

SELMA SELMAN
FLOWERS OF LIFE

JUNE 20 – SEPTEMBER 15, 2024

EXHIBITION TEXTS

She is the most dangerous woman in the world: with an axe in her hands, she dismantles a washing machine or a black Mercedes-Benz; she raises her voice and shouts “You have no idea” at a crowd; she paints portraits of women, including her mother from Kosovo, on used car parts. Selma Selman, who has Roma origins, grew up in Bosnia and Herzegovina and lives between New York, Amsterdam, and Bihać. She came to the attention of an international audience through her participation in documenta fifteen and Manifesta in Pristina, both in 2022, where she took an avowed stance against populism and racism.

In her artistic actions, Selma Selman repeatedly disassembles Mercedes-Benz cars in collaboration with her father and brothers. The usage of car parts has become a trademark of the artist, who was born in 1991. In her works with scrap metal, she intertwines her family history with the subject of discrimination against women, using her art to transform patriarchal social constructs. The focus here does fall on anger and violence, but also on the meticulous work of a unprivileged group of people that Selma Selman brings into the museum in order to endow their labor with symbolic and economic value.

This work, like many others by the young artist, questions socially accepted values and directs our gaze to the other side of the coin. Although most people see an old car, computer, vacuum cleaner, or washing machine as worthless, a small number can still earn money with the so-called scrap—either by amassing large amounts of it or by extracting the precious metals contained within, such as platinum from catalytic converters or gold from computers.

Flowers of Life is both the title of this exhibition and the title of a new work. The work consists of so-called multipronged grabs, which are more typically found in scrap yards. As a descendant of a family that deals in scrap metal, Selma Selman transforms these crude tools into upright flowers that slowly and steadily open and close.

The other new work, *Crossing the Blue Bridge*, a co-commission with Röda Sten Konsthall, Gothenburg, and the European Capital of Culture Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024, concerns the war in Selman’s homeland of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1990s. In the film, which depicts her on Bihać’s Alija Izetbegović Bridge, she restages an episode of the war from 1994 through the eyes of her mother, in turn considering care, being a woman, exclusion, and anger towards mainstream society.

The involvement of her family in numerous projects has both practical and socio-critical importance for Selman. The societal gender conflict that pervades Selman’s work reflects Roma culture, which has developed largely around the restriction to inferior employment, and the role of women, which is limited to reproduction and housework. Selman has men work for her and uses the art system’s capital to pay for their manual labor. With this strategy, the artist kills two birds with one stone: one against the patriarchy and the other for her perception within the art world. The life of her mother—who was married off and had children at a very young age, reducing her to the role of wife and mother—is exemplary of an extremely conservative understanding of gender roles that has been abolished in modern societies, but is still far from being overcome.

Platinum (Axe), 2021

Object made from 33 grams of platinum extracted from car catalytic converters

This axe fabricated from platinum is produced during the performance *Platinum (2021)*, in which Selman, with the help of male members of her family and community, brings car wrecks into the exhibition space, where she then uses an axe and chainsaw to detach their catalytic converters. In addition to dirt, these car parts also contain platinum, palladium, and rhodium—precious metals that are sometimes used to reduce environmentally harmful exhaust emissions.

In collaboration with a chemist, the artist successfully separates the platinum through a complex process. She then forges a silver axe from the collected material, which is now presented as a museum object behind glass. For Selman, this axe is doubly valuable: as a tool in her artistic practice and the family scrap metal trade, and as a museum artifact that is worthy of protection.

Motherboards (A Golden Nail), 2023

Nail coated with 22 grams of gold

Placed at the artist's eye level, the sculpture symbolizes Selman's demand for respectful encounters and societal respect. *Motherboards (A Golden Nail)* results from the performance of the same name, in which the artist, in collaboration with her family, dismantles computers in order to access their motherboards. This piece of hardware connects all of a computer's components, allowing them to communicate with each other; it also contains gold. Motherboards were invented by engineer Patty McHugh, who developed the first PC with eleven male coworkers at IBM in the early 1980s.

Using cupellation, a thousand-years-old chemical process, Selman removes the gold from the circuit boards and uses it to adorn the nail presented here. In Selman's view, the Roma community, with their knowledge of material lifespans and recycling processes, are some of the world's leading social, ecological, and technological futurists in the twenty-first century.

Flowers of Life, 2024

Construction grabs, acrylic on steel, metal, electric motor, engine oil

Produced especially for this exhibition, these sculptures are made of multipronged grabs, which are more commonly used on construction sites and scrap yards. Selman's act of appropriation turns the grabbers into ambiguous symbols, at once specifically feminine in connotation and erotic in allusion (flowers often serve as the sexual organs of plants). At the same time, they are firmly anchored in her own (family) history and reference the resilience of Roma traditions. The vital function of these flowers stems not only from the fact that they can be read as references to the family business, the scrap metal trade; these flowers also prove to be as tenacious as the women in her community.

With *Flowers of Life*, Selman reinterprets the stereotypes of Roma culture that serve to exclude and stigmatize them. Yet these works can neither be repressed nor absorbed—they strongly and defiantly assert their presence.

The Most Dangerous Woman in the World, 2024

Fragrance by Selma Selman in cooperation with Attiya Setai, Marc vom Ende and Perfumery School, Symrise AG

Crossing the Blue Bridge, 2024

16 mm transferred to digital video, 27:15 Minuten / minutes

With *Crossing the Blue Bridge*, Selman creates a haunting autobiographical film based on her mother's memories of the Bosnian War (1992–95) that explores historical traumas, her mother's strength, and Selman's own resistance to social classification. The Blue Bridge plays both a literal and a figurative role in the film. It refers to a real architectural structure, which crosses the Una River on the border between Bosnia and Croatia. But it also forms a metaphor for Selman's artistic activism, which allows her to overcome differences and unlock new paths that had previously been denied to her.

During a day of ceasefire in 1994, the mother, accompanied by Selman's sister, went into town to sell their belongings and use the proceeds to buy food for their family. On their way home, they crossed the Blue Bridge and found it littered with corpses and animal carcasses. Within the film, Selman reenacts her mother and sister's journey with great urgency.

Superpositional Intersectionalism – Ophelia's Awakening, 2024–ongoing

Pencil and crayon on paper

Superpositional Intersectionalism – Sleeping Guards, 2023–ongoing

Pencil and crayon on paper

Based on her self-portrait, Selman creates hybrid beings in round drawings, who are constantly in the midst of transformation. Accompanied by diaristic entries full of pain, they depict the faces or bodies of women who seem to be divided and in search of healing. They elude any clear-cut form as they alternate between blue, yellow, green, and red, morphing into abstract beings with futuristic features that are at once natural and technological.

The title links the principle of superposition, which derives from quantum physics—and, in simplified terms, refers to the fact that atoms can be in different states at the same time—with the theory of intersectionality, which describes the interaction of several mechanisms of oppression. The artist deliberately leaves the white backgrounds of the round sheets blank: they symbolize spaces of limitless possibility. Selman thus creates a place for herself where she can be everything at the same time: an artist, a Roma person, an internationally successful star, a daughter, a European, a Muslim, vulnerable, contradictory, beautiful.