

A LITTLE RETROSPECTION

Małgorzata Wielek-Mandrela is the author of numerous painting cycles which she has been creating since 2004. The exhibition entitled *From the archetype archive* presents paintings created within the last four years. As a small concession, a video work is included, entitled *Little grotesquerie or the slaughter of teddies*, which I considered an important point of reference for presenting the artist's painting.

In 2009 Wielek-Mandrela defended her PhD work entitled *Heart check*. I had the opportunity to get acquainted with the theoretical part of the thesis. This is why I know what kind of background accompanied the artist's stage of painterly/theoretical decisions. Its most prominent features are postmodernist literature with surrealist borrowings, underground American cinema of the 90s and Japanese horror novel. These serious, not to say sombre, roots were completed by pop culture iconosphere in its infantile/folk version. While I realise that setting out the border territory for an active young artist always carries with it the risk of overly hasty summaries and evaluations, I wanted to draw attention to the significant metaphor whose culmination in painting took place during another artistic edition. I see *Heart check* as a demarcation line, beyond which the tendency for using notorious motives from the kitsch arsenal fades and is replaced by generically more heavyweight landscape and portrait with a clear existential/psychological touch.

Teddy. The story of this character goes back to 2008, when the artist created the video work mentioned earlier in the text. The lovable, innocent cuddly toys were subjected to cruel profanation. With a decisive gesture, the artist used the tools prepared earlier to deprive them of the filling which gave them their form. The shreds were then "resurrected" in the form of application collages put back together illogically. The ripping process was accompanied by trance music and, at points, the babbling of a baby. Bringing together poles as far apart as the innocence of a child and the cruelty of the world of the adults, presented or implied, provokes a natural resistance, creates a force field of enormous emotional intensity and wide range of possible interpretations. While the disturbing black and white photographs of mutilated dolls, coloured with the hand of Hans Bellmer, inspired Paul Eluard to write a cycle of poems¹, the video work created by Mandrela might be considered as a visual version of Henri Michaux *My occupations*: "It's the rare person I meet whom I don't want to beat up. Others favor the interior monologue, stream-of-consciousness, art and dreams. Not me. I like to beat people up. (...) Notice how swiftly I grab him by the collar. Pow! Then I do it again. Bam! Pow! Then I hang him on the coat rack. Unhang him. Hang him. Unhang him. Then I toss him on the table, hit him, kick him, choke him."²

Mawkish pictures are easy to slight. They seem closer in style to sentimental inscriptions in an adolescent girl's album, with adages as weighty as the one postulating that "roses are red and violets are blue", than to "ambitious painting". The arsenal of iconic representatives includes: *Cross-stitched angel*, *Bear Madams*, *Deers and flowers* as well as *Mom and kid*. The unpretentious, soothing kitsch is – in the opinion of the artist – a placebo to sorrows. *If it makes you happy* sings Sheryl Crow with a grimace on her excessively made-up lips. The video includes the frames of idyllic landscapes, sunsets, deers, bears and waterfalls, following one another³. I know, it's rather unfortunate to put together an icon of the American pop culture with the artist of great stature that Henri Michaux was beyond any doubt. Let me justify this juxtaposition by calling on the artist's decision: she herself has no qualms about placing next to each other figures from children's fairy tales and authorities from the pantheon of great history of art: René Magritte, Vincent van Gogh, Max Ernst, Paul Delvaux, Francis Picabia and Giuseppe Arcimboldo or Sandro Botticelli. And what if we assume that employing motives from the kitsch repertoire is a provocation no lesser than the *Little grotesquerie or the slaughter of teddies* video work, mentioned before, and Cupid and Fawn are the fetish and the idol of the 21st century? While labelling kitsch with the pejorative terms such as "parody of katharsis" or "false consciousness", Theodor Adorno does not deny it certain therapeutic duties, stating that

¹ P. Eluard's poems *Jeux vagues de la poupée* concerned the second series of H. Bellmer's *Dolls* completed between 1937 and 1938. Published in the *Messages* magazine in 1938.

² H. Michaux, *Mes occupations*, translated by David Lehman.

