

Djordje Ozbolt

Birdsongs of Praise

10 April – 17 May 2025

Djordje Ozbolt's playful, fantastical, deliberately absurdist and sometimes provocative practice juxtaposes ephemera from popular culture and motifs from art history with social commentary and personal narrative. Born in Belgrade, formerly Yugoslavia, Ozbolt – after living in London for over three decades – is now based in central Serbia, near the Rudnik mountain range, where he has created ten new paintings of fictional birds perched on branches in wild and abstract landscapes. His newest works, all executed at the same intimate scale, are presented on religious icon boards lined with walnut tray frames. *Birdsongs of Praise* marks the artist's seventh exhibition with Herald St.

Writer Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith has previously described Ozbolt as 'an itinerant traveller and unabashed exoticist' and previous works have included a diverse array of references, such as landscape and history painting, contemporary and period portraits, traditional still-life, African and Asian art and even specific artists like Pablo Picasso and Piet Mondrian – sometimes within the same image. While the paintings in this exhibition are united by their depiction of birds, they similarly weave together a rich tapestry of attributions and allusions, using birds, as Ozbolt explains, 'as a vehicle for ideas.'

Ozbolt draws from an extensive library of books on animals and birds, borrowing and adapting imagery by altering their colours and physical features. He has spoken of his embrace of 'eclectic ideas' and a desire for a sense of incoherence. Yet, his recent works share a focus on some of his favourite and most influential cultural references. Detroit's jazz, R&B, Motown and techno music scenes are alluded to through a depiction of the city's skyline in *Motor City* (2025); Francis Picabia's well-known surreal and multilayered *Transparency* series, a key influence on Pablo Picasso, is synthesised with Disney characters in *All Together Now* (2025); and his cousin's *Red Blue Chair*, a reproduction of Gerrit Rietveld's De Stijl masterpiece, appears in *Life Goals* (2025).

The title of the exhibition riffs on the longstanding BBC television programme *Songs of Praise*, which broadcasts Christian hymns, worship songs, interviews and performances in churches around the United Kingdom. Music is a recurring theme throughout the works; *Top of the Pops* (2025), features a psychedelic 1970s studio background and a brightly coloured robin with voluminous hair, resembling a performer on the iconic British talent show; and with three birds precariously standing on each other, *The Song of Jah* (2025), makes a direct allusion to the famous reggae track *Three Little Birds* by Bob Marley and the Wailers.

Depicting an invisible owl, *My Imaginary Friend* (2025) figuratively embodies the notion of an imaginary best friend. This close kinship between birds and humans is often portrayed in films and television shows, which depict them as all-knowing, compassionate and intelligent creatures. While Ozbolt's mysterious birds are born from his imagination, they retain a universality that invites viewers to project their own memories, emotions, tastes, and prejudices onto them.

'The symbols in my paintings are almost like props... It's kind of misleading, and intentionally so, in order to confuse the viewer,' Ozbolt once observed about his desire to bring seemingly disparate phenomena together. 'The confusion is helpful because it invites viewers to interpret the paintings as they wish, which is of course far more interesting than when the reading is closed down or obvious. Escape from reality is welcome and occasionally necessary. But for me escape comes more in the act of painting, which can be like meditation, or skiing. And, of course, the paintings themselves are as real as anything else is real, but what they depict is another matter...'

Text by Laurie Barron