

# Art in America

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*Jelena Tomasevic: Joy of Life, 2004, mixed mediums and acrylic on unstretched canvas, 16 1/2 by 25 1/2 inches; at the Serbia and Montenegro pavilion. Photo E. Baker.*

... There isn't much painting on view at the Biennale, by either men or women, but two women artists provide memorable contributions in that medium: Marlene Dumas and Jelena Tomasevic. In the Italian pavilion, Dumas's stark, thinly painted oils of the heads of dead women--seen close up, mouths gaping, eyes shut, either in profile or slightly turned as though on a mortuary slab--are both elegant and appalling. Identified by first names only, they are true portraits, the features distinctive, the brushwork as ephemeral as life itself. Though the context is never specified, the paintings speak of troubled times and places.

Tomasevic's little figurative pieces--hardly "paintings" in the strict sense of the word--combine acrylic and Sellotape on canvas. Widely spaced, they punctuate brushily textured dark gray walls in staggered rows to form a wraparound installation. Tomasevic's room is one component of the Serbia and Montenegro pavilion, in which two other artists contribute as well; the overall presentation is titled "The Eros of Slight Offence." Tomasevic's images are, indeed, as stated in the catalogue by the commissioner of the pavilion, "of the order of 'modest trespasses' ... that penetrate unexpected places." These precisely drawn vignettes have something of the cartoon about them, although the humor is

low-key, scarcely adumbrated. In one, a handsome, bearded older man, a famous intellectual, perhaps, is shown in half-length close-up with his head in the grip of a giant pair of pliers that draws blood; the handles of the pliers are bright yellow, the blood red; all else is black and white or grisaille. A young woman photographer, much more delicately sketched, snaps a picture in the background. In another image, a seductive female in a strapless dress lies on a couch under a large lamp hanging by a cord above her, while the right side of the image is blocked off by what seems to be a wall and pavement. It is difficult to describe the effect of these paintings, or to say how their memorable strangeness is achieved; yet they have remained in my head ever since I saw them...