

## *Gesture and Matter*

A conversation between Marek Szczęsny and Gilles Altieri

**Gilles Altieri:** To begin this interview, Marek Szczęsny, could you tell us in a few words about your first contact with painting?

**Marek Szczęsny:** My first contact with painting was in Poland, in Radom, my home town, about 100km south of Warsaw. There I first met an artist who painted tiny little landscapes. He lived alone, entirely devoted to his work. First of all, I studied in a private art school. After leaving school, I headed for Gdansk where I attended lectures at the School of Fine Art. There was a group of students there, a kind of theatre-cafe club, who were developing different kinds of artistic practices. A group of well-known artists got together there, and it was there too that I presented my first works - posters and set design. Later I met a painter, Tadeusz Brzozowski, professor at the School of Fine Art in Poznan and he supported me and helped me with my first exhibition.

**GA:** So when you arrived in Gdansk, had you already decided that you were going to be an artist?

**MS:** Yes of course. That student 'club' was a very powerful force which brought together students from three cities - Gdansk, Gdynia and Sopot. We also published 'jazz' there in Gdansk, which was the first jazz magazine after the war, and a huge number of people came from all over Poland, including well-known artists. I was so happy to be a part of all that. However, on the other hand, I didn't feel very confident as an artist. I felt as though I might not be able to handle the pressure, so I decided in the end to leave Gdansk. The life I was leading there was so intense, physically and psychologically. So I decided to leave and to settle in Zakopane in the Tatras mountains, and there I began mountaineering.

**GA:** Can you tell us a bit about the kind of painting that you were making at that time?

**MS:** I was influenced by nature, the mountains, by silhouettes against a blank backdrop; I went mountaineering in the winter, I really like the snow. Those associations are still with me, that white-grey that I showed you.

**GA:** Tell me about Zakopane.

**MS:** It's a small town but it's really important to Poland. It's about 100km from Krakow and lots of artists and writers spent time there before the war. The region itself is beautiful, the

houses have a particular kind of wooden architecture. Now, sadly, it's over, the town has become too touristy.

**GA:** Are you a qualified mountaineer then?

**MS:** Yes, I was a mountain guide. I did five or six first ascents. The Tatras are not very high but in winter, there are some long and difficult routes.

**GA:** And then you left the group of guides to devote yourself to painting...

**MS:** Yes I really devoted myself to painting. I began to exhibit in two or three national exhibitions. Even though the political situation had begun to deteriorate there were still two 'salons' - the February salon and the March salon. They were national salons. Other painters and other artists from different parts of Poland were invited. I also participated in one of the biggest national festivals of Polish painting.

I continued my work but I wanted to see what was going on in Paris, in Berlin, in London. In Poland there was a lack of deeper and wider knowledge of painting.

**GA:** At that point, you were painting and at the same time working as a graphic artist, designing book jackets...

**MS:** And also from time to time, backdrops for the cinema. It was the point where I felt I needed to go and see what was happening in the West. I had a really unrealistic idea of the West. I only spoke a little bit of English and I knew France only through literature.

**GA:** And when you arrived in Paris, did you have any contacts who helped you to settle in?

**MS:** I had a few contacts. But I realised at a certain point, that I couldn't live in France because I didn't speak the language. In my case, emigration represented a kind of rupture with my own surroundings, with my friends, with a world that I had spent years constructing. For a new kind of integration to take place, takes a lot of time. Today I have a few friends, here and there, in different countries but I am and I feel outside any artistic community.

**GA:** How did you survive in those difficult times?

**MS:** I lived off odd jobs: I worked on a building site, I was a night watchman, I also did a bit of graphic design work.

**GA:** Maybe your past as a guide and alpine climber helped you physically, and mentally, to put up with those trials?

**MS:** Yes, I felt like I was able to bear those circumstances thanks to the energy that I had developed in the mountains.

