

Project Title

Double Portraits

1. Curatorial and Artistic Concept

The project “**Double Portraits**” explores portraiture as a form of public representation, power, and symbolic construction in the contemporary world. At its core lies the understanding that every public image operates simultaneously on two distinct yet interconnected levels: an iconic, stylized, widely recognizable layer, and a realistic, concrete, and personalized layer that often remains hidden behind the symbols through which power is perceived.

In the *Double Portraits* series, the visible layer is composed of images and signs belonging to global visual culture: animated characters such as Mickey Mouse, Winnie the Pooh, and Boss Baby; national symbols; corporate logos; both sides of the Nobel Peace Prize medal; as well as quotations from emblematic works of contemporary art, including the crown from Jean-Michel Basquiat’s painting transformed into a logo. This iconic layer functions as the visual language of mass culture – simplified, impactful, easily recognizable, and seemingly impersonal.

Beneath this layer, however, lies a second level that is invisible without technical mediation – the realistic portrait layer depicting specific political and public figures who have exerted tangible influence on global processes in the early 21st century. These include contemporary and historical leaders such as Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping, as well as deceased figures with enduring symbolic presence, including Queen Elizabeth II and Alexei Navalny. This layer also includes figures whose political presence was brief yet indicative, such as Elon Musk – representatives of a new type of power situated between politics, economics, and technology.

Petko Dourmana’s artistic practice consistently engages with this stratification of the image. The classical painted portrait is not the final result, but rather an entry point into a second perceptual level, accessible only through an instrument – infrared visualization, video, or camera. In this way, the project questions trust in the image as a bearer of truth and stable identity, directing attention instead to the mechanisms through which public figures are stylized, simplified, and transformed into symbols.

The curatorial concept is built around the tension between icon and face, symbol and human being, between what is easily visible and what requires effort, position, and tools to be revealed. The project does not offer a fixed message but involves the viewer in a process of observation and comparison, where the act of looking itself becomes a critical gesture.

In this sense, *Double Portraits* does not treat power as an abstract notion, but as a visual construct – a system of images that conceal real faces and real decisions. The series investigates how iconic images of mass culture can simultaneously mask and amplify political presence, transforming portraiture into a field of tension between appearance and reality.

2. Relation to the Theme and Context of the Venice Biennale

For the 61st International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia in 2026, the official curatorial theme “**In Minor Keys**”, proposed by Koyo Kouoh, emphasizes a vision grounded in nuance, sensitivity, and restraint.

The theme metaphorically refers to musical minor tonalities – modes that tend to evoke more introspective, reflective, and emotional experiences rather than grandeur or spectacle. It foregrounds subtle, intimate, and sometimes concealed registers of perception, inviting attention to delicate, contemplative, and imperfect aspects of the human condition.

Within this framework, *Double Portraits* offers a sustained investigation of the image not as a fixed identity but as a field of internal tension. The project does not pursue visual triumph or spectacle; instead, it creates a space in which the image is layered between what is immediately visible and what is revealed only through mediation and tools. Like minor tonalities, it operates in subtext, emotional resonance, and hidden connections rather than bold accents.

Through the use of dual visual layers (painted portrait / technologically mediated image), the project raises questions about how we look and how images acquire context and meaning. This reflective field resonates directly with the theme *In Minor Keys*, emphasizing attentiveness to complexity, nuance, and subtlety rather than overt drama.

Thus, the project does not merely align with the Biennale’s theme but enters into dialogue with it – not by imitation, but by addressing shared principles of attention, sensitivity, and hidden structures within visual culture.

3. Relation to the Space of Sala Tiziano and the Context of Venice

Double Portraits has been developed specifically for **Sala Tiziano**, a space with deep historical and cultural memory whose architectural characteristics are integral to the exhibition’s curatorial logic. As part of a complex with monastic origins, the space carries traces of ritualized observation and public contemplation. It is not a neutral container but an environment charged with historical presence.

Venice itself functions as a multilayered symbolic context. Historically a city of intermediaries – merchants, diplomats, bankers, and travelers – Venice has long been a site where public appearance and hidden interests intersect. Its most emblematic symbol of this duality is the Venetian mask: seductive and ornate, concealing identity while asserting presence.

This logic directly parallels the conceptual structure of *Double Portraits*. The mask does not alter identity; it situates it within a visual system of recognition and misrecognition. Likewise, the painted image operates as a mask, while the hidden layer becomes visible only through deliberate engagement.

The linear architectural structure of Sala Tiziano allows for a carefully choreographed movement of the viewer. Painted works line the walls as the first visual register, while opposite them, monitors and cameras reveal the second layer. The architecture does not merely host the works; it activates them, creating tension between center and periphery, visibility and concealment, surface and depth.

Partial darkening of the windows produces a controlled light environment while leaving the courtyard visible as an external reminder of what remains outside the space of representation. This balance between interior and exterior reinforces the conceptual framework of the project.

4. Description of the Works and Exhibition Format

The project consists of **10 painted works**, each measuring **100 × 100 cm**, conceived as double-layered images. The first layer is a classical painted portrait, functioning as an autonomous visual object. The second layer contains visual information invisible to the naked eye, revealed only through infrared visualization and video.

The exhibition unfolds as a linear route guiding the visitor through a sequence of visual encounters. The entrance introduces the conceptual framework through a text panel and a monitor presenting video related to the work *Hey Iran!*, which marks the conceptual starting point of the series.

The paintings form a rhythmic sequence along the walls, constituting the exhibition's quiet, contemplative layer. Opposite them, monitors display the second, technological layer. Above each monitor, a CCTV camera is installed—not as a surveillance device in the conventional sense, but as a visual mediator. The cameras are directed toward the artworks rather than the audience, reversing the logic of observation.

Visitors become part of the image: their reflections and movements appear on the monitors in real time. The second layer is thus not archival but living, changing with each presence in the space. Observation becomes reciprocal.

The exhibition culminates in the diptych *Nobel*, which condenses the project's themes of power, legitimacy, and symbolic capital, serving as both visual and conceptual conclusion.

5. Argument for National Representation

Double Portraits is a project with a clearly articulated artistic identity and proven exhibition history. Initiated in 2019, works from the series have been presented in major exhibitions in Bulgaria, including *XXL Presents* at Gallery Oborishte 5 (2020) and *Infrared Paintings* at Gallery Contrast (2021).

Within the Bulgarian socio-political context, the project resonates strongly with themes of dual power structures and the discrepancy between public image and hidden mechanisms of governance. Without illustrating specific events, it articulates these tensions through visual logic, making them legible to an international audience.

The project represents a mature, technically feasible, and conceptually coherent artistic position. Petko Dourmana's practice combines classical painting with contemporary visual technologies, producing a distinctive language that neither imitates nor depends on dominant international trends.

Double Portraits achieves a rare balance between conceptual depth and visual clarity. Technology serves the idea rather than dominating it, making the project particularly suited to the critical environment of the Venice Biennale and to the task of national representation.