

HOUBEN TCHERKELOV (HOUBEN RT)

Born 1970

About the Artist:

Houben Tcherkelov is a Bulgarian - American artist who lives and works in New York. Tcherkelov studied in the National Academy of Arts in Sofia and in became known as part of the XXL group, active in the 1990s in Bulgaria.

The XXL group was created in 1994 by art historian Svilen Stefanov together with artists like Houben Tcherkelov, Rassim, Kosio Minchev, George Tushev, Ivan Kiuranov, Genadi Gatev, among others. The group's first manifesto A Kick in the Back of Inertia was published in 1995. From 1996 to 2003, the group run a gallery space under the same name. The gallery was closed down in 2003 from the governor of Sofia after an exhibition called AntiSax (New Political Art). In the 1990s the group worked in the field of installation, performance, video art and actions in urban environment. At the same time they invariably developed the contemporary potentialities of painting – for example the conceptual curatorial exhibition New Bulgarian Painting (1996), also almost everybody from the group have worked in this, considered classical, medium.

Tcherkelov, together with Toushev and Minchev, fromed a group within the group, often doing interventions or exhibitions. They were most well known for their graffiti spread all over the city of Sofia, spelling "Kosio, Houben, Tushev", announcing the presence of art on the street and in real life, but also the disquiet of a whole generation.

Together they emigrated to the United States around 1998, remaining close friends even though their artistic practices began to deviate through the years. Using the artistic skills developed during his classical sculpture education in Bulgaria, for a time Kossio Minchev worked as assistant in the studio of Jeff Koons. Coming from an understanding of art as a radical avant-garde practice, although set in post-modern times, the experience of New York and its art scene, and in particular the work at Koons studio, constituted a turning point for their art. In Bulgaria Houben Tcherkelov had a varied practice of performance, sculpture, objects, video, photography or urban interventions. In New York he focused mostly on painting, developing an ongoing series of "money paintings", which he has continued for more than 20 years.

The proposed donation offers works from both periods.

HOUBEN TCHERKELOV

1.10 *Euro Negative Watermark*, 2015

Acrylic and foil on canvas, 40 x 50 cm

Edition: Unique

Ownership history: American Foundation for Bulgaria

Exhibition history: Exhibited at National Art Gallery Sofia 2017-2018



HOUBEN TCHERKELOV

2. 5 *Leva*, 2017

Acrylic and foil on canvas, 92 x 102 cm

Edition: Unique

Ownership history: American Foundation for Bulgaria

Exhibition history: Exhibited at the National Art Gallery, Sofia Arsenal Museum of Contemporary Art, 2018. Solo show "Worth". Catalogue,



HOUBEN TCHERKELOV

1.10 *Euro Negative Watermark*, 2015

2. 5 *Leva*, 2017

About the works:

The two works are part of an ongoing series of paintings, which have money from different countries as their subject matter. Houben Tcherkelov began the series in the year 2000 - a couple of years after arriving to the U.S. from his native Bulgaria.

“In 1939, critic Clement Greenberg argued that the avant-garde was connected to the ruling class of society by an “umbilical cord of gold,” but what he literally meant was modern money, specifically banknotes and coins. Fittingly—if you consider the financialization of, well, everything, including the current tokenized trade in units of social capital—the latter are the exclusive subject of Houben R. Tcherkelov’s signature foil-transfer and acrylic paintings. If paper and coin versions of money have turned the world into objects, then Tcherkelov’s paintings return the favor. They turn money into objects—albeit ones that are charged with substantially altered symbolic and exchange value.

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Like thousands of artists before him, what Tcherkelov has done since is take the creative measure of his surroundings. As the artist told an interviewer in 2020: “New York is the financial capital of the United States. Nothing is produced here anymore; the main business is financial services and instruments.” To paraphrase the artist, his paintings of figures and motifs cribbed from extant and defunct currency—among them U.S. bills, euros, pounds sterling, French and Swiss Francs and Taiwanese dollars—focus on the most salient facts of his immediate environment: the bottomless pit of cash, credit and speculation that alternately devours and, in the words of Cabaret, makes the world go around. Tcherkelov’s decision to focus on the wellspring of power in modern-day Rome also amounts to an artistic credo. It was, he says, “a choice to deprive [himself] of the luxury of paying attention to anything else.”

Christian Viveros-Fauné
Brooklyn, 2022

HOUBEN TCHERKELOV

3. The Suitable Suit, 1996-2023

Color photography from a performance, 100 x 80 cm

Edition: 1/5

Ownership history: American Foundation for Bulgaria

Exhibition history: A Few Ways to Win the World, Doza Gallery, Sofia, 2023



HOUBEN TCHERKELOV, *The Suitable Suit*, 1996-2023

About the work:

The work is based on a performance from 1996 (duration 2h15). The costume itself and the original VHS video were stolen after the exhibition of the work at Golden Eye, II Triennial of Balkan Art, Novi Sad, Serbia in 1999. There are only two existing stills from the performance and no remaining video documentation. The work exists today in two photographs, both edition of 5. One of them is proposed here.

“After that the work was exhibited for the first time again in 2022, when Genadi Gatev from the group Group XXL, asked me to make a print of the remaining stills for his curated exhibition " The End of Dreams" in the gallery of Shipka 6 (Union of Bulgarian Artists). He convinced me that despite joining the European Union in 2007, many people still perceive wishful thinking as reality. That is to say, the work was still topical. The idea came to me from the phrase of the Romanian/French philosopher Emil Cioran that he despises the monkey who failed to reach further west.

The suit is something between a monkey costume and a straitjacket. I was dealing ,(then in 1996) with the desire of people in Bulgaria to adopt ready-made models without regard to their reality.”

Houben Tcherkelov

“One of the XXL group, Houben Tcherkelov, showed me photos of a recent piece called *The Suitable Suit*, which he describes as “a foreign fashion design tailored for the Bulgarian men”. The suit’s excessively long sleeves are meant to recall the legend that has Bulgarians descending from apes, and the accompanying shoes, the artist says, “can hardly take one far” as they are crammed with lead weights. Photographs and video footage show Tcherkelov chattering miserably in this outfit through selected Bulgarian landscapes.”

Christopher Phillips, *The View from Europe’s Lower East Side*, “Art in America”, October, 1997, p. 49