**GA:** On your artistic journey, who are the artists who have affected or influenced you most?

**MS:** When I arrived in France, I knew I was lacking a much greater vision of painting, and this was the main reason for my coming to Paris. Later, I received several American grants. I travelled to the United States and visited museums and galleries. But if those experiences are reflected in my work somehow, they do not represent for me the essential, which is much deeper and is the result of a certain experience of life, which I try to set down, to give it pictorial form. So to answer your question, I would say Matisse, Marcel Duchamp, Yves Klein, Francis Bacon, Wladyslaw Strzeminski and the Polish Constructivists; the 50s in American art, notably Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. Among today's artists I'd think of Sean Scully, Julian Schnabel, Christian Boltanski.

**GA:** Among those artists, some of them seem harder for me to relate to your work than others. I suppose in a way that's normal - one can admire certain artists without being inspired by them. You mentioned Marcel Duchamp, in what ways has he affected or influenced you?

**MS:** In my case, my artistic life has been in two parts. The first is my Polish period and the second is what I found and discovered in France. Also, what I am doing now is a bit different from what I was doing before. In the beginning I was fascinated by the natural world but I had a sort of idea of the direction that I wanted to take. However, that idea was rather vague, not very clear. I was fascinated by Constructivism, notably painters like Malevich and the Polish Constructivists. I was very open, thirsty for knowledge of what was going on in France, in England, in the United States.

I looked at exhibitions that had taken place there, I also looked at Duchamp's work, what he had done, how he had located himself within those different artistic movements.

With Yves Klein, it was sort of the same fascination, because at that time I also wanted to do 'performances', politically-charged performances, but that was impossible because of the events and the censorship that was rife in Poland at the time. For example, the photos of Yves Klein where you see him jumping off a wall had a huge impact on me. That's why I mention those two artists. Of course, when I was young, I was fascinated by Matisse, and several years later I went to the big retrospective at Beaubourg. But it was really Duchamp and Yves Klein who had the biggest influence on me. Still today those two artists remain important to me, though I don't think all of that really influenced me directly.

**GA:** Yes indeed, it's hard to see any evidence of them in your work. What about Bacon?

**MS:** That's a painter who really struck me.

**GA:** There's no direct relationship between you but in front of both of your work the viewer is struck by the violence and the dramatic atmosphere that they give off. You mention Schnabel, and in fact I did sense a bit of him in your work.

**MS:** I saw only one big Schnabel exhibition at Beaubourg. Certainly there is always one significant thing about an era, a period. If one direction runs out of possibilities, the artist has to find a way out. Personally though, even though formally I have nothing in common with Jackson Pollock, I feel closer to him than to Schnabel. And having lived quite a long time in the mountains, I am fascinated with open space, not just the open space of the mountains though. For example, when I am in the countryside I love sitting down in front of the house and looking out at the space, not in a picturesque kind of way. What fascinates me is breathing, the earth, the light, the cosmos, the evening, the night.

Like Julian Schnabel, I am drawn to large-scale formats. At the same time, I also need to work with formats that relate to human sizes, it's a physical need. For example, when someone is a certain distance away from me, they lose something of what is essential. In painting it is the same, I have to feel myself physically in the canvas when I paint. I have to be able to embrace the whole thing.

My painting is about one metre by two, it's in that kind of size that I want to make things. To view space in relation to those physical dimensions. Maybe there is something of Schnabel in that but not consciously.

**GA:** The choice of Scully is interesting. Can you tell me about that?

**MS:** I saw Sean Scully's work for the first time when I was exhibiting at a gallery in Switzerland, in Zurich. I came across a gallery showing his work by chance. That had a very big impression on me.

It is impossible to say why one loves a painting. The second time, I saw his work in a gallery in Paris, just one work. I think that he also thinks about space but in a different way.

**GA:** For a long time I have thought that your paintings were deliberately not figurative. However, the drawings that you made to accompany the poetry of Jean Portante are figurative and that changed the way I saw your work. Now I feel like at the heart of your work there is always some element that is taken from reality. Can you say a bit more about this?

**MS:** I don't want my work to have that kind of association, however I am also not searching for new kinds of abstraction.

