

GORAN BERTOK: SEVEN SIGNS

Goran Bertok presents his latest series at the Photon Gallery entitled *Seven Signs*, which is an apparent departure from his usual theme of the transience of the human body. Despite the seeming change of subject, he remains faithful to addressing the big questions of humanity, especially finitude. Whereas previous series focused on decay, death, and the connections between Eros and Thanatos, Bertok now focuses on the search for the eternal that materialises in the visible world. With the new series, the artist continues his preoccupation with the themes of transience and eternity, but shifts his focus beyond corporeality to the role and meaning of symbols. In doing so, he raises questions about the nature of symbols and their influence on our perception of the world. Bertok thus remains faithful to his artistic expression, but extends his research into a new field that opens up new perspectives on eternity and materiality.

Bertok's series presents a photographic treatment of symbols that have been an important part of human history, society and culture. These symbols range from the official symbols of the former era of self-managed socialism, which had a strong subjective meaning for him, such as the star, the hammer and sickle, to negative symbols that represented opposing values, such as the Nazi swastika. Although socio-economic changes have taken place in parts of Europe in recent decades, these symbols have retained their power. Their social role has changed to a large extent, and they may even have opposite meanings, but they are still very much present. For example, the red star, formerly a symbol of the struggle against Nazism, may now be perceived as a symbol of totalitarianism in former socialist countries, while it is still accepted as a symbol of anti-fascism and socialism in countries without a communist background.

Symbols such as the swastika and the cross are particularly complex, with varied meanings and interpretations in different cultures. The swastika is an example of a symbol that has been largely condemned in recent history, but nevertheless, remains an object of fascination or provocation. It is one of the world's most widespread symbols, found on every continent, among ancient peoples, the Egyptians, the Chinese, the Arabs, the Sumerians, the Celts and

the Slavs. It is still used today in some places as a religious or national symbol, for example, in India it has always been a symbol of the eternal cycle and the law of karma. It is therefore important to understand the context in which a symbol is used, as it can have completely different meanings depending on the culture. This complexity and diversity in swastika's meanings reminds us how important researching and understanding the cultural context and history of symbols is before we draw conclusions about their meaning or use.

Western civilisation is imbued with the symbols of Christianity, which have largely shaped the imagination of the population of the last two millennia. The most powerful symbol of Christianity is, of course, the cross, which comes in many forms – Greek, Latin, Papal, Byzantine, etc. It can be with or without the figure of Christ, but it is always, essentially, a symbol of hope and ultimately, eternal, life. In Christian iconography we find many symbols with a specific hermeneutic around it that has developed over the centuries, such as the fish, the lamb, the dove, plants, numbers, monograms, etc. These symbols represent different aspects of the Christian faith and have deeper spiritual meanings which have been interpreted and understood in different ways by believers throughout history. What is important for the artist's perception of Christian symbols is the fact that under socialism they occupied a kind of intermediate, neutral position. Although they were not banned, they no longer represented the official ideology as they had in the pre-World War II era. This created a specific context in which these symbols were preserved and understood in different ways, depending on one's religion, tradition and cultural background.

In his project, the artist specifically highlights symbols representing religions, political ideologies and countries. Throughout history, the cross, the swastika and the star have been associated with religion, political ideologies and states, and consequently with conquest and subjugation, wars and revolutions. These symbols have been and continue to be used by countries as national symbols. They are often included on flags, such as the cross on the flags of Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries. The stars are found on the flags of many countries, with the red star being retained by those whose official ideology is rooted in communism, like China. The most famous country to use



