budi normal: photos from bosnia and herzegovina

susan nolan

The Walsh Gallery gratefully acknowledges the support of:

The Women and Gender Studies Program
Russian and East European Studies Program
Slavic Club

Newark Art Supply & CUSTOM FRAMING

61 Halsey Street
Newark, NJ 07102
(973) 230-2828

The Walsh Gallery
Seton Hall University
400 South Orange Avenue
South Orange, NJ 07079
973-275-2033
http://academic.shu.edu/libraries/gallery/
Mon - Fri, 10:30am to 4:30pm

for more information contact: susan.nolan@shu.edu

January 12 - February 13, 2010
Budi normal is a bastardization of a common colloquial phrase in Bosnia. It’s the way a native English speaker (OK, I might ungrammatically translate the typically gendered phrase – for a woman (budi normalna) or a man (budi normalan). It translates literally as just “be normal,” or figuratively as “chill.”

What’s lovely about this phrase is the assumption that everyone somehow agrees what “normal” is, as if it’s obvious and as if we all have at least that in common. As a psychologist, I’m fascinated by this use of the word “normal.” A psychologist would frown on the idea that one is either “normal” or “not normal” – it is possible to be a little crazy – but in Bosnia, with so many reminders of recent conflict apparent, it’s a relief. In its blunt simplicity, it conveys something that the English language can’t.

What’s also lovely about this phrase is that “budi” also translates as “wake up.” It’s good to imagine shaking normality awake after years of conflict. Spending time in Bosnia and Hercegovina, you start to get why a simple “be normal” is so appropriate. In the wake of a war and a country’s collapse, “normal” has seductive powers that it lacks elsewhere. Now, fifteen years post-war, there really is a normal, everyday life. And that normal, everyday life is exciting, creative, inspiring.

I lived in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) with my now husband, Ivan Bojanic, for fifteen months in 2005 and 2006, and have returned every summer since; in fact, we now own a small house there. During the former period, I was on sabbatical from my psychology professor position at Seton Hall University. Struck by the contrast between the U.S.-media-generated stereotypes and the realities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, I began photographically documenting my impressions.

During the war, many people fled Bosnia for safety or financial reasons; many who remained actively pursued emigration. Others, however, dreamed of a Bosnia in which its people stay and work toward a post-war environment that allows them to thrive – not merely to earn a living, but to express their identities through vocation or avocation. Indeed, it is not uncommon, particularly among young people, to have multiple jobs along with multiple serious pursuits. The current mode is one that doesn’t constrain anyone to a single interest. I gravitated to people in that group; spent time with them; and photographed extensively.

Because my initial stay in Bosnia lasted 15 months, and because my husband speaks the local language fluently, I was able to photographically capture Bosnians as an insider. It helped that my language skills improved as time went on; when I first lived there in Livno, a small town in the southwest, I studied the local language weekly with Aija, my firm but patient, and decidedly feminist, Bosniak Muslim instructor, while residing in a predominately Croat town using a language book titled “Croatian!,” and living with my Serbian-American partner. In fact, given the difference in the three dialects, I’ve been told several times that I’ve created sentences that no one has ever uttered!

Moreover, during our time there, we traveled widely. Many photographs of Bosnia capture haunting war-torn villages and charmingly rural residents; the stereotypical goat herder in front of a bombed-out stone house does in fact exist. Other photographs focus on the most international and storied of Bosnian cities, Sarajevo – remnants of the 1984 Winter Olympics and the eclectic mix of shrapnel-pocked Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian architecture. The photos in this exhibit show a broader, and less-documented, geographic representation of BiH; moreover, the photographic subjects explicitly represent all three major ethnic groups.

Beyond that, the photos demonstrate that gendered boundaries are falling, too. In the current BiH, it seems that women are as likely as men to direct film festivals; to win international fellowships; to work for international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); to be professors; to curse like sailors. Many women in BiH, like their male counterparts, are strong, funny, and fabulously opinionated. The Bosnia I love is neither normal nor normalan. It is simply normal.

Living in Bosnia gave me a different perspective; I befriended people whom I would have sought as friends anywhere. My Bosnian friends are broadly talented, open-mindedly opinionated, well-traveled, wisely wry, and active in improving their communities. Some enter government; some make films; others record music. They organize arts festivals, write books, teach, beautify public spaces. Some weathered the war in their hometowns; others live in permanent displacement. Seemingly without effort, they contradict the glass-half-empty Balkan stereotype of disengagement, passivity, and obsession with the past.

When I think of Bosnia, I think of them. And I also think – both for them and for us – budi normal. Just chill.