

AGATA SZYMANEK

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

CONVERSATIONS



Edna Baud, Dobrawa Borkała, Bartek Buczek,
Jużtyna Górowska, Kasia Kukuła, Paulina Ołowska,
Liliana Piskorska, Marek Rachwałik, Agata Słowak,

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**Conversation with Paulina Ołowska translated by
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SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

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SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

AGATA SZYMANEK



The idea of striving to transform your soul Splendor Solis-style may inspire Polish artists, yet when you want to have an intimate relationship with your art, no treaties are necessary. The confessions of these artists about their relationship with magic and esotericism add depth to the discussion on contemporary human needs and magical thinking.

It is quite a simple reflection that politics and the specter of a global warming catastrophe have sparked a renewed search for a spirituality that differs from the official models. Some echoes of the national trance induced by esoteric TV celebrities in the 1980s and 1990s can today be found in people watching the same productions on streaming networks. It is obviously not the same type of esotericism as at the end of the previous century. To repeat after Paulina Ołowska, there is a connection between the new feminist turn in Polish art and the re-emergence of the search for magic and esotericism, which also affects the character of the search itself. One can choose to escape the capitalist, rational world, at least within the confines of one's artistic practice, or to reach for something deeper, to develop one's own philosophy of existence in accordance with one's internal needs. This is the direction taken by art that draws on magic and esoteric motifs in Poland, in the neighborhood of the scientific and deconstructive approach to the subject in Western European art. Obviously, the subjects that the artists refer to remain relatively constant (take, for example, romanticism), even though recently we have been able to observe the emergence of new forms and a Phoenix-like renewal. Within the broader, general human context, we see a tug of war between religious factions, as seen both in radicalization and the emergence of new religious forms such as

Kopimism or Terasem, and there are more and more followers of all religions.

The artists present extremely diverse views on issues related to spirituality. The key idea of the interviews was to define their position by looking at individual motifs in their works. Because of their general approach to magic and esotericism as well as broad references to the symbolism of alchemy, astrology, ceremonial magic and other eclectic systems, yoga, meditation and the use of psychedelics, the studies are merely an introduction to the subject. They are therefore a starting point for more detailed research.

The interviews begin with a conversation with Paulina Ołowska, who sheds light on the background of the seance with Alina Szapocznikow, explains the meaning of magic accessories in a photo session with Laura Morgan, and presents the character of “The Wise Woman” – a woman who knows. The author of *The Revenge of the Wise Woman* wonders about the relationship between magic and art, and shows the transition from “This is all magic” thinking to treating magic practice as a manifestation of religiosity.

Marek Rachwalik describes the reality of his paintings as, on the one hand, galvanized with the darkness of metal, and on the other hand as precisely constructed as a child’s Lego-block sculpture. This is the place where agro-techno golems and other creatures driven by some internal power levitate and radiate ecstatic power.

Liliana Piskorska uses magical thinking to oppose political demagoguery, contrasting the former with magical-nationalist thinking in the face of which one often feels powerless. The artist talks about her experiences in places of power, ritualism in the context of the activities of the SCUM group, and the functioning of oppressive

conspiracy theories which quickly permeate everyday language.

Justyna Górowska discusses the context of her incarnations as a water nymph. Their result is her involvement in performative actions combining environmental awareness (particularly of water pollution) and new technologies which in her opinion could build social justice. At the same time, by referring to a magical language, she puts forward the postulate of building a deeper relationship with the natural world.

Bartek Buczek dissociates himself from the search for esoteric depths and admits to using empty signs to expose esoteric conceit. He explains his relation with romanticism and melancholy and decides to break with them, to start treating lingering depression as something normal. In the meantime, he reveals the history of the longbow fraternity and of the making of black mass utensils.

In another interview, Dobrawa Borkała reports on her achievements with the breathing alphabet and talks about the close connection between her artistic activity, yoga practice, breathing practice, and therapeutic work. She references social projects aimed at bringing about greater sensitivity, including *Lunarium*, *Mszak*, and *Experimental Breathing Chorus*. She explains the sense of inner time and the difference between esoteric and ethereal qualities.

The painter Katarzyna Kukuła presents the history of her relationship with magic and indigenous sweat lodges which did not bring her soul positive relief but instead gifted her with visionary power. She also explains the symbol of sacred sexuality which has become her sigil. She talks about her new painting, *The Triumph of Life*, which shows that everything has finally fallen into place.

The next interview is concerned with art involving the construction of allegorical meanings through images, which in its ideal variant is intended for the soul, the rational faculty, and society. The artist Edna Baud draws attention to the need to communicate and refers to language operations that focus on the visual representation of books, signs, and letters in various forms. She also talks about the role of everyday objects which, despite their prosaic nature, can have a magical aura.

Agata Słowak discusses some elements of her master's thesis which explores various themes related to eroticism, gender, and feminism. She also talks about her supplementary diploma project – an installation made with sewn dolls, an old gynecological chair and hay, in which she compares the act of giving birth or abortion to a sabbath. She also mentions an artistic event which took place in the installation space and involved naked girls performing ritual gestures.

The artists' interest in magic and esotericism is not a superficial fashion; nor it is related to the detailed study of esoteric theories. Most of the time, it stems from experiences and practices propelled by an internal need. Similar themes can be found in the works of Zuzanna Janin, Agnieszka Brzeżańska, Aleksandra Waliszewska, Dominika Olszowy, Jakub Wojnarowski, Bartosz Zaskórski, Dominika Śniegocka, Vala Foltyn and others. An important event that highlighted the powerful influence of esoteric thought on art was Janina Kraupe-Świdorska's large-scale exhibition *Horoskopy i zapis automatyczny* (Horoscopes and Automatic Writing), organized by Paulina Ołowska at the Kadenówka in Rabka in 2019. Magic and esotericism are undoubtedly an area that requires tenderness

and sensitivity and may invite environmental, postcolonial, feminist and gender narratives, but also leaves room for sentimentalism and kitsch. It also has other, darker faces associated with the exaltation of hermetic concepts or casting out demons. As a sphere that may give one additional control over reality, it is sometimes the hallmark of an epoch characterized by uncertainty

☾ THE MOON

Artists can teach us the forgotten art of observing astrological bodies and remind us of their rich symbolism. Dobra Borkała and Samia have created the project Lunarium which reflects the way our emotions and behaviors (especially those related to the menstrual cycle) depend on the phases of the moon. The authors design a Moon mandala, a notebook that lets one observe the changes in one's body depending on the moon month. Images of the moon – in Kasia Kukuła's painting Full Moon 2 or Bartek Buczek's Winter series VIII – highlight its hypnotizing and mysterious influence. According to old beliefs, moonlight had a positive effect on vampires and drowned men and could also invigorate demons and cause madness. Nighttime is when the otherworld has more power to affect reality, so for example potions prepared at night are more effective.



138, 19,1 cm × 21,2 cm, 2019

☉
THE SUN

In Kasia Kukuła's painting *The Triumph of Life* a woman catches the sun sitting on a skull. In the eye of the skull one can see the moon, in its shadow, the universe and night. The painter used the symbolic distinction between up (life) and down (death) to convey a personal message about recovering from illness. The sun, whose attributes include divinity and masculinity, is seized by a female figure, thanks to which the two elements – male and female – are merged. The sun renews life and this solar renewal also happened to Kasia. The joint occurrence of the sun and moon, related to cyclicity, defines the internal time within the frame.



133, 15,2 cm × 12,2 cm, 2018



THE CIRCLE



144, 16,2 × 20,6 cm, 2019

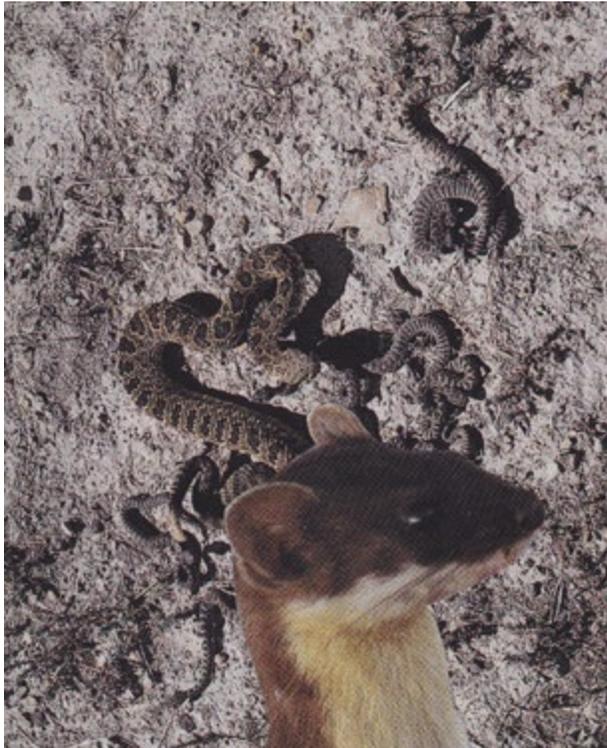
The use of tondo is poetically described by Edna Baud who compares it to placing a curtain between the viewer and the image. We understand the energy of geometry subcutaneously. The circle appears in Kasia Kukuła's cosmic objects; it is the sun, the full moon, the Earth being eaten, and the eye. Three mathematically perfect globes form Bartek Buczek's snowman, an ephemeral monument that monumentalizes itself through a connection to ancient idols (the word *bałwan* can denote both "snowman" and "idol" in Polish — transl.).

The circle has a strong association with rituals. It has mediational powers, it isolates from the outside and provides a bridge between worlds. This meaning is manifest in the salt circle made during the seance by Paulina Ołowska, who contacts Alina Szapocznikow with the help of the witch Anna. It also appears in collective rituals, in the dancing scenes in Kasia Kukuła's paintings, or in an artistic action relating to the sabbath (involving Agata Słowak's installation). The circle is the head — we can see it in Dobrawa Borkała's woven painting *Nourriture lumineuse* and in the self-portraits of Agata Słowak in a hat, reminiscent of a girl with a halo. The circle is the opposite of linearity and Dobrawa Borkała strives to achieve this circular feeling of time in her breathing scores. Circles can also be found in the rings of Bartek Buczek's super-villains and in the secret waves in his painting *Gerechtigkeit wenn einer den andern umbringt*. They resemble the spells cast on Faust in Friedrich Murnau's film, which looked like material loops or hula-hoops. Uroboros too, representing the idea of infinity and eternal transformation, takes the shape of a circle.

○ THE SNAKE

A snake, and sometimes a dragon representing the tamed forces of chaos, contributes to the creation of the world. At other times it is the ancient flesh from which life is born. The symbol has a dual nature: it is not pure because it refers to a sphere connected to the afterlife, it symbolizes the destruction of the paradisaical order and the emergence of time and death, but due to its phallic shape, it is also used in fertility cults and is sometimes equated with life.

The snake-female hybrid by Agata Słowak is a combination of male and female characteristics that spark reflection on gender. At the same time the figure evokes a dark eroticism. Uroboros, the snake devouring its tail, is a hermetic symbol of knowledge and healing, but used by Bartek Buczek in his publication *Too expensive, too weak, too difficult*. Several selected recipes for an art work possible in the hypothetical fantasy world, it becomes an empty symbol.

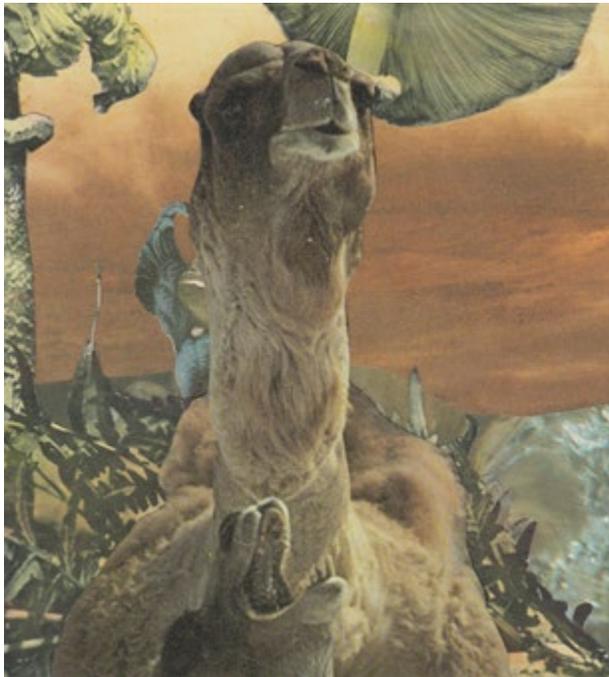


141, 8,9 × 11,2 cm, 2019



FUNGI

In the works of Marek Rachwalik, spotted bowls — toadstools — alluding to self-made garden decorations, connote unfettered creativity, but may also have been inspired by Yayoi Kusama's madness. Marek also uses networks of trypanophobic holes in his paintings which combine careful observation of nature and gaping cosmic spaces, representing the micro and macro level at the same time. Mushroom picking as a ritual appears in the paintings of Kasia Kukuła, while Paulina Ołowska organizes mycological theaters, i.e. meetings of artists devoted to mushroom picking, involving walks in the forest to draw from its vitality and the warm and humid weather. A walk in the forest is a symbolic venture into the wilderness, into the afterlife, while the moisture of mushrooms is associated with rotting and decay, that is why these elements of nature are associated with chaos and magical impurity. They are mediatory aphrodisiacs and can take us into other dimensions of reality.



131, 15,3 × 17,2 cm, 2019



THE WITCH



149, 9,7 × 12,7 cm, 2019

The witch Anna, invited by Paulina Ołowska to her seance, calls herself a witch in order to bring back the positive meaning of the word, which for many years in patriarchal discourse was equated with evil, fear, or sexual desire. Witchcraft was mainly associated with either impotence or fertility, as opposed to virginity which was believed to have apotropaic qualities. Witches, who mostly originated from the lower social strata, were in possession of knowledge and practices characteristic of the life of oppressed people. At the same time they stood out from their impoverished milieu on account of their unique skills and great powers. As non-normative characters, they could define themselves, which shows a close connection between magical practice and creativity, the latter requiring sensitivity and sensuality, but also the courage to engage in necromancy and to control chaos. Agata Słowak stages a sabbath using her installation, where naked girls perform ecstatic rituals. The witch figure combines feminist themes, environmental involvement, and can be emblematic of contemporary political activism, as in the case of the American feminist group WITCH.



THE SPELL

The incantation is integrated with a fragment of reality which it describes, and in magical thinking it has the same importance as an act. This is why pronouncing someone's name may evoke that person and the uttering of a bad prophecy needs knocking on wood. Liliana Piskorska talks about the significance of the words spoken by politicians which have real power to affect reality. Therefore, in order to disenchant the political arena, in the grip of Catholic-nationalist discourse, the artist organizes the action *Annihilate* by speaking, referring to a spell used long ago in the Polish lands: the ritual of enchanting. The spell needs to be repeated three times and symbols of elements such as earth, coal from the fireplace, or water have to be used.

A spell can take the visual form of a sigil – a symbol representing a person's magical purpose. Kasia Kukuła creates sigils of sacred sexuality, while Justyna Górowska uses a digital emoji spell that she sends to herself or others through text messages or online posts. The most important thing is the intention and strong desire, then one should choose the appropriate spell form, but one must be careful because the spell may come true as something that is not to our liking.





THE EYE

The symmetry of seeing and being seen can influence our behavior. This is why you should never stand with your back to the sun or the moon. Seeing other worlds and places, so something that exists but is not available to us in ordinary perception, becomes a real problem. We are helped in this by the many shapes and forms that impress themselves on our word through correspondence, by various substances, and by the gift of visionary sight. Multiplied eyes appear in the works of Kasia Kukuła, for example in the windows in the paintings of “inner spaces.” Thus, the eyes, like the stars, are themselves windows, vectors of mediation, and mirrors of the soul. In one of the paintings by Kasia Kukuła we see a skull with a third eye, representing preternatural vision. It refers to a more sensitive and intuitive way of looking. Our sight has such great power that it can really wreak havoc, that is why menstruating and pregnant women as well as wanderers were isolated from the community to prevent them causing any damage. They were liminal characters because of their condition of uncertainty.



107, 6 cm × 26 cm, 2018



THE DEMON

The night demons in Agata Slowaks' paintings *Do it like a dude* or *Scapegoat* have been shown in erotic poses. They can either be messengers of Satan or identified with Satan himself. Satan also appears in Marek Rachwalik's painting *Project of a sculpture of the leader of the Bestial War black metal formation next to the church in Kłomnice as the Roman god Pan*. In mythology, Pan, a human-goat hybrid, is responsible for fertility and associated with male sexuality. The goat is therefore the devil's and the witch's favorite. Bartek Buczek uses a goat motif in his design of a grate which could also be used as a black mass implement, but the author denies that there is any occult ideology behind it. Nowadays, the devil can be portrayed ironically without arousing fear. Kasia Kukuła paints harmless demons for fun; they allow viewers to connect with other worlds.



107, 6 cm × 26 cm, 2018



MAGICAL CONFLUENCE

CONVERSATION WITH PAULINA OŁOWSKA



Paulina Ołowska, Installation view, 'Janina Kraupe-Świdzka: Horoscopes and automatic writing', Kadenówka, Rabka Zdrój, phot. Paweł Dudziak, 2019

In 'The revenge of the wise woman,' you combine the figure of Emma Hennings, a saved sculpture from a fountain in Rabka, and Suzy Lake's performance. What is the meaning of this work?

The Title 'The revenge of the wise woman' originates from a poster promoting a performance at "Rabcio" theatre. I went there and found myself looking through an old, dark basement full of surprises with posters and remnants from several plays. It was there that I discovered the posters of Jerzy Koleccki. They were concise and depicted interestingly drawn characters. As, for example, Zdrowotek or Alice in Wonderland. And there I came across the poster of 'The revenge of the wise woman'. I don't remember how it looked, but I remembered the title and the fact that it was wonderful. Later, when I began translating the title to English, I talked to my friend and artist Bonnie Camplin and asked her if there is a word I could replace the expression the revenge of the witch with. In Polish, a witch can cast a spell yet she is not a vixen. Bonnie advised me to translate the title to The Wise Woman, so the woman who knows. The full English title then became The revenge of the wise woman, in Polish Zemsta wróżki. And as the name was taken from a theatre performance, probably for children, I thought that this would be my first exhibition connected to the revision of modernism. There used to be a fountain in the centre of Rabka in the 60s and a part of it was the sculpture Three Roses. I managed to find its remains in the junkyard. I renovated the sculpture, leaving some signs of time such as graffiti. At Foksal Gallery, where the exhibition took place, I arranged the sculpture together with my painting that depicted a model with ginger hair in a beautiful Yves Saint Laurent dress. The model was sitting on a chair, fully aware of her pose, looking directly at a spectator. Behind her

was an absolutely crazy painting by Francis Bacon. It was supposed to be a bit of a game: 'Be careful gentlemen, the revenge of the wise woman is about to begin!'.

How did you get the idea for a spiritual seance? Why did you choose this way of commemorating the work and life of Alina Szapocznikow?

Since I worked as a guest editor for the fashion magazine "Vogue", and it was to be the first art edition, I was given very practical instructions at the beginning: a dialogue between two female artists was to take place. I immediately said: 'Oh great, I'll do it with Alina Szapocznikow!' Why did I think of her? Probably because she had a very big and interesting exhibition titled 'Human Landscapes' at The Hepworth Wakefield in England. I thought that because this exhibition had received so little attention, the figure of Alina, who became very important for many people on an international scale, might be forgotten. I wanted to revive the awareness of Alina. Her works are very sensuous, she unites herself and her emotions through art. I also thought that with the help of a medium, i.e. a witch, I could start a dialogue. Ania – the Witch who runs the Akademia Magii – Akademia Duchy – calls herself a witch. She doesn't refer to herself as a vixen but as a witch because she wants to bring back a positive meaning of the word. I was sure of one thing, more or less intuitively, that I would need Alina's works for the seance. I thought that this could show female readers that art is not only an object but also something that happens. An object has both power and resonance. This is what I wanted to show through this daring performance. Of course I know more daring artists, such as Honorata Martin, who

leans out over a rooftop held back only by her hair. But it was daring for me because I didn't know what it would lead to. I knew the witch Ania and that she is a good witch who knows the intention of this performance. In art, we often forget that when we make something, we barely think of its intention: what meaning does the work have for future generations, for my family, for strangers, for a place? Ania understood that the intention of the performance was to show that when we look at art, we can dream and imagine more. The outcome was great because the National Art Gallery Zachęta agreed to lend the works shortly before the exhibition 'The Perspective of Adolescence. Szapocznikow-Wróblewski-Wajda', which was curated by Anda Rottenburg in Katowice. I was told: "Hurry, hurry, you must do it before the 1st of May because 'Personal Tumours' are leaving!". So we did it before the 1st of May and it was amazing. I asked only a few people to participate, so there was me, a photographer who was to record the performance and an art conservator. We were allowed to use scent and burn various things such as salvia. There were candles, incense, salt, and various minerals that could influence the work. There was also a dog, a goldendoodle, and Anka Kempkes who wrote everything down. We discussed with Ania-The Witch that we would see through whom Alina would speak: either through her or through me. I was sitting on the couch surrounded by a circle of salt. We placed the work 'Personal Tumours' on the ground. I had my own visions and reflections that I voiced to Ania. I knew that something might appear the following night, a thought or something in a newspaper. And then I came across an article about new technology related to breast cancer treatments. Ania-the Witch connected with Alina, she could hear her voice. She asked her a question and after a while she

said: 'Oh, I already have an answer, Alina is laughing'. For example, Ania asked: 'What would you like to happen to your sculptures?', then Alina laughed and answered: 'Best burn them all'.