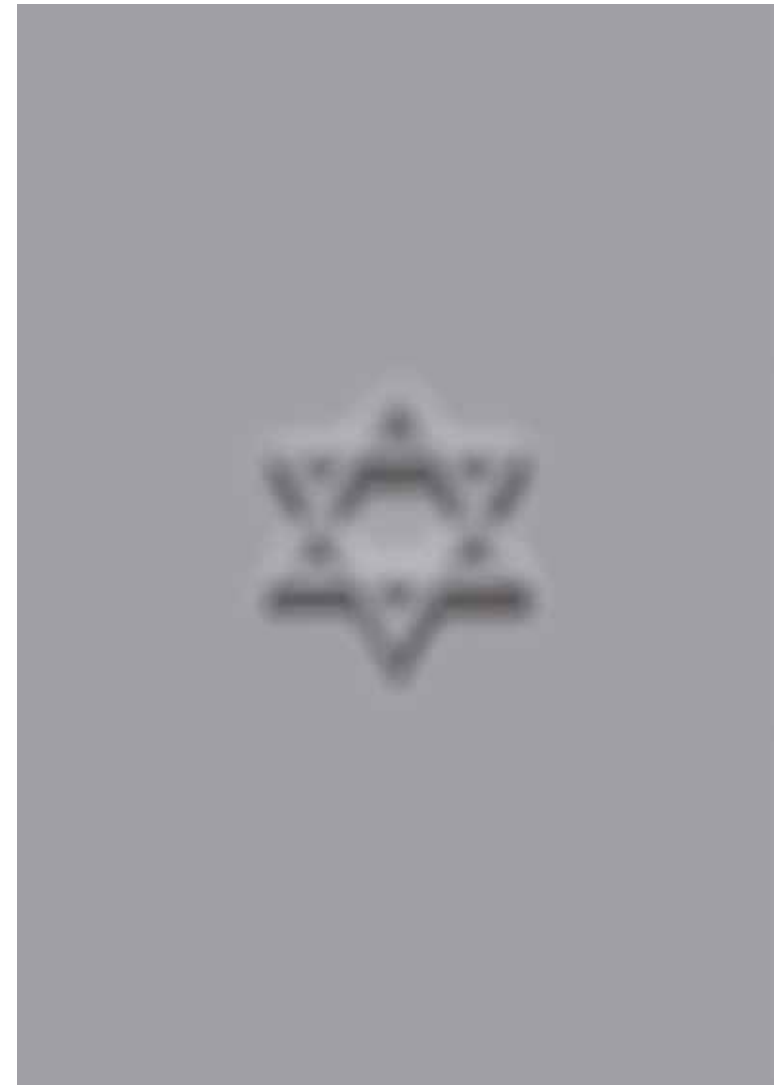
the swastika on its flag was, of course, Nazi Germany, but the symbol also appeared for a time on the official emblems of India and Mongolia, and, interestingly, in the early 20th century as a symbol of the Finnish air force. The Star of David, the symbol of the Jewish community, is probably the most relevant symbol at the moment, especially in the context of the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the long-lasting Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the contemporary context, this symbol is highly politicised and often the subject of controversy. The six-pointed star consists of two interlocking triangles forming the shape of a star and, as the national symbol of the State of Israel, it appears on the Israeli flag, coins, official documents and elsewhere. For Israelis, it represents the independence and sovereignty of their country, and the unity of the Jewish community. On the other hand, it has been misused throughout history, especially during the Nazi era, as a symbol of hatred and anti-Semitism. Even in more recent times, it has been used by various neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic groups to attack the Jewish community and to express hatred towards Jews, and some see it, more and more rightly so in recent times, as a symbol of the oppression of the Palestinians and of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory.

In neoliberal capitalism, currency symbols such as the dollar and the euro also have a strong, albeit specifically economic, meaning, and in this they differ somewhat from the symbols mentioned above. The dollar symbolises the American economy and the influence of the United States on the world economy, while the euro represents European integration and a single currency for the countries in the euro area. Both symbols are strongly associated with the so-called West, with countries, politics and economics that belong to the "Western" geopolitical sphere. Their meaning and impact vary depending on the context in which they are used and on their individual interpretations and historical circumstances.

