

# JACKY STRENZ

## MARTINA VACHEVA

The March of Decadence

September 5 – Oktober 25, 2025

Martina Vacheva's new paintings at her solo exhibition *The March of Decadence* pose many questions. Her work views ancient pagan rituals' relevance in contemporary life. She questions how much of their meaning is retained and how much of it is lost in translation. What symbols used in those rituals retain their meaning and what symbols are perceived on their face value? She examines how rituals serve our need for belonging to a community and foster our humanity while the ancient wisdom of rituals has turned into a meaningless spectacle, which serves our lowest standard for cheap entertainment or Instagrammable debauchery. Many of those rituals around the world originated in a deep exploration of the relationships between humans and nature, yet, in our contemporary times, they have become commercial tools for amassing wealth or appropriated to serve current political agendas.

Rituals around the world regardless of their ethnic origin have many similarities as they bridge the logical material world and the realm of the irrational. They are built on the basic human understanding of energy and our relationship with nature. What we couldn't understand as humans, we turned into monsters, so that we could train our minds to accept the fear that we instinctually feel. One such ritual is Kukeri in which monstrous hybrid forms of animals and humans dance and parade to chase away evil spirits. Kukeri is currently going through a revival in Martina Vacheva's native Bulgaria. In her new paintings, she delves into the meaning of rituals in our contemporary culture, which is much more global than local. While some rituals are forgotten, others become massive movements. The ritual's original meaning evolves or is altogether lost. The paintings in the exhibition examine such evolution from a spiritual practice to a show for the masses and how the healing powers of water and fire are harnessed into shallow but glamorous events for financial profit and entertainment.

At the same time, the artist's visual references continue to stem from pop culture as in her previous work. Over the years, she has explored multiple images of characters from David Lynch's series *Twin Peaks*. In the paintings of this exhibition, The Log Lady is a recurrent character with layers of meanings. She plays a significant role as a commentator of the scene pictured. She is chased away, denied an entry to the round table, unafraid to step in and be present. As a character with multiple layers of complexity, she is revered in her unconventional wisdom and challenges our own standards for beauty. As the log has been a symbol of renewal and regeneration of nature in many ancient European traditions especially when Christmas rituals are concerned, the Log Lady is the Madonna of contemporary times - an image from TV, which is rooted in the same rituals that the artist examines in her work.

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Vacheva's painting style reflects the complexity of her subject matter as wild scenes are often narrated as vignettes on a journey. Her intense vibrant colors define the spectacularity of rituals, while the smudges of paint add ambiguity to her characters. The lack of definition of some characters' faces is an invitation to fill in the blanks as we restore our own memory of places and situations. The multitude of scenes within most of her paintings has the quality of reading a non-linear comic strip while her sophisticated painting style defies the literal reading of each scene.

Martina Vacheva's newest paintings are a commentary on the state of our current state of society, what spectacles we choose to passively view, in what excesses we choose to indulge, how we choose to express our humanity and form our alliances. While her work deals with primordial issues of life, death, life choices, fears, joys, power, excess, it also provides an opportunity to consider the tenderness of motherhood, our nurturing role in relation to nature, and our own judgments.

Text by Meglena Zapreva

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**Martina Vacheva (b. 1988) lives and works in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. She graduated from National Academy of Arts in Sofia in illustration and book design.**

**Scholarships:** Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart (2022); MGLC Ljubljana Residency, Ljubljana; Residency Unlimited, NYC (2018)

**Awards:** BUNA (forum of contemporary art Varna), Sofia (2024); Research Residency Award of the 33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts (2019); BAZA Award for Contemporary Art (2017)

**Solo shows include (selection):** Octopus art space, Sofia; Archeological Museum, Varna; Octopus art space, Sofia; (2024); Sariev gallery, Plovdiv (2021); Museum Folkwang, Essen (2019)

**Group shows include (selection):** Soldout Design & Untiled Gallery, Sofia (2025); Sofia City Art Gallery; Art Collection Telekom and Prague City Gallery, Stone Bell House, Prague (2024); Art Collection Telekom, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana (2023); Art Collection Telekom, Wilhelm Hallen, Berlin (2022); New Tretyakov Gallery Moscow (2021); Crack up – Crack down, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw (2020); 33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, Ljubljana (2019)

## **Collections:**

Metropolitan Museum of Arts library collection, NYC; Art Collection Telekom; Gaudenz B. Ruf Collection, Zurich, Vienna; EVN Collection, Enzersdorf; Museum Folkwang, Essen.