And what do you understand by this?

I understood it this way – because indeed there are multiple interpretations – that she began to reflect upon the meaning of her work. At that time, Alina Szapocznikow's works were being exhibited on an international and commercial scale and their prices increased. Perhaps she didn't like this turn of events. She may have regarded sculptures simply as sculptures. My first closer contact with Alina was during the project 'The troupe panique at the end of the world', which related to the situation when Alina and a couple of her friends, including Cieśliewicz and Roland Topor, had meetings in Paris and called themselves 'Groupe Panique'. Do you remember the famous photo on which Alina is in her Parisian studio holding a drill in her hand with all her sculptures around her? She had a studio in the old town and in it were many sculptures arranged in a circle. A large retrospective of her work took place at Wiels, – where we also made a musical performance, playing sounds related to the creation of the sculpture. So there was a drill, an open piano, a double bass, cymbals and synthesizers arranged in a circle, like the sculptures in the photo. We reenacted the phenomenon of the sculptor through sound. At the end we played a recording from the dialogue with Alina. We chose the following fragment: "Ha ha, everything is so light and fleeting." She said it in that particular laughing voice. I received a phone call from a person who said: "Paulina, do you have any idea what you're

doing? Do you know what you might cause by opening up Alina's space? Did you know she was imprisoned in concentration camps and saw numerous experiments being carried out on people?'. I was very afraid, but thought that I really needed to do this and that she would understand that I'm doing it for a good cause – to tell other women about the possibility of experiencing art as something more than just a subject.

The main message of the performance is 'Art is freedom'. This brought to my mind the most important principle of the chaos magic: "Nothing is real, everything is allowed'.

I am at the beginning of my search for magic, I believe it all started with the first Mycorial theatre. Or was it the second? Because the first one drew more on nature and on a fascination with mushrooms. What can a mushroom mean to man, to nature? The fact that it is used from psychedelics to medicine and even for artistic meetings left a huge impression on me. Ten individuals can meet up, walk in the mountains for two days and experience a different energy amongst each other than the one exchanged during openings or parties related to art. Chiara Fumai took part in the second meeting. She was the first person who introduced me to the chaos magic. I understood magic a bit like "This is all magic". To me it seemed magic was related to rareness and the subconscious. Besides, it's really interesting how rare visions quickly become forbidden in our society. In this light, magic reveals itself as an anarchy and that attracts me to it. The same attracted Chiara Fumai. Thanks to magic, we can speak words that mean more than the words we use every day. Well, and there are techniques. I remember when I was a teenager and a group of



Paulina Ołowska. Installation view, 'Janina Kraupe-Świdzka: Horoscopes and automatic writing', Kadenówka, Rabka Zdrój, phot. Paweł Dudziak, 2019

yogis visited my mum. As my mum had just gone through a rough time in her life, the yogis wanted to help. There was one yogi who used to stand on his head, play CDs and me – a girl of 14 – thought then: ‘God, what on earth are they doing?’ But now I’m starting to appreciate yoga; I suppose everything comes at its time. I believe in pre-historic sciences like herbalism and that there is incredible potential in the subconscious, which we don’t use because we live in times of absolute reason. I agree with those who believe that more time should be devoted to the subconscious. I think that we as artists already devote a lot of time to understanding ourselves and the world. Not only through philosophy and science, but also through spirituality. I see magic as interesting in that it recognizes a form of religiousness and I don’t agree with the belief that witches are per se old women. These are all stereotypes one should think about and fight against. Was it not rather that witches were actually very wise women who knew a lot more, ruled their life, didn’t want to get married or preferred to study natural medicine and remain independent of the outside world? There are many stories about witches and vixens we don’t even know about. The main subject of my art and paintings are women and the question: where are we as women in culture and where are we in ourselves? Like my current exhibition – ‘Destroyed woman’ – which is based on a novel by Simone de Beauvoir and reflects on what the process of aging means for women. I find this a really fascinating subject because in painting it’s only ever been defined by men. Women were seen as those distant muses who represent certain ideals: wisdom, justice. This is why I see magic strongly related to women.

The relationship between art and magic is becoming increasingly popular. Why do you think young Polish artists are inspired by phenomena that go beyond rational reasoning?

I will answer your question by using an anecdote about painting. When I started studying painting internationally, everyone spoke about the concept of painting as a subject and about the return of the idea, that – come on, let’s not be silly – painting is only a commodity, like a washing machine. A painting is something that you can hang on your wall and show your visitors. I was very much against that notion – I didn’t believe in it. In the 1990s no one talked about painting, video appeared, and someone who was painting back then was seen as pre-historic, lost; who simply didn’t know what else to do. After this complete collapse of painting, a lot of questions arose. How to believe in painting again? And that’s when, in my opinion, magic and spirituality appeared. Painting – like the writing of books – is to me the telling of something in a narrative manner or making a gesture that expresses something. In painting, I’m interested in the possibility of envisioning and in deviating from ways in which something should be painted. Generally speaking, art is tired of searching for conceptual views on politics. We have to deal with a return to ourselves, our dreams, phobias, visions or for example techniques, such as those used by Janina Kraupe. This is why I’m now organizing an exhibition of Janina’s works because I am most interested in her method. When I teach, my students ask me: what’s the method? In reality, everyone knows how to paint what’s on their mind. Yet how to enter that state of being aware and ready to paint that which you know will be good? And this exactly is magic. That’s also the reason I held spiritual seances, to receive an answer from Kora Jackowska to

the question: how should I prepare myself to the work on her house, which seemed to me a fun challenge offered to me by her husband. Nevertheless, it was very personal and perhaps Kora wanted to say more through it. And so I thought about her, watched a lot of movies about her life but was also looking for signs on the way. And then Ania-the Witch also helped me out.

I would like to ask you about the accessories that appear in your session with Laura Morgan for Vogue. For example a cat hidden under a hood, a jar of rhubarb and even a bag with garlic presented in a way reminiscent of magic items. How did you select items and what is their meaning?

I'm happy you found symbols hidden in the photos. That was my intention. Of course, as a guest editor, I participated in the selection of models and we really wanted to work with Laura Morgan because she was the muse of many designers, including Vivienne Westwood. She was one of the most important McQueen models. It was she who participated in that famous photo session, dressed in a big hood and a floor length cloak, walking alongside wolves on the catwalk. Laura Morgan was also an older model then and I liked that. Then I wanted to present Cracow, which is a magic place. Just the Wawel castle itself, with its chakra or catacombs, such an abundance of symbols. I thought it would be very nice to address contemporaneity and magic because this is an interesting subject, which I tried capturing in some of my paintings, such as The Alchemist and the Mykolożka. Now I'm painting Temida, the goddess of justice. How to show the mysterious power of women portrayed in fashion? And the garlic. The story with the garlic was that right when we were taking

photos near a small restaurant called Żonglerka, the owner passed by carrying smoked garlic. I snapped the garlic from him and it was fantastic. Another important aspect was that the Women's Industrial School was in the back, which was to be an additional department of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow. Now there's a big empty building standing there. I came up with the idea of a model holding garlic going to the Academy. As to the cats, well, cats are known to be very wise. And the rhubarb jar? In this case I was looking for symbols related to Queen Bona, who is associated with storage and conservation. I found vinegar rhubarb at an organic market. But I wanted to show different symbols of power, because, for example, the woman standing under the sign "Directorate" in the National Museum is also a symbol. Some people were very open-minded, for example the Director of the National Museum who just left us with his office. The mosaic with the sun is also a symbol, located at the back of the Kijów cinema. When the architectural plans of this marvelous cinema appeared, which also had a secret passage to the hotel next door, this mosaic was supposed to be in front. However, in the end it was seen as too dominant, so it was moved to the back of the building. The cinema walls used to be made of glass and you could see the mosaics from outside. Even the moon on the boat is a sign. Bartek Koczenasz made this beautiful moon on which he swam. We managed to capture the moon, but the model is in front of it, so only a fragment is visible. The idea was that she is checking what's going on in Tyniec, in rubber boots embroidered with lace and wearing rubber gloves. In fashion, as in painting, everything is some kind of symbol. And what did you think of the symbols when you saw them?

When I first looked at the photos, I didn't perceive them in this context, but when I started to analyze the photos from a magical-esoteric-spiritual perspective, I thought: these are objects for casting spells! The first photo I paid special attention to is where the model is holding ordinary twigs in her hand.

Do you know where these twigs came from? From the women's toilet of the National Museum! While I was working on this set, I was so concentrated that I entered a different state of consciousness. Apparently it was impossible to be around me. And I just knew that I had to do the splits at exactly the right moment and hand over the toilet twigs or the jar of rhubarb. I fought for a long time to get the cat in the photo at the F.A.I.T. gallery. The cat was supposed to participate in the session with Anja Rubik, because a black cat lived in that neighbourhood, but it ran away. On Stromboli island, where we did a session, many art exhibitions took place, a little like in Kadenówka. It was supposed to start with a photo of a woman in a cave holding one lit candle. Then she was to leave the cave and collect more and more of her belongings. That is why we added passion flower, keys from Kadenówka or a dagger — the sword of my husband's father who served in the Polish navy. I wanted to smuggle in as many symbols as possible.

This edition was supposed to be called Matrilocation. The idea stems from the book *God and woman*, which states that thousands of years before our culture appeared, people gathered around women, because it was the place where children, food, and elderly people were. Yet suddenly the women, no longer knowing what to do with all these men, said: 'Alright then, go on out and hunt'. But at first women also hunted, they did everything. In the second to last photo from the

session with Laura Morgan, a woman in clothes designed by Rick Owens was meant to appear, so this is the devil woman who is standing and holding Hasior and exclaiming: "All will be well! Look, this is my country". And now everyone wants to destroy this sculpture. It used to be a relevant sculpture and the place where it stands is one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen in Lesser Poland. There is the Czorsztyn lake, the mountains, Slovakia.

Do you have your own magical places?

Kadenówka, Artists House, Maciejowa. I'm still searching. The cave of Emma Kunz is also an interesting place. Her exhibition is currently on show at the Susch Museum. Emma discovered a cave that had the element iodine and found a crystal in it that could be used for healing. This is certainly a magical place worth visiting. And apart from that also Stromboli island, Hel, Wawel and abandoned houses.

In conclusion, what is your definition of magic?

I think I'll go back to what I said earlier, that I'm interested in the idea of the chaos magic where everyone can find what they want. But I also find its historical aspect interesting. Methods related to cognitive knowledge are definitely crucial, connecting to what is inside oneself, feeling and intuition, and observation. I encourage my students to do deep observation, a method that allows us to work visually by staring at one object - or painting - for a longer time. And perhaps in all of this it's also all about looking for signs, so activating deeper observation and reflection through magic.

Paulina Ołowska was born in 1976 in Gdańsk.

She lives and works in Rabka-Zdrój and in Kraków.

She obtained a BA in Fine Arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and an MA in Fine Arts from the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk. She continued her studies at the prestigious Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, where she was honored with the Rijksakademie Purchasing Committee Award in 2003. Laureate of the Aachen Art Prize in 2014.

In 2016, the New York Times listed Paulina Ołowska as one of 28 creative geniuses who had redefined culture that year.

Her work has been presented around the world as part of many individual exhibitions and art projects, including at the Novcento Museum, Milan (2018), The Kitchen, New York (2017), Tate Modern, London, (2015), Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen (2015), Zachęta, Warsaw, (2014), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2013), Kunsthalle Basel (2013), CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco (2010), Camden Arts Centre, London (2009), Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich (2009) and Sammlung Goetz, Munich (2007), as well as important group exhibitions, including at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (2019), Museum Susch, (2018), Liverpool Biennale (2018), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2016), Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool (2016), Centre Pompidou, Paris (2016), Manifesta 11, The European Biennial of Contemporary Art, Zurich (2016), Museum der Moderne, Salzburg (2016), Haus der Kunst, Munich (2015), BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead (2014), Museum of Contemporary Art Serralves, Porto (2014), Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw (2013), Museum of Modern Art, New York (2012), BOZAR Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (2011), New Mu-

seum, New York (2011), KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2010) and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Barcelona (2009).

Paulina Ołowska's works can be found in prestigious private and public collections, including at Tate, London; Sammlung Boros, Berlin; Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw; Museum of Contemporary Art Serralves, Porto; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.



THE FOLKLORE OF EXTRAMENTAL LIFE

CONVERSATION WITH JUSTYNA GÓROWSKA

For me, your magical abilities appeared for the first time when you conjured up a selfie stick from natural materials. It has been described by Michal Korta in a photo reportage in which you are the main character. How does magical thinking affect your art?

The photo reportage realized for Contemporary Lynx magazine documented my performative incarnation as a Slav rusalka, which I called WetMeWild. Its natural habitat includes rivers, lakes and forest streams; hence the action took place near water. This photo shoot, and all its realizations, are a reflection on water pollution by humans. The selfie stick made from some sticks found on the shore embodies the idea of sustainable art as well as opposition to the production of useless copy-paste items that end up in landfills: physical, digital, and symbolic ones. This activity is a form of “conjuring reality,” it highlights the potential of artistic activities as self-sufficient magical activities.

Does such activity change your way of perceiving reality?

These actions are more about building new forms of spirituality in art, a search for a lost connection with nature by returning to the “natural” order. This is particularly important when the modern world finds itself in a hitherto unknown ecological crisis caused by an unlimited increase in consumption and faith in the infallibility of human reason. The Enlightenment project and the cult of rationality has petered out and we risk suffocation if we don’t regain the grace of “nature.” I think I’m not the only one guided by this need for a new spirituality in my projects. It’s apparent in many cultural manifestations from recent years, such as Ari Aster’s Midsommar or Bartosz Konopka’s God’s Blood, as well as the work of Nobel Prize winner Olga Tokarczuk.



DIY selfie stick, phot. Michal Korta, 2018

In your interview with Ola Koperda* you said that the rusalka can foretell the future. How does she do that?

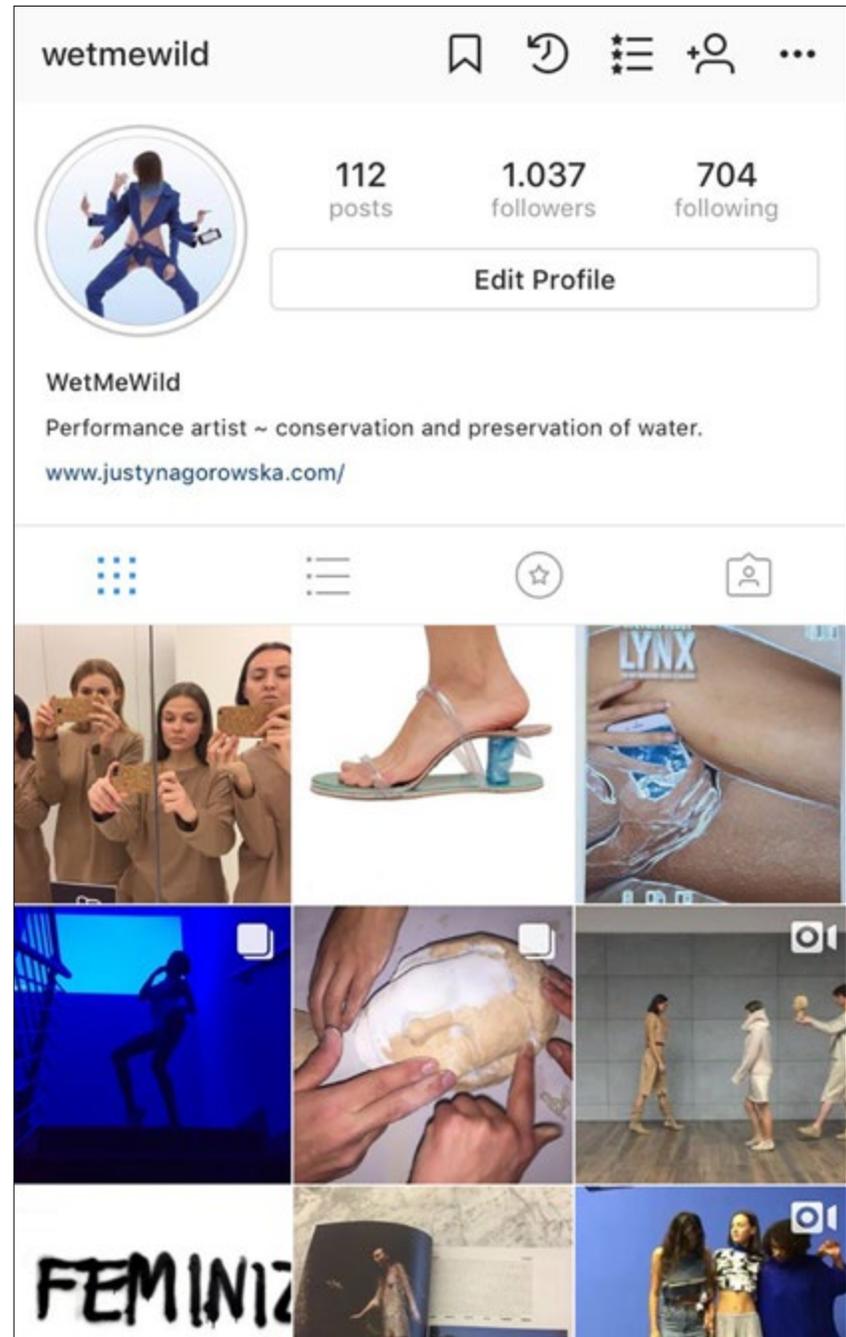
She doesn't foretell the future but sees what is under the skin, often things that escape common knowledge. As the WetMeWild rusalka I started to draw public attention to the problem of water pollution caused by microplastic a few years ago. At that time the problem was not broadly recognized, nowadays people are more aware of the existing threat and the European Union has signed a resolution withdrawing single-use plastic products and microplastics in cosmetics, as well as designing an improved plastic recycling system which is going to start operating by 2025.

In your interview for Szum† you said: "I regard language as a magical tool" and "language is a type of conjuring." Could you explain what you meant by that?

In my actions, I often use language as a tool of agency that acts outside our consciousness. Recently I have been particularly interested in the practice of digital magic using emoji. All you need is a smartphone and a wish. Depending on the intention, I send my emoji spells arranged in the appropriate order via text messages to myself or to others: I also post them online. Sometimes I give them material form by engraving them on physical objects in the form of spells or manuals. This is how the series of objects/artifacts #enjoyablenaturetoys was created.

* "Sztuka to rytuał. Z Justyną Górowską rozmawia Ola Koperda," Hygge 2019. Source: <http://hygge-blog.com/justyna-gorowska-sztuka-to-rytual/> [accessed: 1.01.2020]

† WetMeWild. 2020 does not exist. Interview with Justyna Górowska by Anna Batko, 'Szum' 2019. Online access: <https://magazynszum.pl/wetme-wild-2020-roku-nie-ma-rozmowa-z-justyna-gorowska/> [access: 1.01.2020]





The magician is often accompanied by an animal. This animal can be a messenger, an intermediary, an only friend; its importance in the relationship has many dimensions. And there are animals in your works (Girl playing with a cat, Iris and Reks). What is your relationship like?

Both of these video performances show my intimate relationship with the dogs Iris and Reks and the cat Ziomek. I treat my artistic projects involving them as interspecies art in which they also shape and generate the meaning. They are my collaborators in overcoming the human-animal dichotomy by showing that we all belong to the same group of milk-loving mammals.

Your interest in magic, alchemy, old beliefs and superstitions is very evident in your bachelor diploma work Rooted Man – Humanized Mandrake Root. In your text, you search for the cultural interpretations of a mandrake. But the video documentation reveals the sensual relationship between a human being and a plant. How did this experience affect your work, and do you still find these themes interesting?

It was one of the first projects that got me interested in herbs – they play a huge role in our culture (they are the subject of many legends and oral transmissions). Since then, I have expanded my knowledge of plants which are particularly important in Poland, using it in my next projects, e.g. in Wild Catering, where I served plants gathered in a meadow in Białowieża during the vernissage at the Arsenal Gallery in Białystok. I am still working with plants and I have some new ideas related to them.

You often use new technologies in your work. Esoteric ideas can be present in their constant development and power to change reality. How do you understand technology?

In new technologies such as AR or VR (often treated as “magic tricks”) I see potential to save the natural environment and to establish social justice. By using them in my work, I try to promote the democratization of these technologies as well as grassroots initiatives which are a form of resistance against big companies that objectify technology for the sake of uncontrolled economic growth. When I employ them as a woman, I try to detach them from the discourse of male domination and hand them over to nature, of which they are a natural continuation.

Liquids, water, lubricants, chemical compounds, scents, extracted genes and microplastic — all this could be included in the equipment of an alchemy study. Are you more interested in science or alchemy?

I am certainly closer to alchemy than to modern science, from which I am very distanced, especially when in the 20th century it started being identified with progress. Science controls nature for the “good” of mankind while concealing the environmental and social consequences of that project. And alchemy regarded as a search for transcendence and initiated knowledge is actually something that we find in my actions. I am particularly keen on liquids and I try to find multidimensional sense in them. At the molecular level, we are 70% made of water, which is in constant circulation with nature. The vital wetness of nature is emblematic of the inseparable connection with water, the substance around which all life on earth revolves.

My extracted gene was immersed in water, I created a lubricant using water, and water is related to the issue of microplastic pollution.

Can you tell me something about your stay in Indonesia? In the description of the exhibition *The Girl Who Married a Volcano* it says that you were interested in Javanese mysticism and related practices.

