

Olena Zubach

“WE SEE THINGS NOT AS THEY ARE,
BUT AS WE ARE.” Anaïs Nin



We first encountered Olena Zubach at Photo Basel, where her photographs stopped us for precisely the reason so much contemporary imagery does not: they asked for time.

At first, everything appears almost impossibly resolved. A vessel. A plane. A shadow. A field of colour. Nothing excessive, nothing accidental. And yet the longer one looks, the less certain these quiet arrangements become. Objects that seem familiar cannot be used. Surfaces that appear immaculate reveal the traces of printing and the hand. Three-dimensional forms become planes; pieces of paper acquire volume. The camera records exactly what stood before it—and somehow leaves us questioning what was ever there.

Zubach constructs these worlds before she photographs them. Forms are imagined, modelled, 3D-printed with the help of her husband Mykola, painted by hand, positioned and repositioned, sometimes by mere millimetres, until the image finds its balance. Photography arrives almost at the end. What it records is real, but it is a reality created expressly to be photographed.

Born in Kyiv, trained first in economics and finance and now based in Ljubljana, Zubach came to art without many of the rules that traditionally define what photography should be. Perhaps that is what makes her work so compelling. Morandi, Albers, William Scott and Cubism hover somewhere in the room, but Zubach is building a language distinctly her own—one concerned with colour, perception, fabrication and the unreliable distance between seeing and knowing.

In an age in which images increasingly demand to be consumed instantly, hers do something quietly radical.

They make recognition only the beginning of looking.

Art Talk Magazine: We first encountered your work at Photo Basel this year, where Galerija Fotografija was presenting your photographs. We also had the pleasure of meeting you and your husband, and there was something that stayed with us beyond the images themselves: the sense that the work exists within a very particular dialogue between the two of you. Before we talk about photography, could you tell us about that relationship — where does your individual practice end and the collaboration between you begin?

Olena Zubach: We were also very happy to meet you in Basel. And yes, you sensed it very accurately: my husband and I do work closely together, and I value his help enormously. He is probably the greatest supporter of my practice — I think that was quite visible in Basel.

At the same time, the boundary between our roles is fairly clear. The idea, form, colour, composition, and framing are my part of the work. Mykola designs and prints the objects based on my sketches.

I explain what kind of form the composition is missing, or quickly sketch it for him; he translates that sketch into a digital model, and then into a physical object. Because of his background in programming, the parameters of the model can be adjusted quite quickly. It is sometimes through these adjustments that unexpected forms emerge — discoveries I had not planned.

So my individual practice does not end where our collaboration begins. Rather, within it there is a shared stage: the transition from an imagined form to a physical object.

ATM: Your route to becoming an artist is wonderfully unexpected. You studied economics and finance and only later entered the Kyiv School of Photography. Do you think coming to art from outside the traditional art-school system allowed you to see photography differently — perhaps with fewer assumptions about what a photograph is supposed to be?

OZ: Yes, I worked in finance for about thirteen years — I started when I was nineteen. Encountering art while studying at the Kyiv School of Photography overturned my understanding of what really mattered to me and where I wanted to go.

Did that give me a different view of photography? I think so, in two senses. First, I came to art already having a certain amount of life and professional experience, so I was able to make conscious choices about what felt close to me and what did not. Second, I had no settled idea of how things were “supposed to be”, or of where exactly the boundaries of photography lie. That gave me the freedom to build my own method around the idea rather than around predetermined rules: not knowing that something “cannot be done”, I do not dismiss an idea in advance, I simply try to realise it. It is often in the process that unexpected solutions appear and possibilities open up that I could not have foreseen at the beginning. Perhaps in that sense not knowing does sometimes make you bolder.

At the same time, this freedom has another side to it: I had no ready-made map. I am well aware that I came to art later in life. The experience that accumulates over years within an academic education is something I now have to gather for myself — from books, exhibitions, films, articles, conversations and daily work. I do not consider my years in finance wasted, but I do feel a strong need to make up for the time when art was not yet such a large part of my life. Perhaps my way of seeing photography is formed precisely by this combination of freedom and a constant need to learn.

