

EXHIBITIONS

WORD PLAY

Juliette Mahieux Bartoli rearranges linguistic building blocks in her ingenious modular artworks



Language lies at the heart of the London-based artist Juliette Mahieux Bartoli's colourful, collage-style creations. A keen traveller who has spent time living in Paris, Washington DC, Geneva and Rome, she grew up speaking French, Italian and English,

which prompted her to delve into the study of linguistics as a source of artistic inspiration. 'It's an art form that's also a practical tool,' she says of the discipline. Her latest series of works, 'Nonsequitur', is influenced by Noam Chomsky's theory of universal grammar, which posits that we are all born with an innate capacity for language, based on a set of inbuilt structural rules. 'You have these blocks of meaning that you can take apart and recombine, but you never lose the root,' she explains. 'The same applies to the composition of my new series – the panels can be shown individually or together, and in any orientation, so it allows the collector or curator to play around with them.'

Mahieux Bartoli works with a selection of photographs that she has taken over the years, ranging from images of herself to classical motifs – a bust of Hermes, the messenger god, features among her latest pieces, in an apt reference to the theme of communication.

Designed digitally but finished with real paint, their eye-catching palette conjures up the colours of Rome and of antiquity. 'By drawing from our shared history and from the universality of language,' says the artist, 'perhaps my quiet hope is to provide a positive argument for European identity.' FRANCES HEDGES *Juliette Mahieux Bartoli's work will go on show at Gallery 46 (www.gallery46.co.uk) as part of the all-female exhibition 'We Sing the Body Electric', which runs from 2 to 28 August.*



Above: 'Anaphore' (2019). Below: 'Asyndète' (2019)



Téa Obreht with her grandmother in Croatia



When we speak on the phone, Téa Obreht is in Wyoming, just south of Jackson Hole, and I am in London, wishing I too were in that expansive landscape. 'It's a meditative space – I find it really soul-cleansing,' says Obreht. She and her husband have been travelling here for the past five years – they divide their time between the West and New York, where she teaches at Hunter College. 'It's a mountainous region,' she says. 'We're in the Teton Range. There's so much wildlife – and I have really got into cycling. So we come here and we sit by the river, cycle around and look for moose.'

I have another reason besides envy to be asking Obreht about her surroundings: her compelling new novel, *Inland*, is set in the American West – specifically, in the Territory of Arizona at the end of the 19th century. Nora is a settler on the frontier, left alone while her husband goes in search of water for their thirsty household and her older sons have disappeared after an explosive argument. She is at home with her youngest son and her husband's teenage cousin, both convinced that a mysterious beast haunts the brutal land. Nora is as tough as they come – and struggles to contain her anger. Her story starts to mesh with that of Lurie, a man who has come to a fledgling country to make a new life and, like Obreht, an immigrant. It's an intriguing, atmospheric book, and one that has complex connections with its author's life.

Obreht grew up in Belgrade, in the former Yugoslavia, and lived in Cyprus and Egypt before arriving in the United States at the age of 12. She has had a stellar literary career from the outset: her debut novel, *The Tiger's Wife*, won the 2011 Orange Prize for Fiction and went on to become an international bestseller; she was 25 at the time, and had already been recognised by *The New Yorker* as one of the 20 best American writers under 40. Though now firmly settled in the US, her early existence was, she says, 'nomadic'. 'We moved around a lot when I was a kid,' she tells me now. 'So I have this kind of internal clock that goes off at a certain point and says: time for the next thing!'

It was that ticking clock that nudged her out West. 'I had a strong

pull to the region, which I found very interesting. That doesn't happen to me often. It was a historic kind of pull – towards the circumstances of emigration and settlement out here. I wanted to think about the question of home, and what it means: is a place ever going to feel like home for someone like me? That was my state of mind when I started to do research for the book.'

But the book was also sparked by a podcast, *Stuff You Missed in History Class*, which digs up the stories you wish you'd heard while dozing at your desk. It was on this show that Obreht heard about the 'red ghost of Arizona' – an apparently supernatural beast seen by two women in 1883 at Eagle Creek; it trampled one of them to death. This fascinating tale inspired her strange narrative.

Ultimately, though, it is the emotion of a story that interests Obreht. The only child of a single mother, she was very close to her maternal grandparents: Stefan, a Roman Catholic, and Zahida, a Muslim. 'When I started writing *Inland*,' she says, 'my grandmother was in her final year of life. She had always been a very generous woman but she had quite a lot of rage. She was one of six children from a butcher's family in Bosnia, a country not oriented towards her people; she had congenital heart disease, she lost two children, she had an incredibly difficult life. Female rage is generally unacceptable in society – and the character of Nora, I think, was rooted in that feeling of being a person completely aware of her lack of agency in the world.'

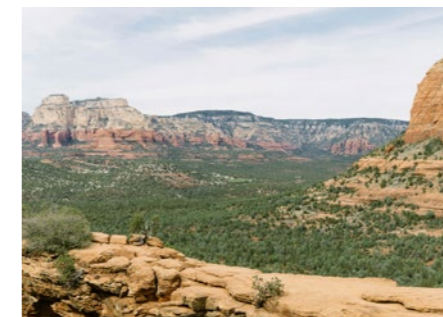
Obreht's novel addresses how to settle in a strange land, and considers issues of assimilation and belonging. She remains attuned to the way in which that can be harder for some, including with regard to her own life. When Obreht arrived in the United States, she was white and English-speaking; thus, she admits that she 'didn't see many of the difficult circumstances that can befall people'. *Inland* is another step in this fine author's journey to discover the meaning of home. □ *'Inland' by Téa Obreht (£14.99, Weidenfeld & Nicolson) is out on 13 August.*

BOOKS

NEW FRONTIERS

Drawing on her own immigrant experience, Téa Obreht tells a haunting tale about 19th-century settlers in the American West

By ERICA WAGNER



Four colourful exhibitions to see this autumn

1 Julia Dubsky at Amanda Wilkinson Gallery

Raised between Ireland and the Czech Republic, Julia Dubsky makes abstract artworks influenced by her travels. 3 September to 26 October (www.amandawilkingallery.com)



2 Lisa Brice at Stephen Friedman Gallery

The South African artist has created a set of five portraits, connected by their colour palette, that capture women in moments of reflection. 27 September to 2 November (www.stephenfriedman.com)



4 Andrea Büttner at Hollybush Gardens

A new mural by the German artist playfully reinterprets one of Giotto's frescoes. 21 September to 30 November (www.hollybushgardens.co.uk). FH

ART

BOLD & BRIGHT

Dóra Maurer at Tate Modern

The geometric paintings of the avant-garde Hungarian artist go on display as part of a free exhibition celebrating her five-decade career. 5 August to 5 July 2020 (www.tate.org.uk)



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Above right: Juliette Mahieux Bartoli. Above: 'Rime intérieure' (2019). Below: 'Blason' (2019)

