

Bożenna Biskupska, *Epiphany of Time*

Tom Jeffreys

The paintings of Bożenna Biskupska do not give much away. Her paintings range in scale from A3 works on paper to canvases the height of a human. Within the edges of each work is a painted border. This rectangle runs inside the edge of the material substrate, forming a second border between the 'inside' of the painting and the 'outside' that is the rest of the world. There is therefore a slim no-man's land between the border and the edge. Each work is unframed, for it contains its own frame within it.

Biskupska refers to these works as *klatka*. Each is dated but otherwise untitled. *Klatka* is the Polish for 'cage', the wooden box or wire mesh that imprisons an animal or bird inside but that also provides a measure of protection from, say, the neighbour's cat. *Klatka* can also refer to a square or a staircase. There are a number of Polish towns and villages named *Klatka*.

Biskupska's *Klatka* paintings revel in their own materiality and in the relationship between materiality and time. Biskupska applies paint in thin washes and thick, crusty layers. She rarely uses brushes, preferring instead a wide range of tools about which she says little. The key ingredient then is age. Each painting is left, often for years. Biskupska dates them by the year in which they were started, rather than completed. *Epiphany of Time*, Biskupska's aptly named solo show at l'étrangère, London, is the artist's first exhibition in the UK. Many of the works date from over a decade ago, when the world, and the paintings it contains, were quite different. Today, paint leaches into yellowed paper, bleeds across decade-old canvases.

Standing in front of these works is a beguiling experience. Even among the dozen or so on show at l'étrangère, and even taking into account the work's highly restricted forms, there is so much to focus on. There is so much colour and texture: a jewelled teardrop of bright jade; a smooth stripe like blue and white china; cracks of black and gold like roots or nerves or tributaries. Gunboat grey. Fire-alarm red. Pond gunge yellow. One painting forms a blazing field of ripe yellow; another is very quiet – a small, off-white canvas marked only by broken stripes of lumpy cream. One border looks like bathroom sealant, but amateurishly applied, with beads of orange-brown resin, dappling the pale paint like mould. Another forms a jaunty cottage window. Formally, these paintings share something with the colour field painters of the 1950s and '60s: Mark Rothko (1903-1970) and Barnett Newman (1905-1970). Several works feature large expanses of rippling darkness. These dark (violet not quite black) surfaces undulate with tiny contoured ripples like poured chocolate or the unique ridge contours of every human finger.

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The *Klatka* paintings did not emerge fully formed into the world. Rather they evolved quite directly out of the sculptural practice for which Biskupska is best-known. In the 1990s, Biskupska began to exhibit her human-scale sculptures of one-legged figures

inside cages. An early painting (*Klatka*, 1991) shows one such figure reading while kneeling atop a cage-like plinth or pedestal against a blue background. This work reminds me of Francis Bacon (1909-1992), whose warped figures were often framed by cage-like interiors. Like Bacon, the *klatka* is not only an apparatus of restriction or confinement but a visual aid, a device upon which or through which a figure may be viewed.

The Polish word *klatka* can also refer to a photographic frame, a single exposure in a roll of film. Biskupska, incidentally, was born into a family of photographers. In 1999, Biskupska's husband, artist-photographer Zygmunt Rytko, produced extensive photographic documentation of seven one-legged sculptural figures that she had produced. This documentation was then co-opted and represented as a work of art by Biskupska, (*Packing*, 1999) when she exhibited these photographic plates in seven rows within a large, cage-like structure. Seven is a recurring number in her work. Installations such as *Packing* suggest that, for Biskupska, the two-dimensional is always in fact three-dimensional. The *klatka* is therefore not only a frame that demarcates individuality (for example, of the photographic image) but also part of a larger framework in which that individuality is rendered anonymous through systemic repetition and the ever-present possibility for (re)appropriation.