³ S. Crow, *If It Makes You Happy* [online]. Available in the Internet: 10 May 2011: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyihQtBes1I>

“the need for amusement and all that is called relaxation is born in a society whose involuntary members would otherwise find it hard to bear the burdens and the monotony of their existence”⁴. The idealised, sickly sweet image of the world was, after all, the expression of a conscious protest against the bitterness of vegetation, an answer to the banality of the monotonous rhythm of the mundane in many periods of art history.

A LANDSCAPE IN A PORTRAIT. A PORTRAIT IN A LANDSCAPE – MELANCHOLY ACCEPTED

Human face. One of the most plastic elements of the body. Even the most illegible one bears traces of emotions that its owner has gone through, his physical states, her triumphs and losses. It is a mirror of thought processes. The expression of the eyes, the position of the mouth, scars and blemishes determine its unique expressiveness. Absence of mimical changes is seen with suspicion (especially at the age when plastic surgery offers such great possibilities). The complete inability to express emotion with one's face may be the symptom of a rare condition known as the Moebius' disease. This is how it works in life. How about art?

Maria Janion in her book: *Will you know what you have experienced?* responds to the charge of finding secrets and hidden meanings where there are none in the following words: “I say that to me mist is a sign and a signal, it is a conscious obscurity”⁵. In late Latin, “ex(s)istere” meant to appear, to emerge, to become, to visualise. The obscurity of human existence is realised (happens) in the conditions of layered languages and images, ambiguity of meanings. The first type of Wielek-Mandrela's portraits are faces whose identities remain hidden. Ornamental patterns, labyrinthine motives, calligraphic signs, hair covering the whole of the face or the reverse – the face emerging from the multiplicity of traces – all of these are perhaps a sign of the absence of self-consciousness. This is the stage (if we use the metaphor of journey) during which we go deep into the external and the internal reality in search of ourselves. In a moment, however, the borderline situation will take place, which will determine the quest, which in the case of paintings by Wielek-Mandrela will happen during the next portrait stage.

In the 1960s Witold Lutosławski composed a three-part piece inspired by the poetry of the already quoted Henri Michaux. In it, the composer reflected on the existential journey. The last part of the piece, entitled *Repos dans le malheur* deals with the condition of a defeated man, resting after the experienced suffering (I would paraphrase the title as “melancholy accepted”). This is the kind of association evoked by the portraits from the latest period – *Facial composites*. Grey, brown, dark faces stand out distinctly from the background, suspended like holograms in the neutral space of impersonal ochre. Supposedly inspired by the crime columns, they bring blatant associations of the coffin portrait. The heads presented in *Facial composites* are always displayed *en face*, always staring suggestively towards the person looking at the painting. The characteristically thickly painted lines, organic in style, flow out of the mouth or the eyes, press on the head, enveloping it like solidified swellings of memories. What's significant – despite the fact that their form resembles the blood circulation system, their colour is cool blue. Within the area of the *Castrum doloris* structure, besides the coffin portrait, attributes characteristic of the departed were placed. In the case of *Facial composites*, their absence is striking, and the *horror vacui* is replaced with emptiness, silence, something final, something on the other side.

And finally, some remarks about the landscapes. They are uninhabited, rather dark, and the vast majority of them are occupied by a claustrophobic clustering of succulent branches and leaves, pushing their way through the entire space of the painting. *The green landscape*, *The mountain landscape*, *The blue landscape* are painted with jerky movements reminiscent of the neurotic hand of van Gogh. *The lunar landscape II* is undoubtedly an homage to him. The landscape painting of Wielek-Mandrela, regardless of whether we are talking about images of heavy texture or landscapes painted in delicate, ornamental style (one finds those here as well) all belong to the category of the nocturne.

Nature and man - *sacrum* and *profane*, the tenacity of destiny and the helpless opposition attempt ending in a failure. Is it really failure? The final scenes of *Dead Man* by Jim Jarmusch show an oak boat

⁴ T.W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*.

⁵ M. Janion, *Czy będziesz wiedział, co przeżyłeś*, Warsaw 1996, p. 113.

floating into the boundlessness of the ocean. This is the lonely journey of William Blake, the last one he will make. On the shore stands his friend – a Native American by the significant name of Xebeche - “he who speaks loudly without saying anything.”

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