

Inside / Outside / Me An Exhibition by Ioana Predescu at the Constanța Art Museum

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Abstract: *Rare are the cases when one can speak of an already formed style, understood as a unitary set of aesthetic values, to which somebody adheres fully assumed from the years of study. Following the trajectory of Ioana Predescu, a former student of the Art Faculty from Ovidius Constanța University, we seem to find ourselves in such a happy case. Regarding the artist's exhibition, it can be noticed that two great themes present in the Constanța Art Museum, the self-portrait and Uroborus, the mythical snake, are unexpectedly completing themselves. Self-portrait is a means of self-investigation, philosophy and psychology, intimate and personal, coinciding with the center of the circle and Uroborus, a symbol of the universe and of time, creation and destruction, alike the outer edge of the circle. Inside / outside / me is a coherent exposure type determined by this continuous flow that is created between the interior, the exterior, the personal - the universal, the boundaries between which Ioana places her artistic approach.*

Key-words: *Contemporary Art Exhibition; Circle; Uroborus; Self-Portrait; Symbolism; Art Faculty UOC; Constanța Art Museum*

1. Introduction

Rare are the cases when one can speak of an already formed style, understood as a unitary set of aesthetic values, to which somebody adheres fully assumed from the years of study. Following the trajectory of Ioana Predescu, we seem to find ourselves in such a happy case. Regarding the artist's exhibition, it can be noticed that two great themes present in the Constanta Museum of Art, the self-portrait and Uroborus, the mythical snake, are unexpectedly completing themselves. Self-portrait is a means of self-investigation, philosophy and psychology, intimate and personal, coinciding with the center of the circle and Uroborus, a symbol of the universe and of time, creation and destruction, alike the outer edge of the circle.

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2. Ioana Predescu - An artist inspired by ancient symbols

Ioana Predescu has an appetite for a minimal number of colours and for vast surfaces, vibrating barely perceptible, according to techniques that also innovate some jarring transitions between the plans, which do not destroy the unity of the image but it potentiates it. Without being attracted by the shimmering or chromatic contrasts that seem effortless, the artist chooses to dominate her work, the black; it does not refer exclusively to the night regime, but it imparts

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the necessary dose of mystery to a whole that is required to be deciphered. Because the abstraction process practiced by the artist is not a simple reduction, it appeals to form and symbolic significance.²



Fig. 1. Philosophical Portrait, mixed media on canvas, 60x50 cm

Beyond such considerations, to which we call upon the symbolic vocation of forms, we can appreciate the authenticity of the approach and the quality of the painting practiced by Ioana Predescu, in whose works the tendency to reduce or even suppress the spatial depth is the way to emphasize its figuration neutral surfaces, and deep colors appear in expressive tones and halftones.

From this point of view we can assume that the simple geometry, based on straight lines and sometimes their projection in space - the sloping of the works, has its origin in the traditional architecture, based on the pillar-beam system, and the round and spherical ones, refer

² Doina Păuleanu, Lelia Pîrvan Rus. 2019. *Inside / outside / me*, Constanța: Ex Ponto Publishing House.

to an invented zoomorphic world, in fact a true bestiary; Dominant here, as a symbol of interiority, meditative, even self-reflexive, is the fantastic animal called the Uroboros, which, in many religions and mythologies of the planet earth, can self-defeat, but which equally refers to the exterior of a becoming cosmos; In both hypostases, the primordial creature can represent the aspiration to light after the shades of the interior or exterior have been scattered, the self-turning and the upward trend as major ways of deliverance.³



Fig. 2. Uroboros 12, mixed media on canvas, 100x150 cm

3. The snake or the main element for many symbols and interpretations

The success that this Uroboros achieved in the Italian Renaissance is related to the rebirth of paganism promoted by the Neoplatonism of Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino. Princes and aristocrats wear this emblem on the reverse of medals to synthesize, through a figurative symbol, the intellectual, political and moral qualities of their nature.⁴

Every symbol has at least two opposite interpretations that together give complete meaning. In Hebrew, for example, the word shet (snake) has two opposite meanings: foundation and ruin, which justifies the two meanings of the hermetic caduceus. In Latin the word *altus* means high and deep, and the word *sacer* means holy and cursed. This could be translated geometrically by a straight line whose vertical direction would have traveled in the two opposite directions - from top to bottom and from bottom to top - a finding that could facilitate a definition of the symbolic function.⁵

³ Doina Păuleanu, Lelia Pîrvan Rus, *op. cit.*

⁴ Battistini, Matilde. 2008. *Symbols and allegories*. Bucharest: Monitorul Oficial R.A., p. 10.

