

Browsing through Ivo Sekulovski's *Down the Jade Mountain* - in an attempt to slowly decipher the book - I notice that different types of photos are presented interchangeably. Still lifes with many products labelled in Cyrillic; fruits such as grapes in combination with small glasses for Rakija; bright green, sour pickles that will take the enamel right off your teeth; showy but small porcelain figurines of horses, dogs, multicolored fishing gear. These still lifes appear alongside black and white photographs, mostly of young people who, judging by the clothes they're wearing, are probably a lot older now. They sit at tables full of food, sometimes dressed in folkloric costumes. These archival photographs, probably from the family album, are combined with photographs of people drinking and dancing in an office-like room or doing daily activities around three exercise bikes in front of the camera. Ivo went back several summers to the place down the jade mountain to reconstruct memories with his father, mother and sister from the time before he left for Italy. Together they create slightly absurd scenes staged for the camera that come out of intimate shared memories.

Collectively, the photographs seem to be Ivo's visual translation of the fragmentary way that the brain constructs memories and which together form the story of the past. Whether this is based on truth or not, distorted by the passing of time, cannot be determined with 100% certainty. It is a way of perceiving things that is colored, in this case by Ivo himself, for whom the world is a theatre.

It would seem that, for Ivo, the project is the search for belonging. A search for a feeling of acceptance, inclusion and identity related to his small town at the foot of the jade mountain and the blue mountain lake in North Macedonia. Ivo is in a permanent state of flux. This is already implicit in the area where he was born, which itself has always been in transition and composed of many identities: Ohrid was built in ancient Greece, rebuilt by the Romans after a devastating earthquake, elevated to an imperial town by the Bulgarian Emperor Samuel, sacked by the Normans, recaptured by the Serbs, dominated by the Ottomans, became part of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia and in the end of the independent Republic of Macedonia, which under international pressure changed its name to North Macedonia. In addition, Ivo felt out of place in the conservative town defined by the influence of the Orthodox Church. Seeking more freedom, he left. But even in his new home country of Italy there is a nagging feeling of not quite being at home there. The fact that he is in several ways in a continuous state of transition seems to invite him to return to his hometown and take root, at least photographically, in the place where it all started.

Ivo's continuous state of transition and his search for the relationship between culture, territory and existence results in a new kind of identity, an identity formed by contrasting realities and moving between them. Together, all of this is united in a unique new identity: an identity of in-betweenness. In an apparently objective, direct style, Ivo captures highly readable, but also layered, stories in a metaphorical way. A metaphor can be described as a figure of speech in which two or more different meanings are brought together to form one new meaning. This seems to fit perfectly with his hybrid identity of in-betweenness, the seeds of which lie in Ohrid.

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When I asked Ivo about a local source of inspiration from his homeland, he mentioned *The Big Water* (Macedonian: *Golemata Voda*) by writer Zivko Cingo (1935 -1987), also from Ohrid. As a photography curator but an outsider with little knowledge of North Macedonian culture, my question was intended to give me some clues to decode his photographs. *Down the Jade Mountain* and *The Big Water* would make for a compelling comparison. Not so much for the political significance of Cingo's book as the way in which the writer uses the metaphor as a figure of speech.

The award-winning children's book from 1971 is about a politician's childhood memories that surface in flashbacks as he lies in an ambulance on the way to the hospital. A childhood in which he tried to form an identity against the background of communism. I tried to get a copy of the Australian translation but in the short term it was not possible in the small town where I live. I was happier than a preacher in a month of Sundays when I discovered that a movie based on the book was available on YouTube. Unfortunately my euphoria was short-lived. No English subtitles. This didn't bring me any further in my attempt to fully embrace Ivo's photographs and come to grips with a photobook whose meaning, due to a different cultural background, remained partly hidden to me.

So why is it - besides satisfying my own unbridled curiosity - still so dear to me to write about such a specific project, rooted in such a particular local context? With the photographic reconstruction made of his personal memories of growing up in the Ohrid area, Ivo tells a wholly universal story as well. *Down the Jade Mountain* is a reflection of relationships in a family. It is a visual ode to an area in flux. And above all it is a search for one's history and one's identity. An identity of in-betweenness that applies not only to Ivo but to so many people. One that we should recognize and celebrate more as a source of creativity and as essential to human existence.

This is a book about identity. Specifically, an identity crisis of a person, artist, family, country, and of photography itself. After living in Italy for a long time in that liminal state that all immigrants know, unable to feel at home anywhere, artist Ivo Sekulovski decided to embark on a project in his hometown Ohrid in North Macedonia, involving his family members as active participants.

Down the Jade Mountain reads like a series of visual riddles, every page bustling with hints and symbols; some universally readable, some deeply and irredeemably personal. In it, Ivo explores and dissects his family dynamics, the multitude of cultures that compose his native country, and his scattered sense of self while all the time playing with the everconflicted relationship between photography, reality, and truth. With an unsettling ability to blur the lines between all these themes, we see family archival images intersecting with staged images of his parents and immaculate, eerie still lifes.

Through the pages, time is not the only element that is contorted and overlapped; the various identities and cultures referenced in the book get the same treatment. Like an impossible atlas, porcelains made in a country that no longer exists, Yugoslavia, are photographed next to Turkish delights, Bosnian salt, Macedonian butter, ripe fruits, and disparate objects like tide pods, medicines, or fishing lures.

This clash of cultures and family relationships almost always happens on or around a table, an object that instantly evokes many human activities, from conviviality to negotiations. The setting can invoke a sense of togetherness or estrangement. You can see it used as a dance prop, like in the Slavic folkloric dances, or conjuring twisted power plays in office-like environments.

The medium of choice is also particularly apt for the story Ivo is trying to tell. The nature of all the images is purposefully left ambiguous. You are never really sure what you are looking at as a sense of mystery pervades all the pages, one after the other. Are you looking at a 3D render or a traditional photograph? Is this a performance or a spontaneous gesture? Ivo skillfully plays with the dangerous proximity of photography and reality, presenting us with impure evidence of family and cultural histories. All the questions raised by the photographic medium since its origins, on time, truth, memory, and reality, leap out at us from each and every page of this photobook.

Like an ever-changing labyrinth, Down the Jade Mountain draws you in and keeps you wandering through its maze of multi-layered images, prompting questions on the mysteries of photography and, of course, the mystery of our identities.

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