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Performance Artist Marina Abramovic on Her Belgrade Youth



Marina Abramovic in a recent portrait in New York *Photo: Paola + Murray*

Marina Abramovic, 68, helped pioneer performance as a visual art. She is designing the environment and method by which audiences will listen to pianist Igor Levit perform Bach's "Goldberg Variations" at New York's Park Avenue Armory on Dec. 7-19. She spoke with Marc Myers.

As a performance artist, I love bad ideas. They're often our best ideas, but we tend to reject them outright because they frighten us. Most people are more comfortable with what is familiar. I've spent my life doing the opposite.

Growing up in Belgrade, the capital of the former Yugoslavia, I refused to play with dolls or toys. I was more interested in shadows and talking to invisible people I saw in the dark like luminous beings.

My family lived in a house on the city's main street and we had the entire third floor. It was a spacious apartment and I had two rooms—my bedroom and an art studio. We were Red bourgeoisie. My father, Vojin, was a war hero and a member of President Tito's elite guard, and my mother, Danica, was an art historian and director of the Museum of Revolution.

My mother kept her emotions inside and never kissed or hugged me as a child. When she died in 2007, I cleaned out her house and found a box of medals she had been awarded, along with a newspaper clip about her heroism during World War II. She never told me. There also was a diary, and her entries were unbelievably emotional. If she had let me read just one page when I was young, I would have had a completely different relationship with her.

My maternal grandmother, Milica Rosic, was very important to me. She was religious and mystical. I lived with her for six years while my parents worked, which was typical. As soon as I'd wake up, we'd go to church, light a candle, return for breakfast and tell each other what we had dreamed. She believed dreams held clues about our health and future.

One day when I was 8, my grandmother had to go out and leave me alone. She told me to sit at our kitchen table and not to move. She put a glass of water there and left. Several hours later, when she returned, I hadn't moved. I had such a rich life inside my head. I never grew restless.

As a child, I drew all the time and painted with watercolors. At 14, I had my first serious painting lesson. For my birthday, I told my mother I wanted oil paints and a roll of canvas. She told my father, and he told his friend—an abstract artist who had been a partisan with him during World War II. They went to an art shop.

After my father gave me all of the boxes, his friend came over. He took the canvas and cut it into an irregular shape. Next, he put it on the floor and spread blue paint around and added powder plaster and some red and yellow pigments. Then he poured turpentine all over the painting and dropped a lit match. Everything exploded in flames. He looked at me and said, “This is sunset,” and left.

I was mesmerized. I pinned up the canvas on the wall. When the sun shined directly on it, all of the dried pigment fell onto the floor, like dust. Looking back, that painting lesson was so important. I realized that process means more than the result and that art can be temporary.

A few years later, I was painting clouds when I saw 12 military planes fly across the blue sky, leaving trails behind them. I went to the military headquarters nearby and asked if they could have 12 planes create similar lines in the sky so I could add them to my painting. They called my father and told him I was insane.

After this, I didn't want to paint anymore. I decided I was going to just do things, and that would be art.

For my first installation, in 1968, I wanted to mount speakers on the Belgrade Bridge over the Danube that played the sound of a huge structure collapsing. The bridge would be there visually, but from the sound it would cease to exist. When I went to city hall to ask permission, they said no.

Instead, I installed the speakers at the building where I lived in Belgrade. When the crashing sound started, all the inhabitants ran out. From then on, I was always experimenting and causing problems. By creating installations, I felt alive.

In 1976, I moved to Amsterdam to be with Ulay, a German artist I had fallen in love with. After we separated in 1988, I met Paolo Canevari, an Italian sculptor. We married and moved to a SoHo loft in New York in 2001, but divorced in 2009. Last year I moved into a loft in Tribeca. I love that it's quiet, spacious and minimalist.

Today, I constantly have ideas for performance pieces. Whenever I'm afraid of an idea, I want to do it even more. My biggest fear isn't what an audience will think but that I'll lose faith in myself to see it through.