

What does it mean to be a painter?

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In art the banality of contact with the everyday is something extraordinary when at the sources of artistic experience there appears an unknown coincidence, some chance encounter, an unexpected tangle of events, or simply an unconventional glance. Among the greyness there are flashes of colour. Filling the canvas with forms means the gluing together of those biographical crumbs that have stuck in memory as extraordinary into some unfinished whole; it means emotional returns to one's past, the wrestling with the emptiness of the present time and reality, it is a long journey through the world in the uncertainty of having some support in life and in the search of the precision of the shape of painting. We know about it from anecdotal bits and pieces, from beneath which emerge sketchily drawn, as if with charcoal, silhouettes of people, close planes drenched in smoke and jazz, monotonously snowy white surfaces, unlimited vistas divided with a chaotic line of mountain ranges. Biography becomes filled with the smell of turpentine of painters' studios, with the stench of emigrants' digs in New York City and Paris, and with the breath of the glamorous avenues of the world's metropolises.

Among all this mess there is a place for Zakopane, which in this biographical journey is an emotional compass point for the unfound whole. Biographical mythography concretises the world whose true dimension cannot be grasped in the coldness of rationalised words but rather in the heat of an inexpressible emotion. In spite of the fact that Marek Szczesny likes to talk, the sense of his art and life eludes discourse. Biography returns to the beginning which cannot be expressed with words, to the non-existent commentary. Here, too, begins the biographical circulation which silently decomposes the emotional world of concrete values subjected this time to ethical scrutiny.

In Marek Szczesny's opinion the circle of observation, reflection, impressions, and expression, in other words of existence and experience, can be completed neither by human life nor by artistic creation. This is a constant circulation between myth, truth, deception, insatiability, pursuit, abandonment, discovery, uncertainty, and doubt. Art touches on all of those. Is it the sufficient reason, though, to become a painter?

In Marek Szczesny's paintings, executed on canvas and paper, forms lie in layers in order to emerge in the transparency of glazes or hide again in the thickness of paint. They also develop on the surface, their shapes mutually attracting or repelling. Sometimes they touch one another, thus creating chains of forms of uncertain balance. Other times they drip down together, as if left to their own devices. The almost monochromatic canvases bring out nuances of colour hues. Examples of reduced chromatic solutions are offered by the browns that are either broken with whites or saturated with reds, blues that move in the direction of grey or green, whites that are sprinkled with ochre or matt greys that acquire the depth of silver; there is also the blackness of the lines and shapes that saturates the backdrop or sounds flat on the surface. Some colours seem to have permeated the matter,

merging with the ground, while others retain their autonomy and glide on the surface. In the torn, frayed, and punctured papers the white colour of cardboard as well as the brown wrapping paper is the ground and the basis of a colourful construction with superimposed irregular ways of lines. As in the case of canvases, the lines on paper are painted with gesture, albeit with the precision of a surveyor; they cover the territory of the painting, delineate paths, sides of roads, devious routes, and highroads of a pictorial map that is full of depressions, ravines, and bulges.

In Marek Szczesny's work topography plays a significant role as a transfiguration of landscape and the place, infinity and closure. No wonder, then, that Szczesny has no trust in limits even if he does not abandon them. Shapes attached to the canvas, neither in the form of collage nor assemblage, transport a given artistic question beyond the frame of the painting, while in papers, never closed with an outlines, only the surroundings endeavour to define the fluid interior of a still. A question remains, though, whether there is no horizon in space and whether one can move with impunity over the surface. Posing this question, Marek Szczesny is no longer a conqueror who takes possession of foreign lands but rather a nomad wondering over established routes, the knowledge of which is tied with the burden of traversing them. The Earth, as a detached form, recedes from beneath the feet, each careless step might result in a fall into a chasm that lurks in paintings between detached shapes; the shade cast by dislocated cartons and by objects superimposed on canvases is not deep enough to bring reprieve. The wandering is the inner movement of shapes that try to define themselves; this is an extremely slow and painstaking movement. The eye needs time to perceive the spectral circulation of colours between the glow and the fading away, the kinetics of contracting and lengthening lines, the almost imperceptible rise and fall of irregularly cut fragments of tin sheet and torn papers. This is the rhythm of the pulse and the movement of the painter's hand.

