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Belvedere 21

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1030 Wien
Austria

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11am–6pm
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Thursdays 11am–9pm
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Tamuna Sirbiladze, *Kotzen*, 2005

Photo: courtesy of Saatchi Family Collection, London © Tamuna Sirbiladze

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TAMUNA SIRBILADZE NOT COOL BUT COMPELLING

March 22–August 11, 2024

In a career that spans around three decades, Tamuna Sirbiladze (1971–2016) undertakes an uncompromising and insistent inquiry into the potentials of painting. Eight years after her death, the Belvedere presents the Georgian-Austrian artist's first comprehensive retrospective, surveying the complete spectrum of her oeuvre, from painting and drawing to installation art.

General Director Stella Rollig: *In Vienna, the Tbilisi-born Tamuna Sirbiladze developed her distinctive style, which is defined by a markedly expressive technique and anthropomorphic imagery. She left an oeuvre that speaks to the esprit, sense of humor, and radicalism she brought to the medium of painting and yet ineluctably prompts the question "What if?"—a question to which we will never have an answer.*

Curator Sergey Harutoonian: *The exhibition's title, Not Cool but Compelling, is borrowed from an oil stick drawing created in 2011. It aptly indicates what was always Tamuna Sirbiladze's guiding concern in her work: giving cogent form to her own creative vision without being bound by the aesthetic conventions of her time.*

From her beginnings at the Academy of Fine Arts in Tbilisi to her final years in Vienna, Tamuna Sirbiladze's art undergoes a remarkable evolution that is abruptly cut short by her tragic death at the age of forty-five, when she is at the height of her creative powers and has just achieved her international breakthrough.

After a largely figural early oeuvre, Sirbiladze's visual language gradually shifts away from representation and toward abstraction. By the early 2000s, she returns to figuration, but from a very different angle. Although Sirbiladze consistently eschews any display of her brilliant painterly skills, a choice that leads many critics to label her an exponent of Bad Painting, her pictures possess an undeniable beauty and radiance.

The human body, sexuality, and vulnerability are recurrent themes in Sirbiladze's paintings, sustained in part by the artist's searching contemplation and interrogation of her own self. Meanwhile, her art also reflects a probing engagement with classic art history. Several series reinterpret iconic works, while unvarnished depictions of female bodies introduce images of womanhood previously unseen in art.

ON THE EXHIBITION

Not Cool but Compelling showcases around one hundred works from all periods of Tamuna Sirbiladze's oeuvre, including central paintings, late drawings, and a large installation created in collaboration with the artist's husband, Franz West. Divided into five chapters, the chronologically arranged presentation at the Belvedere 21 surveys the artist's entire oeuvre and retraces major threads that run through her art.

It opens with ten paintings in small formats that document both Sirbiladze's great interest in the history of art and her thorough study of painting styles during her education in Tbilisi. Her growing rejection of the Soviet academic tradition in which she has been trained is the defining characteristic of her evolution during her early years in Vienna beginning in 1997. A subsequent creative crisis prompts a phase of experimentation with abstraction and an immersion in the imagery of the internet: Sirbiladze appropriates selected details and motifs from digital images as inspiration for literary or painterly creations.

In the mid-2000s, Sirbiladze returns to figural painting, which she executes on large-format canvases using thinly applied acrylic paint and a gestural technique. In this key phase of her oeuvre, she dedicates herself to the subject of a female physicality released from the implications of formative male influence. Works like *Kotzen* (2005), *My Rapist* (2006), and *Suicide Painting* (2007) show women in extraordinarily intimate and dramatic situations. Around the same time, the artist also produces a series of enigmatic mask paintings. Yet more austere in their painterly execution and numbered rather than individually titled, they almost read as studies.

Early collaborative projects with Franz West like the expansive installation *Moonlight* (1998–2001) reveal Sirbiladze to be a painter who no longer thinks in terms of traditional genres and forms of presentation, but instead fuses painting and sculpture. In her marriage to Franz West and their creative partnership, she finds a fruitful and productive exchange between two artists who meet as equals.

Meanwhile, Sirbiladze delves into the history of her craft, relying on painterly means that are distinctly her own yet paying tribute to luminaries like Vincent van Gogh, Henri Matisse, or Martin Kippenberger. Around the late 2000s, this practice yields several series of loosely connected works that revisit

different stylistic epochs. After Franz West's death in 2012, she grapples with iconic works by old masters; over the years that follow, she deepens her engagement with more recent art history, and especially with Andy Warhol and his *Flowers*.

Sirbiladze's final years are defined by a revival of her creative urges, as reflected by her oil-stick drawings in large formats. The subjects of these works, executed on unprimed canvas with graphic finesse, seem to represent a kind of quintessence of her life as an artist: Sirbiladze repeatedly takes up the motif of the pomegranate, Georgia's national fruit and a symbol of fertility in Orthodox Christianity. Besides these art-theoretical and cultural subtexts, it is highly personal references, such as to drawings by her children Emily and Lazare, that distinguish the artist's formidable and affecting late oeuvre.

TAMUNA SIRBILADZE: BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Tamuna Sirbiladze is born in Tbilisi on February 12, 1971. She studies painting at the local State Academy of Fine Arts from 1989 until 1994. In 1997, she relocates to Vienna, rounding out her creative education with Franz Graf at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, then at the Slade School of Fine Art, London, until 2003. As a student, she meets the Austrian artist Franz West (1947–2012); they marry in 2002 and collaborate on a series of art projects until his death in 2012. Starting in 2003, Sirbiladze shows her work in solo and group exhibitions in Austria and other countries, including at the Deichtorhallen, Hamburg; the Saatchi Gallery, London; Galerie Almine Rech, Brussels; and Charim Galerie, Vienna. The artist passes away on March 2, 2016, at the age of forty-five years.

CATALOGUE

Tamuna Sirbiladze. Not Cool but Compelling

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