Sometimes I want to send a simpler signal to the viewer. But what signal, what form? I see myself a bit at the forefront of real forms. I did have periods where I painted tables, but it's true, I'm afraid of getting too close to figurative painting. So everything is located between those forms that come out of me, undefined, quite abstract, hard to identify, and a more direct kind of communication. I don't want those forms to suggest real forms but on the other hand they have got to signify something. So it's a really difficult question. There are probably not many viewers who feel that though.

Maybe now that is going to change; I'd like to move towards something deeper. But I do oscillate between those two poles.

**GA:** What part does forward planning play in the way you approach making a new work?

**MS:** Some people might think that I have a system, that I can see exactly what the finished work will be, that I make a little sketch version and afterwards attack the canvas, that from beginning to end I know what I want to say. But personally, I don't believe in the result of that kind of work, and, indeed, I am probably not even capable of it, even though I am sometimes fascinated by artists who work like that. For me, a kind of uncertainty is necessary. Something has to come out of me that is uncontrollable. I don't mean to say that I am a pure Expressionist, that I don't think about what I am doing, that I don't create a kind of idea that finds its reflection (expression) in the painting. But, I want that to come out without planning ahead, I need to take that risk. What interests me more is the inability to create my vision, rather than the actual creation of it.

**GA:** The colour palette you are using at the moment is very restricted - white, black and a few earth tones.

**MS:** Yes those are the latest colours, the most recent. At the beginning it was richer if I can put it that way. I wanted to oppose what we see in contemporary art. I wanted to find my own meanings in colour. Sometimes I go to extremes though.

At times for me it is colour that creates an atmosphere. I would like the painting to emit more energy because of the colour. I am working on this problem at the moment, to make the surface of the painting more energetic.

**GA:** Can you talk me through your creative process then?

**MS:** So for example, in this big white painting, I wanted to create a space, paint the pathway with vertical forms, it's an initial idea, and then in the course of working on it there is always a degree of emotion and analysis, until the moment I feel exhausted. I start to have doubts, that lasts a long time, I paint, I stop, I start again... very often I ask myself what's next? What direction should I take? Should I continue or not? My way is already mapped out but I don't know what the different stages are. Sometimes I feel that everything has been said in painting. But it's exactly that which intrigues me and motivates me to continue.

**GA:** I imagine your very gestural approach and the spontaneity that you show in your work must bring a number of dramatic changes to the structure that you initially had in mind. Can you say a bit about that aspect of your creative process?

**MS:** Preparatory work is sometimes a very long process, but mainly in that initial conceptual phase. I never make preliminary drawings or sketches.

Then comes the process of basically organising the surface. What is very important for me is the kind of dynamic transformation that I get through the gesture, but at the same time there is reflection and analysis. For me, making the painting is only a part of the creation. More important is the time that has accumulated within me. The time of reaction, experience, observation. In my work I try to deal with the eternal problems of mankind. It is only afterwards when the final work has come out that the initial desired effect is either partly achieved or proves satisfactory.

**GA:** You often include scraps of paper, stuck or simply placed in your work, as well as pieces of wood. What kind of role do those play? Do you use this when you feel stuck, to get out of a dead end, or is more systematic and intentional?

**MS:** At first, when I arrived in France, I made works on a small scale, I worked a lot on the drawings and afterwards I began ripping up these drawings. I don't know exactly when this ripping up of things began, but I tried to use it as an integral part of my work. Then going from those little, small-scale works I tried to transpose this technique onto larger-scale work. Of course I would like to use other materials but I don't have the means for this. On the other hand, I am not bound by these little scraps of paper, I just always opposed a certain kind of formalism, I don't want to be limited just to the researching of forms. I would like both of those classic elements to be present always: content and form.

**GA:** So it doesn't just become an aesthetic exercise.

**MS:** Exactly.

**GA:** In your way of ripping things up there is a feeling of violence and spontaneity. That must involve both risk-taking and the intervention of chance.

**MS:** Yes! I think I am part of the collage. But by the act of tearing things I never wanted to make a collage.

**GA:** In the presence of your work, one gets a sense of energy, power and violence, which strikes the viewer on first sight.