ATM: When we saw your work in Basel, what struck us immediately was its extraordinary stillness. Nothing appears superfluous. Every object, colour, shadow and interval seems necessary. In a world increasingly defined by visual excess, speed and distraction, what attracts you to reduction — and how do you know when an



Still Life with a Magenta Rectangle_2025_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija



Still Life with Two Rectangles and a Cuboid_2025_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija

image has finally said enough?

OZ: What attracts me is not reduction in itself, but what it allows us to see. When there are only a few objects, they stop being perceived simply as vessels; their function no longer seems obvious. Form, surface, the distance between objects, the edge of a shadow, and the slightest shift all become visible. Each element carries more weight.

I see this stillness not only as silence, but also as incapacity. The objects do nothing because they cannot. They may be recognisable as vessels, but their proportions and construction prevent them from being used as such. At the same time, this stillness does not mean absolute calm. It is important to me that a certain tension remains in the image — something that prevents the eye from settling immediately and holds attention a little longer.

As for how I know when an image has said enough, the honest answer is that I often do not. I can rearrange the objects again and again, remove something and then put it back, constantly looking at the composition through the camera. Sometimes a few millimetres determine the balance of the entire arrangement.

If an element can be removed without any loss, it is not necessary. If the next change begins to disturb the internal balance, I stop. Sometimes I think a work is finished, only to realise a few days or weeks later how it could be better — so I set it up again and reshoot it. In that sense, “I stop” can sometimes mean “I stop for now.”

ATM: You have spoken about searching for an almost “ideal simplicity,” yet the simplicity of your photographs is deceptive. Objects are fabricated, compositions constructed, surfaces painted, light controlled. Is simplicity, paradoxically, one of the most complicated things to achieve?

OZ: I do think simplicity is one of the most difficult things to achieve. But at a certain point I began to feel that my phrase “ideal simplicity” no longer described what I was doing quite accurately. In the beginning, it was true: I was looking for clarity and trying to remove everything unnecessary. Now it sounds too polished to me, as though perfection were the ultimate goal. I am increasingly interested in a kind of simplicity that still contains irregularity, tension, and traces of how something was made. When there are only a few elements in an image, an imprecise decision has nowhere to hide. Any inaccuracy in proportion, colour, or shadow becomes immediately visible. So for me, simplicity does not mean an absence of complexity, but the necessity of making very precise choices.

Behind an apparently simple image are many stages — from the initial sketch to an object that has been printed and painted by hand. I work with natural light, so I do not so much control it as observe it, wait for it, and respond to its changes.

At the same time, I do not try to conceal this process completely or create the illusion of a flawless surface. The objects retain the layers of printing, irregularities, and traces of hand-painting. Perhaps the difficulty lies precisely in allowing the image

to remain clear without becoming sterile.

ATM: Some of the vessels in your photographs are 3D-printed and then hand-painted before you photograph them. We love this idea because it complicates photography’s traditional relationship with truth: the camera records something that genuinely existed, but you created that reality specifically so that it could be photographed. At what point does the photograph begin for you — when you take the picture, or much earlier, when you begin constructing the world that will eventually exist in front of the lens?

OZ: My photograph begins long before the camera — probably at the moment when I realise that the composition is missing a form that does not yet exist, and decide that it needs to come into being. Then come the sketch, the digital model, several hours of printing, and hand-painting. Only after that does the photographing begin. The actual exposure takes a fraction of a second, but the path towards it is stretched out over time. A composition can remain on the table for quite a while: I return to it, change it, add something, remove something. If I need a different colour, I usually do not repaint an existing form; we print a new one, because it is important to me to apply the paint onto a clean white base. Once the composition finally comes together, the photograph itself can be made quite quickly. The difficulty is not in pressing the shutter, but in assembling everything that needs to exist in front of the camera.

I am very interested in the question of photographic truth, and in my work it takes on a slightly strange form. Everything visible in the photograph genuinely existed in front of the camera: the objects were standing on the table, and the light and shadows were real. But the photograph records a reality that was created specifically for it. These objects would not exist without the idea of the future photograph, and they have no other function. Between shoots, they lie in plastic containers. So the camera truthfully bears witness to the existence of something that had no other reason to exist.