Symbols represent a universal language that is passed down from generation to generation. They are archetypes and part of the human unconscious, expressing the link between human desire and the divine will. Understanding symbols is key to understanding the past, present and future, as they reflect the core values, beliefs and identities of different cultures and civilisations. This

is why they have been interpreted and studied by many thinkers throughout history. Undoubtedly, one of the key figures in the study of archetypes and symbols is Carl Gustav Jung, whose work *Man and His Symbols* is considered to be his most popular but also his most profound work. In the book, Jung discusses symbols and images as basic elements used by our unconscious mind, as opposed to the conscious mind, which uses language to think and express ideas. The key message of Jung's book is that our unconscious mind communicates ideas to us in dreams through symbols and images, which are very individual. Each individual can understand symbols in their own way according to their personal experiences, beliefs and psychic processes. Jung's theory of symbols emphasises the importance of exploring the unconscious layers of the mind and understanding how symbols influence our thinking, behaviour and perception of the world around us.

Bertok's photographic treatment of the selected symbols allows us to reflect on their complex nature and the changing context of their meaning in different social environments. In doing so, he encourages us to reflect on the power of symbols and their influence on our perception of the world over time. As they are used as a way to explore and express deeper spiritual truths or to find a connection to something greater than ourselves, symbols, as an important part of religious and spiritual traditions, connect us to the divine or the transcendent. And it is this theme of transcendence that the artist leads us to in his latest series. Bertok's oeuvre so far gives us a glimpse into the dimension of human existence in the context of transience and finitude. With *Symbols*, he seems to invite us to step beyond the confines of the corporeal and the material, to encourage us to reflect on our place in a broader spiritual or cosmic context. Through his interpretation of symbols, he offers us the possibility to explore the depths of our own (sub)consciousness and to search for connections between the material world and higher spiritual truths.



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Goran Bertok (CV)

- 2023** »Konec, prva vaja«, Zdaj je tukaj! Festival Maska, Stara mestna elektrarna, Ljubljana, Slovenija
2022 »Štiri serije«, Galerija Equrna, Ljubljana, Slovenija
2020 »Lakota/Hunger«, Photon gallery, Dunaj, Avstrija
»Lakota«, Galerija Photon, Ljubljana, Slovenija
2016 »Ogenj, led«, 12. festival Bela noč, Galerija KIC Skopje, Makedonija
- 2015** »Telo in meso«, Galerija Photon, Dunaj, Avstrija
»Post Mortem«, Galerija Opservatorijum, Beograd, Srbija
»Družinski album«, Galerija AQ, Celje, Slovenija
- 2013** »Telo, meso in druge zgodbe«, Kunsthalle, Feldbach, Avstrija
»Preživeli«, Galerija Photon, Ljubljana, Slovenija
- 2011** »Mrtva priroda«, Galerija Močvara, Zagreb, Hrvaška
- 2010** »Rdeče in črno«, Galerija Kibela, MMC Kibla, Maribor, Slovenija
Photoport Gallery, Bratislava, Slovaška
- 2009** »Rdeča«, Galerija Kapelica, Ljubljana, Slovenija
- 2008** Gallery Wallywoods, Berlin, Nemčija
- 2007** »Post Mortem«, Galerija Photon, Ljubljana, Slovenija
- 2006** »Still Life«, Galerija Alkatraz, Ljubljana, Slovenija
- 2005** »Obiskovalci«, Galerija Kapelica, Ljubljana, Slovenija
- 2003** »Calligraphia obscura«, Festival Ex Ponto, Zaklonskič pod Ljubljanskim gradom, Ljubljana, Slovenija
- 2002** »Stigmata«, ZPK zapora DOB, Dob pri Mirni na Dolenjskem, Slovenija
- 2001** »Zapori«, Festival Ex Ponto, Kazamate, Ljubljanski grad, Ljubljana, Slovenija
»23«, ZPK zapora Koper, / v sodelovanju z Obalnimi galerijami Piran/, Koper, Slovenija
- 1999** »999«, Umetnostna galerija Maribor, IC Pohorje, Maribor-Ljubljana-Koper, Slovenija
- 1998** »Omen«, Galerija na gradu Podsreda, Podsreda, Slovenija
»East of Eden«, Festival Ex Ponto, Galerija Gabriel, Sarajevo, BiH
- 1997** »Rad bi vam povedal zgodbo«, Galerija Š.O.U. Kapelica, Ljubljana, Slovenija

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