⁵ Benoist, Luc. 1995. *Signs, Symbols and Myths*. Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House, pp. 50-51.



Fig. 3. Uroboros 17, mixed media on canvas 60x50 cm

The cobra was seen primarily as a solar symbol, associated with several deities. One of the most important was the goddess of Buto, Wadjet, and through her, the cobra became the symbol of Lower Egypt. Enchantment to be transformed into a snake: I am an old snake, I die at night and I am reborn during the day. I am a snake between the edges of the earth, I go out at night and I am reborn, renewed and rejuvenated, every day. (The Egyptian Book of the Dead, The Enchantment 87)⁶

The serpent, associated in many cultures with evil practices, is undergoing a transformation in Hindu culture, as the Kundalini is the agent of spiritual awakening, physical and spiritual satisfaction. The Kundalini dwells hidden at the chakra level, but, once awakened by the proper meditation techniques, rises to the level of the second chakra, the home of the genitals, and then heads to the seventh and most important, sahasrara chakra, from the top. head.

⁶ Adkinson Robert. 2012. *Sacred Symbols*. Bucharest: Art Publishing House, p. 75.

It is believed that when the energy reaches the seventh chakra, the individual enters into possession of a pure consciousness⁷.

The apinaye shaman has the task of recovering the patient's soul from the village of the dead, taking the form of a black snake, which feeds on venomous snakes. The agent that propels the shaman's soul in search of the lost soul is tobacco⁸.

As far as the world outside the intimate universe is concerned, it seems to take place - suggests the author - cyclically; Uroboros, the animal that makes up its own body, a circle, a primordial being before good and evil find specific forms of manifestation, dominates the images; Once discovered as a form and meaning, you seek it everywhere, even if its body's trace is barely (or is not) suggested, because it creates bridges and unites, merges beyond any crack, struggles and dies to reborn, darkens to shine.

"In tantric symbolism, the Kundalini Snake represents the force that spreads through the body, opening the chakras until it touches the seventh, seven-petalled lotus above the head. Always a cult object for animistic cultures in Southeast Asia, the snake was considered a protective presence, protecting teachings and temples. As a water sign, the snake was seen as a link between earth and sky, appearing as a decorative motif on sculptures, on bridges or at the entrance of temples to symbolize the transition from one state to another."⁹

Similar themes can be found in Western mythologies, but here the antagonism is not resolved. The half-divine hero, Heracles, the son of Heaven-Father, Zeus, and thus himself a part of the heavenly energies, is a relentless enemy of the serpents on earth. As a baby, he strangled the snakes sent into his cradle by the ancient earth goddess, Hera. Later, he defeats the Hydra, an almost invincible destructive monster, the blind vital force, from whose body, instead of each severed head, seven other heads grew. Christ also crushes the serpent's head, although he falls victim to its bite. (...) In India, on the other hand, the serpent and the savior are two fundamental manifestations of a single all-encompassing divine substance. And this substance cannot disagree with one of its polarized and mutually antagonistic aspects. Within it, the two are reconciled and subsumed.¹⁰

"A completely extraordinary settlement in North America is Snake Hill on the top of a hill in Ohio. It is a half-kilometer long embankment, in the shape of a snake, holding a hemispherical hill in its mouth. The monumentality of the work demonstrates the important place that the Great Snake occupies in the symbolism of the American natives. Among the Cherokee tribes as well as other tribes in the southeastern region, he was known as the Uktena, considered malevolent, but the bearer of a crystal that, if used by a shaman, brought "Representations of the serpent or similar animals, such as the dragon, have found their place in world mythologies since time immemorial. Once the conditions of creation are met, various sexually connoted forces intervene in the game, and the snake is the image of many of them."¹¹

Greek Magical Parchments (Papyri Graecae Magicae - PGM), a collection of magical texts, spells and incantations, Greek-Roman-Egyptian, written mainly in Greek but also in Coptic or Demotic, describes us in Part IV (PGM IV), in "Spell of Helios", Ouroboros with the attributes that were attributed to him at that time:

"Helios the brilliant, the one who gives light to the whole world.

⁷ Walhalla and Thule. 1977. *Old Germanic Myths and Legends*. Bucharest: Minerva Publishing House, p. 703.

⁸ Culianu, Ioan Petru, apud L. E. Sullivan. 1988. *Icanchu's Drum. An Orientation to Meaning in South American Religions*. New York: Macmillan, p. 425.

