

The MONUMENTS

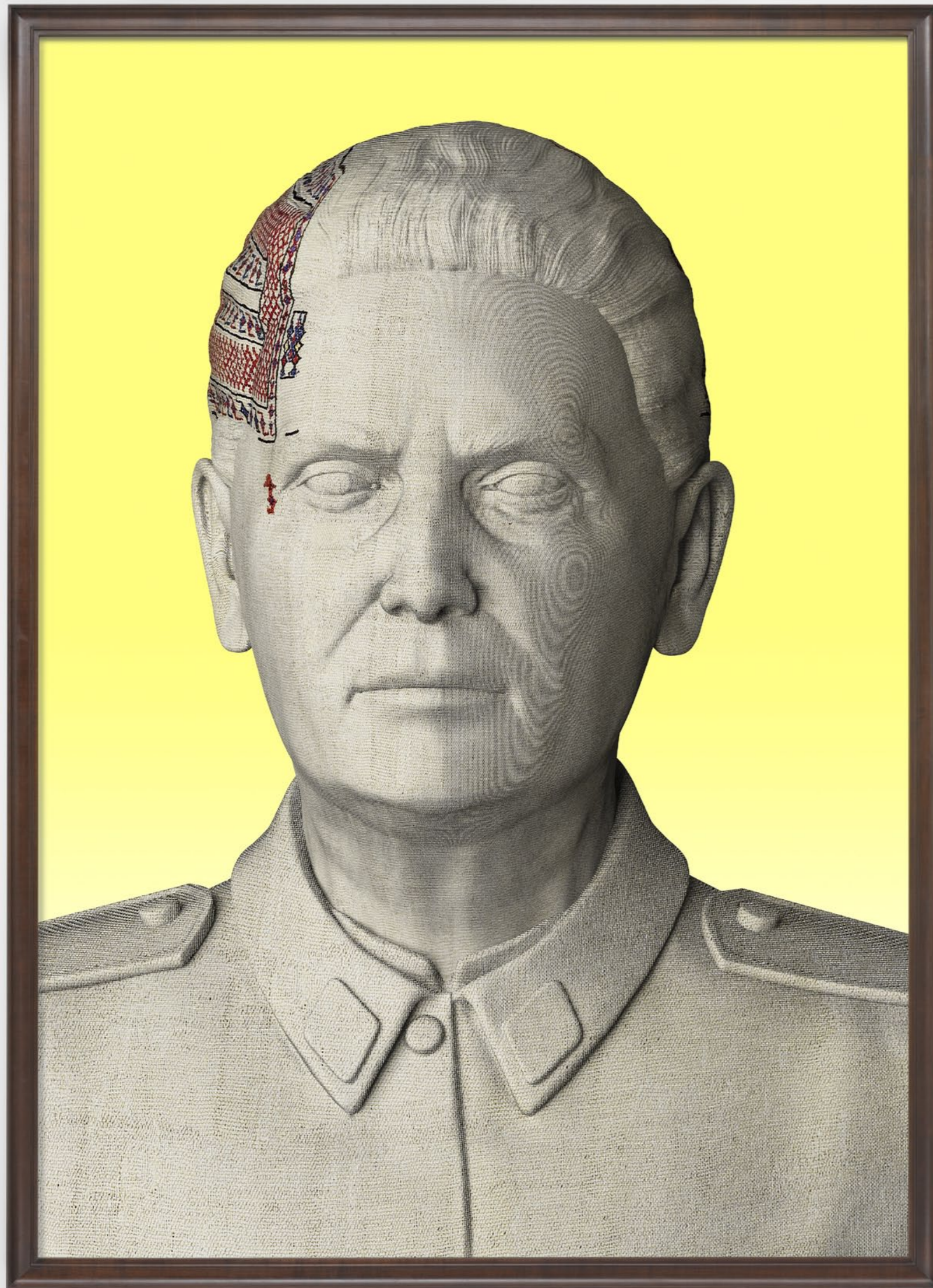
WOMAN



The imagination of the Serbian-born artist Aleksandra DOMANOVIĆ is haunted by hollow monuments:

relics of a vanished country and vanished politics. She reframes them, refashions them in other media, and re-covers them in foreign skins, creating iconography for a new millennium. She takes a break from preparing for forthcoming shows at Glasgow International, Firstsite in Colchester, Kunstverein Hildesheim in Germany, Bard College in New York, and P74 in Ljubljana to discuss the construction of national and personal identity with curator Cecilia ALEMANI