What does it mean to be a painter nowadays? What does it mean to cover canvases with pigments? What does it mean to confront vision with the surface? These are not so much questions aiming at dispelling doubts but rather at returning to the basic inquiry about the condition of painting in the world of alluring media, global spectacles, virtual spaces, and ubiquitous ideologies. In Marek Szczesny's work this is not so much an aesthetic but an ethical problem, which does not allow him to surrender to the tyranny of the contemporary, the common masquerade of artistic complacency and philosophical slumber, the creative sham that strives to be nothing else but a pretence of a non-existent reality. Marek Szczesny likewise is full of reserve towards those means of the political and humanistic critique of the world which, while exercising the right to document reality, fall into the trap of involvement and make a fetish out of reality.

Painting founded on ethics, says Szczesny, is an art of constructed form, with a history that needs to be processed and a metaphysics that must be fathomed. Processing painting, a constant process of dismounting and piecing anew, is not, then, in Szczesny's art an abandonment of the contemporary territory, but of a difficult attempt at settling down there in a different way. This is not a question of taking root but of an unattainable balance between the current place and the non-placement (u-topia). This is a territory that is not too well defined, torn or glued together, punctured with holes and patched up. Contemporaneity understood in such a way, close to Szczesny's heart, is a balancing between the current and memory, which justifies the current in circular returns, crossing lines, shapes superimposed on one another like carbon copies, in the layers of colours that

shine through. If memory is of a universal dimension, it encompasses the entire anthropology of painting, from the magical imprint of a hand on a cave stone and a phantom presence in the Fayum portraits through rationalisation of vision in the modern illusion, to the sphere of spiritual cosmos and the screen of libidinal pulsations in 20th century art. If memory has a universally human dimension, it contains pain and joy, faith and blasphemy, truth and falseness of man, recognition of the Other and hatred toward the Foreigner, the time of truce and the tragedy of wars. If memory has an individual character, it becomes lost in well-known landscapes and labyrinths of houses, among people close to us and the faces we recognise, in the moments we have experienced and those that have remained only potential.

What is remembered (invisible) becomes visible during the creation of a painting. Memory becomes detached from time and becomes transformed into a perceived experience of the surface. An imaginary story is lost, the sensuous form gains shape, and the invisible moves into the territory of very existence. In this fundamental process of structuralisation is shaped the wholeness of the visible and the invisible. Merleau-Ponty writes as follows,

When I say, then, that all the invisible is visible, that perception is non-perception, that awareness has its punctum caecum, that vision invariably means seeing something more than one sees, we should not imagine this to be addition to the visible, defined precisely as being-in-itself, of something invisible, which would be an objective absence, i.e., an objective presence somewhere else, a being somewhere else; rather than that we should understand that the very visible contains the invisible.

In Marek Szczesny's art this is the crucial problem. On the one hand, it allows him to encode the invisible in systems of significations, enabling him to transform the visible into an artistic set of forms. On the other hand, it provokes a question about the feasibility of reading this intimate, personal language in universally understandable symbols. What is the way that leads from the perceived surface of a canvas, full of artistic tensions, to the world of events? How does the white line breaking somewhere in the painting reveal the invisible tragedy of a particular human being? In what way does the history of our life emerge from the visible fissures between colours? It is not a question of complicating literary narration, a simple or complex metaphor that refers us always to something other, which is not 'mine' and personally experienced. It is a question of an unrepeatable and thus unique being, which is encompassed by art and as a result made durable. Does painting, in posing a philosophical question, exceed its competences? The phenomenology of perception assumes as the precondition of cognition the participation of a human being in the world, an idea that Szczesny no doubt supports. This participation results not in a sentimental experience, but should consist of a creative expression, identical with the primordial experience of existence and its fathoming.

Coming back to what I claimed earlier, the relation between the eye and painting is by all means justified, then. This is a relation between 'my' place and non-place, the very core of existence. We can also name it differently; where there used to be avant-garde utopia, in Szczesny's painting we deal with a metaphysical question. It is here that is visible both the historical and philosophical bent in Marek Szczesny's art. Now he would like to, while not abandoning the phenomenology of perception which describes the experience of the world in terms of expression and body, arrest in a creative act, i.e., in his practice as a painter, the

foundation of existence, to reach the point where existence comes into being. As Heidegger wrote in his 'Letter on Humanism':

Metaphysics knows the trace of being only as an image of what is present in its >appearance< (idea), or critically, as what subjectivity looks into through categorical representation. This means that the truth of being as a trace itself is concealed from metaphysics. This concealment is by no means a lack of metaphysics, but rather a treasure of its own wealth which is concealed from it and at the same time revealed to it. The trace itself is being, though. Within the participation of metaphysics in being, only the trace opens up a field of vision, from which the present coming into being touches man coming into being in its presence, so that man himself, through perception, is able to touch being.
