

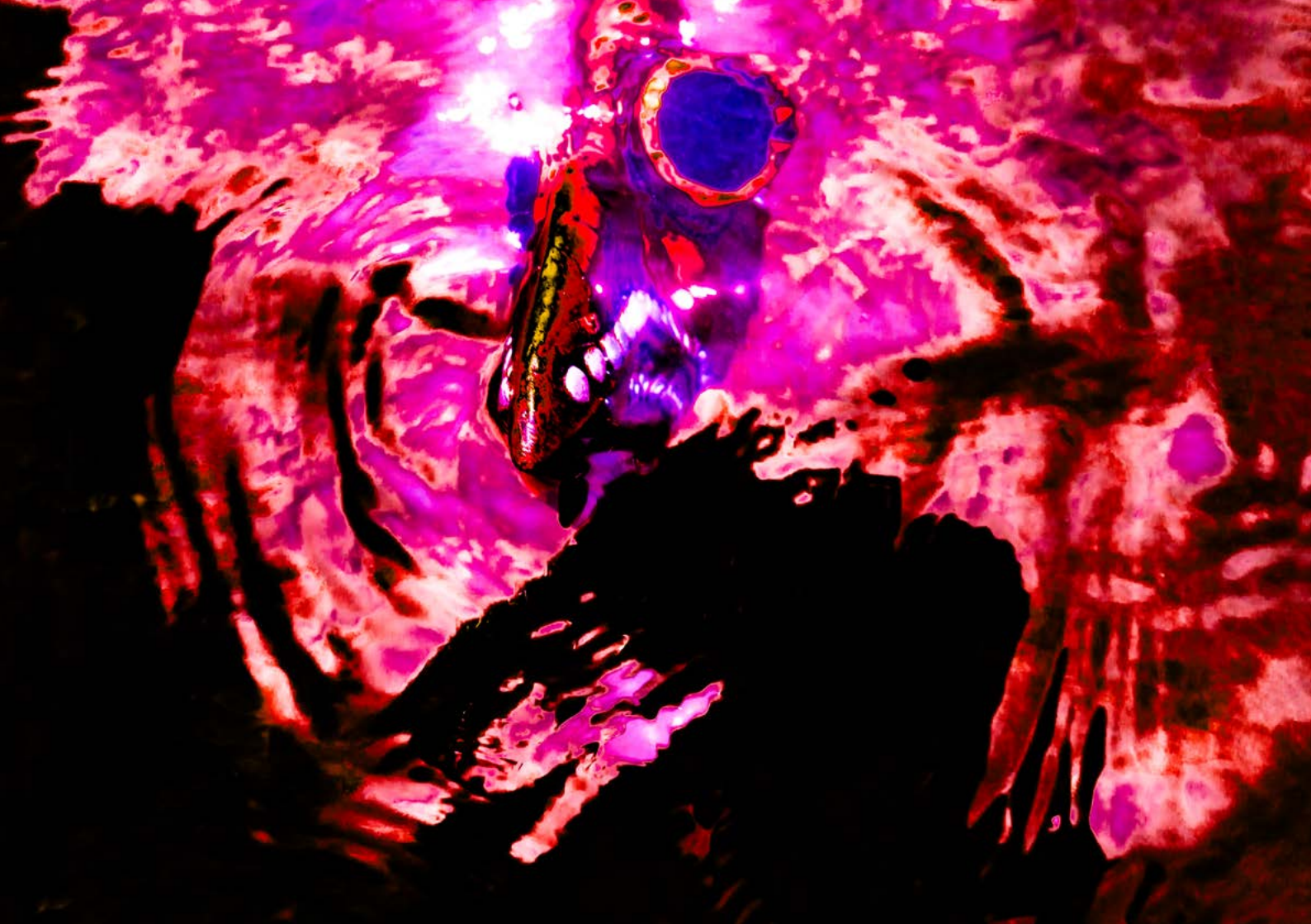


Pedja Pavlović

REM II: Undercurrent

8-28 May 2025





***Darn that Dream* – or is it Reverie?**

Memories, jazz phrases and palimpsests of Pedja Pavlovic's *REM II: Undercurrent*

REM I: Overcurrent

How would a pre-Raphaelite painting sound if it was a jazz tune? How would a jazz improv look if it were an image? And, conversely, if a photo was played as a sound, what melody would it play?

