

DEGENERATES, MONSTERS, AND TRAITORS (1573)

Kristian Kozul

TROTOAR, Zagreb, Croatia

May 22 – September 6, 2025

TROTOAR is pleased to present *Monsters, Degenerates and Traitors (1573)*, a solo exhibition by Kristian Kozul, one of Croatia's leading contemporary artists. Known for his exploration of ideological iconography and national mythologies, Kozul transforms the gallery into a scene of uneasy spectacle.

Through hybrid spatial installations, he revisits the 1573 Peasant Revolt, reimagining it as grotesque theatre shaped by satire, power, and modern anxieties. Kozul dismantles myths of heroism and defeat, exposing history as a field of moral ambiguity. Aesthetically rich yet materially fragile, the installation contrasts traces of violence with artificial idylls, blurring the lines between fact and fiction, defeat and spectacle. History, it reminds us, is written by those who hold the pen—and the trickster's tongue is sharp, deceptive, and full of traps.

From the exhibition text:

Wise serpents and innocent doves beware: this room is full of big bad wolves. A perverse pastoral, a site of a trickster weaving plots against all us fools. You may recognize the story. You may even recognize the faces. It takes us back to 1573, to the wake of the Slovenian-Croatian Peasant Revolt, also known as Gubec's Rebellion. The revolt lasted twelve days and took the lives of over 3,000 peasants – an uprising, so the story goes, triggered by the despicable cruelty of one Baron Ferenc Tahy.

Notice that the serfs' hero, Matija Gubec, is missing.

But the Baron is present in all his devilish glory, a horned figure armed with bells, beads, leather scraps, and bottle caps. A monster? Perhaps. In any case, he is not alone. The Duchess's severed head waves a jiggling flag, adorned with the same language of meticulously crafted materials and found debris. Horns protrude through her cheap dyed wig, red ceramic teardrops are scattered across her figure, in place of her noble throat, a collar of broken bottles. She's loud. She's obnoxious. She's a freak. Yes, someone unexpected has also joined this violent farce. The Bishop's face hangs on the wall, a mask radiating beatific power. A mute chameleon, defaced and disfigured. Finally, nameless gargoyles spewing forth nooses accompany these villains. The deadly ropes echo the fate of the sixteen mutilated peasants left to dangle from a wild pear tree as chronicled by Nikola Istvánffy in 1622, a witness to their grim defeat. Fake grass, trampled flowers and lovely picket fences face these moral abominations.

Who defines what is right? Who names the rascals? Who holds the pen? Yellow, green, white, and red strike the scene – simple colours for simple stories. Past is crowded with winners and losers, oppressors and the oppressed – absolute mythologies shaping nations, fuelling romantic conspiracies of power, cruelty, and loss. Bygones are bygones, as fantasy creates blueprints from

reality. Isn't it so, so, sweet to give in to villainous betrayals? To conjure grotesque ghosts of traumatic defeats? To romanticize loss and revel in others' inhumanity? A familiar story, indeed.

The trickster's tongue, however, is sharp and full of surprises.

History becomes a playing field in which tales and heroic gestures are game to bend the rules. This room is deceptive, seemingly opulent, yet cobbled with everyday scraps and broken glass. Trickery bleeds, clouding virtue and vice. Tragedy mutates into folk jest, horror into blasphemous extravagance – a satirical exhumation of a collective identity founded on defeat and subjugation. Sweet mixes with sour, could-have-beens unravel, lines of fiction and fact blur, ancient truths swell with complexity and contradictions. Could the beast be the same as us? Donning the wolf's skin, stripped of the privilege of an unassuming lamb. Could it be that fabrication is endurance? Surviving past disasters, weathering present collapse because we once triumphantly failed. Could it be that God's will works both ways – to revolt or to rule over others?

As the trickster's plot thickens with ambiguity... Maybe it's time to run wild.

Author of the text: Luja Šimunović (KUĆČA); Co-author: Klara Petrović (KUĆČA)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kristian Kozul (b. 1975, Munich) is a Croatian artist whose interdisciplinary practice explores the visual language of power, the dynamics of desire, and the symbolic architecture of contemporary mythologies. Drawing on strategies of forensic aesthetics, baroque theatricality, and speculative fiction, Kozul constructs fantastical yet critically charged works that reflect the contradictions of the present moment. His sculptural objects and installations—which often evoke themes of security, luxury, and ideological iconography—function as hyper-stylized and fetishized markers of collective anxiety and aspiration.

He has exhibited at MoMA PS1 in New York, the Beijing International Art Biennale, the Jeju Biennale in Korea, the IMPAKT Festival in Utrecht, the Maifa Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, the National Museum of Modern Art in Zagreb, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, Galerie Anhava in Helsinki, Exile Gallery in Berlin, and Goff+Rosenthal Gallery in New York, among others.

Kozul studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb and the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. His work is held in numerous public and private collections, including the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, the National Museum of Modern Art in Zagreb, and the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka.

TROTOAR

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Opening hours: Wed – Fri 11 – 19, Sat 10 – 14, and by appointment

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