**MS:** Yes of course. We spoke earlier about the different associations the colours have. And through the gesture, through a certain kind of brutality in the act of painting, I wanted to give a sense of energy to the picture surface.

**GA:** Obviously this brutality and this violence are extremely controlled because your work is very precise and subtle. The 'mise-en-scène' and the composition are very highly worked. So how does the encounter between these two opposing forces work for you? On the one hand the spontaneity of the gesture, the brutality and loss of control that you demand, a kind of trance-like state, and then the control that you exercise over the different parts of your work.

**MS:** I am more or less on 'automatic pilot' though there is a kind of control all the same. A painting has to have power and at the same time it needs to be a bit contemplative also. And there you have two extremes. Contemplation requires a kind of calm. I don't want to head towards pure uncontrolled expression. The first layer and the first surface are quite expressionistic and then I calm things down a bit.

**GA:** Do you work on just one canvas until it is finished, or do you work simultaneously on several canvases at a time?

**MS:** No, never simultaneously. First of all I don't have the means. I work painting by painting. Not necessarily right to the end because sometimes I can't get there - I leave it and if the result is not satisfactory, I destroy it completely.

**GA:** You destroy it? You don't rework an unfinished canvas in order to paint something else over the top of it?

**MS:** In a way, reworking a canvas is my whole process. Yet at the same time if I feel that my work is missing a kind of freshness, then I don't fake it, I don't scrape it off, I don't 'cook' it, I don't try to get it back. The painting has to keep its energy, its charge, I hate paintings that have been retouched.

**GA:** Yes, but you could find that 'freshness' by starting out on an old canvas and painting over the top.

**MS:** Yes that sometimes happens. I actually really like Eugene Leroy's work and that's how he does it, but it's impossible for me, it's contrary to who I am. Also, I really hate fine painting. Painting needs to have a certain substance, but this substance also has to have its limits.

**GA:** The various 'strata' in the paint, layers one on top of the other, give the viewer several possible ways to read your work.

**MS:** Yes that's because of the depth, a certain depth.

**GA:** I'd call your work candid. I mean by that, that the paintings offer themselves to the viewer just as they are, without pretence. They hide nothing about the way they were created. The viewer can follow the different phases of them at their own pace, can see the doubts, the difficulties encountered, the dead ends that you found yourself in and the solutions that you discovered. The viewer can move around in your works, scour them to find various meanings, read them differently. It's a kind of painting that needs to be consumed slowly and over time and which requires active participation from the viewer.

Your painting is intended for a public of passionate lovers of art, who love painting for itself, who have a sensual relationship with paint, physical as much as intellectual.

The idea of the viewer - does that enter into things for you? The same question was asked of Robert Ryman and he replied: 'I paint for myself, and if it pleases me, eventually it will please someone else.'



**MS:** I can agree with that idea, that what pleases me might also please a viewer, but there is always a huge difference in the way communication is established. The most important thing for me, the basis of communication, is the education that one has received, the books and poetry read, the people with whom one has talked about art, how life has unfolded and what we still expect from it.

If these elements diverge, it is very difficult to establish a true means of communication, particularly in seeking out the avant-garde. And it often happens that after an artist gives a large part of his life over to his work, in a certain direction, immersed in his quest, the public can't follow because they didn't have the same personal journey. I think the viewer has to make an effort though, that's the way we raise the level of our quest, our thoughts, our art.

In art there must be a cosmic component. There has to be deep motivation to accomplish something and not just seek out aesthetic pleasure otherwise one may as well just play sport!

Art needs to move people. I am not talking about politically-engaged art because that is too linked to an ideology. The painted surface should move us in a more universal way, one could define it as an exhortation to reflect on ourselves.

**GA:** Today, the most cutting edge forms of contemporary art have broken with the traditional art history. The umbilical cord that linked past generations to one another is more or less cut. You, on the contrary, have decided to stay with painting and the risks that you take, your daring, are all purely pictorial. That doesn't really fit in with the taste of the times and it requires of the viewer some ability to understand and appreciate your work. Today's public perhaps has no great expectations of painting and no longer possess the necessary reference points for understanding.

