



Exhibition Dream weaver

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Self Portrait: Artist's Brain
by Lada Dedić

Images: Bob Newman
M Contemporary Gallery,
Sydney, Australia
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For more on the **artist's work**
see <http://www.studiolada.com/>

"How curious that we think the mind is in the head. The brain is in the head, but the brain isn't the mind."

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, Buddhist nun

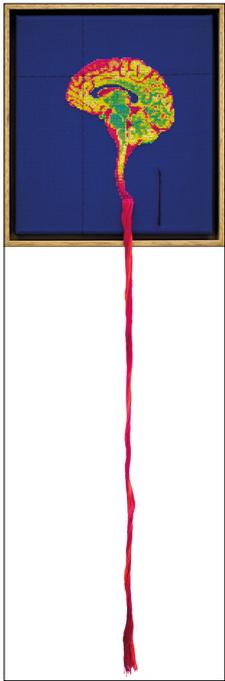
At the heart of a Buddhist existence there is a need, and indeed an obligation, to question everything. The non-theist philosophies that motivate their adherents to spend hours, days, and sometimes years in silence and isolation, contemplating the architecture of thoughts and the ruminations of the mind, are almost scientific in their rigour. It is within this intangible cerebral space, woven from the threads of ideological doctrines and the very real environment of neurons, axons, and dendrites that artist Lada Dedić draws inspiration.

In her latest exhibition, *Self Portrait: Artist's Brain*, Dedić couples her seemingly incongruous delight for

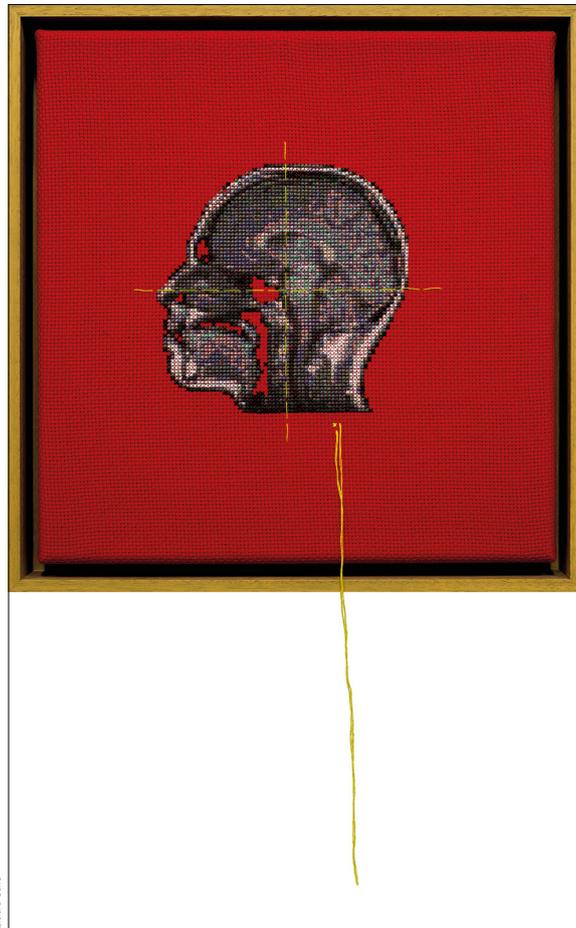
neuroanatomy with a desire to weave the slow, rhythmic, and repetitive practice of Buddhist meditation into her art. The exceptional nature of the pieces—a series of MRI images of her own brain embroidered on linen using a needlepoint technique—stems from a synchronous meeting of metaphysics, art, and science in the artist's life. Having volunteered in 1999 to participate in a longitudinal neuroimaging study in which periodical scans were performed on healthy brains over 15 years, Dedić became intrigued by the intricacies of the mind and its processes. The early scans were blurry and suggestive only of the countless synapses and implications evident in their grainy sketches. By 2014, technology had advanced sufficiently that Dedić was able to take a three-dimensional journey through her own brain in real time. "The researchers were very happy to have me as a participant because I lie very still. I meditate while I'm in the scanner", remarks Dedić.

Thus, the artist's fascination with artistic practice and its profound connections to the brain and mind began. She was already an advocate of the quiet introspection promoted by Buddhism and, to feed her curiosity, she took an intensive course in medical anatomy alongside her degree in fine art. However, it was a chance meeting with the Dalai Lama in a hotel lobby in 2007 that perhaps had the most pronounced influence on the trajectory of her career. The encounter eventually led to a job as Entourage Liaison with the Tibetan spiritual leader in 2009, working and travelling with him for the next six years. Dedić describes this time period in fond detail. "I would rise at 3.30am and bring breakfast to His Holiness. Then, when he went into his five hours of morning meditation, I would stitch in the room next door to calm myself for the day ahead." Dedić would stitch in silence, reciting in her mind the Buddhist mantra of compassion. The cadent routine, which matched the almost surgical discipline of her needlework, not only formed part of her own daily meditation but also reinforced the cultural tradition of embroidery that was so intrinsic to the artist's Croatian and Bosnian heritage. Her style of stitching is organic, yet its execution is particular. Dedić explains: "each cubic millimetre of brain matter has about 50 000 neurons. I stitch in square millimetres. There is a symmetry between the art and the science."