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Sometimes the paintings ask to be viewed from above. From this perspective, scale shifts dramatically. The mind turns them into maps, like those of Jasper Johns, or three-dimensional models of a landscape far away below. Browns bleed into a sea of sandy grey, like the waters of a wide estuary. Islands of blue half-submerged in frothy white. The Thames paintings of Michael Andrews (1928-1995) spring to mind. Or, more recently, the urgent ecological imperatives in the aerial photographs of Edward Burtynsky (b.1955). Viewed from this angle, those fascinating dark ripples suddenly seem geological: tiny mountains folded upwards by the shifting of a thousand tectonic plates. This in fact is how the works were painted – laid horizontally rather than upright on an easel or hung on the wall. You can tell by the way the wet paint has run down the sides of the canvases. The artist, and now the viewer, looks down upon a world below.

If the paintings are maps, then what do these borders denote? Unlike those of a map, Biskupska's borders are neither thin nor neatly annotated. They leave gaps or bleed into the world around them. Each is thick, multiple. They shift like Poland's own borders. Biskupska, after all, lives in Sokołowsko, just two miles from the Polish border with the Czech Republic. The village was part of Germany until 1945. In Sokołowsko, Biskupska has her studio in a nineteenth-century former tuberculosis sanatorium. Thanks to Biskupska, the elaborately crumbling red-brick edifice now plays host to popular arts festivals. Like her paintings, this home is a borderland marked by time: both by decay and by the energy of new growth.

If Biskupska's paintings are maps, her borders need not only be those of the nation state. I see, alternately, a hedge around a suburban garden; a fence around an abandoned factory or an empty patch of land awaiting the developer's bulldozer; the

legal demarcations that protect a national park such as Broumovsko, just over the border in the Czech Republic. The bureaucratic distinctions and historical accidents which ensure that one human is a citizen of the Czech Republic, another of Poland. But maybe I'm just seeing things. Each *klatka*, is just paint after all. Paint subjected to time.

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Another way to attempt to read Biskupska's paintings is diagrammatically. This is especially apt for the works on paper, which are more minimal than the canvases. Within each of the thick-painted borders is an either/or. Either a long diagonal line (sometimes from top left to bottom right, as if marked by the artist's right hand; sometimes from top right to bottom left, as if by her left) or nothing. A blank, empty expanse. Or rather an expanse that is not blank but full of its own marks, textures, colours... Nonetheless, this logic of the binary either/or – the presence or absence of the diagonal line – provides another link between Biskupska's paintings and her sculptural practice. In a series of works entitled *Delineating the Image* (1995-2010), thumb-sized bronze figures are arranged in repeated patterns on rectangular, wall-mounted blocks of concrete. Each pattern is based on an order of seven, and each location in the pattern is constituted either by the presence of a figure or by its absence.

Unlike the paintings in all their textural glory, Biskupska's sculptural works point towards an altogether more austere philosophy of existential presence and absence. Each figure is unique: every one individually formed in clay by Biskupska before being painstakingly hand-cast in bronze at a specialist foundry. But each inhabits a highly repetitive, binary system of existence and non-existence. Life and death are systematised, mechanised, codified. Much of Biskupska's early work reads like attempts to schematise a fictional runic language. Cages are not always physical. Language, culture, religion, economics, geopolitics, the law: each can form

one of Biskupska's cages – not simply a prison but a frame for the conditioning, understanding and self-expression of each individual.

In the paintings, each diagonal line – like the sculpted figures – is an assertion of individuality, presence, life, meaning, being itself. But the paintings are more exuberant. Or at least they are not always bleak. You get the sense of an artist in love with the materiality of paint, its tactile fissures, cracks, ripples... Even those works without diagonal lines are far from empty. Rather they testify to the possibility – indeed to the existence right there in front of you – of a world without the diagonal line and whatever it represents or embodies. A world come to terms with absence and loss, that remains bountiful without the need for identity, self-presence, being, sense, order... maybe even life itself.

Tom Jeffreys writes about art for publications such as *Apollo*, *art-agenda*, *Frieze*, *Monocle*, and *The Telegraph*. He is the author of *Signal Failure: London to Birmingham, HS2 on Foot* (Influx Press, 2017) and is working on a new book about birch trees in Russian art, landscape and identity.

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