ATM: Giorgio Morandi inevitably enters the conversation around your work: ordinary vessels, repetition, silence, subtle differences and the extraordinary attention given to seemingly insignificant objects. But what have you personally taken from Morandi — and where do you feel the need to leave him behind?

OZ: Morandi became a real point of reference for me — in the sense of showing me that “this is possible.” He demonstrated that a few vessels on a table could be worth looking at for years, and that they could become the foundation of an entire artistic practice. That is not at all self-evident, and without such an example I might not have dared.

When I began painting my own printed forms, I did not yet know that Morandi also altered objects before painting them: removing labels and repainting their surfaces. I discovered this later and

was pleasantly surprised by such an unexpected coincidence.

At the same time, behind this similar gesture lies a fundamental difference. Morandi's world of objects was largely made up of things that already existed and had their own physical past. He selected and altered them. In my case, the sequence is different: the idea of the image comes before the object. First there is an imagined form, and only then does it become a physical thing that can be placed in front of the camera. My objects come into being within the photographic idea itself. They have no past; they do not age because they have never lived. Instead of scratches and patina, they carry the lines of 3D printing and traces of the brush — not traces of life, but traces of their origin.

So I do not really think of it as needing to “leave Morandi behind.” He showed me that these kinds of objects are worth looking at in the first place. At the same time, my work begins from a different point and, I think, asks different questions.

ATM: There are other ghosts within the work too — Josef Albers, William Scott, Cubism, abstraction, modernism and the avant-garde. Yet the photographs never feel nostalgic. How do you enter into conversation with art history without becoming imprisoned by it?

OZ: Of all the references you mention, Albers is probably the most important to me, and my relationship with his work has changed over time. At first, I came to him through colour. What fascinated me about his squares was the combination of a strict construction and how alive they remain. That still does not let go of me.

Later I realised that what I had taken from him was not colour itself, but a way of thinking about colour. Albers showed that colour never exists on its own: the same hue behaves differently depending on what surrounds it. It is not simply a matter of taste, but an interaction that can be observed and tested.

In my own work, colour does not simply belong to an object either. It can merge an object with the background and make it almost disappear, or, on the contrary, separate it and alter the balance of the entire composition.

What interests me in Cubism is above all the freedom to treat an object not as something that has to be described correctly, but as a form that an image can dismantle, flatten, and reconstruct. I am not trying to reproduce a Cubist language or any other historical artistic language, but I am drawn to the possibility of abandoning conventional ways of showing things.

More generally, I try to enter into conversation with art history through questions rather than through ready-made images. I then test those questions through my own materials and processes — digital modelling, 3D printing, hand-painting, and photography. Perhaps that is why this conversation does not become a form of stylisation or nostalgia for me.

ATM: Colour in your photographs seems almost

architectural. It doesn't merely describe an object; it constructs the space around it. A red bottle against a red field can almost disappear, while a black rectangle can suddenly reorganise an entire composition. What comes first when you are constructing an image: the object, the geometry or the colour?

OZ: To be honest, the order is not always the same. Often I do not even know myself what came first — the form or the colour. Sometimes a form feels so strong to me that I want to see it only in grey or black. Sometimes, on the contrary, only in red. And at other times everything begins with colour: I know I want to make a monochromatic work, and the other decisions are subordinated to that. The geometry of the composition as a whole almost always comes last, and it takes the most time. It is worked out on the table and through the camera: I move objects, change the distances between them, remove something or add something else. The colour may be decided in advance, but whether it truly works only becomes clear once the objects are in place. Very often, this is the moment when I realise that the composition is missing a particular shade, height, or form — and then the process returns to the beginning.

The rectangle in my work is a separate case. It is both a plane and an object, but for me it is also a way for abstract painting to enter the still life. That is where it came from, particularly through the work of William Scott. It is the only element in the frame that does not pretend to be a vessel and does not inherit its form from a function.

My vessels are forms from which function has been removed. The rectangle is a form that never had a function in the first place.

At the same time, the rectangle only appears to be a flat plane. In reality, it is a three-dimensional printed object, designed to look flat from the camera's point of view. In other words, it is a three-dimensional form created specifically to become a plane within the photograph. That is precisely why it can reorganise the entire composition: it operates as pure colour and pure geometry, without any suggestion of function.

