

Text by Mihaela Chiriac

In a filmed interview from 1978, the great Alice Neel shares her artistic credo: “When paintings or writing are good, it’s taken right out of life itself, to my mind, and put into the work. Now, that doesn’t mean that the work has to tell about real life. I mean, it can be abstract or anything, but the vitality is taken out of real living and put into the creative project, whatever it is.”[\[i\]](#)

This quote from Neel provides two entry points into the respective practices of Marieta Chirulescu and Ana Botezatu. The first, perhaps less obvious, is that while Marieta’s paintings are often described as abstract, to me they are more rooted in the concrete, and have been all along. She works across media, and the image-making process she has devised over more than two decades involves a generous and fluid dialogue between painting and digital printing, with the results sometimes emphasizing one technique more than the other. At times, this has brought forth images that strongly bear the specificity of their making. In previous bodies of work, for instance, the photomechanical vision of the scanner, or the recognizable aesthetic of a UV print, transfer their cool distance onto the canvas, which has generally remained Marieta’s support of choice. Even so, in all phases of her work that I can remember, she has never failed to introduce a subtle disruption in these presumably abstract images—a hint or token of the real and concrete that grounds their heightened conceptualization. This element, sometimes a visual pun, appears either as an “image of” or as the actual thing. It can range from the suggestion of three-dimensional space in a scanner image to a material or object that might be found in her studio—such as a plain sheet of paper, a book cover, a thread, or a textile.

Most, if not all, of Marieta’s images are the result of a type of bricolage thinking[\[ii\]](#), in practical terms using collage/assemblage, which, regardless of whether she employs it digitally or manually, is purposefully—and elegantly—simple. Oftentimes, the foregrounds and backgrounds of her paintings are interchangeable, or her images make it hard to discern whether a mark is painted or printed. But while the trompe-l’œils and visual dilemmas are conceptually captivating, this is not all. Her interest is devoted to the understated potential of so-called minor—private—gestures and to those images which emerge as byproducts of work—especially when that work is supposed to unearth some Great Idea or serve the gods of Efficiency and Productivity. In a world that seems, in part, to be entering a sort of cultural regress, I fully understand and share this love for the understated, for the careful and thrifty consideration of what is at hand. I appreciate the rare feeling of freedom it offers. There’s also humor in that and, if I may say so, a Dadaist refusal—in this case, a refusal to fully give in to the digital/virtual and instead subjectively reshape it and reconnect it to the tangible material.

No wonder, then, that Marieta’s newest works do just that, taking a step further toward the concrete. Her paintings expand into objects and make consistent use of different found fabrics, which are nestled, tucked in, encased, folded, and which cover, veil, or clothe the canvases echoed in wooden cases of similar shapes. Though untitled, these works—using fabric as an element of assemblage—nevertheless *show*, in great part, the simple and transparent actions Marieta took in their making. Here are a few more: clipping and cutting out, pasting on and over, stripping, replacing, reframing, layering. I’m reminded of her once quoting Georges Perec’s *Species of Spaces* (originally published in 1974), particularly the chapter “Moving in,” which consists only of an interchangeable sequence of verbs describing the many actions (and trials) required when settling into a new home. The canvas, a sheet of paper, or a block of clay can be such a space too. Continuing this train of thought, fellow experimenter and *bricolatrice*, late Romanian artist Geta Brătescu once irrefutably declared: “A project gets created at the work desk, not in the head.”[\[iii\]](#) I

read Brătescu's statement in the vein of Alice Neel's, as the vitality of real living can only be the result of decisions put into action, of movement and doing, of trials and errors, and their absorption and sublimation.

Geta Brătescu's sentence could serve as a motto for both Marieta's and Ana Botezatu's practice. Ana's work, spanning many years, is multifaceted (drawing, book illustration, set design, puppet theatre, and ethnographic research) yet it is primarily focused on ceramics as her main means of expression. I am not coincidentally placing Ana too in the proximity of Geta Brătescu, as she, too, is a masterful *bricolatrice*. In a recent conversation, Ana once again emphasized an idea she had previously expressed: that it's important for her to listen to the material. In her case, that material has primarily been clay. Ana's use of it extends from gleamingly glazed, whimsical figures of small proportions—hand-sized descendants of a sometimes lascivious, baroque bestiary—to functional objects such as plates and cups, which serve as supports for light-handed, spirited drawings informed by a bibliophile's eye. Though there isn't a single overarching narrative—or rather, there are micro-narratives—highly expressive, ranging from grotesque to ethereal, her characters are all part of the same colorful, gregarious world.

The quieter notes in Ana's newest works come to match Marieta's serenely restrained compositions. Crafted from fired but unglazed or monochromatically glazed clay, they suggest a shift in attention toward spatial presence. It remains productively unclear to what extent they undermine or underscore the functional, domestic connotation of clay: some take the form of flat or relieved, tile-like objects to be hung on the wall while recalling the frugality of Romanesque capitals; others evoke mortuary stones; still others appear as small, simple shelves or containers. They all, however, demonstrate the versatility of the medium: it is both firm and fragile, solid, yet supple, pliable, and sinuous. The ceramic ear, hand, and eye—the folds, bows, and knots—continue, both semantically and chromatically, the visual propositions opened by Marieta's works.

The two artists began working together in 2020, when Marieta hosted Ana in her studio for approximately a year. They each have their individual practices, so if I were to describe the nature of their collaboration, the words of another artist come to mind—and, I admit, I've quoted him before: "Collaboration is when you mull over art or attitudes or monkeys and butterflies; that you call collaboration."^[iv] This exhibition is not only an echo of all those many conversations on „attitudes or monkeys and butterflies“ in which I was also a part. They are likewise their fitting embodiment. With Ana's works nestled in between Marieta's, one form—and gesture—comes to the foreground. The pockets, cases, shelves, containers present in their respective vocabularies all share a fundamental function: they are designed to hold, store, transport, protect—with Ursula K. Le Guin's essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1989) in mind, this is yet another way to describe this collaboration.

[i] *They Are Their Own Gifts* (1978), part of a triptych of film portraits directed by Margaret Murphy and Lucille Rhodes, cinematography by Babette Mangolte. <https://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/from-the-vaults-alice-neel> (6.4.2025)

[ii] Also in 1978, feminist art critic Lucy Lippard published her essay *Making Something From Nothing (Toward a Definition of Women's 'Hobby Art')* in the New York-based publication *Heresies*, in which she established the notion of bricolage as an important feminist

strategy. More generally, bricolage and collage have been significant tools in countercultural movements, from Dada to punk, while Claude Lévi-Strauss theorized the anthropological dimensions of bricolage in the early '60s.

[iii] *Geta Bratescu, Adventuresome Romanian Artist, Is Dead at 92*, [Neil Genzlinger](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/28/obituaries/geta-bratescu-adventuresome-romanian-artist-is-dead-at-92.html), New York Times, September 28, 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/28/obituaries/geta-bratescu-adventuresome-romanian-artist-is-dead-at-92.html> (6.4.2025)

[iv] Martin Kippenberger. In: "Stellen Sie sich vor, ein Mond scheint am Himmel. Gespräch mit Martin Kippenberger", ed. Starship (Hans-Christian Dany, Martin Ebner, Ariane Müller), Berlin, 2007, p. 40.