

ANTONI MALINOWSKI ORACLE

Ken Artspace, London
10 June – 8 July 2023

Antoni Malinowski in conversation with Martin Crimp

MC *Antoni, each of these beautiful and mysterious paintings has the word “oracle” in the title. The meaning of an oracle — whether delivered in words, or through the movement of birds or of leaves — was notoriously ambiguous. Can you say something about what an “oracle” means to you?*

AM The paintings are a kind of spatial construct — and their inner intangible deep space an echo of mythical space — something unknown, forgotten, impossible to retrieve. They are antidotes to the weird and darkly disturbing times we are living through — what Roberto Calasso calls “The Unnamable Present” — namely the superficial one-dimensional layer of pixels that are presented to us by the various media as Reality.

The pandemic altered our perception of time and space. Future stopped. Time stopped. Instability became standard. There was a necessity to establish new base-lines, pointing to a mythic time, outside of individual memory. The layers of brush-strokes excavate (in the Freudian sense) this ambiguous silent space: a presence, a speechless oracle.

Perhaps this spatial entity through some inner reverberation may radiate a glimmer of hope.

MC *Three of these pictures are characterized by the presence of a floating translucent “veil”. You’ve described to me how this part of the painting must be executed at speed and in a state of tension. Tell me something about the physical, technical process of creating this “veil”. How would you describe its function in the work?*

AM Temporal contrasts are as important in my work as chromatic shifts. There is the slow layering of brush-strokes and then a very quick application of a larger patch of colour. In the Oracle paintings, those shapes or veils are painted with an interference pigment. This makes a strong contrast to the background painted with traditional pigments which absorb some and reflect other spectral wavelengths. The interference pigment doesn’t absorb wavelengths – it bends them and scatters in three different directions. My light-sensitive pictorial instability is painted with contemporary materials, but echoes pre-Renaissance gold paintings and mosaics — while new technical possibilities lead to discovering new sonorities, new spaces, new colours.

MC *In the largest painting here, Shimmering Oracle, the viewer is confronted by what might be the ghost of a garden. How did this painting come about?*

AM I was staying in a friend’s house in Puglia and sketching in this ancient garden — strong light-patches, very dark shadows, and stones that resonate with the megalithic past. Pre-history is always present in Apulia, a land of dolmens and menhirs. The idea of a garden as a meditative space where culture and nature unite is itself ancient. The Roman wall painting *Il Giardino di Livia* is one of my mental talismans.

MC *And wall-drawings — a means of inflecting space — also form part of this exhibition. How does this relate to the paintings?*

AM Wall-drawings take me back to the beginning — the deep past, the unknown.

The painter Giorgio Griffa observed that painting as a discipline is a conversation with 30,000 years of painting history. It always begins on the walls of caves. In his film *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* Werner Herzog suggests that the paleolithic painters were also inflecting space — they were already conscious of the characteristic of human perception that it constantly shifts between 2D and 3D. This is inherent to our visual perception and cognition of reality.

The inflected space of the wall-drawings questions the painterly spaces of the canvases.

MC *As a dramatist I often see theatre allusions in your work: the frame, the curtain, magic light, and what you yourself call “the performance of space” — and now empty chairs appear, bringing to my mind Eugène Ionesco’s post-war play The Chairs. I believe these chairs have a private cultural significance for you. Am I right?*

AM I come from a chair culture. The chairs around the round table at my parents’ house were very important — as children we played under them, they framed our world. Then, the Warsaw cafés were full of chairs that had to be claimed. There were also the important paintings of Andrzej Wróblewski of people as if nailed to chairs.

At the same time there were the old photographs of café-chairs on Parisian pavements. Chairs in the Tuileries Garden. Café Florian’s chairs on Piazza San Marco. Chairs that signal both presence and absence.

When I first saw Pina Bausch’s *Café Müller* I was really struck by all those scenes with chairs. Her character was a sleepwalker, and in order to get the right movement-tension, she choreographed a way of walking through the space full of chairs, with her eyes closed, but with her pupils looking straight ahead. This is an extremely difficult and uncomfortable thing to do — normally when we close our eyes the pupils go down. Yet, this tiny alteration so influenced the movement of her entire body that it became uniquely tense and evocative.

In my own work I am searching for those subtle points of tension.

MC *And Ionesco?*

AM Ionesco’s chairs were also present in my mind as were the empty chairs depicted in the 6th century gold shimmering mosaics of the Baptistery of Neon in Ravenna. As in Ionesco’s play, they are still waiting for the final revelation.

—

Born in Warsaw in 1955, Antoni Malinowski’s most recent solo shows are *Light Triggered* (Ragged School Museum, London, 2018) and *Almost seen* (Assab One, Milan, 2018). His work is in many private and public collections, including London’s Tate Gallery. Architectural commissions include The Mathematical Institute, Oxford; Mosaic at Bryanston Street; and work for the Bush, Donmar, Everyman, and Royal Court theatres.

Martin Crimp (b. 1956) is a UK playwright. His play *The Country* is currently showing at Théâtre la Scala in Paris. *Picture a day like this*, a new opera with composer George Benjamin, opens in July at the Festival d’Aix-en-Provence.