

**ArtSeen****Aleksandar Duravcevic:  
*Empire***By **William Corwin**Installation view: *Aleksandar Duravcevic: Empire*, Totah Gallery, New York, 2021. Courtesy Totah Gallery.

Is Aleksandar Duravcevic overwhelming us with the repetitive thud of the mass-produced or presenting a careworn meditation on the handmade? This is the central question that emerges from the 50 graphite drawings on velvety black paper that make up the project

*Empire*. These images are all of the same subject, a bald eagle, and were created between 2013 and 2017. They are, for all intents and purposes, identical, but identical in the same way that Warhol's 1962 *Marilyn Diptych* features 50 images of the same thing, largely rendered in the same way—Warhol does 25 in color, 25 monochrome. Like Marilyns, eagles are of course deeply ambiguous images. They represent empire: the American empire, the Roman Empire, and the Third Reich, among others. They are also the mounts and avatars of the gods Vishnu and Zeus. Then there is the poor titan Prometheus—an eagle tears the liver out of his torso each day as punishment for bringing fire (knowledge) to humankind. So Duravcevic's subject is equivocal, and thus, like Marilyn, it tells us more about ourselves than the proclivities of the famous bird known to taxonomists as *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*.

ON VIEW

TOTAH

*Empire*

October 29, 2020 –

February 6, 2021

New York

A long series of works that are similar in rendering or subject elicits a different reaction from the viewer than a singular work would. Certain works are created to be viewed together rather than as discrete objects. Out of a vast range of projects, one thinks of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974–79), David Hockney's *82 portraits and 1 still life* (2013–16), or the water towers and silos of Hilla and Bernd Becher. It demands a shift of gear in examining the nuance of the work, as one becomes aware of the artist's glossary of gesture. In Duravcevic's case this list of

differences becomes a meditative koan in its own right. There is the distinction between how he renders the fluffy white feathers of the neck of the bald eagle (heavy on the graphite) versus the long feathers of the wing (lightly outlined). There is a difference from drawing to drawing in the modelling of the beak—sometimes Duravcevic simply demarcates the edge, allowing it to recede into the black of the background, while at other times he fills it in, emphasizing the topography of the beak itself, making it pop and project into our consciousness. The glassy gelatinous eye is almost always the same, functioning as an anchor for each image, and also creating the startling effect of 50 glistening eyes staring nobly into the space over your left shoulder.

Aleksandar Duravcevic, *Empire 29*, 2013–17. Graphite on black paper, 40 x 29 inches. Courtesy Totah Gallery, New York.

Do all these subtle variations in a morphologically identical image emphasize the difference or the repetition? We are never clued in to the source. Was it a photograph or did Duravcevic sketch this from life? Does the tension and energy of the show reside in the surrealness of the situation? Being confronted by two rooms of seemingly holographic representations of eagles is hardly an everyday experience, even in the art world. We wonder, would leafing through a book of these images provoke a very different response? The image becomes so familiar that the differences begin to become a discourse on abstraction, articulated via patiently crafted realism. The selection of textures, sheens, reflections, glosses, and the poignant use of absorbent black are exposed as a series of triggers that underlie the almost holographic effect of the images, but they also cue us into the basic refrain that this is “real.” It's the same seductive trickery that bowls us over looking at the fur collar of Holbein the Younger's *Portrait of Sir Thomas More* from 1527, first stunned by its representational fidelity, and then on closer inspection realizing that the passage is created through just as formalist a process as an Adolph Gottlieb composition. In the age of Warhol's Marilyns, the artist no longer needs to be as circumspect about detaching the image from its signification, and patrons of the arts are less enamored of punitive decapitation. Like the sonata format in music, Duravcevic's *Empire* theoretically oscillates from political point A to aesthetic point B, and back once again to its political refrain. The 50 eagles seem initially a riff on the perpetually-intoned mantra of American imperial decline, followed by an interlude reminding the viewer where one might discover the origins of abstraction, but it comes back home to the politics of symbolism. Facing those 50 eagles ringing the gallery and even double-stacked one over the other, the viewer realizes that we invest a great deal of psychic and emotional effort in representations of predatory avians, felines, and ursidae, but with little reflection on what we are actually conveying through them. *Empire* is a well-timed reminder.

**Contributor****William Corwin**

is a sculptor and journalist from New York. He has exhibited at The Clocktower, LaMama and Geary galleries in New York, as well as galleries in London, Hamburg, Beijing and Taipei. He has written regularly for *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Artpapers*, *Bomb*, *Artcritical*, *Raintaxi* and *Canvas* and formerly for *Frieze*. Most recently he curated and wrote the catalog for *Postwar Women* at The Art Students League in New York, an exhibition of the school's alumnae active between 1945-65, and *9th Street Club*, and exhibition of Perle Fine, Helen Frankenthaler, Mercedes Matter, Grace Hartigan, Lee Krasner and Elaine DeKooning at Gazelli Art House in Mayfair. He is the editor of *Formalism; Collected Essays of Saul Ostrow*, to be published in 2020, and he will participate in the exhibition *Anchor/Roots* at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art at Snug Harbor Cultural Center in 2021.