⁹ Robert Adkinson. 2012. *Sacred Symbols*, Bucharest, Art Publishing House, p. 387.

¹⁰ H. Zimmer. 1994. *Myths and Symbols in the Indian Civilization*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, p. 88

¹¹ Robert Adkinson. 2012. *Sacred Symbols*, Bucharest, Art Publishing House, p. 204.

You are the great Serpent, ruler of all gods, the one who rules the beginning
Of Egypt and the whole uninhabited world, which Mating in the Ocean
You are the one who will become
Visible every day and setting in the northwest of heaven, and rising in the southeast.”¹²

An allegory of the cyclicity of the days and the comparison with a snake, which has a part of its body in the water, can very easily be likened to a ouroboros. Also for the power of a spell dedicated to Helios we find the guidance to engrave in the stone the image of a "lion with a celestial globe and a whip left and a snake biting its tail around it.”¹³

In PGM XII. 201-69 we find explicit instructions on how to make a jasper amulet with an engraved "circle-shaped snake with tail in mouth"¹⁴. The amulet guarantees your success in fulfilling your wishes.

In PGM XXXVI. 178-87 describes an image that had to be drawn to unravel a spell and where, in addition to a figure with a torch in his hand, a knife and three hawks, there was also a need for *ouroboros*¹⁵.

The image of cyclicity, of the relentless force of regeneration, *Ouroboros* is also enhanced by the Gnostic doctrine where is attributed the hen to pan (ἐντὸ πᾶν) saying, "All in One". We find it as a representation in the *Chrysopoeia Cleopatra* (Κλεοπάτρης χρυσοποιία), originally from the third century in Alexandria but kept by the copies of the tenth or eleventh century, in what was called *Codex Marcianus*. Here it is presented to us as a true symbol of the harmony of contrasts. The upper part, which contains the head of the snake, black and thick, with a white eye, and the thin and white lower part, with black inlays.¹⁶

The success of Christianity in the face of gnosis and the stigmatization by the Church of dualism has made *ouroboros* a hidden secret symbol, which will be used by what has been called alchemy. An old science of manipulation of matter but also of mysteries, which managed to hide under the veil of esoteric knowledge but also of Christian exegesis, the dualistic heritage.

Ouroboros was represented in alchemy as a dragon, which ate its tail, as a sign of self-destruction. The union of the tail with the dragon's neck also corresponded to a self-fertilization, meaning that he kills himself, marries himself and fertilizes himself.¹⁷

In the Christian Bible, it is the incarnation of the Devil. In Tantra, the Kundalini serpent is the feminine embodiment of man's material and spiritual energy. Kundalini rises from its position at the base of the spine to awaken the nerve centers of the body.

It cannot be said that such conclusions would have been consciously drawn by medieval alchemists as we do today, but "the unconscious expresses many that need not be conscious in all their implications"¹⁸.

Along with *ouroboros*, alchemy also offers a symbol, as complex as *ouroboros* and with a mathematical "accuracy", also using paradox to put in opposition forms and manifestations of existence –*squaring the circle*. The opposition between *physis* and *lapis* is now that between circle and square.

¹² Hans Dieter Betz. 1986. *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*, University of Chicago Press, p. 68.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 161.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 273.

¹⁶ Sînziana Romanescu, Lelia Pîrvan Rus, Vali Cacioianu. 2020. *From symbol to archetype, between text and depiction*. Bucharest: Muzicală Publishing House, p. 49.

¹⁷ Carl Gustav Jung. 2017. *Studii despre reprezentările alchimice*. Bucharest Trei Publishing House, p. 94.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 258.

The problem of squaring the circle was quite easy to understand, even for those with elementary notions of geometry - the construction of a square having the same area as that of a circle. At first glance the solution seems simple through the equality between the area of a square and a circle. But the "irrational" factor appears - π and not that it has any relation to reason, but simply, it has to do with "ratio", the ration, meaning π , cannot be represented as a fraction (ration), and it is a number which has an infinity of digits "after the comma", that is decimals. This translates into the impossibility of material transposition of the spiritual, divine world. Squaring the circle is the clear expression of the symbol generated by the square and the compass in the arches of Freemasonry.¹⁹

The circle - the square, the round - the intersection of lines, the Oroboros represents an iconic image of the harmonization of the oppositions existing in the collective imaginary of the people, a "fundamental alchemical mandala"²⁰, which appears, without seemingly rational justification, in many of the artists' works. The mandala as a religious manifestation appears in the East where certain rituals of Hinduism or Buddhism precede it.

