

Artist of the Month

By Bonnie Potelance in BRIC Contemporary Arts Website,
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As BRIC's Contemporary Art program marks its 30th anniversary this fall, it seems only fitting that our Artist of the Month be one of the very first five associated with the organization, Despo Magoni.



BRIC Rotunda Gallery's founding director, Jackie Battenfield, selected Magoni's work for the gallery's third exhibition, *Figurative Works on Paper*. She revealed to me that Jackie's optimism was contagious and played a pivotal role early in her career, by introducing her to other art venues, including the Alternative Museum. Despo's love of life and art is contagious. As I sat down at her work table in her Cobble Hill studio, amidst charcoal and discarded bits of paper, she walked me through her own personal history of art. She has devoted her work- including paintings, works on paper, and handmade books to the most universal of themes, the human condition. One might say that her demeanor is in stark contrast to the art before us. Despo Magoni's work exists in the ether between darkness and light. As an expressionist, she reveals and challenges our truly exquisite yet damaged inner selves; calling out the id, ego and super-ego all at once. Inspired in her youth by artists such as El Greco, Van Gogh, and the later works of Goya, her work travels the fine line between beauty and the grotesque— tantalizing us with a passionate emotion within the confines of conformity.

Born in Greece, Despo is now a die-hard New Yorker who has lived in Brooklyn since 1969. Her imagery harvests a rich heritage steeped in mythology and literature superimposed with contemporary social and political issues. When asked "Why do you create?" she replied, "I create because I feel certain things have to be said that no one else cares to say." In general, her work focuses on bringing issues to light— whether political, cultural, or pulled from her own personal experience.

Reading the New York Times everyday inspired one of her earliest series People in the News. In 1977, New York City experienced a brutal heat wave, the Son of Sam terror spree, a serious financial crisis, and the lost power resulting in one of the worst episodes of looting in New York history. Despo created artworks where the expressions of the individual portraits, painted on the newsprint, reflected the hidden drama and intensity behind the events mentioned in the text. Each title is taken verbatim from text written somewhere on the page.

It seems tragically ironic that as I write this in September 2011 we've just concluded one of the most violent 72-hour periods in New York's recent memory, with over four dozen shootings, not to mention the current financial crisis and an unemployment rate of over 8%.



A Better-Fed World, oil pastel on a NY Times page, 22½ x 14¾ inches, 1977



The Proposal, oil pastel on a NY Times page, 22½ x 14¾ inches, 1978

With her next few series, Despo shifted to more personal and socially inspired imagery, but her work retained an underlying theme of the struggle that divides the self inwardly and outwardly. I'm most fixated on her 1986 exhibition at the Alternative Museum entitled, Recent Paintings. Magoni utilized the figures of a magician and his assistant to focus on two issues: suffering and the relationship between men and women. As highlighted by Barry Schwabsky's essay On Pathos,

"Magoni's men are 'magicians' – charlatans, performers, imposters. Whatever supernatural potency they claim to possess, one look at them shows that they can barely keep up appearances. Archaic emotions of fear and rage are always just below the surface. Magic claims to give a kind of effortless control over objects and other people. In fact it exists in order for fragile egos to maintain a modicum of control over themselves... Magoni's women are the ones who undergo the real risks of the performance, who stand transfixed as the knives fly past them. They are the ones who give the magicians' theatrical act in tragic dimension, for it is our empathy with their suffering that evokes pity and fear."*

For me, the most poignant role these images play is not merely defining an exterior struggle between the masculine and feminine but rather highlighting the internal one. I am simultaneously the magician and the assistant, and yes, they are constantly at battle – one does not exist without the other.



Poseidon's Phobia, pastel on paper, 40 x 30 inches, 1984, private collection Canada



The Ghost, pastel on paper, 17 x 14 inches, 1985

While her older work remains powerful and significant even today, at this phase in her career Despo is purging her acquired ephemeral; not discarding but re-purposing. She remains dedicated to examining the human condition and expressing it through figurative representation. In her latest body of work, *Under Your Skin*, this translates into separating an old anatomy book into individual sheets of work then rebinding them and creating smaller books. She directed my attention to two rows of pages carefully laid out over archival white paper scroll on the floor. I'm the type of person who gets excited opening a book – eager with the anticipation of what the paper will feel like as I turn the page. For a brief moment, I was anxious to see the individual papers lying there – alone – separated from their loving bind. Perhaps having sensed my distress, she immediately handed me a finished new book. I liked this – art you can touch! It's intimate and engaging. This is not her first series of books and I suspect it will not be her last. When asked what she likes about creating books versus an isolated image, she replied, "There is an element of surprise in an art book, as different ideas develop from page to page inviting the viewer to revisit the book often-finding new meaning at each reading." The process of creating this new work is a meditation on the body dealing with growth, mortality, and the process of grieving.



In our over saturated world, inundated with disposable imagery and text messaging, it's refreshing to experience art that demands more of the viewer. Throughout her career, Despo's work has served as inspiration not only for lesser known artists but for critically acclaimed ones as well, such as Jean-Michel Basquiat as art historian John Angeline mentioned in his thesis *Head to Head: Magoni, Basquiat and Forgotten Soho*.

Despo's work, *Celestial Crossings #1* from the *Sky Watch* series in 2009 can be seen currently as part of BRIC Contemporary Art's exhibition *30: A Brooklyn Salon*.

-Bonnie Portelance

*Barry Schwabsky, from *Despo Magoni, recent painting: April 2-April 26, 1986*, The Alternative Museum, 1986.