I had a chance to live in Indonesia twice: in 2012 and 2016. Already during the first trip I became fascinated with Javanese mysticism, which reminds me to a large extent of pre-Christian Slavic beliefs. In both cases a lot of attention is paid to nature as the emanation of divine forces, also indicating our strong bond with nature and a consciousness of the deep symbiosis between humans and nature when it comes to both growth and destruction. *The Girl Who Married a Volcano* is a project created in the village of Sumber on the slope of the Merapi volcano, where the wedding of a woman with this particular volcano took place, which was supposed to ensure the safety of the residents and to protect them from volcano eruptions and earthquakes. During my second stay, in 2016, together with Adam Gruba we opened a branch of the foundation Fundacja Razem Pamoja. During our one-year stay, we tried to create a Polish-Indonesian community by cultivating Kejawen, a Javanese spiritual tradition. The space was opened by a kunci (Ind. “key”), a Javanese mystic Mas Norem. We organized the reading of the Javanese lunar calendar and the offering (of rice, incense and tobacco on a banana leaf) with best wishes.

In your work Corposhiva you draw on the aesthetics of the East. Why did you choose this form to talk about working in a corporation?

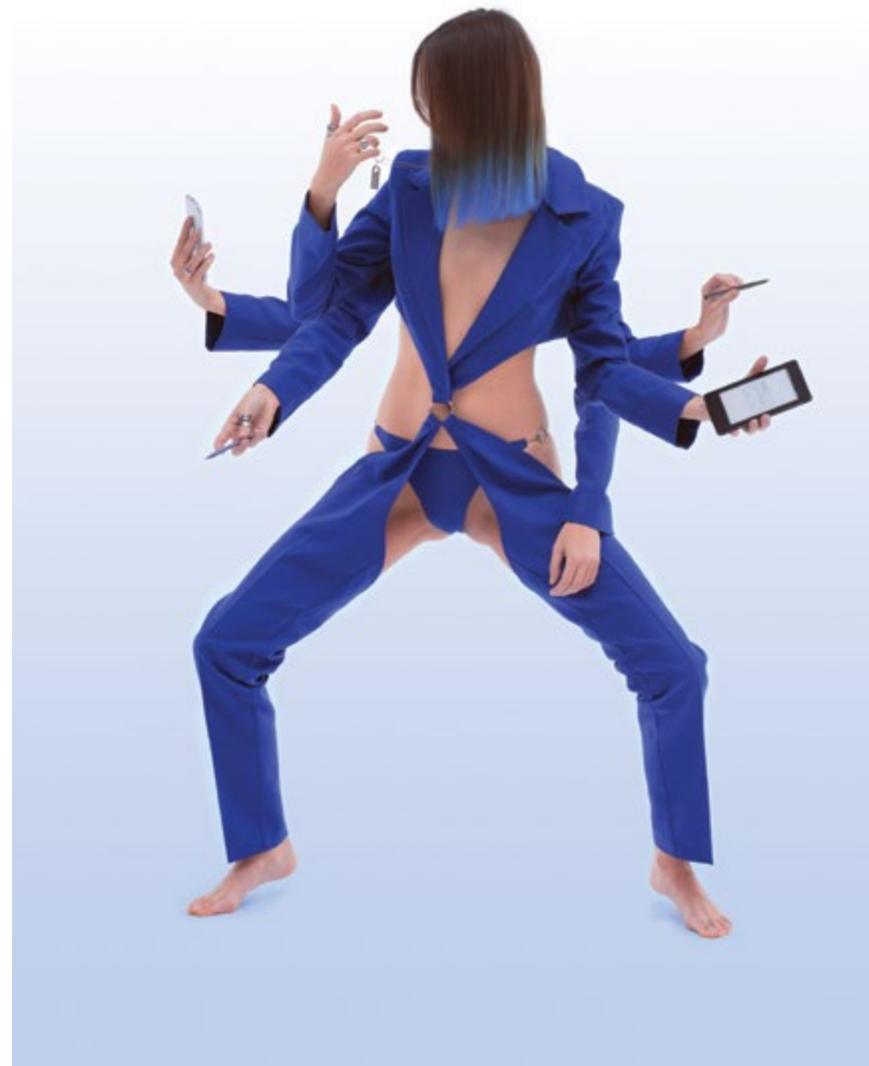
The painting I created is a collage of many borrowings, the state of mind of a global village resident with constant access to the Internet.

How does fashion create a witch, a nymph, a rusalka, a nereid?

I would say that they themselves create fashion, which is not only an extension of their character, but also an excellent artistic medium. During my incarnation as a nymph, I invited designers to collaborate with me on many occasions. As in the case of the *SOYC* (Sperm on the Clothes) brand, with which we created the project 69 at Karlin Studios in Prague, or Pat Guzik, with whom we made the project *What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over* at the *Fundacja Razem Pamoja* in Cracow. The latter project seems to me to be particularly important due to its educational aspect. The collection made from recovered materials was accompanied by a booklet from which we could learn how the fashion industry is destroying our planet, and thus the natural habitat of my water nymph.

Why do you pay so much attention to nails in your works? They are beautifully finished and very aesthetic. As a contrast, it makes me think of the stereotypical witch whose long nails are an ominous sign.

I often use nails because they are an interesting aesthetic element which actually has much interpretative potential. Painting my nails helps me calm down before a performance; it's a kind of nail meditation.



To conclude, I would like to ask you about your work *The Missing*. Disappearing in unexplained circumstances can bring to mind even the most unexpected solutions to the puzzle, such as the fact that you disappeared using a spell. How do you perceive this artistic act today?

It was one of my first performance projects. I put up notices about my disappearance on the streets of Cracow. I wanted to check how subjective reality can be and how easily it can be set up on my own terms. The numerous phone calls I got from residents claiming that they saw me in places I'd never been only confirmed my suppositions.

Justyna Górowska (b. 1988) – performance artist employing an interdisciplinary approach in her art practice. She received her MFA from the Performance Art Studio at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow. Presently, a PhD candidate pursuing Interdisciplinary Doctoral Studies at the University of the Arts in Poznan. Since 2014, she has been cooperating with the lokal_30 gallery in Warsaw. FRISI (Intermedia Art Development Foundation) board member. Main prize winner in the 7th Samsung Art Master Contest (2010); two-time recipient of a Ministry of Culture and National Heritage scholarship (2011; 2013). Her projects were presented e.g. at the Freies Museum, Berlin (2009), Le Lieu Gallery, Quebec City (2014), National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta (2016), Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw (2017) and Art in General, New York (2017).



SLEIGHT OF HAND

CONVERSATION WITH LILIANA PISKORSKA



Herb of Grace, installation (black dibond, flowerbed, Ruta graveolens L.),
exhibition view CCA Kronika, phot. Marcin Wysocki, 2019

Your artistic activity focuses on initiating social changes, yet your recent works, including your exhibition *A Long March Through the Institutions at the Kronika Center for Contemporary Art* concentrated more on the spiritual aspect, old beliefs and practices, and on interpreting nature as a source of power. What prompted you to explore these themes?

Nature and flora is something that has accompanied me for a long time. It's not that my dealing with them dates back to the Kronika exhibition. In my earlier works I also tried to conceptualize the possibility of talking about plants and nature, while touching on current problems and social issues. The problem of plants and plant subjectivity is part of some of my feminist- and queer-sensitive projects. I draw on these themes while paying attention to the fact that queerness or the feminist approach can be treated not as the problem of a certain minority but rather in relation to the issue of inclusivity, which has to do with empathy and sensitivity in a non-species-specific context. I now have a better understanding of the connections between areas I used to treat as separate creative paths. My interests focus on posthumanism on the one hand, and on socio-political issues on the other. This is why I'm very happy that these two paths have come together. However, the magic-ritual aspect you mentioned is another theme. During my work and research for this exhibition, I studied various forms of right-wing speech, right-wing intellectual discourse and conspiracy theories. I started to follow how, specifically in Poland, certain themes emerge, how the meaning of words changes, in what areas or using what words right-wing narratives begin to move from the periphery into the mainstream. This has been happening very much in recent years. In my artistic practice, I use social or magic rituals

to show the schemes apparent in them. Apart from that, I also see a lot of similarities between the language of law, the language of legislation and the language of magic. This is the strange moment when the word becomes action and ceases to be just a message. Therefore, a word spoken by a president or a minister has a greater – or different – meaning due to their function, and can cause specific, tangible effects in the social realm. The meaning of spoken words is all the more interesting to me the more the supernatural and magical themes related to Catholicism pervade the social world, everyday discourse and politics in Poland. Using them in the political realm is incredibly instrumental and intentional. And it serves to closely connect the dominant sphere of Catholic religion with national identity. But there is also a moment of doubt and uncertainty, a moment of retreat into the safety of magical thinking. There is so much violence in today's world that sometimes the only way to escape it is to focus on something totally private, out of the way, close to nature, like starting a permaculture farm or sitting in a garden. As I told you before, this year, for the first time in my life, I have a garden and beds that I am looking after, so this is something that accompanies me.

Did you feel any uniqueness, including regenerative features, when visiting Polish places of power in Chakras of Poland, which you also presented at CCA Kronika?

Chakras of Poland, so a triple trip to places where energy currents intersect, was a very intimate activity that evolved over the course of working. It was supposed to be more performative, but it became something everyday, simple, and familial. I experienced an



Chakras of Poland, audiovisual installation (three-channel projection, two audio channels), exhibition view CCA Kronika, phot. Marcin Wysocki, 2019

interesting thing in one of these places. There were stone circles near the town of Odry, and there I really felt some kind of energy, which was quite amazing. Maybe the reason I experienced that uniqueness was that I went there with people who are very close to me, we spent the previous evening together, talking about great, wise, political and personal things, and the next day we went to visit the chakras. We spent a few hours there, ate lunch, and I was recording a bit, we were just hanging out in this place; at the end of our stay, two of us felt a strange energetic tension. It was the kind of feeling one might have after taking drugs, when you feel your body electrified and you perceive reality differently. It was a short moment but really powerful. The stone circles are really an incredible space. The stones in my video are overgrown with over five-hundred-year-old lichens which have survived to our times. As a sacred place, they were not touched, so they could safely and unhurriedly overgrow with plants. It's a small landscape park. There is a gentleman whom you can phone to get the keys. The place is slowly becoming familiar and a tourist destination — there is an idiotic viewpoint, and this gentleman, who watches over the place and sells souvenirs. Meanwhile, at the top of Mount Ślęża there is a large church, whose presence makes everything else disappear. I think it's a very violent gesture, saying: "this is ours and cannot serve others." It cannot be a part of some kind of older faith, so you can no longer feel anything else there.

And the third place was Wawel.

The third stop on my trip was Wawel Castle, where the most important Polish chakra is situated. This chakra is kind of timid and

invisible. Wawel doesn't want it, doesn't need it for its national-Catholic discourse. When I went there, renovation works were underway and the energy place was covered with a renovation sheet. The Wawel chakra is located in a passage, a corridor. Its main point is a single wall, where people queue up to enter or leave the inner courtyard of Wawel. I spent more than three hours by the wall, crowds were passing by, but there were also people who came explicitly to see the chakra. There is something biological about that wall, something abject; something that will certainly disappear after the renovation, namely the dark spots where people hug the wall. The whole time I was there, a security guard was watching me very carefully, although I was just standing there with my camera and wasn't doing anything illegal. I guess I caused him great discomfort just by being there for a long time. This is a strange way of being in a public space, which is not normalized, so it cannot be assigned to any known social ritual. Yet you cannot reject it, deny it because it doesn't cross the boundary between what is legal and what is illegal. I had already had such a moment once, when preparing the work *Annihilate by speaking*, within the framework of which I repeated a spell three times in three different locations in Poland to undo the curse cast on this country. I did it in front of the Polish parliament, the Ministry of Culture and in front of a conference hall, where the conference Poland has not perished yet — *The Countryside* was being held. I pronounced a spell borrowed from ethnographic research and frequently used in our geographical and cultural area to reverse the evil eye. I was equipped with the necessary supplies, so water, grass and coal from the stove, all in a modernized and handy version. I had various elements hidden in my outfit so that I could move

easily during the ritual. The whole process consisted in walking around the buildings for several hours and then pronouncing the spell. I wanted this walking to be a time of preparing myself for the words to be spoken. During this performance I came up against the physicality of the building itself. This was the moment when it turned out that the first recipients of my actions were the police and law enforcement services.

In your video, this element seems to be very important, the police are everywhere.

That's right; it turned out that they were the first and the main recipients. I didn't know this was going to happen; I didn't plan it. In the case of the Ministry of Culture, I talked to the police and explained what I wanted to do, i.e. look at the building, say the words, lay down the grass and undo the charm. The policemen didn't know what to do, so they decided to keep an eye on me, they parked two police cars nearby and watched me until the process was over. It was a very significant moment, the feeling when you know the attention of the police is on you.

Did it affect the ritual itself?

In the case of the spell cast in front of the Polish parliament it resulted in faster termination of the process. The police and security services started running towards me from different directions, so we stopped and my cameraman and I left the place immediately. In the third place, near a huge conference hall where a conference organized by the State Forests Authority and Radio Maryja was being held, the

aforementioned services also affected the spellcasting significantly. The conference was organized when Jan Szyszko was minister of the environment, so it had a purely propaganda character. The idea was for hunters and foresters to show support for Minister Szyszko, uniting against any environmental activists claiming that the State Forests Authority was destroying the Białowieża Forest. Every hunting club and State Forests branch was therefore obligated to send a delegation. So there were several thousand people at the conference. Buses full of foresters and hunters arrived in front of the huge hall, and in the back very elegant cars with Church dignitaries and top politicians appeared at the VIP entrance. The whole event was organized in a Catholic-national spirit, linking religion and politics closely together. The nature of this event influenced the quality and process of undoing the charm, since the event was private (though organized with public money). I could walk down the neighboring street, I tried to walk around the building, but the police repeatedly stopped and questioned me, checked my identity papers, and removed me. I would come back, but the organizers would try to remove me again, either alone or with the help of the security services. At one point, my cameraman was effectively asked to leave, so I was only left with the documentation of the other person, who was recording the event with a mobile phone. During those few hours, each of the elements of this situation became part of my ritual. Also the moment of being there with the space as such, reflecting on how I felt there and what effect I was having on the place with my strange presence. Especially since it was a situation involving several groups closely associated with the national authorities. And they are all groups with hardly any or very few women in them.

What effect did you expect? It sounds a bit like an ironic method to solve a problem – there's nothing you can do, so let's try magic.

For me, this method was ironic indeed, especially since I believe it's possible to combine irony and seriousness. Therefore, it was both a deadly serious method and a very concrete commentary on the topicality of the situation. I find such a strong relation between the Catholic Church and the state absolutely unacceptable. I was forced to make the magical-nationalist language my language as well. It is not and never will be. Not as an artist, but as a woman, a lesbian, a feminist, a member of a minority. To me, it's violence that is happening against me, and it's inflicted by the state and the Church. Now I'm saying it more directly than I would have said it three years ago. My proposal comes from helplessness and the observation that merit-based arguments have ceased to be understandable. The time of planning and performing this work coincided with the adoption of a resolution on the Fatima apparitions by the Polish parliament, stating that the Polish parliament would be celebrating and commemorating this event. The resolution text was written in a non-merit-based, Catholic, ideological language absolutely violent against non-Catholics. It is this kind of magical-nationalist language that I was referring to in *Annihilate* by speaking.

What is the meaning of the objects you use in your performance?

The spell consisted of spoken elements and gestures. I wanted to recreate them as accurately as possible, but of course I had to change them in some way. My initial plan was to make a fire and heat the coal,

but that would be breaking the law, so I figured I had to make concessions and simplify the spell. Aside from words, the ritual includes gestures as well as the following elements: water, grass, soil, and fire (I treated this last element quite symbolically – I had charcoal from a barbecue). I also had the parts of a grill attached to my body, but I didn't manage to take them out completely even once. I also decided that I wanted to be a bit more girly than I am on an everyday basis, so I put on a dress symbolizing the stereotype of witchy femininity, which had a very useful function, i.e. it allowed me to hide the items.

What inspired you to create the work *Let's Link the Facts*, in which you analyze the conspiracy theory of „Cultural Marxism”? Why did you decide to take up the subject of conspiracy theories?

As I said at the beginning, this project resulted from research on the far right in Poland, which holds a lot of conspiracy theories, with the one called „cultural Marxism” appearing more and more often. Many people need easier, more comprehensible definitions of history, and this specific theory explains a lot, for example the history of the European Union. When you look at conspiracy theories, you can see that they respond to a basic need to understand a world that is complex and confusing. That is why more and more people are trying to create intellectual discourse in far-right circles. One such person, one of the apologists of the theory of „Cultural Marxism,” is Krzysztof Karoń, whom I often referred to in this project. He is a man who rewrote art history. He decided that university knowledge was untrue. Krzysztof Karoń travels around Poland having talks – he is one of the most frequently invited far-right ideologists. During

his lectures, he explains the world in such a way that you want to believe it because his explanations sound so simple and logical. This is one, but not the only reason why conspiracy theories buried deep on the Internet a few years ago are now quickly penetrating into the mainstream. The term „Cultural Marxism” is an entirely artificial construct, yet it is increasingly used as a scientific term. Over the last year, I heard these words spoken by Polish politicians, MPs and media; I saw them sprayed on walls and written on the banners of anti-LGBT marches.

In your work *The field I am buried in*, you pay tribute to Ana Mendieta. Did you get the impression that this procedure might have something to do with correspondence thinking, i.e. that by repeating Ana’s artistic activity you can acquire her creative power? How do you interpret this activity?

I think this work is about looking for continuity. In my works, I often refer to extreme and repressed stories. By referring to Ana Mendieta I perform an identity procedure. Ana Mendieta is one of those personalities who haunt me, just like Valerie Solanas. Her art is seen as eco-feminist, very essentialist. I’ve noticed that in recent years there has been a return to the problematization of ecofeminism from a perspective that, by criticizing its essentialist dimension, enables it to be expanded to include other paradigms, different views and points of view.

In your work *SCUM*, there is a reference to the rituals of organizing an elite, sectarian group. As a collective, you create a symbolic altar to Solanas, who inspired you to create this project, you paint words on your skin, you destroy a portrait of Andy Warhol. How important is the reference to ritualism in this work for you?

The main axis of this project was to create a dystopian group whose status is unclear, but whose aspirations are neither civic nor human rights-oriented. The group identity is thus shaped as an antithesis to everything that is traditionally understood as social. For a collective understood this way, the moment of community, sisterhood, is a moment of violence and transgression of social constructs. This violence, symbolic revenge, ritual, does not happen on the body, as Valerie Solanas suggested (that is, it does not consist in killing



Let's connect the facts, installation (prints, thread),
exhibition view CCA Kronika, phot. Marcin Wysocki, 2019



The field I am buried in, documentation of performance,
photography print on banner fabric, 250 × 166 cm, 2016

all men), but on the body of a painting or the body of art history; on Andy Warhol, on abstract art, painting, all those patriarchal cultural products. After all, violence is also a way of shaping group identity, but when we think of it this way, excluded groups, minorities, and others don't come to mind. In this project, I examine ways of shaping negatively understood femininity, community and eroticism; through violence but without a connection to anything patriarchal. Violence and symbolic revenge against a painting seem idiotic, awkward and incomplete; they are in fact a substitute, imaginary revenge, a fairy tale about violence. In this project, the element of fiction and reality was important to me. When Valerie Solanas tried to form her art group or fighting squad, she was actually trying to organize meetings. But no one ever came. She was alone in her manifesto, but at the same time she created a narrative in which she was not alone, but involved in group activity. We see absolute extremity in this, but it really activates the political imagination.