[Nebulous thoughts as I am seated into a dental chair]

Which elements of an image could become the sound a dentist's drill makes? And if we could transform that scaler tool's scary sound into a jazz improv, surely it would make it much more palatable?

[The wasp-like drilling sound fills my ears, mingling with the sound of *Darn that Dream* by Bill Evans and Jim Hall]

If my eyes framed the blinding dental light and the syringe heading my way, would it

calm my beating heart, and provide some placebo effect for the pain of the needle piercing my gum - before the anaesthetic takes hold?

[Body stiffens, terrified and relieved at the same time]

Are the cameraman and the sound guy hovering around my open mouth truly managing to capture this synesthetic cacophony in my head, the inexplicable experience of discussing art photography in the dentist chair while listening to jazz, or is it a mere hallucination produced by the relentless throb of a tooth abscess?

[Memory – Novi Sad, 1991]

I have known Pedja Pavlovic, as they say, since the 20th century. I entered Pavlovic's

private dental practice as a young (and conveniently toothache-ridden) journalist to interview him for 3P/3K – and to experience excitingly disorienting cognitive dissonances in my life – as I witnessed the waiting room of his dental practice transform into an exquisitely curated space commissioned by Zlatno Oko (Golden Eye), Novi Sad's annual art photography exhibition. Little did I know then that I would *a)* be granted an exhilarating experience that would forever change my understanding of oral hygiene as well as art photography and *b)* that the aforementioned dentist/artist would become a dentist/artist/friend as we found ourselves exiled to another country, and into a new century.

I am delighted to see Pedja Pavlovic coming home to his art, choosing Novi Sad to relaunch his work after a long (and justified) hiatus. I am further elated to see his idiosyncratic, synesthetic work still *looks* like jazz, and *sounds* like an exhilarating, contradictory dream that threatens to cure our pain. His once-signature style of grating interventions on negatives have

now been retuned into the more expressive sharp undulations of water. The fluidity of sound improv that was always there is now sublimated, captured – better still – captivated – by photographing dreamscapes submerged in water. The immersive and translucent spaces that perfectly organise light and shadow, and Pavlovic's grasp of ripples as storytellers that turn shadows into jarring burst of reds, pinks not unlike Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire* – that colours bring both pain and joy to new-born human(ity).

[REM II: Undercurrent]

Just how photography thickens the environment it captures (Susan Sontag, 1973), in this case, the intangibility and receptivity of water, is explored through its limpid yet heavy mass that can support as well as resist (and sink) bodies and objects. It lifts, floats and protects his muse (his patient wife Prue) drawing parallels to Elizabeth Siddal, John Everett-Millais's iconic Ophelia. Yet her elongated, delicate





yet faceless (headless) body, which is the direct pastiche of the Undercurrent record cover – the ambiguous, intriguing image chosen to frame the delicate piano and guitar playing by Bill Evans and Jim Hall. The body is submerged in the water, in a white dress, further purified by the water's lulling ripples – yet unlike Ophelia, we don't see her face as she floats, and the ambiguous masks that share the space of water, resist water's buoyancy. Did she remove the mask, and is she liberated, finally breathing freely? If so, why are we, the spectators, limited to only seeing what is in the undercurrent?

Masks are human (under)currencies – they dance for us, they hunt for us, they lie and speak truth for us - they are our public personae. In Christian Manichean cosmology, they are here to externalise demonic tendencies. But we rarely consider their most important role – that they are there to *protect*. Slipping back into my part as Pavlovic's dental patient, I cannot help but consider similarities between the most menacing looking mask on his photographs – that of 'the big nose plague doctor' used by

Venetian doctors during 17th century plague – with Pavlovic's own constraining PPE wear mandatory throughout the recent COVID.

Lest we forget the collective trauma - masks are seen as immersed, resisting – indestructibly so – as undercurrents, as they can survive under water without the breath of a wearer. In fact, they thrive, animated by the movement of water, with solidified, sharpening ripples warning us that they are a matter out of place. Yet, their void for eyes seems to beckon the spectators - are they here to unshackle us, invoking Bakhtin's carnivalesque, as they suspend and revert the power of the wearer, of our habitual social roles. They are here for both the hangman and the undertaker, but interestingly, for the dentist but *not* his patient.

