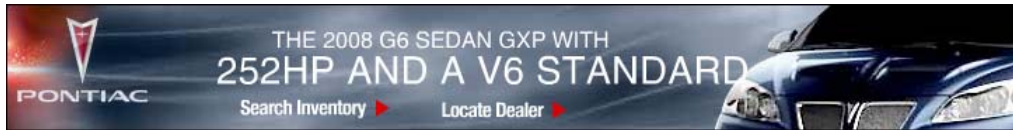




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## Odavde/Otuda

By David Bonetti

POST-DISPATCH VISUAL ARTS CRITIC  
 02/17/2008



Damir Niksic's video, "If I Wasn't Muslim." It has been viewed about 160,000 times on YouTube.

ostensibly modern European nation. After 50 years of hearing the slogan "never again," it happened again. Genocide occurred in Europe.

About 50,000 Bosnians, the largest population of displaced Bosnians in the world, ended up in St. Louis. In the decade they have been here, they have re-created communities and contributed to the larger metropolitan economy and culture.

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Watch the YouTube video

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Jeffrey Hughes of the Webster University art department, with independent curator Dana Turkovic, decided to use their presence as an opportunity to take a look at contemporary Bosnian art.

The seven artists they chose suggest the Bosnian diaspora's geographic range: Two live in St. Louis; one in New York City; one in London; one in Stockholm, Sweden; and one in Dubai. Only one lives in Sarajevo, Bosnia's capital city.

In an introductory text, Hughes writes that "the majority of works in "Odavde/Otuda" suggest a state of being caught in between times, cultures or locales."

The displacement expressed in their art is mirrored in the exhibition's title, which translates as "From here/From there," linguistic markers of belonging or not belonging.

The Bosnians expelled from majority Serb areas were Muslim and call themselves Bosniak. The only surviving historical Muslim population in Europe, they are a legacy of the long-term domination of the Balkans by the Ottoman Empire.

Hughes writes: "The Bosnian experience is fraught with binary oppositions: Muslim/Orthodox Christian; Serb/Bosniak; communist/capitalist; Ottoman/Austro-Hungarian; tradition/modern; from here/from there."

The displacement-misplacement paradox is brilliantly captured in the exhibition in Damir Niksic's video "If I Wasn't Muslim." Based on the song "If I Were a Rich Man" from "Fiddler on the Roof," it presents an otherwise happy peasant who laments his fate: to be a Muslim in Christian Europe.

He questions God about why he placed the Bosniaks in Europe, which is otherwise thoroughly Christian. He pleads with him, "Don't let our children go through the horrors we went through just because they call you Allah."

He ends with the plaint, "If I were Christian, I wouldn't have to prove I was human, too!" All to Tevye's bouncy beat.

The work is infectious and amusing. It has been viewed about 160,000 times on YouTube. Sometimes you can make your political point best with humor.

Advertisement None of the other works is funny.

## 'Odavde/Otuda: An International Exhibition of Contemporary Bosnian Artists'

Where: Cecille R. Hunt Gallery, Webster University, 8342 Big Bend Boulevard

When: Through March 14

Hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday;

until 8 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday

More info: 314-968-7171

## Isil Egrikavuk: 'The Interview'

Where: Boots Contemporary Art Space, 2307 Cherokee Street

When: Through March 20

Hours: 8 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

More info: 314-772-2667 or www.bootsart.com

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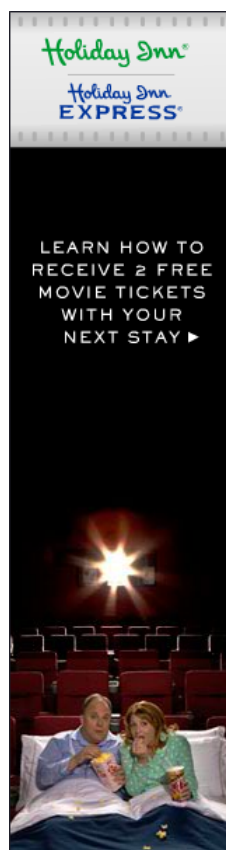
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TOP JOBS



St. Louis-based artist Alen Basics has created a memorial to the 31 members of his family killed during three horrible months in 1992. Their names are simply noted on panels that project from the wall in the order in which they were killed.