ALEKSANDRA DOMANOVIĆ
PORTRAIT (KILIM), 2012INKJET PRINT AND WOODEN FRAME, 190 x 137 CM
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND TANYA LEIGHTON, BERLIN

Cecilia Alemani: What draws you to civic monuments?

Aleksandra Domanović: When I was a child, my grandmother used to take me to play at a monument commemorating a Second World War victory in the center of Murska Sobota, the small town I grew up in. It was a socialist-realist statue of two soldiers: a Red Army private and a Yugoslav partisan. My brother and I used to swing on their guns and play on the decrepit tanks that were part of the installation. Later I learned that this was the first Second World War monument built in Slovenia, as early as 1945. It was dedicated to the scores of Soviet soldiers who fell there. It's also one of those that made it past the transitional period of the 1990s, and is still standing and being cared for.

CA: What do these monuments commemorate now?

AD: The same thing as before. It's just that fewer people know about it, or care.

CA: And your piece *Bubanj Fist Relief* draws on Ivan Sabolić's iconic anti-Fascist monument built in the early 1960s to harden Yugoslav national identity.

AD: I've never been to Niš, so I haven't seen it in person; all I had was pictures from the web. The three raised fists seemed easy to emulate; the form was simple. The work was a study for the monument I built in Marrakech.

CA: That seems an unlikely connection.

AD: The curator of the 2012 Marrakech Biennale, Carson Chan, asked me to make something that connects how I work with Yugoslavia to something local there. The first thing I noticed was that there were no public monuments in Marrakech, at least not in the sense that I know them from Europe. The two countries, Yugoslavia and Morocco, had been linked via the Non-Aligned Movement, but more than that, I tried to connect the spirit of the times, the newfound freedom and confidence that brought about the erection of the so-called "monuments to revolution" in former Yugoslavia, to a similar state of mind in the Maghreb region, which was then experiencing uprisings and revolution. I placed the monument in Cyber Park, a public park in the middle of Marrakech with free wireless internet access. The idea was that it would be an image first, then a monument, then an image again

through documentation. After all, the largest public space we have is online.

CA: Tell me about your use of tadelakt.
AD: I was staying at a traditional riad in Marrakech and discovered that what I thought was a luxurious, carved-stone bathtub was actually just coated in a plaster made of limestone and pigment. I was fascinated by it and started to see that this plaster, called tadelakt, was everywhere. Whole walls of palaces were covered with it, public basins, hammams, sinks, everything down to cups and ashtrays. Things plastered in tadelakt appeared rustic and old, even though they might have been made very recently. Another thing I learned is that *tadelakt* means "to rub" in Berber. So I had the idea of taking a "sharp", modernist, abstract monument, recreating it at a 1:1 scale, and rubbing it over with tadelakt to "Moroccanize" it. This also brought to mind what's happening in Skopje, where the government is putting baroque façades over modernist buildings, giving them an "antiquo-maniac" face-lift.

CA: You carried your interest in civic monuments into video format with *Turbo Sculpture*. It seems to rewrite history to include new heroes – Western movie stars instead of political leaders.

AD: I discovered these things online and found them hilarious – a statue of Orson Welles in Split, Croatia, made by his former lover; a gilded Bill Clinton monument in Priština; or a proposed statue of Samantha Fox in Čačak, a little town in south Serbia where my grandfather is from. I coined the term "turbo sculpture" after the popular music genre from the region, turbo folk. Everything in the video is sourced online – images and text that I've been collecting over the years. I've done four different versions of the video. Every year I discover new turbo sculptures and add them in.