Yet, Pavlovic's photographs, those liquid imageries of dreams, can be seen as masks in their own right. The shape of water, the *sine qua non* medium of emotions, is feminine, fluid and heavy, buoyant and overwhelming, the perfect metaphor of the elusive state of dreaming itself, and drowns

not only objects but also distorts sounds, muffling *all that jazz*, slowing things right down. The water *others* the matter in/out of place, an instrument that, in Pavlovic's hands, solidifies its ripples. The syncopated shimmers may sound like jazz but they also obscure it. Fundamentally, dreams seem to drown themselves, and like palimpsests, it is us who reuse their traces, choose elements to save, and those that need to be rewritten.

Because, as Gaston Bachelard (1942-1983) revealed to us in the last century, water is the imagination of matter – it is first dreamed and then perceived – or, perhaps, then, like palimpsests, read and re-written, by sound, by pen or by camera, acting out of our imagination. It is a choice, then, how to frame these exquisite, imaginative entities that states; and we can choose that this muted nightmare, becomes a reverie, as it is already framed, already written - 'written with emotion and taste, being relived all the more strongly because it is being written down.' Pedja Pavlovic's *Undercurrent*, thus, drowns only that what we need to shed, the uncomfortable wasp-like drilling, and use

the water's poetic buoyancy to allow the feminine to gasp for air, for music, for love.

[postscript]

Some realities enter dream states accidentally: like the footage of the aforementioned interview that also involved dental intervention, conducted, I believe, in 1991 or 1992. The record of it may still be found, on a dusty VHS tape somewhere, that was wiped and rerecorded so many times, turning evidence in dissolved unreal[ity] of the undercurrent of memory.

Dr Vana Goblot,
Goldsmiths, University of London



(Re)discovering the power of photographic storytelling

Now I can barely know that I had a dream,
And in it someone's eyes, someone's sky,
A face, don't know whose, maybe of a fry,
An old song, old stars, and old day gleam,
Now I can barely know that I had a dream

V Petkovic Dis, She May be Sleeping

A photograph can describe everything in the frame down to the smallest detail, but the meaning can be ambiguous. And a photo of a dream? A dream is as incomprehensible as the truth. How to photograph that?

Why do I press the shutter button on the camera?

To register reality.

To interpret or misinterpret reality.

To activate the senses, emotions and state of mind.

To interpret what is visible, to hint at what is not seen.

About REM II: Undercurrent

The Undercurrent photo series examines the state of sleep and wakefulness, remembering and forgetting, between reality and the surreal, where the irrational and the abstract prevail. The photographs question the difference between the two and the search for meaning where it is impossible to maintain it.

Hallucinations are not the only thing that happens as part of REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, there are also delusions, disorientation and changes in the affective state - extreme changes in emotions. These are the four stages the mind goes through during REM according to Matthew Walker (*Why We Sleep*, 2017)

Conceptually, there is an introduction, guided by everyday life, as an excuse for a dream, followed by a dream and all things irrational.

I don't know how the story ended, it's open to interpretation. After waking up, I forgot part of the dream, and I tried to reconstruct the story, I remember it as a happy one. This knowledge of ignorance hints at floating between the bliss of sleep as an illusion, in which we are allowed to be alone, unfettered and irresponsible. Awakening means entering reality, it brings responsibility and self-awareness, and it takes away the magic.

I was trying to ask the question of what could be happening outside the frame and inside the story. What's going on? Why is the body wearing a mask? Why did I have that dream, why did it bother me so much that I had to try to recreate it?

In sleep we are completely unaware of reality. By waking up, we realise that boring and prosaic things, - awareness, vigilance and responsibility are necessary to be able to live. And at the same time, we can dream. This is exactly the power of real life - without it, we wouldn't even be able to dream.

In the waking state, we begin to forget the dream. We feel that in it we had deep

feelings for some people and places, but we cannot remember where and how we spent the time. Oblivion deepens... until emotions and memories fade completely. Unless we preserve it by actually creating images.