When Dedić speaks of the history that informs her work, she draws attention to the inverted stitch that often appears in traditional Croatian embroidery to symbolise the impossibility of achieving perfection. She counterbalances this notion with Buddhist logic, which argues for the potential of completeness through improvement and change. "I've purposefully put a stitch in backwards,



Self Portrait: Artist's Brain VII
Stranded cotton on aida cloth,
2015



Self Portrait: Artist's Brain IV
Stranded cotton on aida cloth, 2015

which I call the impermanence stitch. However, I've left it loose so that, theoretically, it could be restitched to achieve perfection."

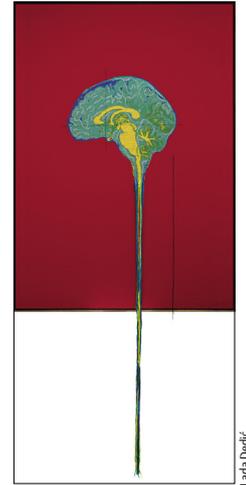
These concepts of progress and mastery that Dedić explores are reflected in *Self Portrait: Artist's Brain*, which she playfully describes as her magnum opus. The exhibition took place almost 20 years after her first MRI scan, and the sophisticated detail and colour in her work mirrors the evolution of neuroimaging technology. The embroideries that depict early scans are subtle and monochrome, emitting greys and muted whites that echo the palettes of last century's technology. Her later works, by contrast, strike the eye in bold, primary-coloured flashes that bring to life the dynamic mechanisms of human intelligence.

In *Self Portrait: Artist's Brain VII*, a tangle of scarlet-coloured threads depicting the brain stem erupts from the canvas and hangs a metre below the frame. *Self Portrait: Artist's Brain X* interprets a cross-sectional brain slice, with the cortical neurons travelling down the blood-red canvas in a suspended mass of multi-coloured fibres. The guidelines

stitched in a naive and loose fashion across *Self Portrait: Artist's Brain IV* are reminiscent of the stratification used in neuroimaging and suggest the perhaps elusive aim of modern science to control, contain, and compartmentalise the unknowable elements of the mind.

In her work, Dedić's so-called impermanence stitch—a solitary strand of cotton that is drawn through a single millimetre of linen and dangles free—entices her audience to engage with the seemingly disparate disciplines of art and science. The tantalising and evanescent nature of this stitch asks viewers to take opportunities, test hypotheses, and, in line with Buddhist tradition, question everything. When Dedić recalls her time spent with the Dalai Lama, her abiding memory is of a man whose enthusiasm for life revolves specifically around these empirical inquiries. "The one thing that really gets him excited is meeting scientists", she says. "His philosophy is that, if science ever disproves something from Buddhism, then we must let it go."

Clare Caldwell



Self Portrait: Artist's Brain X
Stranded cotton on aida cloth,
2015

Lifeline

Farrah Mateen is a neurologist with a PhD in international health and fellowships in neuroimmunology and medical ethics. She is an associate professor at Harvard Medical School and directs the global neurology research group at Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, USA. She studies low-cost interventions for high-prevalence neurological conditions in resource-limited settings, including Bhutan, Guinea, and Tanzania. In Boston, she clinically cares for and performs research with patients living with multiple sclerosis and neuromyelitis optica.

What has been the greatest achievement of your career?
Growing the field of global health and neurology to become more mainstream and recognised.

What inspires you?

I am inspired by African neurologists in training. In several locations where I work, there is no running water, electricity, or library. You are left with ambition.

What do you think is the most neglected field of science or medicine at the moment?

Research ethics.

If you had not entered your current profession, what would you have liked to do?

Law. I always like a careful, well-reasoned argument.

Who was your most influential teacher, and why?

In medicine, the anonymous collective of manuscript and grant reviewers. Sometimes, people really take the time to help you and you will never know who or where they are. In life, my mother because she comes to reasonable conclusions on complicated matters.

What is the most memorable comment from a referee?

"The authors failed to account for the impact of self-driving cars."

If you wrote an autobiography, what would be the title?

Sasquatch, because I am from Saskatchewan, Canada.

What was your first experiment as a child?

Interventions to delay my bedtime: an adaptive trial design.

What is your greatest fear?

Flying in aeroplanes.

What one discovery or invention would most improve your life?

Safe supersonic air travel.

If you were Bill Gates, how would you spend your fortune?

I would endow academic faculty to do global health work throughout their careers, developing a permanent network of experts across disciplines and geographies. I do like his recent work on reinventing the toilet and bringing attention to water and sanitation.

What is the best piece of advice you have received?

"Money cannot be eaten", which is often ascribed to the Cree people and is both a statement on the uselessness of money itself and a vision for a collectively better future.

What is your greatest regret?

Taking criticism too personally. Since I take my work personally, I take criticism of it personally. If I could tell my younger self to take criticism less personally, I would.