ATM: Your Plain Plane Cuts series performs a beautiful reversal. Photography normally takes a three-dimensional world and flattens it into an image; you begin with flat pieces of paper and use light, shadow and photography to convince us that volume exists where it doesn't. Why are you so interested in that moment when the eye believes something the intellect knows isn't true?

OZ: What interests me is not so much the deception of the eye itself as the moment when the illusion has already been exposed and still continues to work. We may know that we are looking only at flat pieces of paper, yet the eye still almost automatically assembles them into a volumetric form. A few edges, tonal transitions, and shadows are enough for it to do so.

In Plain Plane Cuts, I cut the forms by hand from paper and then photograph them. The shadows are real, but the volume they seem to describe



Still Life with a Blue Bottle_2025_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija



Still Life with a Dark Brown Bottle_2025_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija

does not actually exist. At the same time, the structure of the illusion is not concealed: the edge and thickness of the paper remain visible. The eye sees a vessel and, at the same time, sees that it is paper. These two readings do not cancel each other out. I like this contradiction: photography invents nothing and faithfully records what was in front of the camera, yet at the same time it helps the image persuade us of something that was not there. It is really the same theme that runs through my work with printed objects, only explored through a different material. In both cases, I am interested in the distance between what a thing physically is and what we see in it. Perhaps I am attracted to this moment because it reveals that vision is not neutral. The eye does not simply register the world; it continually completes and reconstructs it according to what it already knows. Photography usually turns three-dimensional space into a flat image; here I give it a flat surface, and it returns to me an illusion of space. And even when the mind already understands how that illusion is made, the eye does not stop believing in it.

ATM: Perhaps that brings us to illusion. Photography has always carried this peculiar promise that what we are seeing somehow “really happened.” Your photographs complicate that promise because they are simultaneously truthful and invented. In an age of AI-generated imagery and increasingly synthetic visual realities, has the distinction between a photograph and an invented image become more interesting to you — or less important?

OZ: I think AI has made this question more visible, but it has not created it. The boundary between a photograph and a generated image has become more interesting, while its blurring — especially outside the context of art — can also, in some cases, become more dangerous. At the same time, a simple division between what is “true” and what is “invented” seems increasingly unhelpful to me. Has photography ever really been a neutral copy of reality? Even a purely documentary image selects a frame, a moment, and the light, and is therefore not identical to the event it shows. Perhaps that is why we are so interested in looking behind the scenes and understanding how an image was made: not necessarily to expose a deception, but to understand how reality was transformed into a photograph. What interests me particularly is what photography does to the possibility of verification. If you held my objects in your hands, the material would reveal itself within seconds — through weight, temperature, sound, and the way the surface responds to touch. Photography removes precisely those senses through which an object could be tested. It does not necessarily hide anything deliberately; it simply deprives the viewer of any means of verification.

Sometimes an ordinary functional object appears among the printed forms in my still lifes. The first was a wooden spoon: I needed exactly that shape,

and the spoon already suited the composition perfectly, so there was no reason to reinvent it. Within the image, it remains a functional object among forms that cannot be used, but photography makes that difference less obvious than it would be in the hand. Since then, I have sometimes used ready-made objects deliberately, precisely as a different kind of presence.

So for me, it is less important to establish which category an image belongs to than to understand what exactly it allows us to verify. In this particular sense, my photographs are entirely literal: everything visible in them really did stand in front of the camera; I do not add or replace objects. But looking and knowing are not the same thing.

ATM: You were born in Kyiv and are now based in Ljubljana. We are reluctant to impose biography onto formal work, particularly when discussing Ukrainian artists, but we are curious about something more fundamental. Your photographs create extraordinarily controlled, ordered and quiet worlds. Has creating order ever become a response to experiencing a world in which so much lies beyond our control?

OZ: I am grateful for the caution of this question. To be honest, I do not have a ready-made answer to it. Forms did not begin as a direct response to the war or to forced emigration, and I did not consciously build my personal history into the project. At the same time, an artist does not exist separately from what they live through, and a project does not necessarily reveal all of its connections even to its author at once.