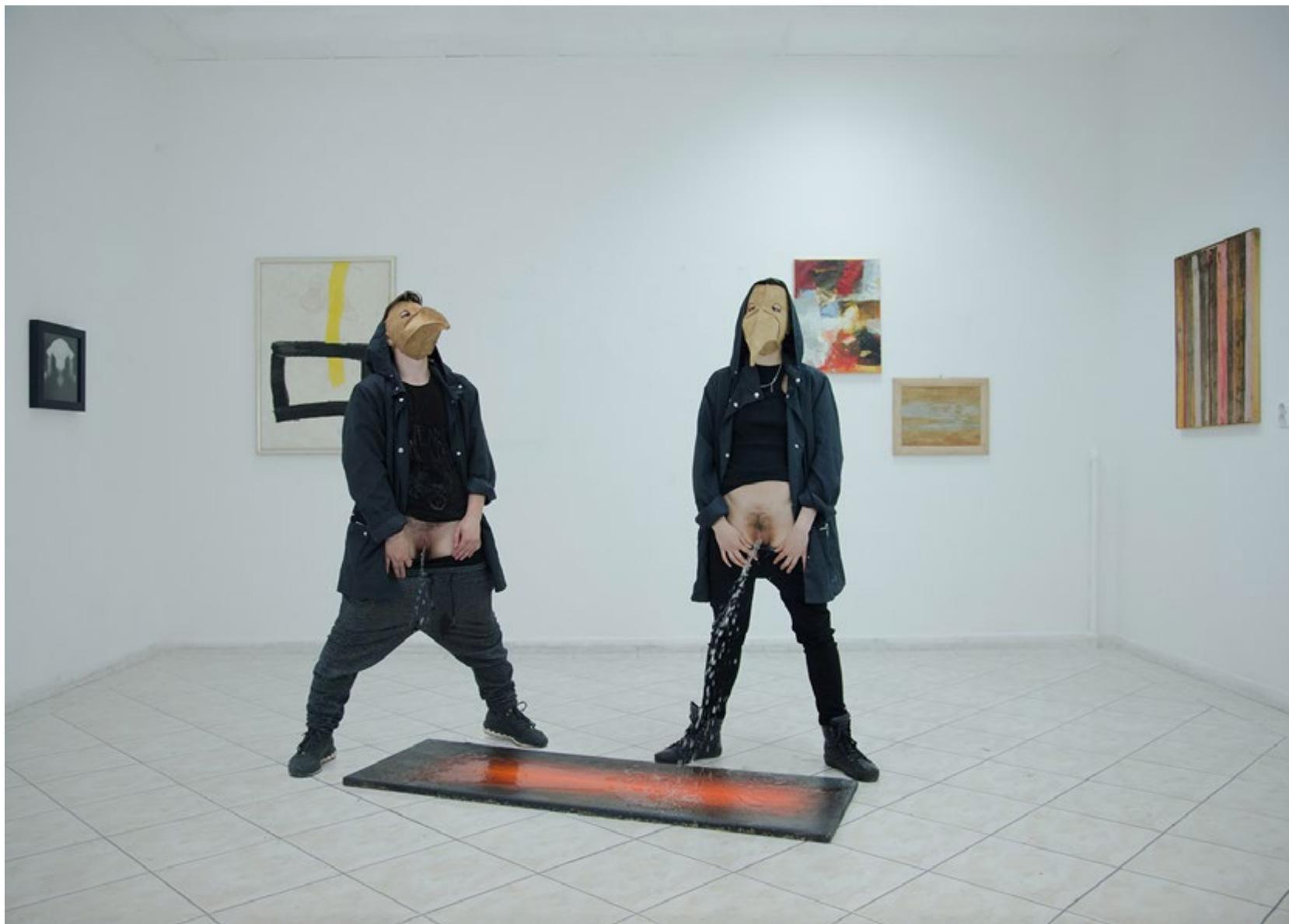
At the exhibition at CCA Kronika, in your work Herb of Grace, there is a pyramid made of black Dibond, a reference to the Pyramid in Rapa (Poland). What was the purpose of this structure?

The installation Herb of Grace is a pyramidal flowerbed in which I planted *Ruta graveolens*. The installation is a tenfold reduction of the Pyramid in Rapa, built in 1811 by the family of German barons von Fahrenheit. The 19th-century structure refers to the Egyptian pyramids at Giza and replicates their angle of inclination (51'52 degrees). Transferring the sacred object to Europe was, of course, an absolutely colonial gesture — a fashion for the exotic and the Orient that prevailed among the European nobility. In my project, I move

between cultural borrowings, pop culture, fashion, colonialism, beliefs, and kitsch. The installation also has a flower bed, a place for orderly nature, a tightly designated space for plant life. It seems to me that this work includes both commercialized, exoticized esotericism, often founded on stealing from other cultures, as well as an esotericism that can still serve as a space of peace, reflection, and security.

Why should we go back to the Old Slavic beliefs and rituals that you refer to in Herb of Grace and in the ritual of enchanting?

Because it's a space that can also be non-nationalized, a space that disrupts everyday hierarchies and the patriarchal structure of dominant religious systems, power, state, and Church, and at the same time it can be a community space. The common rue, so another element of the installation, is for me the space of beauty, closeness and sisterhood, the gift of feminine wisdom. Placing the rue in my project resulted from my need to create positive narratives around issues linked to abortion and contrast them with narratives that use the issue of abortion for ideological and political purposes.



Liliana Piskorska was born in 1988 and graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Toruń in 2013. In 2017, she completed her PhD at the Faculty of Fine Arts under the supervision of Elżbieta Jabłońska. In 2011, she studied at the University of Warsaw as an exchange student. She has taken part in over 90 individual and group exhibitions in Poland and abroad. Since 2013, she has been a member of an artistic/self-education group centered around Galeria nad Wisłą in Toruń. She is a finalist of Forecast Forum at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (2017) and a winner of the Audience Award and Deutsche Bank Award within the framework of Spojrzenia 2019.

In her artistic work, she analyses social issues from the perspective of radical sensitivity, rooted in feminist-queer and feminist-posthumanist practice and theory.

She focuses on the dependencies between the state, nation, Central European identity, and the status of peripheral identities. She takes up the subject of queer lesbianism and non-heteronormativity, considering their construction and potentiality, and examines the place of the Other in constructing state projects.

Some important elements of her practice include questions of group identity, collective memory, the construction of law, and methods of building imagined communities. Her projects are based on performative experiences and she works intermedially, creating works that are a mix of installation and sculpture, video and photography.



INTELLECTUAL FOUNT

CONVERSATION WITH BARTEK BUCZEK



In your statement, you write that you are tired of reality. What is the reason for this and how does it manifest?

The full sentence was: “a realist tired of reality.” It’s not quite up to date, it comes more from a tendency to exaggerate things and to make nice, full sentences.

So you don’t admit it, do you?

I do admit it. In the meantime I also said that “I love hip-hop on a par with my mother,” “I am a master of great things on a low budget,” and currently what I have is: “broadly speaking, I am interested in man, and more precisely – in myself.” So it could have been a case of exaggeration, but “a realist tired of reality” was indeed more about “tiredness of reality,” which is close to surrealism. Yet tiredness of reality could also have been a reference to the subject of the interview or to a melancholic or Saturnal view of reality. I suppose that was what I meant. And realism? One can’t deny that this is realism, because these pictures were never surreal in their aesthetics.

Why did you become interested in Romantic sensitivity?

I have a soft spot for Romantic culture, I love Caspar David Friedrich. I used to listen to the radio program There is a painting which started with a jingle from Dead Can Dance – so Romantic and Gothic. From the program about The Wanderer above the sea of fog I learned that Friedrich could not paint characters, he borrowed them from fashion catalogs. It’s so wonderful, romantic, and a little bit funny. Recently

I read Susan Sontag's *Under the Sign of Saturn*. There is a fragment in it about Leni Riefenstahl explaining why fascism was so alluring, that it aesthetically alluded to Romanticism, that it had beauty, sublimity, closeness to nature. It's a shame to admit, but such things can be found attractive. I would paint a painting with mountains, a landscape. We still read some books from the Romantic period. Edgar Allan Poe is still appealing. My painting *Southern Gothic* alludes to the literature of the American South, which is still interesting, even in modern times. Cormac McCarthy is a continuer of this Romantic and Gothic style. We don't deny that it has some power. Right now I'm painting a new painting on shooting mushrooms. I know I have to include some flexed buttocks, the grass must be ruffled by the wind, perhaps we will be looking at the scene through predatory branches in the foreground. For me, it is both attractive and a bit cynical because with a bit of luck this painting will earn me money for other works with less commercial potential.

And what is shooting mushrooms all about?

The first mushroom was shot on November 11, 2018 in Siemczyn, Drawskie Lake District, from Maciek Skobel's air gun. Maciek is a member of our longbow fraternity founded on the margins of our technical activities*. The purpose of the fraternity is to shoot mushrooms, which goes without saying†. I can say that shooting

* Bartek Buczek is a member of a team involved in the assembly of exhibitions and technical productions.

† In Polish, the term *bractwo kurkowe* (longbow fraternity) can literally be translated as *hen brotherhood* or *chanterelle mushroom brotherhood*.



Grim Picker, oil on canvas, 25 × 25 cm, 2019

mushrooms gives one the perverse satisfaction of committing a bad deed causing little harm. The whole hunting situation is really alluring. Like in the movie *My dear Wendy* about a group of children, pacifists, who also really love their guns. Taking into account the recent ecological turn in art, it's a kind of game – a reversal of what we would expect from an artist who sets an example. You can also approach it as the artist not being useless because he can serve as a bad example. For us, it's also important – like in the Masonic lodges that originated from medieval masonry guilds – that our „elite” society has its origins in a technical guild. When working on exhibitions, we sometimes invite selected artists whose works are being exhibited to have fun together.

What inspired you to paint the phantom in a painting from 2017?

You probably want to ask about the movie *A Ghost Story*? This movie had come out in the meantime and I was annoyed that all the shots featured Casey Affleck in a sheet with holes. My painting was inspired by *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*. The ghost characters in this movie are actors with 50% transparency like in the old movies. I found it very amusing. It occurred to me to make a painting like this, but then I decided that the sheet-draped ghost was better. I needed to make it more complicated in the technical/painting aspect, hence the surprising light refractions, transparency, overlapping gradations. In my view it's a strong painting. It is painted in a way that convinces me. It uses a symbol and it's quite concise. It came about because of an aesthetic need, not because of any esoteric inducements, if that's what you're asking about.



Untitled, oil on canvas, 100 × 100 cm, phot. Barbara Kubaska, 2017



Is there any inner thought or energy behind the geometry that frequently appears in your paintings? In Agnieszka Kwiecień's interview for *Fragile* you said that the obelisks from the *Winter Series* exude an abyssal power. In my opinion, a similar power can be found in the snowman, the perfect snowflake (*Winter Series VII*) or the landscape *American Night*. In this context, your loyalty to the square is special when it comes to the shape of the canvas.

A lost obelisk, a trace of a bygone civilization, former grandeur and ruin, Dürer's famous melancholy – the polyhedron or the black obelisk from *Space Odyssey* are so sublime, they are such well-established symbols also associated with dark Romanticism and Gothic tales. Sublimity is also such a repressed category. We don't want it, but in right-wing artistic criticism cultivating sublimity is actually alive and well; it is desirable for art to realize this function and arouse emotions. And those pictures are so self-important, unless you turn the monoliths into a snowman. The snowman itself is a block that one can easily describe mathematically. At the same time, we can use the word *bałwan* (Polish: "snowman") to denote snow figures, the foamy crest of a wave, or an idol that one worships. We can also call stupid people that ‡, but that's not what I am trying to do. I assume that it is no coincidence that we have idols and snowmen, this is probably some pre-Christian belief: the snowman exists to appease the powerful winter nature. If we treat a snowman this way, we take away its ridiculousness and monumentalize it a bit. From an early age, children learn to make a snowman and it is a very important ritual. As soon as winter begins, there are snowmen and obelisks everywhere. This is really interesting for me, and that's why I have recently come back to this theme in my paintings.

‡ In Polish, the word *bałwan* (snowman) can be used to designate all of these things.

Ice, snow, frost, or, as you put it yourself, “the hell of the north,” and the sensory deprivation present in your work are often explained by melancholy. It makes me think of an atmosphere of purification. The mythical Shambhala was supposed to welcome those who get through the frosty peaks of the Himalayas with a pure mind. Can the winter and cold in your works be related to the accomplishment of a spiritual goal or challenge?

I am certainly repelled by an interpretation related to Eastern philosophy.

You don't like this stuff, do you?

I'm not an enthusiast.

With Shambhala, I meant the very theme of winter — that it can be a challenge and a purification of the mind.

The Hell of the North is the title of a book by Alina and Czesław Centkiewicz. It's a collection of polar stories, great reading. There was also a book titled Defeating the Devil of the North about reaching the North Pole. There is a vision that hell is cold. Among my works that possibly refer to this is the video Standing above a groving cold body of the enemy. In the work I'm standing still and letting the snow cover my body. Playing in the background is a black metal song recorded by Szymon Szewczyk inspired by the sound of the band Burzum. This is my favorite winter music. The frontman of Burzum is a guy, who killed a man, burnt several churches and fired an air gun at the first McDonald's in Norway. I can't help liking him. I associate winter with madness. When you read about polar explorers or mountaineers, it all comes down to



Standing above a groving cold body of the enemy, video, music Szymon Szewczyk, phot. Barbara Kubaska, assist Dominika Tylez and Michal Gruszczyk, 2016



Seria zimowa XVIII, oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm, phot. Barbara Kubaska,

madness. Like for example Reinhold Messner, a climber who gets to the summit of eight-thousanders without oxygen and who believes in Yeti. That's probably because of his climbing without oxygen. It's so abysmal, but is it purifying? For me, not really. I don't think anything positive could come of it.

Your work *Extract* makes me think of sympathetic thinking in magic, where the meaning of objects is understood too literally, which leads to some weird situations such as treating jaundice with the color red. What was the aim of this work?

The sole reason it came about was because of the publication of *Too expensive, too weak, too difficult*. A couple of recipes for an artwork in a hypothetical world of fantasy in collaboration with Bunkier Sztuki (Gallery of Contemporary Art in Cracow). It was one of my bad ideas put into action within the framework of creating book illustrations. Why do bad ideas pop into one's head? We are only human and, whether we like it or not, not all our ideas are good.

Why do you think this work was a bad idea?

I used the wrong technique, that's not how alcohol is made from cellulose. If it had been a painting, people would probably have liked it, because I try not to sink below accepted standards, but I would have been ashamed of it.



Dożynki, oil on canvas, 50 × 50 cm, phot. Barbara Kubaska,



Could you explain your painting *Gerechtigkeit wenn einer den andern umbringt?*

The title means “It’s fair when one gets rid of another.” There should be a subtitle: “In contact with another person, you can only get dirty.” It’s a quotation from Thomas Bernhard’s *Kalkwerk*. It’s yet another case of appealing to symbols. The work is part of the dark characters series. I suggested to my friends that I would paint them. What I was after in these portraits was the psychological truth of my models, and that should not be touched because it’s even older than Romanticism. I asked two of my friends what powers they would like to have. The arsonist has a head like a burnt match. The other said he wanted the power to interfere with transmission signals. I was up to my ears in winter stuff, that’s the reason for the ice helmet. It was more about the joy of making a nice painting and putting silly things into it. As usual. The quote vaguely refers to what’s in the painting. I don’t do that anymore. When there are different themes, I try to bring them closer together. It’s not erudition if you throw random things into the same basket. It must lead to something.

And what would you think if someone interpreted this work esoterically and found the following elements there: fire, earth, water, and air.

I would be surprised it works.

In your works you often mask evil with wit, which creates a rather accessible image of evil, as in the Black Characters. How much does evil interest you?

I don't know if we can still relate to such grand questions, believe in them, and at the same time not be stupid. Art history has moved ahead so far mentally that we are not gullibly going in that direction. Unless we want to create something kitschy. As I said in the conversation with Marta Lisok (published in her book *The Savages*) in reference to Edmund Blackadder — heaven is for people who like the things done in heaven: singing, dancing, taking care of flowers. Hell, that's different — there one rapes, murders, commits adultery, etc. Everyone can choose where they want to go. Edmund Blackadder was a great character. Evil is interesting in its perversity. It is easier for me to believe that someone will fail rather than succeed, and therefore, as a rule, I don't cheer on people with good intentions because something is bound to go wrong. I don't like artists who want to help people or try to help by creating art dealing with problems that they themselves don't have[§]. I hate it when artists literally create projects that respond to current needs in a way that matches expectations perfectly. In my opinion, it absolutely doesn't matter if the artist is right. I have

[§]M. Lisok, *Dzikusy. Nowa Sztuka ze Śląska*, Katowice 2014, p. 73.
Source: <http://www.sbc.org.pl/Content/217028/DZIKUSY.pdf>
[accessed: 1.01.2020]

a hard time thinking about good people who on top of that have to force themselves to be good artists. It doesn't make their art any more interesting. Another category are socially sensitive artists who hurt their "charges." Lukasz Surowiec has probably been the most famous one in recent years.

And isn't that the type of art that should interest you? One marked by error, giving rise to evil.

No, because he probably does it unconsciously, unlike, for example, Santiago Sierra, who uses people deliberately, with all the consequences that such an approach entails.

You aren't convinced by "performers who don't know what they are doing and what for (not asking themselves if what they are doing has any value), the art of new media about new media, and artists engaged in problems which they themselves don't have." But is it possible to get people interested in Romanticism nowadays?

Interesting new media art is practiced by my friend, an engineer from outside the artistic milieu. It's definitely better than the art of someone who has nothing to say but uses electronics to do that. That's all I wanted to say about my aversion to new media in art. Romanticism had a broader range as a cultural trend, largely appealing to human emotions. As it happens, that's what interests me more. Coming back to your question about being fascinated with evil. As I am told by Kinga Olesiejuk (who has joined the conversation), I am interested in evil on an abstract level, as potential — as an idea concerned with doing something bad, but not realized.

However, evil took a very real form in the Mayhem Project video, when you hurt yourself by removing your fingerprints with lye.

Well, but that's unpunished, only for the camera. I once recorded a snuff movie with Marek Rachwalik, a movie with unfeigned violence entitled No limits fun. Marek Rachwalik was supposed to play the role of the torturer; I was the victim. There were some funny things along the way, as usual when doing something that's supposed to be self-important. It turned out that Marek was afraid of hitting me and we needed to ask a friend (who in the meantime has asked to remain anonymous) to show Marek that you can hit somebody with all your strength. Marek got enthusiastic and at the end he broke my nose. He was indignant that we didn't show the punch in the film because, as he says, it's the only thing his grandchildren would respect him for.

This is very surprising for me, as neither you nor Marek give me the impression of people who would have such urges.

There was a time when a couple of things used to really annoy me in relationships with people. I thought: fuck, I'm gonna have to hang around these people for a while. Instead of having discussions with them, I figured we could do it like in game theory. I mean the mathematical theory which is used to solve conflicts. There are various tactics you can adopt to find the right solution. They consist in maximizing the minimum payoff and minimizing the maximum losses. That's the main goal, and it can be achieved in various ways. In game theory you break down a conflict into different schemata and, depending on the pattern, you apply the optimal solution. A conflict

consisting in playing the chicken game is a good example – two cars are driving straight at each other and the one that swerves away first loses. In this type of conflict, the madman's strategy wins: you must convince your opponent that you are acting irrationally. I had a need for such seemingly irrational action.

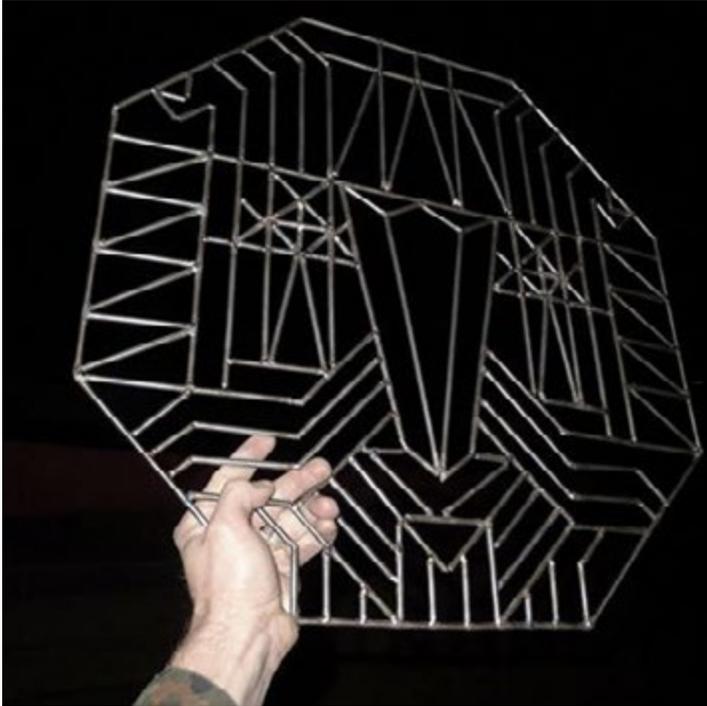
I was intrigued by your work of a smelting grate with the image of a goat. Marta Lisok has included it in the collection of dystopian devotional items[¶].

It came from a desire to do an exhibition about black metal. The idea was to make black mass utensils and at the same time a utility item, namely a grill grate. I like grilling and it's nice to have an attractive and interesting artifact. In black metal, the artists often refer to pre-Christian times, and I had a book about folk art from Belarus and there were straw decorations in there, there was also a very nice goat. I tweaked it a bit and it made a design for the grate. What often happens is that you don't need any super accurate explanation why you want to do something. It seemed attractive to me.

And did you manage to realize anything from the Black Mass?

No, the exhibition never took off. The grate was shown at some exhibitions, e.g. at Narracje in Gdańsk. There, I showed as broadly as possible what I wanted to include in this project. There was this grate with the heat underneath it, which created a ritual-dark mood. There were two videos: Standing above a groving cold body of the enemy and Mayhem Project. That was a motif from Fight Club combined

[¶] “Abstrakcja użytkowa – wystawa Bartka Buczka w Małej Przestrzeni.”
Source: http://www.bwa.katowice.pl/p/563/abstrakcja_uzytkowa_wystaw_bartka_buczka_w_mal/ [accessed: 1.01.2020]



with the band Mayhem. The fictional characters in *Fight Club*, as part of the activities included in the Mayhem Project, and the real musicians of Mayhem and other Norwegian black metal bands wanted to destroy Western civilization based on Christian foundations, including, among others, through terrorist acts. In the book, the way to be a better terrorist was to dissolve one's fingerprints with lye, which is what I actually did.

If you could hold a black mass, would you do it?

It would have to be a classic mass like what was done in church or on TV to scare people in the 1990s. Perhaps, as part of the art, I could also recreate an artifact from Hitler's birthday as recently celebrated in the forests of Silesia and richly rebroadcast in the media. My favorite part was the swastika-shaped birthday cake made from Prince Polo wafers.

In your publication *Too expensive, too weak, too difficult*. A couple of recipes for an artwork in a hypothetical world of fantasy one can see the sign of a snake swallowing its tail (Ouroboros) at the bottom of the pages. A snake about to swallow its tail is also visible in the recording on your Instagram, which comes from the Snake game on mobile phones with black-and-white display. Why did you choose this theme in the publication and is it important to you?

