

Irena Knezevic

By Susan Snodgrass [✉](#) March 5, 2013 11:49am



The evocative works in Irena Knezevic's exhibition "Night of the World" belie the horrifying narrative from which they unfold. These untitled objects were displayed, or, as Knezevic puts it, "dispersed like body parts," in various tableaux connected to the political history of her native Serbia. Fundamental to understanding them is a text written by the artist, in which she reveals the show's core inspiration: a World War II diary of the chief officer of the Jasenovac concentration camp in Croatia that describes, in exacting detail, the atrocities carried out against antifascists, communist supporters and Jews. The diary also played a role in an accompanying vigil that took place one evening during the show's run. In the gallery, which was lit only by candlelight, visitors were asked to read passages from the book out loud, reciting scenes of rape, cannibalism and other acts of violence, the brutality of which might otherwise remain unimaginable.

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According to Knezevic, the diary resurfaced in Yugoslavia in 1982. Subsequent reprints made it broadly accessible, leaving an indelible mark upon the public imagination and fueling tensions between Serbs and Croats that later escalated in the ethnic conflicts of the 1990s. Knezevic translated the diary into English, and her translation formed the basis for the works on view. The show's centerpiece involved a live albino boa constrictor housed inside an acrylic case set atop a metal table. Both predator and guardian, the snake was used here as a symbol of rebirth, in reference to the fact that an albino boa was one of the few animals at the Belgrade zoo to survive the 1999 NATO bombing. Placed on the floor of the case was an aluminum plate printed with the full translation of the diary and then covered in scratch-off paint, producing a coating like that found on lottery tickets. As the snake writhed and slithered within its habitat, the paint wore away in swatches, revealing portions of the text underneath.

A monochrome panel (27 by 36 inches) that was mounted on the wall has been printed with a section of the translation but then coated with the same scratch-off paint. It was one of six inkjet prints offered for sale (the others were not on view), with the stipulation that if the overpaint is removed the work must be covered. As if to destroy the terror of the words Knezevic has brought to light, porcelain casts of the Epson ink cartridges used to create her prints were filled with glass and then fired in a kiln. The bricklike remnants are part of a series of ceramic pieces that were displayed in the case alongside the boa and on a wall-mounted shelf with small editioned works from previous projects.

Throughout this minimal exhibition, Knezevic continuously stimulated esthetic desires, yet denied the pure pleasure of looking, replacing it with a mediated horror that haunted viewers long after they left the gallery.

Photo: Detail of Irena Knezevic's *Table, 2012, live snake, vitrine and mixed mediums, 36 by 60 by 30 inches overall*; at Alderman Exhibitions.