

CONTEMPORARY FINE ARTS

MAJA RUZNIC

WHO TASTES FIRE AND CANNOT SPEAK

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Contemporary Fine Arts is pleased to present *Who Tastes Fire and Cannot Speak*, the first solo exhibition of Bosnia and Herzegovina-born, New Mexico-based artist Maja Ruznic at the Basel gallery.

Made especially for this presentation, Ruznic's new oil paintings move between figuration and abstraction without treating either mode as stable ground. Contours blur as if softened by mist. A head may take the shape of a receptacle. A room can resemble an organ. A silhouette seems to fade into pigment before it can fully declare itself. Rather than starting from a predetermined concept, the artist allows each canvas to develop through process. Her readings and surroundings enter the studio over time, giving each work a deliberate yet unsettled tension.

The title comes from Louise Glück's poem *Day Without Night*. Ruznic was drawn to the poem's inversion of hell. Instead of darkness and flame, Glück depicts a world held in relentless light, where exposure turns into torment. For the artist, this reversal opened a way to think about the need for shadow. In these works, peace does not belong to clarity alone. It is found in obscurity, in moonlit zones where thought is not yet verbal and feeling has not hardened into certainty.

Over the last months, Ruznic has returned to active imagination, a practice associated with Jungian analysis, and to Edward Edinger's 1985 book *Anatomy of the Psyche: Alchemical Symbolism in Psychotherapy*. Edinger describes alchemy as the "anatomy of the psyche," linking the search for the philosopher's stone to psychological transformation. For Ruznic, this framework makes painting a site of change. The canvas behaves as an alchemical vessel where raw impulses are recast, while the painted surface records the reaction.

The show unfolds within this mercurial logic. Night and the moon are set against daylight and consciousness, but the opposition never settles into a simple division. The subconscious presses on both sides. Images calcine and dissolve. They thicken, rise, darken, then join again. These movements echo Edinger's seven stages (calcinatio, solutio, coagulatio, sublimatio, mortificatio, separatio, and coniunctio), yet Ruznic does not illustrate them. She attunes to their cadence. Fire burns away attachment. Water loosens rigid patterns. Earth lends weight to insight. Air lifts instinct toward a finer pitch. Psychic material traverses these elemental cycles.

This investigation is closely tied to visceral experience. Works such as *The Making of a Gallbladder* (2026) and *Mouth Mantra* (2026) locate emotion inside flesh, suggesting that organs can retain memory with the same insistence as the mind. Ruznic has been reflecting on traditional Chinese medicine, where each body part sits within a wider system and corresponds to a distinct affect. Anger and grief are not remote here. Fear has its own undertow. They seem lodged in tissue and breath. Painting functions as excavation, not to explain this terrain, but to listen to what it stores.

At times, the body disappears from view and returns as architecture. In *All the Rooms in the House* (2026) and *Self Portrait as a House in Order* (2026), the psyche is imagined as a structure with hidden chambers. A basement may hint at what stays below awareness. A cellar introduces concealment. The heart assumes a spatial dimension. These are anatomical, geometric paintings, but they resist perfect balance. Their slight misalignments matter. Ruznic sees this asymmetry as a desire to recalibrate her centre, especially when physical discomfort makes itself known. The composition tries to find order, while also admitting that alignment is never complete.

Speech forms a key axis of the exhibition. Glück's poem invokes the infant Moses, who is offered gold and coal, then reaches for the ember and burns his mouth. Ruznic is interested less in the biblical frame than in the damaged voice that follows. This scene of interrupted utterance points back to *Mutter*, her 2024 solo show at Contemporary Fine Arts in Berlin, and to a recurring concern in her practice. The inability to speak is not absence. It reveals what language cannot carry. Beneath words lies a residue of failure, pressure, and stifled sound.

The Moses episode has a further resonance. Sent down the river to be saved, the child stands as a sign of survival amid displacement. Ruznic connects this passage to her own history as a refugee from Bosnia. Her diluted tableaux draw on childhood memories shaped by war, flight, and familial rupture, while refusing to remain only autobiographical. The pain at stake is larger than any individual account. At a moment marked by ongoing conflicts, these paintings register the instability of home and the fragile hope attached to rescue.

Ruznic's images often feel spiritual without turning didactic. In *Self Portrait as Memory* (2026), an imposing figure appears to lean toward something beyond ordinary perception. A sacred aura hovers around it, without being reduced to doctrine. Personal narrative meets psychoanalysis. Mythology and esoteric thought pulse as animating energies rather than references to decode. The result is not symbolism in a narrow sense. This visual language gives the unseen real presence via colour and atmosphere.

Ruznic shares an affinity with visionary artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Hilma af Klint, and Paul Klee, while preserving the specificity of her own vocabulary. Like them, she treats the visible world as a threshold. Her sensibility is rooted in embodied loss and in the strange grace that can emerge from devastation. Flowing brushwork and expressive chromatic fields suggest intimate history alongside collective wounds. In *The Girl Who Swallowed the Wolf* (2026), human and animal identities merge. It stages metamorphosis as both danger and protection, as if someone could survive only by absorbing what threatens them.

Across the exhibition, figuration and abstraction should be read together. Their dialogue charts a sequence in flux. Bodies shift into houses. Organs turn into rooms. Colour takes on heat. Line grows vocal. Nothing is final, because the psychic life described here stays in motion. Ruznic's alchemical vessels sustain these transitions without resolving them too quickly.

Who Tastes Fire and Cannot Speak invites viewers into a space where light and darkness reverse their roles. Anatomy remembers what the tongue cannot say, and painting listens to what remains buried. In the Basel gallery, the works do not provide a single route through trauma or renewal. They create a charged environment as fragments gather and alter before us. The encounter guides us inward without sealing its meaning. Ruznic asks us to consider how images can hold what speech fails to contain, and how silence may become a source of knowledge.

Text by Nicolas Vamvouklis

Maja Ruznic was born in Brčko, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 1983, and lives and works in Placitas, New Mexico. Her works are included in the collections of the Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California; the Dallas Art Museum; the EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art, Espoo, Finland; the Harwood Museum of Art, Taos, New Mexico; the Jiménez-Colón Collection, Puerto Rico; the Portland Art Museum, Oregon; the Rachofsky House, Dallas; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Ruznic has exhibited across the United States and internationally. Major institutional exhibitions include the 12th SITE Santa Fe International, curated by Cecilia Alemani, New Mexico (2025–26); the Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2024); *Once Within a Time, Shadow Tracer: Works on Paper* at the Aspen Art Museum, Colorado (2022–23); *HI WOMAN! La notizia del futuro*, curated by Francesco Bonami, at the Museo di Palazzo Pretorio, Prato (2021); and *In the Sliver of the Sun* at the Harwood Museum of Art, Taos (2021).