You'll be disappointed again. The publication has a bombastic title, and the setting is also a bit bombastic. I think there was a snake drawing in the first edition, and a fat unicorn taken from a medieval miniature in the second one. Ouroboros — this will be a classical punchline — is an ancient symbol which shows a snake devouring its own ass. End of joke.

And what's with the fat unicorn?

The unicorn is a magical animal. We didn't want to make it fat but that's what it looked like in the illustration. A bit like a white tiger. They are bred in the zoo because they attract a lot of visitors. Inbreeding is also not good for them. We love them because they are animals but you can see that they are handicapped. On the Super Animals fan page somebody posted a photo of a snake that was defending itself against a cat while its tail was being swallowed by a frog. The brave snake's predicament got a comment from Aleksandra Waliszewska: "he's sssscruwed." It's almost like Ouroboros.

Your work shows that you fetishize various objects, such as signet rings and rings on the hands of supervillains, furniture from the artist's studio, sports jackets and accessories related to cycling; usually they are endowed with causative power. Is this supposed to suggest that objects can influence reality?

In the text accompanying the exhibition *The carpet is lava* (Bartek Buczek and Szymon Szewczyk) I wrote that since objects are an extension of the human body, our vision of beautiful objects is an extension of our vision of a better us. Starting from the fact that evolution has given us the ability to use tools. We got up on our hind limbs, freed our hands, started using them. Thanks to the fact that we have opposing thumbs, we can grasp objects. Using tools aided brain development. That's how it all went more or less. Objects have to do with biology and the human condition, we are not able to survive in nature without the achievements of civilization, we strictly depend on things. Some of them pretend to help us. Judging by my results, these cycling fetishes are only a placebo.

Are you going to return to Romantic themes after the Cyclist exhibition at Rondo Sztuki?

For me, Romantic themes have always been associated with a melancholy outlook. I don't think I'll be coming back to that. How long can you go on talking about being depressed? Everyone has depression these days, it's not as interesting anymore. It's more of a reason to deal with it. There's a great meme of a guy stepping on a rake — it's the first year of depression. Then it's "the tenth year of depression" and the same character does a kickflip on the stairs and then lands on the rake. Yes, it's time to get over depression and start living normally. As for Romantic references, probably not, or maybe as part of juggling conventions.

You say of your performance during Night Activities organized by BWA in Katowice, when you were cycling around the General Jerzy Ziętek roundabout for 6 hours: "When I cycle around a roundabout for six hours, it's not because after six hours there will be some kind of transformation, but because nothing will happen."**

Could you explain that?

Maybe I'm not trying hard enough. When you think, write or talk about your work, it's easy to tell people that it's a compulsive repetition of a ritualistic activity or a struggle with your body; there are tons of such empty slogans. I pretty much believe that people do indeed feel that way. And here, nothing happened, there was no enlightenment, nor did I expect it. There was no transcendental dimension, and I don't think I've made a single work involving that dimension.

**"Potęga i stygmat czarnego słońca. Z Bartkiem Buczkiem rozmawia Agnieszka Kwiecień," *Fragile*, no. 4. Source: <https://fragile.net.pl/home/13139/> [accessed: 1.01.2020]

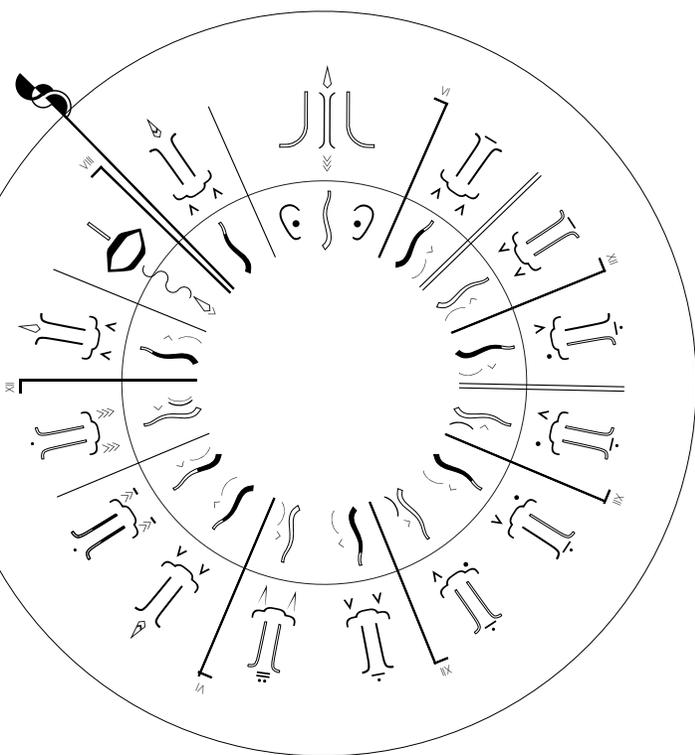
Bartek Buczek, a professional easel painter, amateur cyclist, boquiniste, creator of video art and installations, and author (including of the book *Za drogie, za słabe, zbyt trudne* published by Krakow's Bunkier Sztuki). He graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice in 2011, receiving his diploma in the studio of Andrzej Tobis. He enjoys working as a gallery employee with a broad range of professional competencies (technician, exhibitor, artist, arranger, and curator).

Buczek considers himself one of the most talented painters of his generation. He was a holder of the National Children's Fund scholarship. In his erudite work which goes beyond the scope of his painting one can feel a melancholic vibe, rooted in deep existential reflection. He is interested in the human condition in the modern, technicized world, deprived of calming rituals. He is interested in man, and more precisely, in himself.



LIVING TIME

CONVERSATION WITH DOBRAWA BORKAŁA



In one of the descriptions of your projects you note: “Breathing as an automatic bodily function is an act of continual becoming,” and in an interview for the magazine *Republika Długich Spódnic* (The Republic of Long Skirts) you say that breath has something ethereal about it. What does the breath mean for you?

I’m continually discovering it. I have no final definition. There are some levels: my everyday work with breathing, breathing as a reflex, a vital function. The breath as a tool of self-discovery, exploration and updating of habits. Through breath I learn my body and the many dimensions of my body’s functioning – it is an amazing path. There is also the level of exiting your individual experience, the interactive level. Through breathing, we achieve our first individuation when we come out of our mother’s body which had provided us with oxygen until the moment of birth. And later, when breathing, we exchange air molecules with the environment. I see the air as being in constant motion. It connects us very subtly with the history of life on Earth and, more immediately, with each other.

When reading about your activities, I came across terms such as energizing with breath, fire breathing or the Siberian partial asphyxiation method. These names connote esoteric knowledge and I guess these are methods which could be available to anyone.

It depends on one’s point of reference, one’s definition of esotericism. For me these methods are specific, systematized self-discovery techniques. What is esoteric? What can we call esoteric energy? Is it all that is hardly tangible but present on a level of sensitivity different from that referred to by language? Eastern cultures studied

breathing and learned how to manage its energy. Because of its power, this knowledge is usually passed on orally, from master to disciple. So we come to the issue of the accessible versus the hermetic. Of a mysterious science. My education emphasized the function of collective memory and being precise in your speech. I am happy to unlearn my habits and discover the wisdom of breathing. It turns inward to discover the answer within me. A hidden answer, because we don't direct our attention there while the air is constantly flowing through our nostrils.

How do you understand esotericism?

I rarely allude to it. It often appears around me, in the discourse of people around me. Right now I see it as a space for expanding what we are used to thinking and referring to collectively. Reaching the essence is the working definition I could give. The word ethereal resonates more with me than esotericism. Because of its volatility, its self-updating. I avoid closed formulas that are satisfied with themselves and their answers. For me seeking is important. Living in proximity with the issues that intrigue me. Not taking anything for granted, just questioning your cognitive apparatus all the time.

You have created an alphabet that allows us to perform a piece of music with our breath. What is the significance of the alphabet as such in your project? What is more, you write your music scores in a very attractive visual shape reminiscent of a mandala.

I just want to correct one detail – both the scores and the Breathing Symphony are proposals for a new artistic language, communication

through breath. Shifting our attention from external to internal stimuli. They are breathing pieces, not pieces of music. The breathing alphabet is still under construction. I create it on an ongoing basis, discovering what is really important to include in such an alphabet and what I want to convey. The idea came to me from several sources. As I already mentioned, most breathing practices are “secret teachings” passed down from master to disciple in the countries of the East. Very reasonably. Breathing affects many levels of our subtle body, therefore the natural balance of our body can be disturbed by inappropriate behaviour. A few years ago, I had a moment of questioning most social activities and artistic practices that contribute to the production of objects and dissipate energy. I therefore wanted to get involved in deepening my experience through daily practice and discipline. I thought it would be great to try to record breathing using a visual formula (we are a very ocular-centric society, and I took pains to develop a visual sensitivity over the years). So that I could respond to it; make it a repetitive, intersubjective yet still intimate experience. Each symbol is a synthesis, it reflects a physical state.

Each score has a unique shape. How do they arise?

I discover what a particular score should look like every time. This also applies to all the signs that reflect respiratory variants. I want to move beyond linear notation and linear reading, and at the same time to show a certain sequence. I am still looking for a form that would reflect how space-time bends when we breathe. I have made various attempts. Now I'm creating new notes arranged in a circle:

WSTĘŻYMANIE
PUSTE PŁUCA

ODDECH NOSEM

 A - V

ODDECH USTAMI

 A - V

WDECH

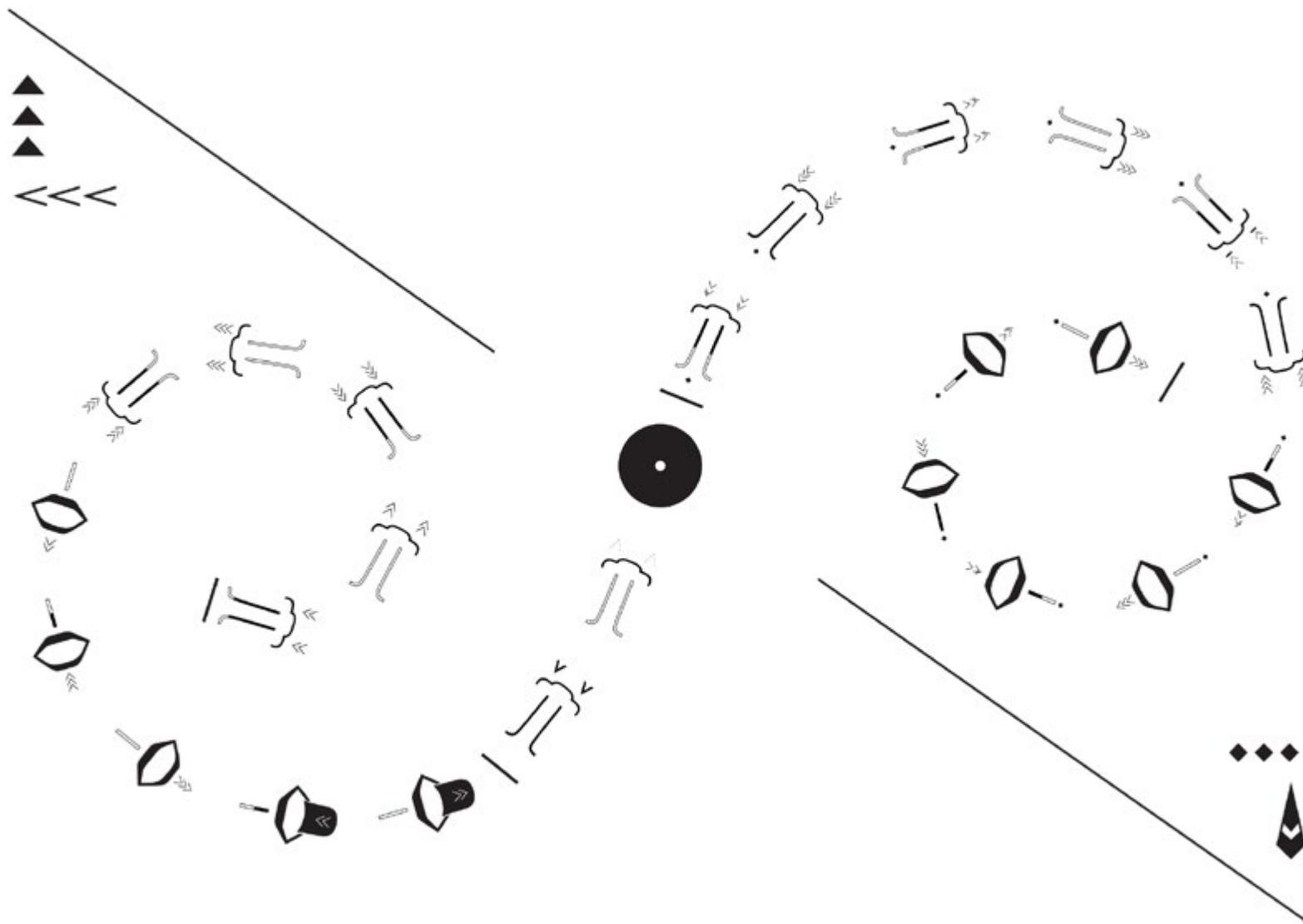
 WYDECH


INTENSYWNOŚĆ ODDECHU

 mała / średnia / duża / bardzo duża

 wdech
 przyśpieszenie
 zwolnienie

 rytm / metrum
 | Wdech i wydech stanowią jeden cykl oddychowy – walczyli! |
 | Kształt walczyli powtarzamy tak długo jak jest to możliwe. |
 niezmienną intensywność



inhale, pause, inhale, pause. They are units, temporal cells, and respiratory cycles. It depends on what type of experience I want to record, what I want to invite to using a particular score.

And what does teaching such a language look like?

The alphabet itself is an approximate notation and it is learned through self-observation and mindfulness, which I can initiate personally during the Breathing Symphony workshops or performances. It is an incentive to explore how different breathing can be depending on the situation and how deeply you can communicate with others through it. Learning the notes requires focus and making an attempt to enter my logic, which is only a proposal with regard to visually systematizing the breathing cycle. Hence my dream is to have space in life (it is probably a lifelong project, implying a certain lifestyle) to explore other alphabet suggestions and develop this formula. When I was devising the alphabet, I used it to write down breathing traditions that I was discovering with delight. I started the exercises with Hindu pranayamas, very rhythmic, with a precisely defined dynamics of successive respiratory cycle elements. The alphabet develops with new experiences, daily breathing practice – this separate space for mindfulness and each breath. In order to include the collective experience of breathing in my research, I founded the experimental breathing chorus EchO. It turned out that the alphabet was completely unsuitable for the breathing improvisations that we were doing. The group

work, which was partly supposed to develop the alphabet, turned into workshop practice. And now, after this long process, I am re-discovering the alphabet, seeing how I can adapt it to this type of experience. It's fun.

In an interview for Republika Długich Spódnic (The Republic of Long Skirts) you said that you would like to tell something in a narrative manner using your alphabet. Did you manage to start working on this project?

Since that interview, the first performance of the Breathing Symphony – Brightening – took place thanks to a residency at Komuna Warszawa. I am extremely grateful for this adventure. I wanted to lead this experience through breathing, the transition from one state to another, alluding to primal, pre-verbal means of expression; to keep the audience focused with minimal breathing signals.

What is the significance of the Rosada shell in the project and what did you want to convey to the audience during this event?

Working on Brightening was a deep process, both individual and collective. The EchO initiative lasted for nine months. I met wonderful, open-minded people. I am extremely grateful to the choir members for their involvement, time, trust, wading into the unknown together. Sometimes the two processes came together beautifully and synchronously, and sometimes they were challenging. The main point for me is working with myself, I have no influence on

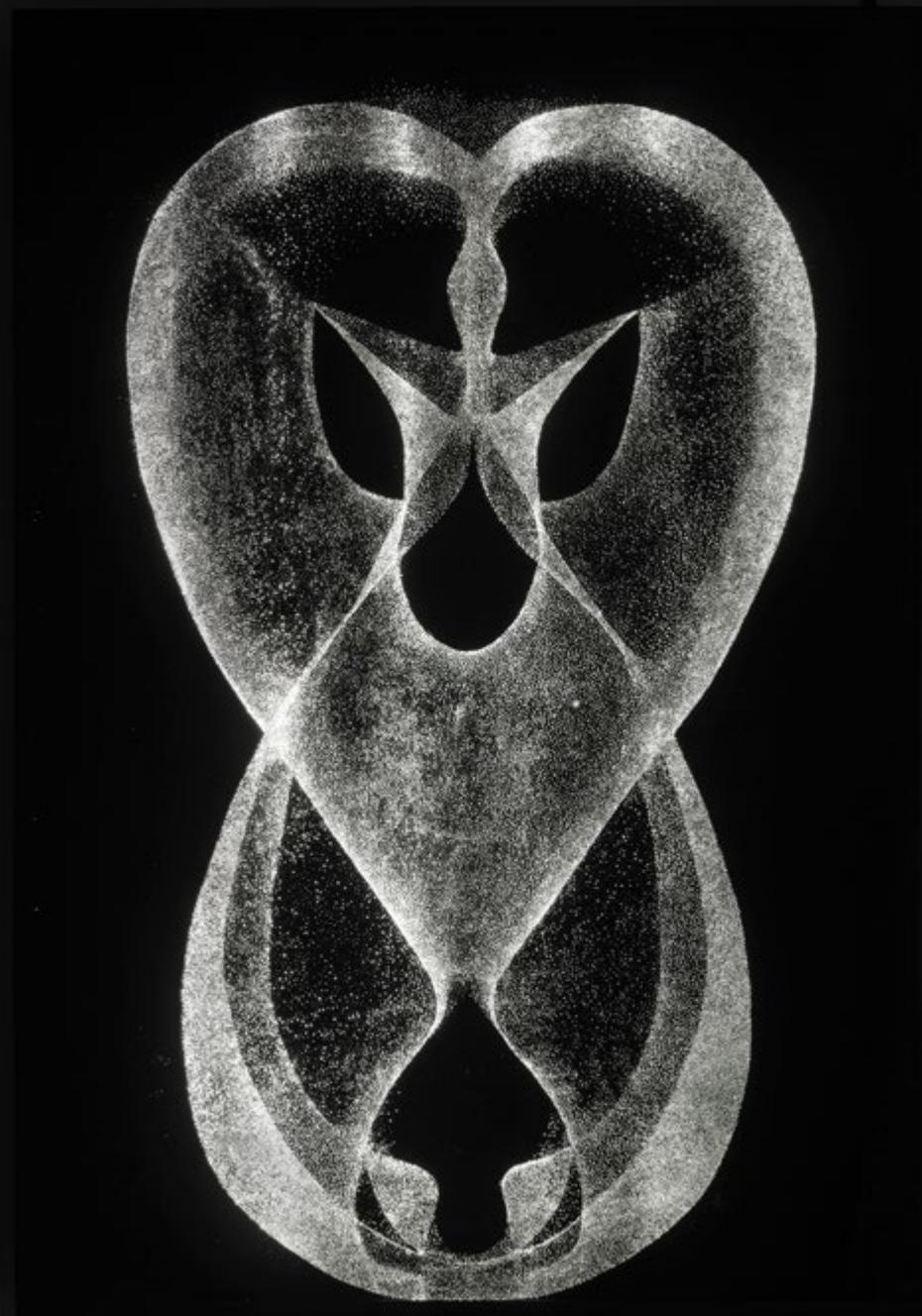


ECHO Jaśnieńie/Brighening, phot. Karolina Gorzelanęzyk, 2019

what another person takes from my proposal. Everybody understands meanings differently. In my therapeutic work I work more directly; in my artistic work I allow myself more freedom. For me, the performance was about the right to breathe, the right to life, and the fact that by changing one's relationship to one's breath, the relationship to oneself and one's surroundings changes. The Rosada shell delights me with its beauty, its vaginal form. It is a kind of connection to the primality of life which has oceanic roots. And the oxygen we breathe comes from the oceans. I worked with the Rosada on many levels: I animated her, lent her my breath to make her voice. Each time its sound is different, it puts my body into deep vibrations. I discover the stories of the shell.

In your project *The atmosphere of self* we find abstract shapes with organic, globular forms. In the description you note that they were created using breath.

These are the first works that I started making after my break from drawing, after a couple of years of breathing research. I was missing this manual form of expression, the focus on the out-of-the-body aspect. I figured out then that I could combine drawing (or rather scraping) with breathing. These are dotted works and each dot is drawn during a given breath phase, usually the pause, on empty lungs. By counting the dots, you can calculate the number of breaths taken in creating each scrape. While making such a drawing, I try to draw it in my body at the same time, from the inside, massaging and executing it spatially using air. I then synchronize it with a two-dimensional map of what happened in the experience. I don't have an idea or sketch in my head — the form is created organically.





The series includes several works. Did you manage to feel each differently?

Completely differently. The most time-consuming works of my life are those on glass, created over the course of a year or two. I cover the glass with paint, then use a needle to scratch off the paint and that's how I make the dots. This procedure also gives me the opportunity to experience time and patience. There are moments when I fall into a trance when making the dots, I enter the infinity of black-and-bright cosmic universes. Each time I sit down to work, it's a new experience that reveals itself. I can't always get into the right state of mind. I am often surprised myself how I manage to concentrate my actions on a piece of glass for months.

Were you able to achieve altered states of consciousness with your breath?

You can change your states of consciousness with your breath. And as for altered states? It depends on what you are thinking of, what your point of reference is, because these states are in constant flux.

So what can you achieve through breath? I know that you wrote that one can calm down, but also stimulate oneself.

These are such "rough" facts, but in fact the changes are much more subtle when it comes to "feeling yourself," feeling your balance and being sensitive to what is happening. More space is created on the microlevel, at least that's how I experience it. When there is more space, you can see more. Stimulation and relaxation have a great effect on the nervous system. That's also valuable.