**MS:** In that question there are probably several elements that go beyond the remit of this interview. I am not someone who combines life and art at high speed. And the world now operates at high speed. Sometimes I feel like I am not able to get on that train. However, one can also ask oneself: why do I want to get on it? It has to go and I have my own pace. On the other hand, I would like to be able to recapture time.

I am coming back to this idea of means for a third time. If I had the means, I would probably keep the essential part of what I want to say but express it in a different way. At the moment, I can't allow myself to do that. And on top of that, even though I have things to suggest, almost no-one would have the confidence to give me the means to express my thoughts. Therefore, I am obliged to do what I can. Maybe that's a pity but at the same time that can also be an advantage.

**GA:** Working within constraints, within certain limits imposed upon you, whether they be political or financial, can be really difficult, but, conversely, it is easy to see that in different areas of art often the greatest works are born in periods or in situations where their creation was very constrained.

I would now like to evoke the dramatic quality of your work. Arrabal said about this, that you could be a Spanish painter, and it's true that Spanish painting is often dramatic, one thinks for example of Goya, Picasso, Tapiès. But I don't feel like it is the same dramatic context, and by my reckoning you are closer to artists like Baselitz and Kiefer, to mention two artists that come to mind.



**MS:** I don't think geography has any part to play in art. But at the same time, it can be regional. Do you know what I miss here? I love the south and I don't often get the chance to go there. But I miss winter too, and in Poland the most beautiful season is the autumn. Here barely a few days separate spring from winter but there, it feels like it is still winter but that day by day spring is approaching. It rains a lot, it's a very depressing kind of atmosphere.

I think that for a man from the south, it must be very difficult to live in a northern country. There are some great paintings that were influenced by the colours of the south, but then again, human life can express itself no matter where it is.

Where one lives is not important, it's how one lives. The associations of colour that can be found there are also colours, and I don't see why one couldn't express oneself in a different climate.

It's really extraordinary what is happening in contemporary art, not just in painting but art in general. One particular way of thinking about art, painting. Metal, asphalt, carbon, other materials have all been used but that shocks and the public is always a step behind, doesn't follow. Sometimes that irritates me, the fact that everyone associates me with sad colours. The problem is not so much the colours that are used but the way they function and what is being said.

**GA:** Do you feel close to those artists I mentioned? For example that dark and menacing power of Kiefer when he painted those huge buildings. I find that, in different ways, you say the same things. As far as I am concerned, I feel the same emotions as I do in front of Baselitz's works. The viewer is confronted by human tragedy.

**MS:** I don't agree about Baselitz but Kiefer, yes. Though, especially at the beginning, he had a really quite clear ideology in his painting. I can't really say why my painting is dramatic, but I know that it is. A great Polish poet once said: 'for there to be drama, there must be silence.' If I express drama, it's a universal one. It's not because my grandfather was in the trenches that I can hear the noise of the bombing.

**GA:** J.L. Borges considers it a very French propensity, to want to locate an artist in relation to his predecessors and his peers, to put him into one of art history's little boxes. I am going to give in to this national obsession anyway, and would like to ask you what place you would assign your work in the midst of all the different contemporary movements?

**MS:** I feel outside of any movement and it's probably because of what I do, which is outside any current tendencies towards conceptual art. It seems to me that in contemporary art over the last few years an important shift has taken place, and not just in the way of conceiving new forms. Art has left its former aesthetic role behind, gone beyond it. Obviously engaged art has always existed. But in art, there must always be a cosmic component and it must move people. I think we must remain hopeful. I know artists fifteen years my junior, who understand contemporary art the way I do, and that reassures me. But, I repeat, I am outside of these contemporary movements. It is very hard to locate oneself. Maybe I am more contemplative, more attached to certain ways of making art, of thinking about art, of thinking about the human condition. I remain faithful to the ideals of my youth. I admit I do not often think about this very French kind of question.

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