There is a Hindu, Tantric, Tibetan *mandala* and even different Japanese representations of Zen, which made Jung come to the conclusion that it is an archetypal manifestation.

The *mandala* was taken with great inspiration by Jung as a personal manifestation of the unconscious, as an attempt to represent the individual psychic processes, "spontaneous products of the individual psyche" and which we find, in different forms, including in Eminescu's poems, prose or drawings²¹.

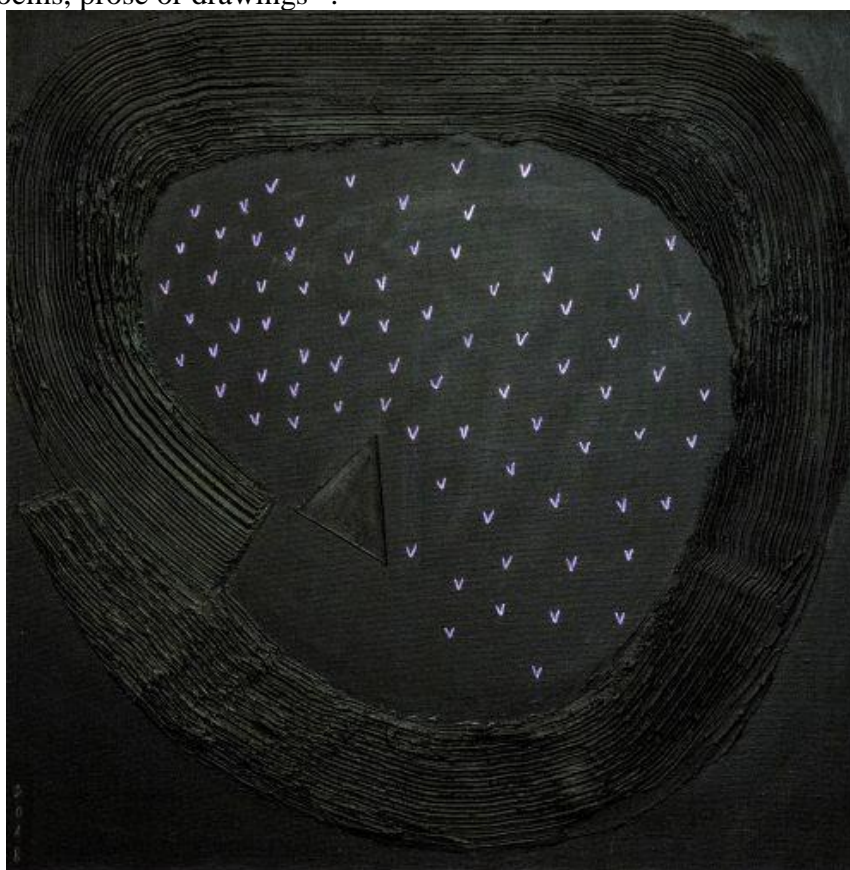


Fig. 4. Uroboros 16, mixed media on canvas, 70x70 cm

¹⁹ Sinziana Romanescu, Lelia Pîrvan Rus, Vali Cacioianu, 2020. *From symbol to archetype, between text and depiction*, Bucharest, Muzicală Publishing House, pp. 52-53.

²⁰ Carl Gustav Jung. 2016. *Psihologie și alchimie*. Bucharest: Trei Publishing House, p. 147.

²¹ Vasile Dem. Zamfirescu. 2009. *Filosofia inconștientului*. Bucharest: Trei Publishing House, p. 470.