In one of your statements you say that it is important for you to discover the perception of inner time? What do you mean by that?

Time is constantly becoming, it doesn't exist, therefore its perception bends. The concept of inner time is very dependent on mindfulness and arises in relation to it, depending on the quality of presence at a given moment and in a given place. The tempo then arises or is absent.

Are you continuing your project Lunarium with Samia, in which you talk about the influence of the moon on different areas of our functioning on Earth, including the menstrual cycle?

Practically speaking the project ended a long time ago. It was very pleasant. The observation of subjective time was related to the outer rhythm of the lunar phases. This inner time, measured with the breath or the menstrual cycle, overlapped with the moon moving across the sky. The lunar cycle can be a reference point for self-observation because it has a different scale than the diurnal cycle or the annual cycle (the seasons). It adds another level of observation, provides a systemic overview. It's a measuring device that has its own quality. The thing can be explained in astrological and planetary terms, but that's another topic.

Are you interested in the astrological explanation?

I am observing it, although I still have few tools and little knowledge. I am open to any suggestions that help analyse reality. I am

not convinced that in this analysis astrology should be considered a more appropriate method than physics. Each of these is interesting enough to get into. As part of the Lunarium project, we explored female archetypes and created many illustrations. At the same time, I made the series of works One/Goddesses, in which I researched female sexual symbols in the aesthetics of ancient art. The works do away with womanhood as fragile and beautiful, incapacitated. They propose a visual language that reflects the strength and multifaceted nature of the female element, its growing role in the creation of humanity.

An illustration of inner time also appears in your drawing referring to palm reading.

This is an illustration of an internal organ clock according to Traditional Chinese Medicine. I often turn the knowledge I am exploring at a given moment into a drawing. That way I can systematize and integrate it more and remember it better.

You are a qualified yoga instructor. Does yoga have an influence on your artistic work?

Yoga is a very valuable practice when it comes to everyday concentration, although I sometimes use elements of it when exploring or working with people. Yoga has helped me. It was a reaction to how creativity was adversely affecting my body, especially the drawing position which wasn't good for my spine. When I started doing yoga, I discovered that I don't have to draw so much and it's much nicer

to stretch. I prefer to spend time making breathing compositions, doing physical exercises, swimming or walking in natural surroundings. These activities definitely compete for my time.

The Mszak project refers to the ritualism of establishing contact with nature. Could you explain why it was created?

The Mszak project is in progress at the moment, it's searching for its own rituals. We are also learning how to be a community. It is a collective entity, an inter-species community. It reflects on how, as the human species, we could communicate with other life forms on Earth and how to do it inclusively, knowing the limitations of our cognitive apparatus. By respecting and defending the ecosystems that man so often destroys. The Mszak project determines itself. It's still too early to describe it in detail.

What is the Double Girl series about? And could you tell me something more about your drawings?

Drawing was my first form of expression which I felt best in since I was a child. At one point I just wanted to stop drawing in order to check if I am able to form relationships with people and dialogue with them any other way. I have always drawn – for me it is a way of integrating, synthesizing experiences, organizing things. I created Lilian the double girl 11 years ago. Hundreds of stories and dialogues. Currently I am returning to this series as a therapist interested in dissociation and personality parts. How many such inner personalities inhabit us? Sometimes they shape



Lilianki, drawing on paper, 21 x 27,9, 2013



one another, enter into relationships that help them find balance. In the case of Lilian the double girl, these are different temperaments, different characters, yet operating within the same body and lifetime. Initially, they want to part, disconnect, but that would mean annihilation, so they learn different ways of coexisting and co-creating, of finding a common thread.

In your work *Nourriture lumineuse* there is a figure with the geometry of a circle and a triangle inscribed into it. Could you explain the meaning of this work? In French the word *nourriture* means “food” and *lumineuse* means “luminous”.

It was the title of my master’s thesis at the Academy of Fine Arts. It was about plants and their sensitivity to light. Light has different functions for our bodies. Plants produce food from light. For man the same vibrations are at the root of visual perception, while the plant world becomes our food... I would like to be able to photosynthesize. This work is a fancywork illustrating my favourite activity in life, which is energizing my womb with the help of sunlight. I made it for the exhibition *Flow* organized by Agnieszka Brzeźńska and Ewa Cieplewska. I was wondering about what was most valuable for me during that time together, i.e. being constantly outdoors, with my naked body bathing in sunlight and water. This work is an illustration of this state, which seems to me to be the optimal form of being in relation to the sun and to myself, with the hips open and everything exposed to sunlight. I think that

metaphysics is mediated by a very simple experience of materiality. The longer I live, the more I appreciate the simplicity of experience, looking for it in what is near.

Dobrawa Borkała (born 1990) visual and respiratory artist and psychologist, EMDR therapist, Buteyko breathing method instructor. Graduate of ENSBA in Paris and SWPS in Warsaw.

She studies the physical and mythical role of air and breath and the affective atmosphere they produce. Creator of the Breathing Alphabet consisting of several dozen characters distinguishing variants of human breath.

She has developed the Breath Synchrony project spanning performance, visual arts, and therapeutic and symbolic recording – combining themes of bodily, social, ecological and environmental experience. In 2018, she initiated the Experimental Breathing Choir (EChO) in Warsaw.



NUCLEAR DESERT

CONVERSATION WITH KATARZYNA KUKUŁA

Full Moon, oil on canvas, 160 × 160 cm, 2014



Could you tell me about the role of intuition in your works and about your visions of your future paintings?

I follow intuition in my painterly gesture. It's a sense of the painting, when I feel the material, the paint, how it reacts. And then I am open to chance. This intuition interacts with magical thinking like a logical mind, things just happen. I'm a bit sceptical when it comes to magic, but more on that later. Visions keep coming, I used to think that they were images of the truth, of the human condition, my own condition. And it was probably the case to some extent. Now I think it's just an active imagination, maybe some sort of filtering out of everyday experiences. I have changed my approach to it now, but it's a really long story.

Tell me about it.

My story with magic began at the age of 25, when I went to an Indian sweat lodge, where people come with their requests or intentions. The Indian sweat lodge is an egg-shaped structure. It's a tent formed from above by Father Heaven, from below by Mother Earth; its egg shape symbolizes new birth, purification. On the tent there is a cross. It divides heaven into four parts, four fields – like the four human races: red, yellow, white, and black. Each colour symbolizes something. White is change, transformation, vision. Black is both death and recovery, red symbolizes material goods, and yellow relationships. When I went to my first Indian sweat lodge I was in bad shape mentally and physically. I asked for healing, both spiritual and physical. Then, unexpectedly, things started to go my way. When I ran out of money, new money appeared. I thought about something

and then it happened. Maybe it was my intuition, coincidence, or maybe I was just on the crest of a wave at the time. I don't know. So I went there for a second time. I was single at the time so I asked for a partner. I was very shy so I asked for someone I could communicate with without words. And, surprisingly, I got a voice in my head that was talking to me, and that was when my bipolar disorder started, and then it was a real world of magic, hardcore. There was a total illusion about reality in my head. It's a mystery to me what was happening at the time. I don't remember a lot from that time, I lived in a weird place then. I wasn't living in the here and now, but more in my head. I can't describe it properly. It was a very strange experience which lasted for 5-6 years. The most intense period was for half a year. Then I ended up in hospital and part of the symptoms began to go away. Or maybe it was some kind of suppression of this intuition? There are different ways you can look at it. Now I focus more on the rational element, but someone may say that I felt more before. I now choose a safe path because this is the best for me and my health. I lose something, but also gain something. In some way I'm losing my vision, although the creativity continues and I gain a healthy life. For some people magic is very safe and they approach it with distance, or not, anyway they don't risk their health. For me it might have caused a gift, or an illness.

There are many symbols in your paintings. You also create your own signs, like the one with a triangle, a penis and a vagina surrounded by sperm. What does it mean?

This is a symbol of sexuality that I've created. I think it's a sign that says: you can reach your spirit through your body, discover or

experience something. It kind of sanctifies the human body, human sexuality, which isn't always perceived positively in Poland, and yet it should be because it's pure joy, pure pleasure. The body is the senses, feeling; it is also our whole life.

How did it occur to you to turn this idea into a symbol?

I remember it was really intuitive, but then I heard about sigils and it seemed to be connected. I had intuitively created my own sigil. And I think that in some sense it also had its influence on reality, perhaps subconsciously. Even though I am sceptical about that, I sometimes give in.

A heart is a frequent symbol in your works. It may be plucked out and held out on a hand, or it can be in the cosmos, as in the painting Tree of knowledge. Why do you use this motif?

It's very interesting because as a result of my illness I often suffered from chest pain. When I was 27 I went to a fortune-teller who said: "You will be rich." He didn't say whether it would be spiritually or materially. "You will be happy, pure, and you will have a boyfriend." And he said one more thing which I hadn't told him before: "Your heart is aching, please allow yourself to love." Actually my heart had been hurting for a long time. My ECG exam was okay. It wasn't until I met my boyfriend that the pain stopped.

Kasia's mother: Residual depression.

Kasia: My mum is always this rational voice that keeps my feet on the ground.

Another important symbol in your works is the rose. Can you tell me something about it?

I use the rose because to me it is a simple symbol of life, of the vagina, of a special kind of beauty. And maybe also of kitsch? When I think of kitsch I think of utopia. I often use kitsch because it's so magical, so cosy. The point is to visually seduce the viewer. Kitsch is the easiest way of doing that. Although viewers differ. Some are probably repelled. But at least there is some reaction and I use kitsch to introduce other meanings. When I was preparing my diploma work I often used kitsch to make my paintings tasty, pink, sweet, nice, pleasant and appealing. For me the connotation was with sexuality and in some ways, utopia.

Does it have anything to do with the esoteric for sale?

My fascination with kitsch began during my studies. It was very intuitive, but then when I went to the Indian sweet lodge, I started reading esoteric books. Osho for example. In my opinion he's really dull. He too wanted to create a utopia but fortunately he didn't succeed. And he is kitschy too. Not like Zen Buddhism, which speaks so beautifully about life and searching for your own path. Osho is so unrefined, his texts are a mix of various concepts that don't necessarily fit together. He was not the best teacher in that area. He got me muddled up pretty bad. At times my paintings exuded a type of tawdry esotericism. I think it was because of the books. I was naive and in quest of meaning, and Osho was the first thing I stumbled upon, and I developed a fascination. But that was an embarrassing stage in my life.

Cosmic space is very important in your works, some of them are downright wallpapered with stars. The cosmos is the scene of some important events.

It's the whole universe. It's a symbol of connection and of the cosmic potentialities unfolding in reality. Now I can define it in a rational way, that it's a cosmos of possibilities, something that happens every day, but I used to treat it as the whole universe, indeed I felt like I myself was the earth. I was experiencing for the whole planet and I felt the beating core of the universe. Terrible megalomania, or maybe it was just my illness.

Kasia's mother: Some of it was certainly the illness. If she read a lot and empathized it made things worse. In this illness, you have to cling to your surroundings.

How do you see your cosmic works today?

I like them, I'm their mother after all. I have great love for my paintings, both old and new. They are a testimony of what I went through, what I had in my head, what was going on inside. They're a kind of dream, a memory. That's how I see them today, I find new meaning in them.

Kasia's mother: Today she can transition from what she reads and thinks to reality, and before she just couldn't. There was a huge space which she could not pass between what was and what she was stuck in — her head in the clouds.

Kasia: It wasn't me devouring books, but books devouring me. I myself became the book I was reading. I took everything in directly, I had no barrier. I was like a child.



Cosmos of possibilities, oil on canvas, 80 x 60, 2017

I would also like to ask you about your heavenly bodies. The Earth as well as the Sun and Moon (and the latter are separate) appear in your paintings.

Right, these three bodies do indeed appear in my paintings. They are the closest to my heart, I experience them every day. The Earth appeared as a reference to the approaching end of the world in 2050 and the ecological catastrophe. The moon is directly related to the feminine and the sun to the masculine. This is close to Taoism, and I was strongly inspired by yin and yang, their interpenetration and movement. In my paintings they often symbolize man and woman, and I build the painting on the tension between them. I once read a Zen story in which one of the Zen master points to the moon and says: “Don’t look at your finger but at the moon.” It’s about feeling experiences directly.

This division also establishes a sense of time in your paintings.

Intuitively I feel that it could symbolize time because it refers to day and night or the transition between them. I was trying to capture this flow back then. There are definitely strong links in my paintings to illness and recovery. The more flowers there are, the more kitschy and colorful they are, the more I am reawakening to the here and now. Those earlier dark, night paintings were made when I was being devoured by darkness from the inside. I would shut my eyes and feel the wordless, empty darkness devouring me. It could also be a stampede of thoughts. And that’s how I could divide it. I had a moon, nighttime, series and a daytime series. Now I’m painting a woman who mounts a skull and catches the sun, and the moon

is hidden in the shadow of the skull. For me, it’s a very symbolic image of the triumph of life. It’s not big, about 60x40 cm, composed vertically. One eye of the skull blends in with the background, the other is black. There is a moon in that black or dark blue eye. The skull casts a shadow on the brown background, on the ground. The earth can stand for grounding. There are stars on the shadow. The skull is being mounted by a voluptuous woman, she is catching the sun with her hands and the sun is shining through her hands. In the background there are small, tiny elements, such as a rainbow, a boob-shaped balloon, a penis-shaped plane and other life-affirming symbols. During my illness I played a kind of game with myself: whether I would live in the real world or in my imagination. I felt that this was some kind of illusion, a game, but a really dangerous one. Recently I’ve realised that the game is over. And that’s my triumph.

What is the meaning of bones in your works? In one of your paintings, the hands are holding a skull that has a third eye; at other times the bones are scattered around the room.

I think this is still a symbol of permanence, something that is perfectly explained in *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. It’s what comes first, it supports the whole body, the bones are indestructible. For a year I suffered from severe depression, I didn’t get out of bed and I thought a lot about death; and so it’s also a symbol of death for me. I’m not really innovative in this. Sometimes it’s also a symbol of wisdom – through death to life, as I’ve heard recently, or through hardships to the stars. I understand both references as saying that in order to appreciate life you have to contemplate death.



Atlaska, oil on canvas, 40 x 80 cm, 2014

In your painting *Atlaska Full Moon II* you depict the mythical figure of Atlas supporting the firmament as a woman. What does this interpretation of the myth mean to you?

It's a self-portrait. I take responsibility for myself, for what goes on in my world in the context of the Earth, of ecology. In my opinion everybody should take responsibility for things around them. I am not talking about great deeds, but about throwing your plastic cups into the bin when you go to the forest, not on the ground. They are such simple gestures, but they change reality. I see it every day in the forest. It really annoys me. I pick up every little piece of garbage. In the painting there is a black hole on the belly, it refers to consumerism. I have more of these paintings. There is also a painting showing the Earth being devoured. It shows a girl devouring the Earth like a hamburger. These paintings are related to insatiability, hunger caused by a lack of emotions or, perhaps, too much emotion. I'm speaking for myself now. That's how I interpreted my own hunger.

In your painting *Soul Cleaner* you show a cleaning lady who is also a witch. She is wearing a housecoat with an image of the cosmos. She is being observed by eyes.

Those are flowers, not stars. The cleaning lady motif dates back to a period when I was working as a security guard and also doing some cleaning. I was on my way to work one day and I heard about the Notre-Dame. The painting for me is a symbol of both how the Catholic Church is currently burning, but also of the opposition between culture and nature. These are the first associations I have in relation to this painting. Its also a documentary painting. It records my experiences.

Your work Tree of knowledge was exhibited at the botanical museum in Berlin. How do you understand this work?

All my works directly reflect my experiences. In this case, I was attending group therapy at the time and was wallowing in unpleasant human experiences. During my therapy I had many intense experiences and it gave rise to a tree made of people with a meditating Buddha underneath. The background is made of skin – this painting was about experiencing reality with body and mind. These people are engaged in all sorts of heavy activities in a moral sense, and at the top of the tree the forms arrange themselves into a face. There are also leaves and flowers in the eyes. This is the seed of consciousness, the being that sees and experiences, and when you see something, you can always change it. The same goes for changing yourself. As soon as you are aware of problems, you can solve them. You can look at them from a different perspective and make the negative into a positive.

In your series Fearing to be afraid we find the motif of a woman and rats. Your painting Fuck, Let it go takes us back to the Middle Ages in terms of the sense of time through the depiction of an enclosed, box-like interior and the presence of rats, but there is also a very modern portrait of a woman there. The woman is being held by the neck but she's smiling.

I recently attended a series of astrology workshops and one of them was about transformation. In alchemy symbolism, red and black are the colors of transformation, and these colors appear in the painting. In some sense, the image that I painted, especially the image of this strangled woman, sometimes intruded into my mind of its





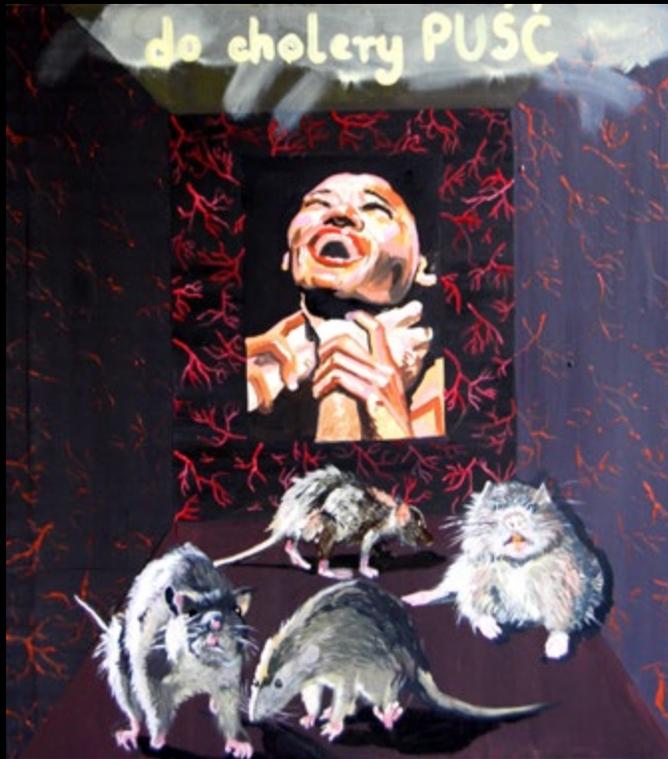
own accord. Jung wrote that when he was sick he felt the collective subconscious. I felt like the collective subconscious. These paintings are a kind of mystery to me. The rats were supposed to symbolize fear and survival at the same time, the interiors were those inner spaces in which we experience our emotions. There is also another painting in which the woman is strangling herself or is being strangled by someone else. This experience of violence made me wonder. How to keep things like anger under control. It's something I learn every day. The images in my mind went away after I painted them. I managed to get rid of that kind of fear and aggression. I began to name my emotions normally, so I can call it a transformation.

The perspective of a closed room, a painting within a painting, often appears in your works.

It symbolizes isolation, sometimes introversion, shutting oneself inside. For a long time I was a hermit, I would spend a lot of time in the forest. And I still do, but my life is different. Shutting yourself in and looking for health.

What are the characters in masks with long horns supposed to represent? In one of your paintings they are licking the sun.

These were reflections on evil. What is evil? We all sometimes feel like being bad for a moment. With a grain of salt I represented devils who are actually tamed and won't do any harm. A lot of symbols emerge in connection with them, and I treat these intuitively. It's a train of thought, an automatic record when I am meditating on a painting and thoughts appear that automatically turn into images.



One thing follows another, and it just keeps coming. I am no longer pausing to think. I act irrationally and rationally at the same time. And I combine both. I stop caring. I am in a kind of painting continuum and I just pour my emotions onto the canvas.

What is the significance of ritual in your works? Dances in a circle or mushroom picking are some examples.

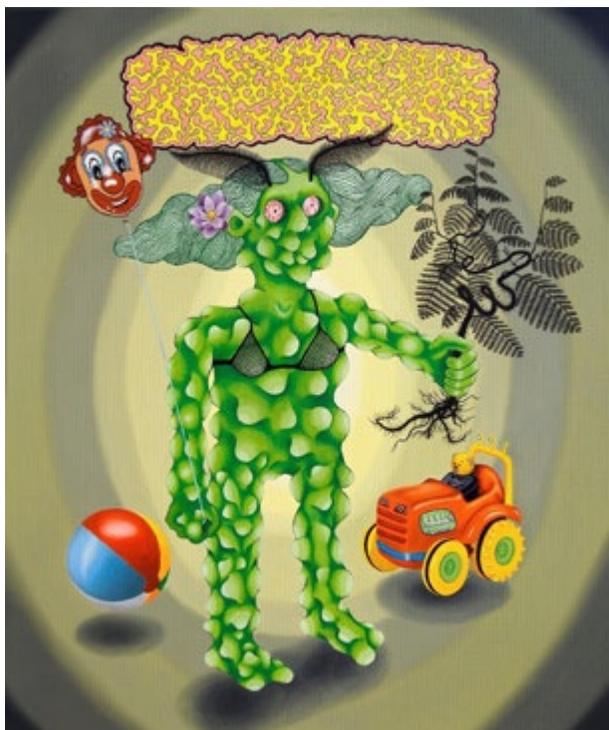
I've never thought of them that way. I'd probably call them "feasts" – as in the feast of Kupala. There are holidays that exist at the cusp of two religions. I was interested in combining paganism with Catholicism and seeing how they permeate one another, or more like the absorption of one by the other. At the beginning I used them subconsciously, they somehow permeated my imagination. The act of painting itself is a ritual. I go into the studio, light a cigarette, sit in an armchair and think, I look at a painting, sometimes I read something, I experience images, I experience myself. This ritual is very flexible and I discover the mystery very slowly.