CA: A similar juxtaposition between the weight of official history and the many possibilities of rewriting it animates your *Portrait* series, in which you formed the iconic face of Tito, the former Yugoslav autocrat, by using elements of the feminine.

AD: When I was in school, until fifth grade, a portrait of Tito hung above the blackboard in every classroom.

I remember one particular teacher – she taught Slovenian and Serbo-Croat. She had short hair, pronounced cheekbones, and a stern gaze. I always thought she looked like a female Tito. The class was 45 minutes long; her face and the portrait eventually morphed together.

CA: What role does your own national history play in your work?

AD: I was born in a Slovak community in Serbia and grew up in Slovenia. I never felt like I belonged anywhere specifically, so the idea of being Yugoslav – something that no one really was and everyone could be if they wanted to – sounds utopian to me. I can fantasize about it. I don't mean the real Yugoslavia here – I would probably be very critical of that one if it still existed.

CA: When did you first become aware that Yugoslavia was more an idea than a country?

AD: Much of my interest in former Yugoslavia has to do with the social and political changes – not to mention the economic ones – that I witnessed growing up. For example, in 1992 I came back to school after the summer holidays and the world had shrunk – there was a map of Slovenia, instead of Yugoslavia, hanging on the wall of our geography class. The same thing happened in other subjects – literature, history, etc. Many of my works are based on personal memories, but they are inseparably bound to the political. My work "aleksandrdomanovic.eu, aleksandrdomanovic.si, aleksandra-domanovic.rs, aleksandrdomanovic.sk" was one of the earliest on the topic. Later, with projects such as *19:30* or *From you to me*, I had to travel to get my material. My research got more and more specific.

CA: You attracted international attention with *19:30*, a collage of found footage taken from the national TV archives of the former Yugoslav republics. And you used music as a central element in it.

AD: I accidentally heard an old TV Serbia news ident on YouTube. It took me completely by surprise, and brought back many forgotten memories. At the same time it sounded like electronic music and just needed a beat to make it

danceable. I wanted to make a techno version of it. Later I found a few remixes of it online, which made me aware that my experience was not unique. I changed my focus from producing something to facilitating an opportunity for others to create versions. The idea was to build an online audio archive and have it distributed and remixed by other people. So I started collecting the idents of all the former republics. I was primarily interested in the sound and the way that it created conditioned responses, in the Pavlovian sense. As I worked on the project, I realized how wonderful the visuals of the news idents were and learned more about those who created them and their history. I wanted to include all of this, so besides the audio archive and an ongoing collection of remixes, I also made a video, a record, a PDF publication, and a party. I see the website – nineteenthirty.net – as the backbone of the project. Even though it's online, this may be the most physical piece I've ever made. I had to travel throughout the entire former Yugoslavia to get the idents. The video has two channels – one showing the idents in chronological order, the other made up of footage from my travels and found stuff. The soundtrack begins with the original idents and gradually transitions to the remixed versions.

CA: You also translated the video into a sculpture series, *Untitled* – columns made of stacks of A4 paper with stills from the video or the internet printed on the margins. When I saw them at the most recent Lyon Biennale, they stood as powerful totems of a future civilization. What do you mean when you refer to them as “printable monuments”?

AD: There is a series of stacks related to the *19:30* project. My first stack

was *Untitled (30.IX.2009)*, the date when “yu” – the internet country code for Yugoslavia – was scheduled to be abolished. Can you imagine? Yugoslavia had an active, top-level internet domain almost 20 years after its dissolution! I wanted to commemorate this online obliteration by materializing something physical from the internet, and also to make it easily available to a large audience. Most computer users have an inkjet printer at home. Some of the stacks I made are freely available online, others are not, but in both cases I send the PDF, which then gets printed out. For me this work has two manifestations – a printed stack of paper and a PDF document. The PDF can be seen as a blueprint – the stack's DNA – but I prefer to view it as an object in its own right. Anyway, the release of the first stack was timed to coincide with the abolition date of “yu”, which was then postponed. Six months later I made a triptych of stacks titled *Untitled (30.III.2010)*, and this time the domain was actually deleted.