About the pleasure of ignorance and ambiguity

Everything you think is happening in the photos is happening in your imagination. I have exaggerated and left out certain details to give a sense of something beyond what is seen. There is no single story to interpret the images, the meaning ultimately rests with the viewer. Sometimes what is not shown is more interesting, more intriguing, activates the senses. As the American photographer Todd Hido describes, there is a kind of pleasure in not knowing and not recognising meaning in a photograph.

I wanted the photos to be emotional, subjective and somewhat mysterious. If your first impression is "what's going on here?", that's good.

Sharp, unsharp, distorted

Sometimes I press the shutter but only later realise why the photo works. Sometimes I take a photo where some part is in focus and some part is not. And sometimes I deliberately distort the image and change the colours in post-processing. This reflects how my mind works. Photographs are a metaphor for memory, and in this case, dreams.

Colour, emotions and the colour of emotions

Colours bring their own meanings and moods to the picture. My photographs do not materialise into form directly from the camera, I chose how they look and to a degree how they are perceived afterwards, capturing an image is just the starting point. Ever since I can remember I have been manipulating in the darkroom and/or on the computer. I am not married to reality, I didn't feel I had to faithfully describe the dream. I added my emotional content to the choices I made in the editing and printing process. Colours change the feeling and everything is

allowed, but it should be as if it could be real, as if it could happen. In the Undercurrent series, the colours are unreal – it was a psychotic dream – but it felt real.

About what I see, what I dream about, what it means

My mind is far more sophisticated than I realise (am I flattering myself?!). One of the great pleasures of photography is the surprise of the results. For a photographic image to have a long life, it should contain enough space, to hold a series of meanings for others as well. The series should look organised even though only half of the photos are presented.

Framing

Everything is very simple, devoid of a large amount of detail, unpolished. These photographs are literally a tool for diving and swimming through a particular dream, an attempt to make it visible.

How did it all start?

Imagine this: late at night after a long weekend in Venice, Jim Hall and Bill Evans



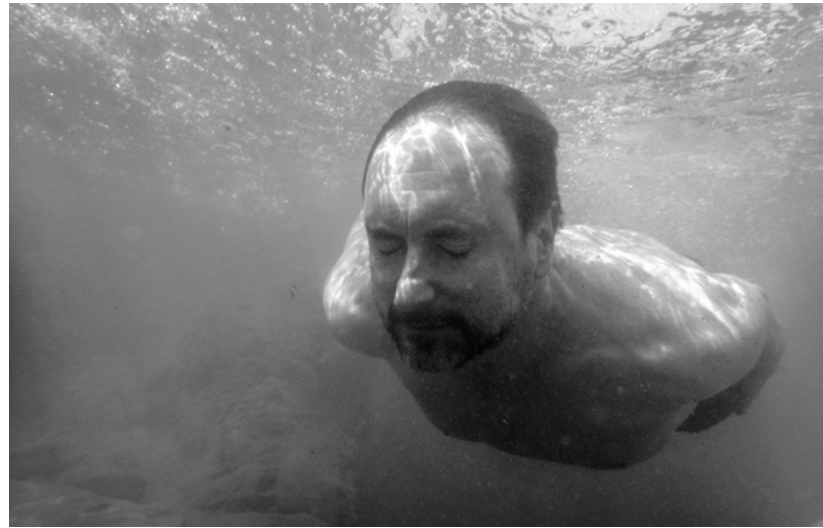
are blasting through the speakers, there's an LP with a photo of Tony Frissell's, single malt, roasted almonds, parmesan, dark chocolate. I slept well that night even without the Ashwagandha!

What you see happened in that dream.

About story building and printing

I printed out the photos, lined them up hoping that they would automatically trigger a story in the viewer's mind. A complicated story exists, but the meaning is up to the viewer.

Photography today is increasingly defined by speed - instant publishing on social media platforms, burst photography with modern equipment and of course AI. What I'm trying to do is exactly the opposite - I'm trying to slow down the image-making process, and in the process reject the one-off nature of digital images. I am not nostalgic or attempting from my part to resist progress, this is my way to rediscover the power of photographic storytelling.



The photos were taken in Lake Como and the Mediterranean coast of France. Everything is cooked slowly, carefully in my laboratory in Tunbridge Wells.

