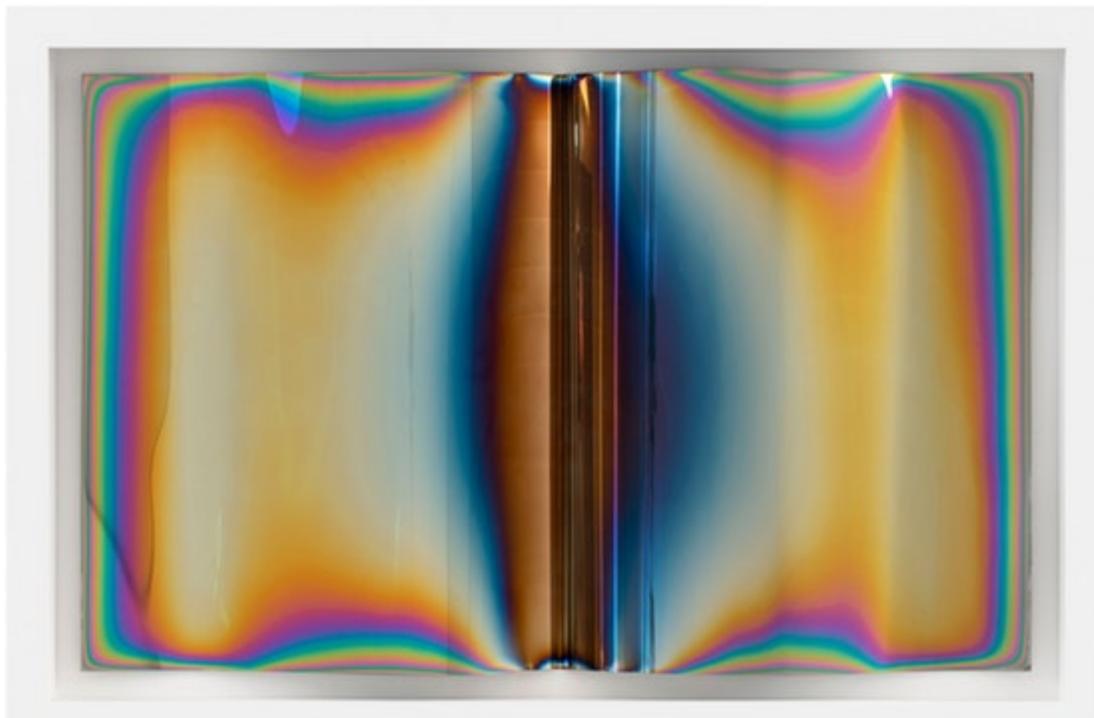


## Aleksandar Duravcevic: *YOUTH*

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By Alfred Mac Adam



Aleksandar Duravcevic, *YOUTH*, 2019. Chemically treated stainless steel, 16 x 30 inches. Courtesy the artist and TOTAH.

The title Aleksandar Duravcevic has given to his current show at TOTAH, *YOUTH*, is ambiguous, but one possible point of reference could be the *kouros*, archaic Greek statues of young men used to commemorate the beloved dead. Not a portrait, a *kouros* celebrates life by transforming the dead person into an abstraction, an artistic metaphor for life itself. Duravcevic's translation of that commemorative spirit into concrete works of art reenacts the metamorphosis of the deceased youth into stone. He takes a sheet of stainless steel and treats it with chemicals and diamond dust. Then, he subjects the sheet to extremely high heat in an Ohio factory that specializes in making aircraft parts. The inert material, imagined as a dead body, must be incinerated like a phoenix that rises as a creature of a different order.

### New York City

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But there is a catch. Although Duravcevic's method for producing the 10 wall pieces that make up *YOUTH* is self-conscious and premeditated, there is randomness in the results. Stéphane Mallarmé's verse "a toss of the dice will never abolish chance" makes the point clearly: commitment to method (tossing the dice) does not lead to a predictable result. In fact, while the works share a family resemblance, they are not identical. The heat should transform Duravcevic's diamond dust into a brilliant metallic blue. And it does, but the hue is not consistent, just as the greens and yellows produced by the chemicals coating the stainless steel are different each time.



Aleksandar Duravcevic, *YOUTH*, 2019. Chemically treated stainless steel, 27 1/2 x 19 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and TOTAH.

Viewers cannot see this process. What they can see, amid the strange rainbows on the surface of the stainless steel, is themselves. Most of the works in *YOUTH* have a reflective quality that transforms visitors into potential avatars of Narcissus. This interaction between viewer and artwork takes place most spectacularly in *YOUTH* (2019), a landscape-format work measuring 16 inches by 30. The piece divides into two distinct halves: we realize that we are looking into a kind of book, opened before us. And what we see, as we do whenever we read, is the author's text: here Duravcevic's mesmerizing colors, but also our own reflected image. All texts, all works of art, are ultimately mirrors because the moment we try to understand them, we impose our individual experience and knowledge. Duravcevic demonstrates this in other works where he partially corrugates the stainless steel sheet. This rippling of the surface resembles water on a pond and takes us back to Narcissus staring at himself in the pool of water. As in dreams, everything here returns to the viewer's gaze.

One work deserves special attention because it eschews color, which for Duravcevic is a notable renunciation. *Thankless* (2019) is an eight by eleven-inch stainless steel panel with the word "thankless" inscribed on it. This mirror piece resembles some stone panels

the artist executed in 2016, with words like "mercy" or "sacrifice" carved into them. While the stone works might recall Ian Hamilton Finlay's politically charged plaques, Duravcevic's intentions here are not political or satiric but ironic. The work is a slap in the face of the viewer, a warning that making art is serious business and must, then, be taken seriously.

The origins of the works in *YOUTH* appear in Duravcevic's earlier projects, particularly his photographs of rainbows, which range from the celestial to the oil slicks that appear on the street after a shower. These images show a similar impulse toward preservation of the transient. Duravcevic saved those all-too-ephemeral rainbows from oblivion and made them permanent. So throughout his varied career as sculptor, draughtsman, photographer, and print-maker we find a consistent desire to memorialize. But as Duravcevic creates new objects, he simultaneously commemorates his own vision: these objects would not survive without his intervention. He knows that he himself is mortal—as does the writer Jorge Luis Borges, author of the quotation that serves as epigraph to Duravcevic's magnificent book *Steppenwolf*: "I am not sure that I exist, actually." Borges finds himself subsumed into his writing and thus into the abstraction we call "the author." And Duravcevic too is subordinated by the process of art-making. For both men, as with the creators of the *kouroi*, the personality of the artist is relinquished in the creative act.

Duravcevic is an artist of resurrection, a soldier in the war against time, who works like an alchemist. He turns banal matter into something grand, but the sacrifice entailed in transforming his raw materials into art is also a self-sacrifice. Ultimately, the reflective works in *YOUTH* tell us as much about ourselves as they tell us about Duravcevic. We must share his desire to transcend mortality.

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ALFRED MAC ADAM is professor of Latin American literature at Barnard College-Columbia University. He has translated works by Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Juan Carlos Onetti, José Donoso, and Jorge Volpi, among others. He recently published an essay on the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa included in *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography*.