Katarzyna Kukuła graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow with a degree in Painting. In her figurative paintings she focuses on questions of female subjectivity, bodily vitality, autonomy, and ecstatic pleasure. Using surrealist stylistics, she depicts the female body as part of the sphere of nature and its sexual energies as cosmic forces.



A CITY FULL OF WHORES AND WEALTH

CONVERSATION WITH MAREK RACHWALIK



Logo and mascot of a band playing low-tuned porn gore grind,
oil on canvas, 60 x 50 cm, 2016

Are you interested in magic and esotericism?

Instead of talking about the world of magic and esotericism I would talk about the world of fantasy. Metalheads have always had a predilection for it. From my first reading of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* in elementary school, I became an incurable fan of this genre. I have read Tolkien and Sapkowski over a couple of times. Black metal, which originated in Norway, has always been heavily influenced by Tolkien's mythology. Varg Vikernes, Gorgoroth – Tolkien names have permeated music and blended with it. There are even bands whose work is dedicated exclusively to this subject, like *Summoning*. Comic books were also a big inspiration for me, my favorite was *Lobo*, an immortal hero who listens to hard rock. Meanwhile, esotericism or occultism, secret knowledge, are more embedded in religion, which I am not interested in, although it plays an important role in heavy metal. Black metal is certainly esoteric, you can feel it in the visual layer too, from the indecipherable logos to the stage image of performers. For me, magic is synonymous with fantasy. Magic realism, as a genre in painting, is the epitome of kitsch. And spirituality is completely foreign to me. Recently I have been reading a biography of Abramović which talks about spirits in the earth, ancient dragons under the Great Wall of China, the male and female element. As much as I like it, I don't believe these things as an atheist.

Why does the aesthetics of psychedelia appear in your works and is there anything esoteric about it?

I am spinning my own interpretation of what psychedelic is. I have never taken psychedelics myself. It's something I have a hard

time identifying with. I like reading about the various effects of psychedelics or drugs on consciousness, but I've never had enough courage to test it on myself. I see psychedelia as a multi-threaded image saturated with intense colors, although not necessarily with various motifs, just simply strange. When I see this type of painting, I immediately put a psychedelic label on it, but I don't know exactly what it means.

Do you agree with Bartosz Zaskórski, who said that instead of criticizing the reality we live in your art is ecstatic*? At the same time, in your interview for NN6T† you say that your interest in heavy metal was your only escape from a lack of prospects and loneliness.

In a way, my art criticizes reality, makes fun of metal and consumer pop culture, robber-band chieftains and freaks. Bartosz doesn't deny it. However, it is certainly ecstatic, maybe not in a sexual way, more in an energetic sense — it is supposed to be a discharge, an explosion. The paintings are supposed to throb when looked at and shimmer like op-art. As for the interview in NN6T... That's true, metal music was my only way of escaping a brutal world. Thanks to it I managed to find my way as early as 13. I believe that

* B. Zaskórski, "Triumf. Wieś. Dionizje*," Szum 2017. Source: <https://magazynszum.pl/triumf-wies-dionizje/> [accessed: 1.01.2020]

† "Postawa mocnego w gębie wiejskiego cwaniaczka. Z Markiem Rachwalikiem rozmawia Aleksandra Litorowicz," NN6T 2018. Source: <https://www.nn6t.pl/2018/10/01/postawa-mocnego-w-gebie-wiejskiego-cwaniaczka/> [accessed: 1.01.2020]

every metalhead is an escapist and generally runs away from his/her social problems — from pop culture and everyday life into the world of fantasy, imagination, and music.

Where do the ideas for your titles come from? E.g. A Team of Water Railwaymen at the Ur-source of an Astrological Well. Could you explain?

It's all based on associations. At that time I was reading one of Pelevin's books. He loves magic and esotericism and he smuggles many such elements into his works. What I like about him is the fact that you can open his books to any page, choose any passage and immerse yourself in multi-layered descriptions. It is all very well composed. I was very inspired by his works at that time. The background of this painting is a fragment of Jupiter. Maybe this reference drove me into astral themes.

Speaking of metal bands, you said that they allude to a religion associated with the primal cult of nature. In your paintings there are many organic forms appearing in combination with technology or devouring technology and other aspects of the culture of man and other cosmic beings. What do your paintings say about nature? They try to reflect this element of fascination. In my recent paintings about music this topic has been pushed to the background. There are fewer of my typical references to microtissues and biological structures, but my earlier works included many enlargements of strange cytoplasmic forms, trees, twigs, or aquarium fish. It's a reflection of my fascination with microfauna and flora.



Could it have anything to do with nature worship in metal?

In my old paintings I didn't see it in the context of metal yet. I wasn't thinking about translating metal music into painting. I had a completely different approach. Something that connects these old paintings with the new is certainly the psychedelic variegation of colors and a love of detail, but in my metal series I moved away from the contemplation of nature, which Andrzej Tobis wrote about in a review of my thesis. I contemplate the objects I depict more. But I will be getting back to nature for sure. However, as far as metal music is concerned, there are quite a lot of genres that reject religion and politics and take up primitive, primal beliefs, directly connecting the human with nature: pagan metal, folk, or ambient. I recently remembered an illustrator I was totally into when I was a kid. His name was Ivan Bilibin and he was a Russian folklorist who made his works at the turn of the 19th century. I had a book of fairy tales with his illustrations and I remember that later, when I was growing up, I gave it to someone. A couple of years ago I bought it online and I was completely enchanted by the illustrations. They are really ominous, full of details. It connects with psychedelic painting and the sinister visuals on metal covers. For years they were lodged somewhere in my subconscious. For me it's pure black metal.

The illustrations look very modern.

A huge amount of details, allusions to Art Nouveau, i.e. nature and dark forest secrets. During my studies I forgot about this book completely. I had been scared of the fairy tales and of the images of Baba Yaga and her hut on chicken legs!

How did you remember Bilibin?

I was simply trying to recall my early fascinations and I thought that maybe it's a good idea to go back to the books I used to read in childhood. It was then that I remembered him. And what's with the metal covers? On the one hand, I know it's kitsch. Everyone laughs about it, but on the other hand I like them because they transport me to the youthful world of fantasy. They're attempts to capture the darkness. Sometimes they are very inept. But in some way they remind me of Bilibin who had the ability to wonderfully convey this atmosphere of mystery, horror, black magic. Witches, skulls – these elements appear in almost every Russian fairy tale. These covers, in a sense ludicrous, clumsy and naive, make me sentimental. When I look at the covers of Necrolord – a funny nickname (he is a famous creator of modern metal covers) – I am immediately flooded with tears because I am swept away to that world. I mainly paint landscapes and there is something about them that fascinates me. I am thinking of painting something that would be a tribute to Bilibin or Necrolord. Their works strongly contemplate nature.

Sometimes artists bring a bit of darkness into their work, and it automatically becomes more interesting.

For me, it probably works the other way. My paintings are full of happiness and cheer. It's like the kitsch metal covers that take you back to youthful fantasy and imagination. In the colors of my paintings, I travel to the world of my childhood, my first fascination with paints and crayons, when you squeezed out pure colors – this approach was



Cover design of my hypothetical black metal solo project,
phot. Bartosz Zaskórski, 2017

less intellectual, more intuitive. That's how I see it when I think about my painting, so total regress, an attempt to hide in the cheerful word of the child. I am fascinated by the dark world of Bilibin and metal covers but I don't literally transfer it to my paintings.

I actually think that they do show some darkness. Even the astrological well has a terrifying black root in it.

Ok, so maybe I just think they are joyful.

Maybe that's your intention, but then anxiety comes along of its own accord? Moving on to the next question, I have the impression that the aliens in your paintings are not a simple borrowing from pop culture and that there is something ominous about them, having to do with the essence of life but also with the transience of organic material.

Firstly, I believe that we are all aliens. The cosmic and strange is the order of the day and the cosmos permeates us, so to speak. Just think of the infinity of the world, of things like black holes that reverse time, and the sheer stampede of thoughts and ideas can drive you mad. Maybe the paintings contemplate this in some way because unfortunately we cannot do anything with this insufficient knowledge. However, I never thought of the characters in my paintings as aliens, maybe more as an echo of cartoon creations.

What's on your map of consciousness? If we look at your painting That's a metaphorical map of consciousness, not some redneck military deployment plan!!!

A map of consciousness also appears somewhere in Pelevin, in Buddha's Little Finger, I think. I remember that I became fascinated

with this expression and it merged with the painting I was painting then. I just decided to give it that title. But there is also some pugnacity there, a kind of joke that others cannot decode. A pugnacious, redneck kind of joke. In this painting there is also Bosch's skating platypus from the hell of musicians, the right wing of The Garden of Earthly Delights, and gourami fish that I used to keep in my aquarium.

Do your paintings say something about transcending consciousness in that case?

Not really, since they are creations of my consciousness, after all. I'm not sure if it's possible at all to transcend consciousness. I'd have to use some kind of drug that would push me beyond the normal framework of everyday perception. I try to search for ideas as deeply in my imagination as possible, but even this process stays within the limits of my everyday awareness, it's not unnatural. I understand transcending consciousness in the sense of taking something that helps you completely alter your perception.

It is also possible to transcend consciousness with meditation. In his review of your master's thesis[‡], Andrzej Tobis compares your painting to meditation.

I usually think of meditation as concentrating on one point for a long time, or focusing one's thought momentarily on a visual motif and processing it in the imagination. Something like looking

[‡] A. Tobis, Review of Marek Rachwalik's master's thesis, Katowice, 2012. Source: <http://marekrachwalik.blogspot.com/p/tekst-text.html> [accessed: 1.01.2020]



through a telescope with fractals. We focus on an object and then develop this motif in our imagination. This is what it truly means to contemplate a detail of nature. Meditation is calming down, tuning out visual, music, tactile and gustatory distractions and focusing on one point, really delving into it. Actually, I've never tried classical meditation, so sitting cross-legged with your fingers joined on your knees, with incense sticks and the sound of a waterfall from a cassette in the background.

Is your painting a meditation in this sense?

Probably a bit like that – it's being suspended in a single point. Although I am always listening to music when painting, it's still about limiting all stimuli to just one. I put all my energy into it. I don't give in to any distractions when coming up with an image and motif.

Can you explain who the figure in your painting The public finance auditor adjudicates... (the pope of specters and phantasms) is? It looks like a forest druid, a wizard, but in the title you call it the public finance auditor.

This is a pre-metal painting. It was the painting after which I decided that it would be neat to allude to metal in my work. Before that, I made covers for cassettes. Later, at the beginning of my studies, I made two paintings in Dominika Kowynia's composition class. I did a primitive little man holding a big radiator that looked like an accordion. It was a visualization of heavy music. Then I used Bartek Zaskórski's photo of the Eyehategod CD with a sculpture

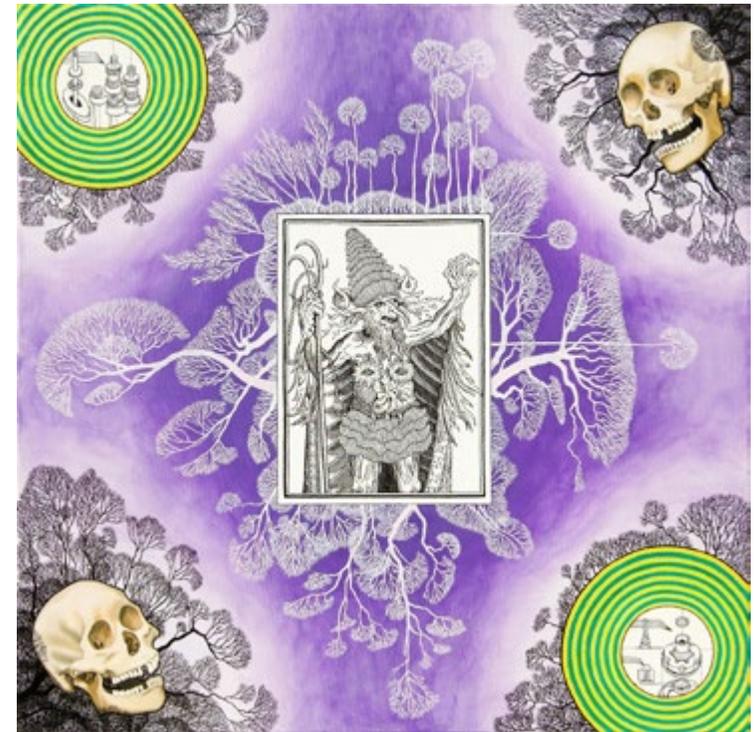
made by Bartosz's dad on which I put my own face. Then I made the painting with the pope. The original engraving was made by an unknown, 16th-century French artist. This motif used to appear very often on the CD covers of metal groups, e.g. Azarath and Kriegsmaschine. Obviously I altered it, it has a totally different cap and dress. It seemed quite a whimsical little creature to me, a little ironic, perfect for a metal altar.

Referring to the title, on what level does magical thinking meet reality here? What is the purpose of that contrast?

The public finance auditor seemed a neat character to me to contrast with the pope's seriousness. Theoretically, the figure in the engraving was supposed to be Satan in the body of a pope. I think the metaphor was that the devil stands behind the Pope. The title arose as an associative contrast. The pope strikes a pose to let the world know that they should pay attention to him. That also inspired me to come up with a title based on a semantic opposition. The painting itself is also quite gloomy. The engraving is too. There are skulls. It contrasts with the strongly psychedelic plants that grow out of the central altar.

In your work you analyze alogicality. Is it the same alogicality that one finds in magic?

Everything that we think up in our heads is basically illogical. It doesn't align with reality. It's more a type of alogicality typical of surrealism, but which also exists in magic or fantasy. I think that alogicality relates to the escapism we have already talked about.



The public finance auditor adjudicates... (the pope of spectres and phantasms), oil on canvas, 60 × 60 cm, 2015

Because where did this metal stuff come from? In some way it saved my life. Its inherently rebellious attitude to the world matched my mismatch with my family, with society and its general principles, with the artistic milieu, women, athletes or in fact with the whole heavy metal subculture, because I never considered myself its stereotypical follower. This is already illogical to me. A certain kind of incompatibility with the environments that one has to live in as a social being in order to stay mentally healthy. When I was growing up, I'd constantly experience one disappointment after another, and I guess that's why escapism fits the whole thing. It seems to me that the image we strive to create of ourselves on Facebook or Instagram is also important. After all, it's another way of escaping classification, labeling, being forced to be unambiguous. So we can always be a mystery to others. Apart from art and visual presentation, an artist must also protect his private life, by playing the clown or trying to cover any tracks that others could use to uniformly judge his world.

In the interview for *Aktivist*§ you say that you are not interested in the meaning of the signs used by metal groups, e.g. 666 or the inverted cross. But you use these symbols when you refer to the style of these groups. Can you explain why you are not interested in them and what makes you employ such references?

I understand the meaning of these signs but I'm an atheist, so neither Catholicism nor satanism affect me in any way. Someone asked me on Facebook if I know what these symbols mean, apparently

§ "Estetyczny margines. Z Markiem Rachwalikiem rozmawia Sylwia Kawalerowicz," *Aktivist* 2019, no. 211. Source: <http://aktivist.pl/es-tetyczny-margines-wywiad-z-markiem-rachwalikiem/> [accessed: 1.01.2020]

this person was strongly offended. I use them for fun. Yet as far as the music is concerned, they make no impression on me. I appreciate the existence of counterculture, I try to have some idea of what's going on in it, I respect its symbols and protest against all religious values – I am also against them – but I don't take sides. It's not a real manifesto but rather only serves to provoke or initiate online fights. Similarly when it comes to previews of my paintings – I evoke the motif of tough guys who often appear on the covers of albums like e.g. those by Manowar, Kreator or Kat. This is a symbolic manifesto, a personification of male aggression, opposition to everything that is holy and alive. Metal is mainly made by men. The purpose of this visual fury is also to provoke.

A logotype inspired by the style of a metal bands occurs in a number of your paintings.

It's part of playing with the visuality of the logotype. I am constantly on the lookout for logos that the name Marek can be inscribed into. The Marduk logo is a perfect match. Marduk is one of my favorite bands. It's important for black metal and has a great logo. I had to remove two letters in order to create my own logo out of it. It has an inverted cross, three sixes, so all the important elements. My first exhibition, the Panzer Division Marek, also made reference to Marduk's album (Panzer Division Marduk from 1999). It was an album that revolutionized black metal and took it to new extremes and standards of technical speed. I feel quite sentimental about it because I had it on cassette. I also made a Marek logotype using the logo of the band Revenge. This is, in my opinion, the most

anti-human, anti-Christian and brutal band on Earth. And they have a great, simple logo – concise, black and white, aggressively studded with spikes. I thought that it would be great to remake it. The very theory of these logos in metal music is also interesting and quite unique. It seems to me that esotericism is the reason behind it. They are supposed to be illegible at first glance for an ordinary recipient. It seems ridiculous to people who are typographers by training, but there is a simple inaccessibility about it. Only those “initiated” into the genre have sufficient knowledge to decode it.

So metal is only for the initiated?

In fact, you either get hooked as a teenager, or there is almost no chance that you’ll understand and fully appreciate it later. Those who make metal music and are fascinated by it fell in love with it very early.

Why are your characters levitating and what is the space in which they circulate?

That’s an interesting question. Already during my graduation work, I was saying that I like to depict levitating objects, but I have never reflected on why they levitate and why they look like they have been cast in plastic. The idea is to have as much space as possible in a painting, to make it as painterly as possible. Not two-dimensional, but as detached and 3D as possible. When objects hang in the air they have shadows, and this scenery immediately becomes more complex for our brain.

But it also gives some additional features to the characters.

They have an inner power that makes them float. Levitation makes the forms even more autonomous, detached from the law of gravity, they become more cosmic, because we associate the cosmos and the planets with a state of weightlessness. Or with very low gravity which would make a human being able to jump very high.

In your paintings, e.g. in Black/death metal machine for grinding the stupid human mob, one can see living creatures that could be described as agro-techno-golems. They also operate through their own latent force that drives them. Can you explain how you understand these creatures?

When I construct these machines I just want to have fun. It’s like building with Lego bricks, figuring out what to put together. It’s possible that the machines were born from totems which occurred in my early paintings, symmetrically built along a central axis. They were all inspired by the complexity of these elements. To make these forms three-dimensional, I had to go through the arduous process of drawing and detail sketching. I am currently designing a huge spiked tricycle which will be a god-fighting machine. With a huge iron rod and a spiked ball. The very essence of the machine is interesting because it is another tool, an extension of the hand, which – along with the levitation properties – enhances the impression of our unlimited possibilities.



Black/death metal machine for grinding stupid,
human mob. oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm, 2019

Marek Rachwalik — born in 1986 in Częstochowa. He comes from the village of Klomnice. He graduated in Painting from the Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice (diploma with medal). He paints, draws, sculpts, and practices metal autophotography. The subjects of his artistic work include visual particles of the organic world, levitating 3D objects, psychedelic phenomena, as well as elements of robotics, microprocessors, plumbing installations, agricultural engineering, village folklore (garden decorations, tyre sculptures), as well as personal experiences, allogicality and pop culture, grotesque and grocery — liquor items. He investigates various areas of musical iconography, mainly the metal music genre and its cover art, appearance and logotypes.

Finalist of the 10th Hestia AJ. Nominated in the Talents of Radio 3 competition (2013). He received honorable mention and a Szum Magazine distinction in the 43rd Bielsko Autumn Painting Biennial. He also received the main prize in the 6th Marian Michalik Painting Triennial. His works have been featured in Szum, Notes na 6 Tygodni, Format, Opcje, Aktivist, K Mag, Olga Drenda's Wyroby, Culture.pl, Grammar of Collecting, CGK, Postmedium and a Polish Language textbook for grade 6 primary school. He is the author of the solo exhibitions Panzer Division Marek at Rondo Sztuki, Vulgar Display of Marek at TRAFO, and Under The Sign Of The Black Marek at Dobro Gallery, with music by Brüdny Skürwiel band. His works are found in the collections of the National Museum in Gdańsk and BWA Bielska Gallery in Bielsko-Biała. Apart from painting, he is interested in sports, walking in the woods, Polish black metal and playing drums amateur. In 2000, he won a bronze medal at the table tennis parish competition in Żarki. One could say he is a hillbilly who distrusts city slickers.



MISTY VEIL

INTERVIEW WITH EDNA BAUD

In your work you use subdued and dark color combinations, some thick clouds appear, one can feel a melancholy and Gothic atmosphere. Why have you chosen this style?

During my studies I used to watch a lot of 1970s and 1980s movies, especially mystery and horror films. The film tapes from those years have a certain color scheme, one that really appeals to me. Back then I didn't know that Netflix would make Stranger Things and this type of aesthetics would enter the mainstream. My wish was always for this "Gothicism," as you put it, not to exude a sinister gravity. I wanted people to look at my works and hear electronic music, not classical instruments. I didn't want my works to be all about melancholy atrophy or nostalgia, but full of paradoxically refreshing energy. I think that in this aesthetics it is mystery that interest me more than horror or sentimentalism, a mystery that foreshadows new discoveries, whether scientific or philosophical. I believe this is the source of the thick clouds and fog that frequently fill my works. There is a kind of neat dialectic of covering and uncovering in those swirling vapors.

You often combine a number of visual themes in a painting. Where do get your material and ideas from?

