

YOUNGER (A FAIRY TALE), 1980 – 1990

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GALLERIA CONTINUA is delighted to present *YOUNGER (a fairy tale), 1980–1990*, a solo exhibition by Nedko Solakov, at its Paris/Marais space.

Retracing the early years of Nedko Solakov's career and presenting for the first time in France a historical body of his work, the exhibition offers a critical lens on the cultural tensions and transformations that shaped Bulgarian and Eastern European society between 1980 and 1990. In a historical moment on the verge of monumental change – marked by the Perestroika reform movement beginning in 1985, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the eventual decline of the USSR – Solakov entered a pivotal decade of artistic production. His work during this period captures the transition from communism to capitalism, while also anticipating the uncertain realities that followed the collapse of the socialist regime.

As one of the most influential artists in Bulgaria and a defining voice in Eastern European art, Solakov navigates a cultural landscape shaped by state-imposed ideological realism with irony, symbolism, ambiguity, and a fragile sense of intimacy. Operating within the cracks of this tightly controlled system, he subtly challenged dominant narratives, crafting an artistic universe imbued with fantasy and delicate poetry. The wide selection of paintings on view reflects his sharp ability to work within a controlled artistic environment through wit and critical storytelling, while showcasing his rich visual vocabulary.

The early 1980s marked a time of personal and artistic growth for Solakov. *Studio* (1980) captures the uncertainty of an artist at the beginning of his journey, evoking a universal sense of introspective searching. Rendered in soft, delicate tones, the small room – filled with brushes, paints, and palettes – reveals the young artist lying pensively beneath a religious icon. The painting, one

of his earliest, retrospectively evokes and encapsulates the nostalgia he would later feel for his youth.

After graduating in Mural Painting from the Academy of Fine Arts in Sofia in 1981, Solakov joined the army. Many of the early 1980s works featured in the exhibition were created during this highly productive period. Between 1978 and 1983, he had contacts with the Bulgarian Secret Services—an experience that later formed the basis for the work *Top Secret* (1989–1990), an index box filled with cards detailing the artist's youthful collaboration, that would become a key milestone in his career. The self-disclosing gesture embodied in this project is a rare case in the context of post-Communist Europe, especially given that the official files about Solakov's involvement were not made public until 2018.

In this context, fairy tales and fantastical narratives became for Solakov a space for imagining alternative worlds during the socialist regime and after its collapse. A playful gaze threads through his work, scrutinizing the viewer as much as the world it portrays. This gaze offers a layered reflection on Solakov's personal history and that of Bulgaria. Delicate and poetic, his images often take the form of fragmented narratives or brief tales that encapsulate daily life, while subtly questioning human existence and our perception of it through hallmark elements of his idiom, such as wordplay and semantic double meanings. The artwork *A Fairy Tale* (1986) exemplifies this ambiguity, with a violent color palette and a figure holding a knife contrasting sharply against the idyllic atmosphere suggested by the title.

The Perestroika period, driven by openness and progressivism, generated increasing political pressure that eventually led the artist to confront the tension between personal conviction and national loyalty. This conflict is poignantly illustrated in *I Already Love*

the Soviet Union (1988), where an amorphous figure embraces a smaller man, a self-portrait for Solakov himself, caught between opposing forces: safety and allegiance on one side, conscience and inner turmoil on the other. Proposed for a National exhibition and rejected by the Union of Bulgarian Artists, the work's seemingly loyal title belied its subversive ambiguity and risked jeopardizing the artist's career.

Another significant work from the same year, *Hierarchy* (1988), deepens the introspective and symbolic atmosphere of the period. Arranged as a pyramid of eight canvases, the painting depicts a foggy, windswept scene. Building a striking metaphor for political hierarchy and corruption, a large, pale-bodied man sits at the apex, producing excrement. Below, vivid orange-brown splashes gradually take shape, revealing more faceless figures defecating on their subordinates arranged in multiple levels, who remain barely visible through the mist.

Alongside the paintings, the exhibition features conceptual objects first shown in *The City?*, a landmark 1988 exhibition held in Sofia. Organized by a collective formed by an art critic and five painters – who later became known as The City Group – the exhibition had one curatorial condition: no paintings were to be included. This deliberate choice symbolized their intent to transform the Bulgarian art scene by proposing new ways of creating and experiencing art. Though Solakov was already an established painter within the official Socialist art world, he welcomed the challenge and helped forge a new avant-garde visual language. During this period, he simultaneously experimented with traditional painting and drawing on one hand, and conceptual interventions on everyday objects on the other, embracing both polysemy and artistic duality.

The groundbreaking interventions Solakov created for *The City?* exhibition laid the groundwork for his later site-specific installations in unconventional art spaces. The artist extended his practice beyond traditional venues by introducing tiny painted figures and narrative elements that bring engaging storytelling into public areas. One such intervention, *Shutter People* (2024), is visible outside the gallery when the exhibition space is closed and the shutters are down, allowing his art to continue dialoguing with viewers even after the gallery doors have closed.

Between autobiography and autofiction, Nedko Solakov invites reflection on the interplay between personal and collective history, as well as the blurred boundaries of reality and imagination. Across a multifaceted exhibition, the artist revisits themes from the Eastern European communist era, youthful memories shaped by political upheavals, and the hopeful pursuit of a brighter future-grounded in the belief that art's engagement with community holds transformative social power.

About the artist:

Since the early 1990s, **Nedko Solakov** (b. 1957, Cherven Bryag, Bulgaria; lives in Sofia) has exhibited extensively in Europe and the US. His work was featured in Aperto '93 (Venice Biennial); the 48th, 49th, 50th and 52nd Venice Biennial; the 3rd, 4th and 9th Istanbul Biennial; São Paulo '94; Manifesta 1, Rotterdam; the 2nd and 4th Gwangju Biennial; the 5th Lyon Biennial; Sonsbeek 9, Arnhem; the 4th and 5th Cetinje Biennial; the 1st Lodz Biennial; the 7th Sharjah Biennial, United Arab Emirates; the 3rd Tirana Biennial; the 2nd Seville Biennial; the 2nd Moscow Biennial; documenta 12; 16th Sydney Biennial; Prospect 1, New Orleans Biennial; Singapore Biennial 2011; Documenta (13); Kathmandu Triennale; 1st Riga International Biennial for Contemporary Art and Lahore Biennale 2. He had solo shows at Museu do Chiado, Lisbon; Stichting De Appel, Amsterdam; CCA Kitakyushu, Japan; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Centre d'Art Santa Monica, Barcelona; Kunsthauts Zurich; Castello di Rivoli, Rivoli; Sofia City Art Gallery; Galleria Borghese, Rome; Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg; BOZAR, Brussels; ICA Sofia; La Panacee, Montpellier; Mudam Luxembourg; Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean; MAXXI – National Museum of 21st Century Art, Rome; Upper Belvedere, Vienna; The Palace–National Art Gallery, Sofia; and Ludwig Museum, Budapest. In 2003–2005 an extensive mid-career “A 12 1/3 (and even more) Year Survey” was presented at Casino Luxembourg, Rooseum Malmoe and O.K Centrum Linz, and in 2008–2009 the “Emotions” solo project was exhibited at Kunstmuseum Bonn, Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, and Institut Mathildenhoehe, Darmstadt. In 2011–2012 his retrospective “All in Order, with Exceptions” was presented at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham; Fondazione Galleria Civica Trento (“All in (My) Order, with Exceptions”), S.M.A.K., Ghent and Fundação de Serralves, Porto. His works belong to more than fifty international museums and public collections, among them MoMA New York, Tate Modern, London and Center Pompidou, Paris.

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