In a certain sense, I really do construct order from nothing: at the beginning there are neither objects nor a composition. The possibility of building a limited world in which every decision can be tested or changed does give me a point of stability. Perhaps the need for that kind of stability is connected to how much in the outside world lies beyond my control, even if I was not initially aware of it.

But order does not mean complete control. Natural light is constantly changing, the material behaves imperfectly, the printing process leaves irregularities, and a composition does not always come together in the way I expect. I create precise conditions, but I do not determine everything. So rather than eliminating uncertainty, I give it boundaries and work with it within them.

Perhaps my biography entered the work not as a story, but as a way of constructing.

ATM: There is another question connected to that. Your work insists on beauty, contemplation and slowness at a moment marked by war, displacement, political anxiety and relentless imagery. Can making something quiet and beautiful itself become a meaningful act — perhaps even a form of resistance?

OZ: I understand the generosity of that reading. But a personal sense of support and an act of resistance are not the same thing. I make objects that do not function, and I photograph them. If I

were to call that resistance, I would be assigning the work a meaning it does not have — especially when, for me personally and for many others, that word means something very different.

I am currently working on a very personal project connected to the experience of forced emigration and questions of identity. The work is still in progress, and I am not yet ready to speak about it. But in that project, this context is present from the very beginning; it has not been added retrospectively.

I believe in the value of slow and attentive work, but I do not think it needs a political justification. It does not have to be an act of resistance in order to be meaningful.

ATM: Returning to the conversation we began with: meeting you and your husband in Basel made us curious about the private life surrounding these very controlled public images. Artistic creation is so often presented through the mythology of the solitary artist, when in reality ideas are discussed over breakfast, objects are carried across rooms, opinions are exchanged, disagreements happen and somebody says, “No, move it slightly to the left.” How important is your husband’s eye to yours, and what happens when the two of you disagree about an image?

OZ: I am not sure I would want a creative partner in the full sense — someone with whom every artistic decision had to be negotiated. I really do need autonomy in my work: the freedom to follow my own thinking, to doubt, to change direction, and not to agree on every next step with someone else. Shared authorship requires two people to arrive at a single vision for a project, and that seems to me far from simple.

My collaboration with Mykola works differently. I work on the concept, form, colour, composition, and framing. Mykola has a technical background and works in IT. His engineering skills became especially valuable when I began creating forms for my still lifes that did not exist. Sometimes I know what I want but have no idea how to realise it in practice — and that is when he helps me find a way.

There are also moments when an idea comes up against the limitations of the available technology. Then we have to change the method of fabrication or find a different tool, and sometimes adjust the idea itself. Right now, for ex-

ample, we have decided to buy a different type of 3D printer because the capabilities of our current one are no longer sufficient for some of my ideas. Of course we disagree sometimes — how could we not? Mykola’s eye is important to me precisely because it does not necessarily coincide with mine. Sometimes I ask for his opinion because I want to understand how the same work looks from another point of view. If he does not like something, he says so directly, and I value that honesty enormously. I may agree and change something, or, on the contrary, understand more clearly why I want to keep it exactly as it is. In the end, the final decision remains mine.

In everyday life, of course, everything is closely intertwined: we both work, raise our children, coordinate schedules, and deal with countless daily practicalities together. At the same time, each of us has our own work and our own area of responsibility. Perhaps the most important thing is that we genuinely root for each other’s success. Mykola is always ready to help, and at art events he often speaks about my work more readily than I do myself. It is thanks to his knowledge and skills that some of my ideas have been able to take physical form. I feel very fortunate.

ATM: Your relationship with Galerija Fotografija feels particularly appropriate because the gallery approaches photography as a medium capable of moving into painting, sculpture, collage and other territories. What did you recognise in Barbara Čeferin and Galerija Fotografija that made you feel this was the right home for the work — and what has that relationship allowed you to do differently?

OZ: When I discovered Galerija Fotografija, I had already been living in Ljubljana for a little over a year. I was working on Forms and Plain Plane Cuts and beginning to look more closely at what was happening around me in the local art scene. I was struck by how close I felt to the work of the artists Barbara represents. It was a sense of affinity rather than similarity: I felt connected to the way the gallery approaches photography without confining it to a narrow definition.