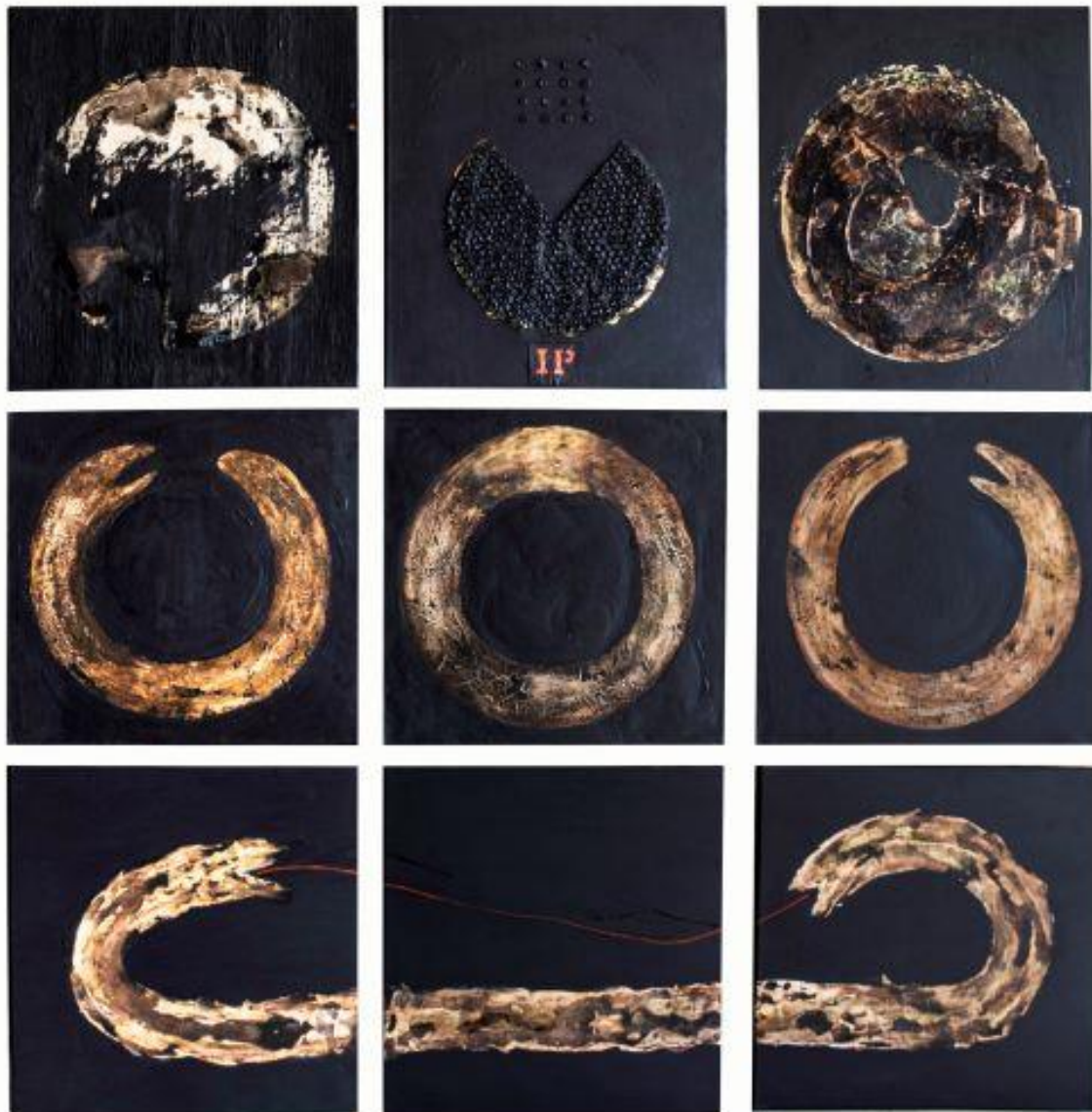


Fig. 5. Uroboros 11, mixed media on canvas, 160 x150 cm

4. Conclusion

Finally, in spite of a certain hermetism of her works that cannot be easily deciphered and an almost ascetic reduction of means of expression, the present exhibition is an intimate one that speaks to the viewer first of all about the author. Even the black smoke, ubiquitous in her paintings, has no dark connotation, but it is deep and velvety as the eyes of her mother who looks at us from the photo installation present in the last room of the museum. At the same time, she witnesses an internal combustion that the artist seems to live with every liberating gesture.

The last exhibition opened by Ioana Predescu in 2018 at the Constanța Art Museum has a suggestive title: *inside / outside / me* and constantly indicates two hermeneutical directions; In her inner frame, the artist registers, analyzes, filters and chooses discreetly, but without hesitation, harmony, major tone, balance; the sense-bearing form is contrary to the broad and imperious gesture, but also to the cry that expels the concentrated energies; the artist prefers the construction, the flat surfaces, with barely visible inserts, in which the light comes in salute.

Though her painting is not a gestural one, the compositional rigor and the apparent stylistic minimalism is always complementary to this tactile pleasure with which Ioana seeks the surfaces, gives them unexpected urges or satinings that urge to comfort. The present exhibition, displayed in the generous space of the Constanța Museum of Art, is a round one, which concludes a prolific stage of Ioana Predescu's creation, and I am sure that, like Uroborus, it will mark another equally surprising and consistent stage.

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