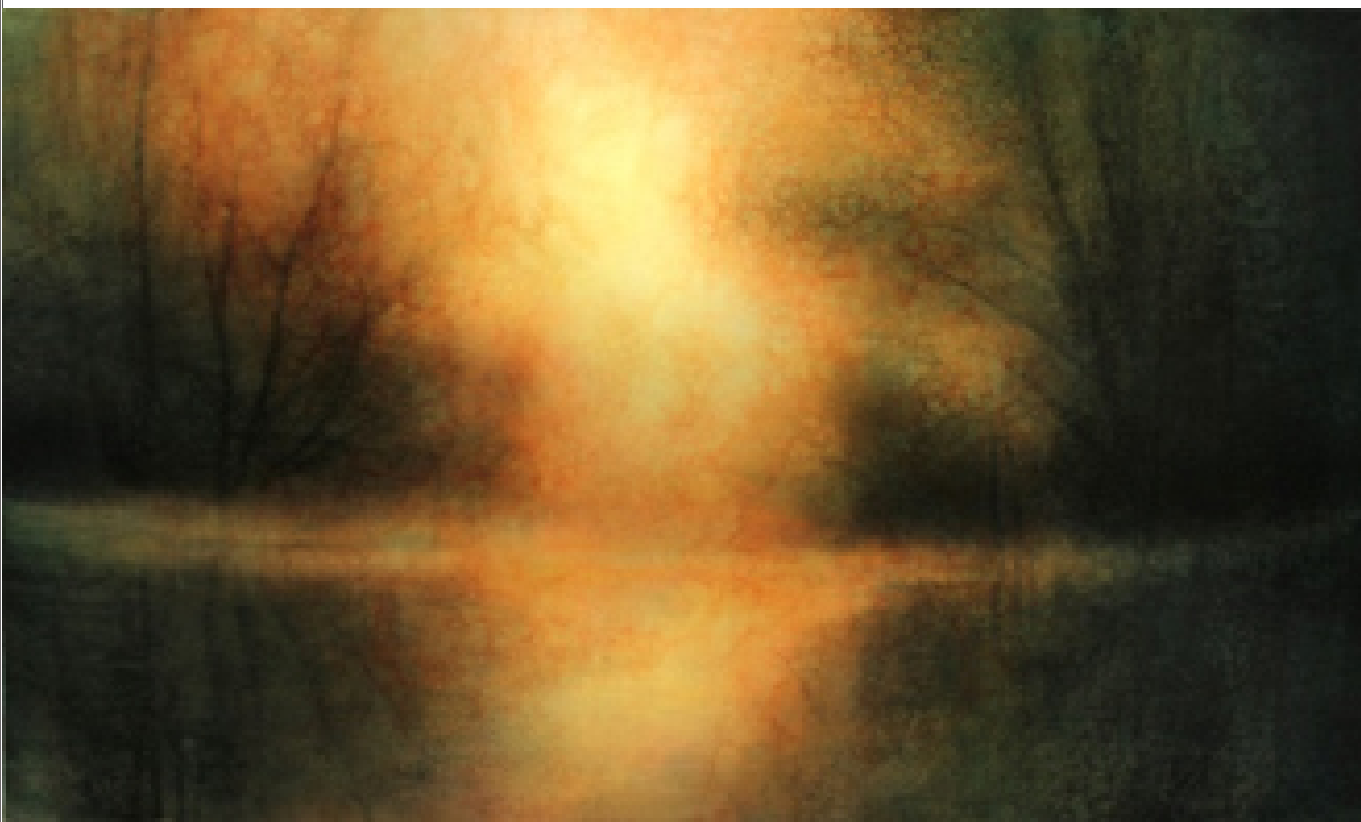
A true artist is said to have a soul that animates everything dead or alive. This is certainly true of Maya Kulenovic. Her landscapes have personality. 'Gathering' feels like a gathering of nature, being together by choice, in the so necessary absence of humans. In 'Breakwater', you are at a loss. Who is breaking who? The water is soft but strong, however the stone walls cleave the water and at the same time they are battered by the water. You see the light growing at the end of the road, or is it birth?



Gathering, 2010

Break water, 2012





Wetlands; inferno, 2013

In 'Wetlands; Inferno' you again feel the contradiction. Is it the Wetland that will swallow you into a hell of fire, or is it the end of the tunnel where the light shows itself: freedom! You feel: Nature rules, Inner strength rules, Integrity rules!

In the buildings you see the same strength as in the faces, the bricks animated with a personality, the proud *Junction*, who will stay together.



Junction, 2009



Traductio, 2012

'Traductio' the bridge with its houses where no one lives anymore. The building gives light, is it for joy of being vacated that the bridge transmits its' robust self. The *Pier 11* seems left behind, used and thrown away. But it kept the secrets of those who lived there. There are no people in Kulenovic's buildings because that would blur the view of the personality of the buildings themselves.



Pier 11, 2009

Where the faces find their opus magnum in “Anaesthesia II, Fugue”, the buildings find their opus magnum in “Aether, Unfolding”. Time opens up from the inner structure of the building that unfolds intimately before your eyes.

The feeling that the face, building or landscape emerge from within their core self gives a timeless dimension to the work. It is the quality of light and quality of darkness that brings life to it: delicate, intimate, integer and untouchable.

Aether unfolding, 2013



They all survived because their path was integrity - and terror vanishes when face to face with integrity. It disturbs but at the same time it comforts you, because of the deep recognition of a healthy universal part in yourself.

Kulenovic's subjects are untouchable and intimate at the same time. She herself speaks of a synthesis of awe and fear, of the familiar and the unknowable. Emotion is at the core of her work, whether it is a human face, a building or a landscape. Reason and emotion merge together with the acute intuition to paint the soul of things. Each transition will lead to a deepening integrity as long as it exists, you will feel this till the last breath, the last brick or the last branch.



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