Tunbridge Wells, UK, March 2025

Pedja started his photographic career as a member of the Foto Kino Klub B Bajic which at that time was considered the best photographic club in Yugoslavia. He was one of a quartet of young photographers – Jovanovic, Zupancic, Peric, Pavlovic- that clearly defined a new trend in photography in Vojvodina with a completely subjective attitude towards selected topics and motifs with a specific understanding of photography as a media possibility for expressing personal artistic views and philosophical reflections.

He had solo exhibitions in ex-Yugoslavia (Novi Sad, Beograd, Sremska Mitrovica) and in Europe (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Dortmund).

He won several photography awards, among them, the Golden Eye at the international

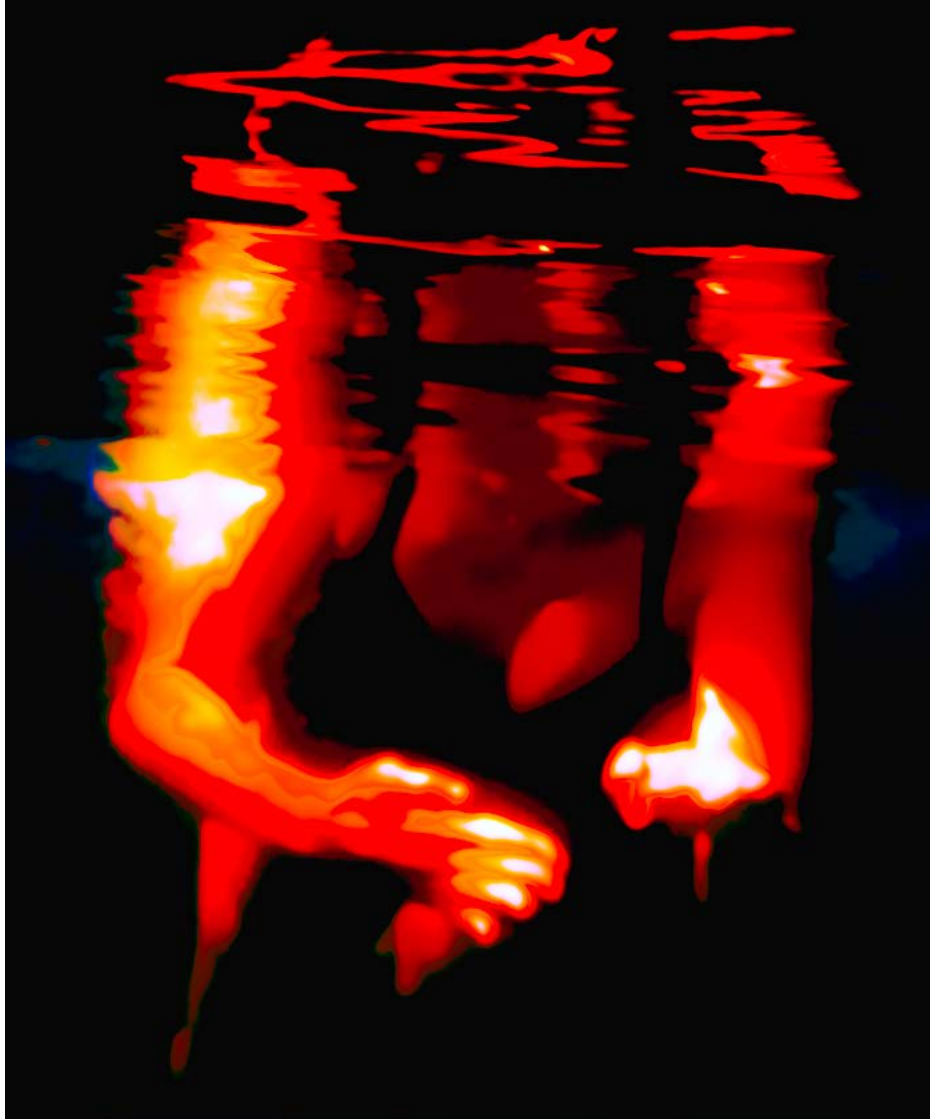
photography exhibition in 1990 in Novi Sad and internationally the Gold Medal from Japan's 49th Photographic Salon in 1989.

Sava Stepanov, art critic, wrote after Pedja's last solo exhibition: "We are eagerly awaiting new creative products from Pedja Pavlovic's photography workshop"

He is back, it just took some time!

Novi Sad, Tunbridge Wells, 2025





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