CA: The internet plays a central role in your work. I'm thinking also of *Hottest to Coldest* (2008), a website that lists world capitals in order of air temperature, defying geopolitical and taxonomic strategies in favor of an unusual, more intuitive categorization.

AD: I would not have become an artist without the internet. It all started with vwork.com, a blog that I made with three colleagues – Oliver Laric, Georg Schnitzer, and Christoph Priglinger. Vwork was an online contemporary art publication with a huge following, at least for an art audience; we had about 20,000

visitors a day. This was before I started making my own work. I used to surf the web for artworks and I found my community online, on and around websites like Nastynets, Rhizome, Clubinternet, and many more.

CA: Recently you've been working on a series of sculptures, including *Little Sister* and *Relay Runner*, of robotic hands, some installed on plexi pedestals. Tell me how these came to be.

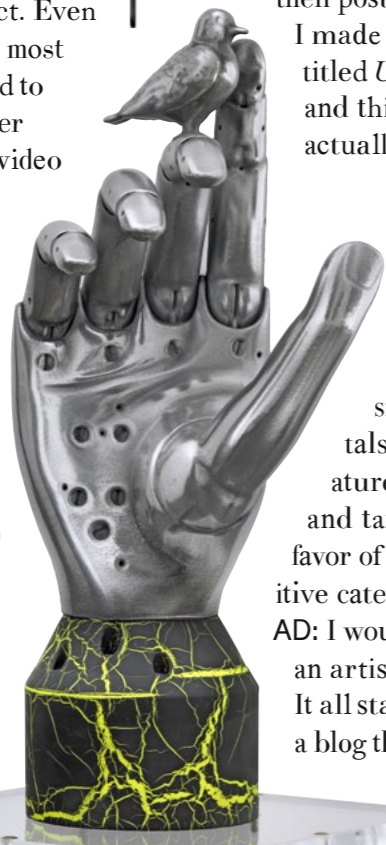
AD: The so-called “Belgrade hand” was one of the first prosthetic hands with a sense of touch. It was invented in the early 1960s by Rajko Tomović for war veterans. I had it digitally rebuilt, and then I had the 3-D model rigged so that the animators could pose it. The hand reappears as an animation in *From you to me*. For that film, I interviewed Professor Borka Jerman Blažič, a scientist who registered the “yu” domain in 1989. I asked her about major scientific and technological advances from the Yugoslav era, and she told me about the cybernetic hand. I thought I'd be lucky to find a low-res image on some obscure website, but to my surprise the hand was all over the web. It was the prototype – the basis for many further prosthetic hands. Anyway, this strand of my work doesn't follow a straight line. It's a mix of ideas that I was thinking about at the time, including the involvement of women in science, technology, and science fiction. Some of the hands hold religious poses, alluding to the superstitious tendencies in our science-driven society.

CA: It's hard to pin down your practice to one medium. Would you say you are primarily a sculptor?

AD: I don't know. I can't pin it down myself.