I followed the gallery on Instagram. That is how Barbara noticed that I was also living in Ljubljana, and in January 2025 we met. She then told me that she had first seen my work at Photo Basel in 2024, in the book 100 Contemporary Ukrainian Photographers, presented at the fair by Form. Paris. The book included works from both of my projects. I like the fact that there was a kind of mutual recognition: I found the gallery without knowing that Barbara had already seen my work; she knew the work, but did not yet know that the artist who made it was living nearby.

Six months later, Galerija Fotografija presented my works at Photo Basel. The fair lasted a week, but I was only able to be there for the first two days. I was extremely nervous, above all about how people would respond to the work. During those two days, I heard many thoughtful and warm responses from very different people — collectors and art lovers,



Still Life with a Red Bottle_2025_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija



Dark Still Life_2025_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija

artists and photographers. It gave me confidence and the push I very much needed to keep moving forward. On the final day, when I was no longer in Basel, Barbara sent me a photograph and wrote, “This is what your wall looks like now.” Only one of the seven works was still there.

What I especially value in working with Barbara is the trust between us and the precision of her eye. I feel very close to her belief that the commercial side should support an artistic practice rather than determine its direction. She shares her observations in a way that leaves them as possibilities rather than ready-made answers. It was through this kind of dialogue that I decided to try presenting Forms in a large format. That changed the way I saw the series and helped me see scale not simply as a matter of presentation, but as part of the work itself.

ATM: We first discovered the work physically, at an art fair, rather than through a screen. That distinction increasingly matters. Your photographs can look almost impossibly perfect digitally, but standing before the prints one becomes much more conscious of surface, scale, colour and tiny irregularities. What do we misunderstand about your work when we encounter it only on Instagram or a computer screen?

OZ: First of all, the screen removes any fixed sense of scale from the work. On Instagram, a small print and a large one become the same rectangle, their size determined not by the artist but by the device. I print my works in two formats, and neither replaces the other.

In a smaller print, the nuances of the surface are still visible, but the act of looking becomes more intimate, and the composition can be taken in at once. In a large format, the status of the forms themselves changes: they exceed the familiar dimensions of vessels, acquire an almost sculptural presence, and relate differently to the viewer’s body. The same image in two sizes offers two different ways of looking.

A digital image communicates the composition well, but in ordinary viewing it tends to reveal only the most pronounced traces of fabrication. The finer lines of 3D printing, brush marks, and irregularities in the painted surface are largely lost. The paper itself is also important. For different series, we carefully select and test samples, because the same work can acquire a very different character on different surfaces. The texture of the print, the density of the colour, the tonal transitions and the visibility of the smallest details all depend on the paper. The digital version shows the image, but it cannot convey this material decision.

On a screen, my works can appear more flawless and more digital than they really are. In a physical print, the precision of the composition coexists with material irregularities and traces of how the work was made. And I am interested precisely in what went slightly wrong in the process.

So online, what we lose is not only certain details, but the experience of photography as a material object.

ATM: Finally, your work seems to ask us to reconsider something we have stopped doing: simply looking. Not scrolling, interpreting, identifying or consuming — looking. If you could remove everything unnecessary from the experience of standing before one of your photographs, what would you ultimately like the viewer to be left with?

OZ: I understand what you mean by “simply looking.” Today we often give an image only a fraction of a second — just enough to recognise it and move on to the next one. I would also like to slow down that movement and give the image some time back. At the same time, I am not sure that looking without thought is ever really possible. The moment we see a form, we are already comparing it with something familiar, naming it, and completing it. So for me, “simply looking” means looking for longer than recognition requires.

My objects are also easy to recognise, but something in their proportions, surfaces, or construction does not quite meet expectations. Recognition happens, but it does not exhaust the image, so the eye returns.

If everything unnecessary were removed, I would want the viewer to be left not with an explanation or a conclusion, but with their own attention — and perhaps with a doubt that does not necessarily need to be resolved. I do not want to determine what someone should feel or how they should read the work. If recognition does not become the end of close looking, that is enough for me.