Turkovic compares the work to Chris Burden's "Other Vietnam Memorial" that lists millions of names of Vietnamese killed during what they call the American War. Christian Boltanski's less-specific memorial pieces are also a reference. But the power of Basics' work, based on his history, is dependent on no aesthetic precedent.

Sejla Kamerić's photo "Bosnian Girl" comes from anger provoked by bigotry. The text "No teeth ...? A mustache ...? Smel Like (expletive) ...? Bosnia Girl!" written artlessly over a photographic self-portrait is appropriated from graffiti on a military barracks occupied by Dutch United Nations forces.

When the breakup of a country goes as badly as it did in the former Yugoslavia, you have to ask whether what came before was so bad. In "Symbols of YU," St. Louis-based artist Zlatko Cosic does just that. Using pre-civil war imagery exclusively, he creates a video collage of touristic landmarks, statues of great men, commemorative bank notes and stamps that carries more than a touch of nostalgia. In his vision, Catholic and Orthodox church towers and Muslim minarets appear together as characteristics of a unified country.

Other works deal with the here and now of everyday diasporan life. I really don't get what Isak Berbic is trying to say, but that seems to be his case.

There's no doubt that Nebojsa Seric is feeling sad. Whether he is naturally sad or his sadness is caused by his exile in New York City, we can't tell from his video here. In any case, the artist stands on the banks of the East River near the Brooklyn end of the Brooklyn Bridge, the skyline of lower Manhattan beyond him. It is a gloomy day. He sings "Passover," a Joy Division song, arranged with melancholy Middle Eastern tones.

One artist looking ahead is Margareta Kern, who has produced a series of photographs of girls graduating from high school. They all wear copies of fashion worn by celebrities, made by her mother, a seamstress in Banja Luka, a town devastated during the war.

The pictures encapsulate the exhibition title. The girls are "from here" — Banja Luka. The fashion is "from there" — not the place of the ominous "other," but the world of style and sophistication. Equally important is that a milestone in personal life is being passed. Young girls are turning into women. It happens everywhere — it happens to boys, too — and its acknowledgment is a sign that life goes on, even in lands where genocide occurred not so long ago.

Considering St. Louis' prominent place in the Bosnian diaspora, it is surprising that this is the first local exhibition devoted to contemporary Bosnian art.

It is also a surprise that it occurs at Webster, which has not been known for its commitment to the visual arts. May it present more exhibitions of similar ambition in the future.

#### **'THE INTERVIEW'**

As the show of Bosnian artists at Webster shows, the art world is increasingly international. Though the Bosnian diaspora was involuntary, the result of violence, most artist peregrinations are by choice. There is no such thing as a "local artist" anymore.

Although it is only a couple of years old, Boots Contemporary Arts Space has been providing the community a service with its international artists residency program. Georgia Kotretsos of Greece created an installation there in 2006, as did Beate Engl of Germany last year. Now, Isil Egrikavuk of Turkey has made a work, "The Interview," that deals in part with international travel.

When you walk into the gallery, its small front room has been set up like the antechamber of an airport where international travelers are interrogated and processed. Stanchions organize those waiting in line, and the standard questions about why the traveler is attempting to enter a foreign country are on the wall.

A video from the opening shows local journalist Anne-Marie Berger interviewing gallerygoers. She asks them if they have had recent contact with animals, avian flu virus being her real subject of interest.

Through the door is another video, this one of an Iraqi doctor doing medical research in St. Louis to find a cure for the disease. Although the video replicates the standard television interview convincingly, it is for the most part a fiction. Egrikavuk's real interest seems to be how readily we accept as fact falsehoods if they are presented in a standard professional manner.

Immigration and bird flu are just pretexts for her to express her skepticism about journalism.

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