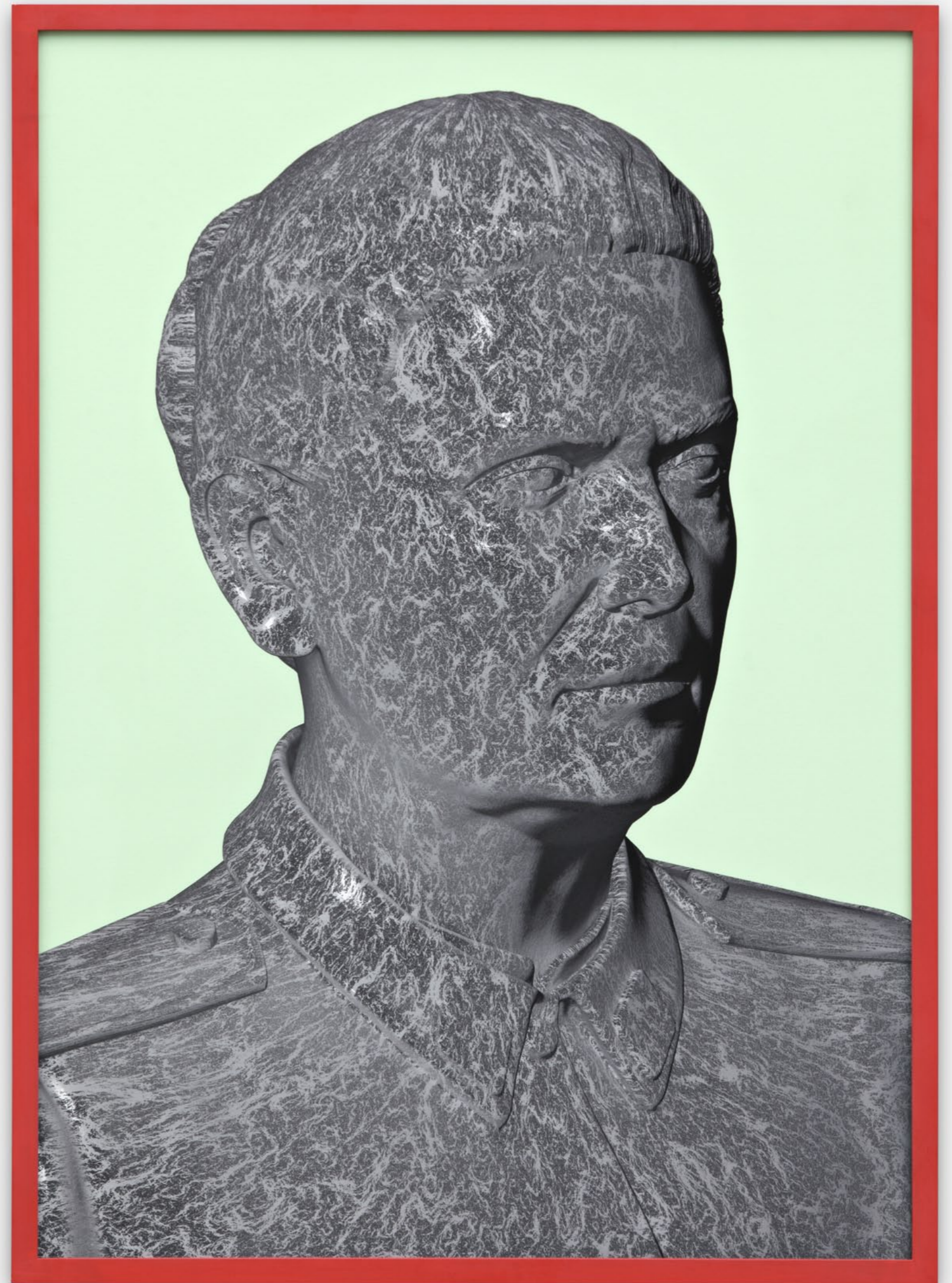
CA: What is your daily artistic practice? Do you make everything in your studio, or do you outsource production?

AD: Recently I got nice new neighbors at my studio, so I go there more often than I used to. Just because I'm there doesn't mean I'm working! I edit video myself but outsource everything involving 3-D software, and also usually the production of sculptures – 3-D printing and coatings such as tadelakt, soft-touch, or brass. Usually each of my projects requires a new technique – it might be a good idea to specialize!



ALEKSANDRA DOMANOVIĆ
LITTLE SISTER, 2013

LASER-SINTERED PA PLASTIC, POLYURETHANE,
SOFT-TOUCH AND ALUMINIUM FINISH, ACRYLIC GLASS, 157 × 30 × 30 CM
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND TANYA LEIGHTON, BERLIN



ALEKSANDRA DOMANOVIĆ
PORTRAIT (BUMP MAP), 2011
INKJET PRINT, RED FRAME, 72 × 52 CM
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND TANYA LEIGHTON, BERLIN