I try to take as much visual material as possible from my own photos. Apart from that I collect movie stills and all kinds of pictures. I then spend quite a lot of time making collages on my computer while listening to music. Painting itself is a rather quick, final process, the execution of what I've already planned down



BIN, OIL ON CANVAS, 62 x 62 x 62 CM, 2017

to the smallest details. I like combining several representations in one painting because I believe that there is a huge power in montage, context, maybe even greater than in painting itself. You can shift meanings, redistribute accents by juxtaposing various iconographic motifs. This allows you to give familiar symbols and clichés a new quality, they combine into constellations that stake out a new topography.

Does geometry have a special meaning for you? Some of your paintings are circular, which has many echoes in the history of art and at the same time makes the representation more enigmatic. Your painting BIN on the other hand is triangular. Why did you choose that format?

Without getting into a broader discussion on Pythagorean motifs, I think that geometry is a universal language, part of our cultural code. You can convey a lot by using geometry and by combining basic geometric figures. I believe that the use of tondo, like the smoke motif, is like putting a curtain between the viewer and the image. It's like looking through a keyhole: we cannot see the whole and, as suggested by the etymology of the Polish word for peephole (judasz), we let ourselves be mistrustful of what awaits us on the other side. The circle series is actually a reworking of baroque emblem books. These were small books whose purpose was to communicate a certain idea through a motto, image, and poem. For example the painting DVM NVTRIO CONSV MOR was originally an engraving showing a burned pine branch on a pedestal. The Latin words are an abbreviated version of a sentence which can be translated as: "I, the pine tree, burn to save the lives of others,



DIE NACHT, OIL ON CANVAS, 100 x 100 CM, 2017

to nurture their lives.” Instead of a pine tree, I painted a welder in front of a factory. I changed the “nice” tone of the original, showing the welder walking away from the plant, abandoning his tools. He does not want to burn for the sake of those who own the means of production. Meanwhile a rubbish bin inside an inverted isosceles triangle fills me with inexplicable horror.

I would like to ask you about the letters and signs in your works. In ELUDING SERIFS the serif letters are ironed and spill all over the room like scattered clothes. In AD SCOPTVM LICET, the figure in the foreground is tearing pages out of a book. What do you want to communicate by referring to the semantics of signs and alphabets, especially by showing their destruction or the violation of their “proper” form?

In an era of increasing relativization in the name of uhlan contrariness I find the issue of communication more important than ever before, and the creation of new alphabets and histories turns out to be more and more needed. I don't think I'm very good at writing and that is why I often introduce the theme of language operations into my paintings. Semiotics seems to be quite a convenient, ideologically transparent subject. In its beginnings, it was a kind of back door that its founders could quietly exit through when their political ideas proved disappointing. This turn in deconstruction and relativism, although it initially had great emancipatory potential, now seems to show its dark side. This makes tongue piercing an even more inspiring motif for me.



The painting DAS ZEUG shows a figure with a staff or rod. The pose, with the face partly covered by a hat and the object held may suggest a master or wizard. The background, with bones and the mysterious remains of a civilization at the bottom, is also interesting. Could you tell me if my guess about the wizard is right?

I'm not so fond of this painting. I think the way the figure is presented is too ungainly and clichéd. The rod was not meant to be a magic wand but to symbolize a tool of some kind. At that time I was reading Heidegger who came up with the concept of the totality of equipment (Zeugganze), saying that we perceive all objects as serving some kind of purpose. Today I am no longer really inspired



by his philosophy. Nevertheless, the concept is still interesting if we take it away from mustachioed metaphysicians and look at it in a class or feminist context. Then the totality of equipment and instrumentalization take on a new, more materialistic hue. It is also interesting when we think about art: should it take care to be useless? Or on the contrary, should it become pure activism?

What appeals more to you?

I don't condemn any attitude as long as it is supported by self-awareness. Not everyone is cut out for activism, and not everyone is good at creating objects. Yet insisting that only one of these options should be called art seems naive to me. Personally I often feel remorse that there I am painting my works when the world is on fire. I have my explanation for it, but I don't want to discuss it now. For me the ideal approach is art that combines elements of aesthetic creativity, academic textuality and social activism. So something for the "soul," the mind, and society.

Can you tell me more about your ideas on objects? Often these are related to building, changing and studying the world, for example a microscope, a compass, a saw, a sickle. Some of them involve metaphors from art history while others, like the stapler, are discovered by you as symbols of the modern times.

When I think about painting objects, I am reminded of one of my favorite paintings, Hans Holbein's Ambassadors. The aura surrounding the scientific instruments there is amazing. Of course, there is also Dürer's Melencolia I about which Panofsky and Saxel wrote an amazing book. For some time I have been finding more

inspiration in the city than in nature. I love raw concrete, steel and glass structures, rubble heaps, construction sites, abandoned sand mines. Walter Benjamin's dialectics of incessant destruction and reconstruction which have been beautifully developed in the texts of Blix Bargeld strike a chord with me. I am inspired by artists like Gordon Matta-Clark and by the musical project Vivenza. This kind of poetics combines a materialistic, post-secular base with an aura of indeterminacy and magic.

Are there any references to groups or concepts that we might call esoteric or hermetic behind the objects you present?

Once, during a more magic period, I looked through a lot of these kinds of books: Ripa's *Emblemata* and *Iconologia*, works by Crowley and other occult works which can now be found at archive.org. However, I never adopted this symbolism 1:1, but treated it more as a kind of loose visual inspiration. Generally speaking, I am more drawn to allegory than symbols. I treat those motifs as having no essential, hidden content, rather like a vessel of a certain shape into which we can fit certain configurations of meanings.

Can you tell me something more about that magic period? Why did it end?

In high school I used to read a lot of Romantic literature: Goethe, Lautréamont, all kinds of pagan and transgressive books filled with pathos. It was an escape from small-town life, growing up in a place where there were no cultural institutions, cinema, or students. Unfortunately no one told me about Bernhard or Jelinek at that time.



I found peace sitting alone in the surrounding forests with books under my arm. About six years ago, due to a change in the political climate, I began to grow suspicious of the Romantic way of thinking. I noticed to what extent this resentment-breeding, ego-pumping and nature-glorifying approach was poisonous to me. Since then I have shifted my interests to other areas. I sometimes return to old things but with distance, looking at them from a somewhat different perspective now.

Nevertheless your paintings, for instance those from your last exhibition in Lublin, have a kind of Romantic ambiance. I am particularly intrigued by the painting of a dog with a small ball-like planet in front of it.

Very interesting – it’s the first time someone has called it a planet. An inspiring interpretation. It was originally supposed to be a hole in a vinyl record, suggesting some kind of loop in this wild run. Or a gun hole. The dog comes from a photo I took many years ago in the middle of the night, in an important place for me. A sentimental moment.

In your statement you write that your compositions feature multi-themed allegories and that you discover the forgotten meanings of symbols. Is it important for you that the recipient understands your paintings?

It’s always nice when people think and understand the world around them. But, as I already said, I don’t treat art as something with a specific, hard message. To some extent, meanings are flexible and in process. For example, I was struck by your idea that the dot on the dog was a planet. More important for me is to make the general atmosphere in which I want to act and the context I create more legible. That’s why I decided to make background music for my last exhibition. Sound has great impact on the reception of paintings, it sets their frequency. I am always happy when people with similar aesthetics or taste in music praise my work as a part of a certain whole whose fascination we share.

The ambient music you create is closely connected with the atmosphere of your paintings. The song titles and covers on Bandcamp sound very enigmatic. Could you tell me more about the project? When did you become interested in creating music? How do you combine music and painting?

I am happy that this connection is decipherable. For a long time I had wanted to do something related to music, but I couldn’t afford to buy analog equipment. Recently I managed to find a way to make music on my computer and I feel very free doing that. I feel even more free than when I paint because nobody expects anything from me in this field. What is more, I can have fun preparing graphic designs for the covers. I try to create music in a style similar to what I am inspired by when painting; to combine music and painting and, as I already said, to refine the message I want to convey to my audience.

Who are the characters in your paintings? Most of them are young men, sometimes girls with hair falling over their faces. The activities they are engaged in are rather static, they are constructing something, waiting, or yielding to undefined events. This yielding seems essential to me, as if their actions are guided by an external force and they themselves are in a trance.

Are the characters I represent in thrall to some external power? That’s another interesting remark. I think it’s true that what I’m after is some kind of lightness in representing the processes unfolding. Perhaps there is something dancelike and trancelike in the images involving people. I divide my works into “cold” – more abstract, monochromatic and technical, and “warm” – more



narrative and colorful. I have tried to devote myself completely to one of these on several occasions, but I now see that they must coexist, complement each other, enter into a dialectical process.

I also see a recurring motif in your work: characters or objects covered with cloth. Sometimes it feels as though there is nothing material under the cloth but the energy. Why do you use this motif?

We talked a bit about it at the beginning – the theme of covering, setting a boundary/hanging a curtain. It's something like that. You can show anything by means of the shape perceptible under the fabric, leaving open the question of whether the thing underneath is real. It's a kind of compromise between mystery, mysticism and formal austerity, which I have always cared about, without going too deeply into the topic. I was really impressed by Man Ray's Enigma of Isidore Ducasse. I am often inspired by covered elements in urban space; graves wrapped in black foil, obsolete road signs covered with fabric. If I had more technical skill I would probably devote myself completely to painting cloth and draperies. That not being the case, I have to get involved in other topics.

Before the interview you wrote that you like your new paintings more than the old ones. Can you tell me something about them?

I already said that about two years ago my aesthetics reoriented itself towards colder, less narrative climates. The topos of stone has



WARM NIGHT, oil on canvas, 40 × 40 cm, 2019

become closer to me than organic effects. But now I am going through a kind of turn again, a lot has changed even since the beginning of this correspondence. I wonder what will come of it in the future.

Moving on to digital technology motifs, in your work DIE NACHT arcane books appear in the form of simple digital icons. At the same time, the central figure is being licked by blue flames and raises its hands. What does this ritual mean?

This is one of the funniest pictures. I wanted to somehow use the witch theme and give it a contemporary twist. Instead of sitting surrounded by cats on the outskirts of a village, at the boundary between wilderness and the human world, the witch wastes her time watching funny videos on YouTube. Our times seem completely frivolous and trivial, but I believe that every aspect of pop culture reflects some important issues — things that we collectively repress by sitting and laughing at cats falling over.

Edna Baud — born in 1991. She graduated in Cultural Studies from Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in 2015. She won the Rector's Award in the 12th edition of the Geppert Competition in Wrocław (2016). She has taken part in collective and individual exhibitions in Poland and Germany. She works and lives in Lublin.



PHALLIC WOMAN

CONVERSATION WITH AGATA SŁOWAK



Self-portrait with a grater, oil on canvas, 160 × 200 cm, 2019

In your diploma work I'm beautiful, I'm a great artist, which you successfully defended in 2019 at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, you combine themes related to feminism and gender with magic. What is the nature of that combination?

I use magical themes mixed with themes related to feminism and gender to draw attention to the fact that the problems of women and people suffering from exclusion because their approach to gender differs from what is commonly accepted have their roots in an era when the belief in magic was more widespread. This is not a problem invented today, but something that has been plaguing the community for a very long time.

You're not afraid to show woman as a witch? Why do you present her this way?

A witch is a very positive character for me and I really sympathize with her. Witches, so “women who know,” “are knowledgeable about something,” e.g. about herbal or folk medicine, were cursed by the Church and persecuted when they were simply helping people. They helped those whom the Church authorities left to die, recommending prayer as the only remedy, and laying the blame for illness on sufferers themselves, as illness was thought to be a punishment for one's purported sins.

Can you tell us about your diploma supplement, your doll installation which you exhibited together with your paintings? Why did you decide to use hay?

My supplement work consists of a collection of objects such as life-size hand-made dolls that I sewed on a machine, soft, embryonic

forms, and an authentic old gynecological chair. At the center of the installation is a woman doll that I sewed, adapted to the gynecological armchair on which she rests. A disproportionate, sewn fetus comes out of the doll. Around the chair I set the remaining dolls in expressive poses, their nakedness, poses and disheveled hair make them look like witches. My installation refers to events like the Black Protest, where women fight for their right to make decisions about their own bodies. It is a tribute to feminists whom patriarchal discourse tries to exclude, much like medieval witches. The installation stands on a base made of hay, which is supposed to evoke primitive conditions, which in turn may suggest the dangerous places in which illegal abortions are performed or connote the world of devils and witches.

Your dolls, but also the characters in your paintings have disproportionate hands. What does it mean?

Those hands are not only disproportionate but also caricatural. They are supposed to be something akin to plush monsters, of a kind of demonic sort, but also like funny gadgets for children. I use this device to make fun of the common stereotype of witches which depicts them as scary, with monstrous paws or other bodily defects. Like fairy tales, these features were invented as part of Church propaganda.

Apart from your diploma exhibition, you've also organized an artistic event in which naked women perform a visual re-enactment of a witches' Sabbath.

In a very early phase of thinking about what I want my diploma to be, I wanted to build a fairly comprehensive exhibition in which other media would complement classic painting. At that time I vaguely envisioned a video to which I would invite women who would participate in a kind of Sabbath with me. I had a time limit to make my diploma work. I gave priority to the series of paintings and the installation, whose creation was time-consuming and required physical effort, and I therefore had to postpone recording the video. I came back to the idea after my defence. It was born again by chance. Paweł Nocuń, an assistant in the painting workshop where I used to study, had recorded a sneak-peak video with his mobile phone – a few seconds-long video of the wind moving the wig of one of my dolls. He posted it on Facebook, where it was noticed by Aneta Grzeszykowska. However, my idea was not for the dolls to be the performers, but rather living women. The video was recorded in the exhibition space and my performers were women whom I had not known or had known only a little before, so here I'd like to express my admiration for their courage and ability to make a spontaneous decision. In the scene, the women initiate an erotic situation with the dolls, then they mutilate them, and finally they make a circle around the pile of fabric bodies. My idea was to leave open various possibilities of reception. An interesting fact is that the video was only edited a few months after the performance, when the Foksal Gallery Foundation reacted to the first clips from the recording.

Often the female bodies you portray are entwined by snakes. Is there any special symbolism behind it? I also find the hybrids of snakes with a woman's head interesting, like for example in your painting Julia as a Bloodthirsty Snake.

The snake is a really interesting motif for me. In some cultures, it represents evil, and on top of that it is quite easy to paint. I like the combination of a snake and a woman's body because it may evoke phallic associations and create an erotic atmosphere. In Julia and the Bloodthirsty Snake I portrayed someone I know, who evoked strong emotions in me at the time, as a snake-woman hybrid. I often put stories into my paintings which are only decipherable for me. Moreover, there is a kind of paradox to presenting a woman as a snake (which evokes the image of a temptress) because – like the mermaid – she cannot be “screwed.” By the way, I once painted a picture entitled How to screw a mermaid?

How do you treat religiosity in your paintings? In Julia as a Bloodthirsty Snake we see a phantom modeled on the image of the Virgin Mary in the distance. Before your diploma work you painted a series of paintings with a girl in a halo.

Religiousness in paintings often comes about by accident, and it usually happens where I did not intend it. For example, the series of my childhood self-portraits is often interpreted as the “girl in a halo,” but for me it is just a series of self-portraits in which I depict myself as a little girl in a hat. Of course, my works are firmly embedded in anticlerical discourse, but I never do it in a premeditated way. The garment floating in Julia as a Bloodthirsty Snake is a kind of deviation from this rule, which actually irritates me.



Julia as bloodthirsty snake, oil on canvas, 140 × 100 cm, 2019



**In the painting Sabbath you decided to take up occult themes.
What made you do that?**

Sabbath is a painting that was created at the beginning of the series and is a framework sketch for the entire diploma project. It presents a theme that I am really keen on in painting. I made the painting with simple brush strokes. In order to paint Sabbath I used one of the largest canvases that I had prepared for the exhibition and I immediately decided that it would be a good idea to compose a multi-figure scene on it. At the beginning, all the characters were very realistic, but over time this literalness began to annoy me a lot so I covered all the female figures and the sun with black paint. Because of this, only the outlines of the bodies are visible, including a goat with a muscular human body which stands out among them. The goat flexes its golden muscles among the ladies, whose depiction is uniform. It behaves as if it no longer felt like representing evil on behalf of the dark lord. It just wants to be cool and enjoy the moment, stupidly flexing its muscles and trying to pick up the girls. The occult theme serves to tell a merry story about how one doesn't necessarily have to meet high expectations and that you should live in harmony with yourself. Occultism is for me a great collection of fantastic motifs (aesthetically speaking), but I also respect it because it paved the way for the development of many scientific disciplines employing a methodology based on experimentation and observation.

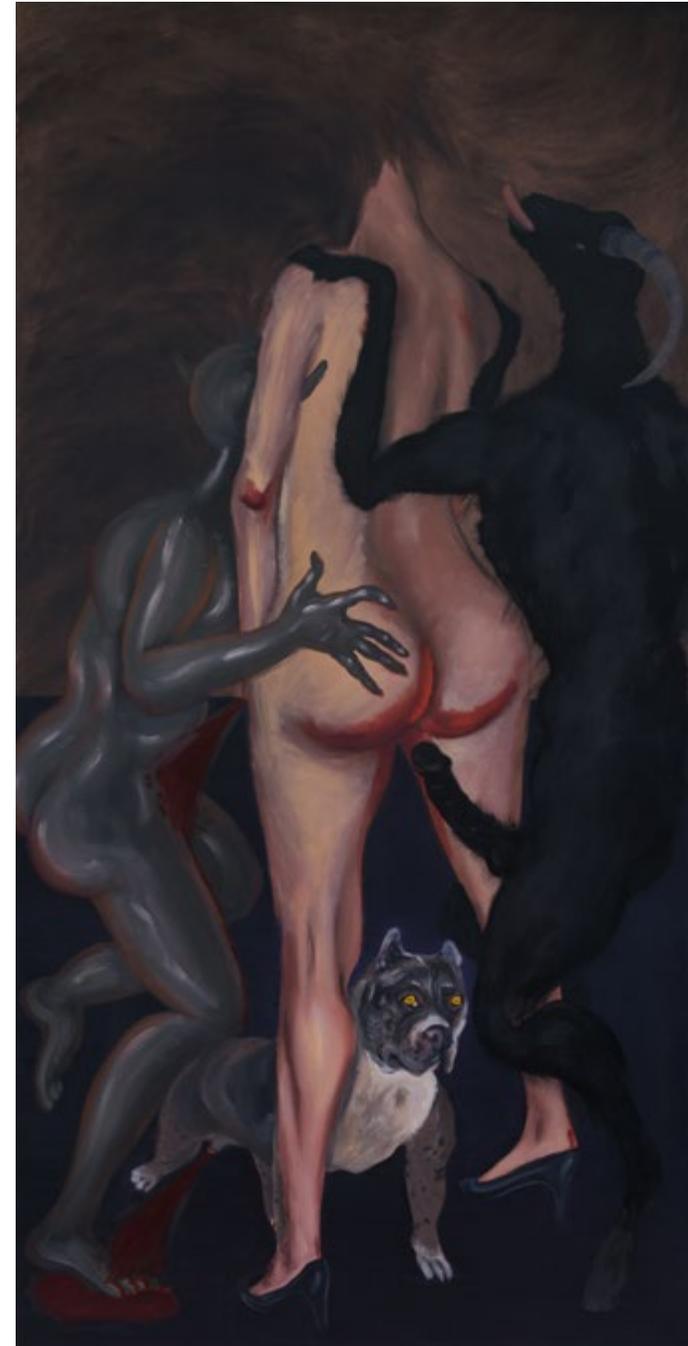
In other paintings you also bring up devils and demons, e.g. in your work *Do it like a dude*.

The main characters in my paintings are women, but devils and demons, who are also strong figures, accompany them wonderfully. As I have already mentioned, the devils are perfect for situations of perverse playfulness, which is supposed to defuse the atmosphere of horror. When you give the paintings a closer look you may notice that the painted devils have their own feelings and emotions and generally are rather sensitive creatures. So people who are scared of devils actually have no reason to be. Although evil exists, it is not any devil, witch, feminist, or gay.

Do you think that magic and occultism may fuel eroticism in your works? In what way is magic related to eroticism?

Magic and occultism are related to something forbidden and the Sabbaths were supposed to be orgiastic and magical gatherings. I use magical themes to create highly-erotic representations so that when applying paint on the canvas I can actually feel sexual pleasure, although not in a physical way. This is what makes my job so great. As Adorno says, the creative act itself is erotic.

Your reference to childbirth/abortion in a magical context is also special. Childbirth is a moment of transition. The fetus in the womb is still unformed chaos, it belongs to the cosmic order. When it is born, it takes a form and becomes a human being, therefore childbirth is a moment when the doors of the other-world are open. How do you understand the moment of transition and why did you decide to give it a demonic character?



Do it like a dude, oil on canvas, 120 × 240 cm, 2019

The moment of childbirth seems to me to be filled with horror, apparently because of some film scenes full of screaming, pain, blood and other bodily fluids in the back of my mind. The thought of childbirth is both exciting and alarming. On the one hand we have a sense of an imminent great unknown change that we unconditionally embrace at the moment of childbirth, but on the other hand we imagine great pain. There are also many ritual connections that evoke associations with transiting through different worlds. Part of my installation with the witch doll on the gynecological chair with a fetus in a metal drawer represents the vision of abortion created by the patriarchal-conservative discourse, although treated with a measure of irreverence in this case. Women in that situation are looked upon as evil witches and demonized. I don't want to give an unequivocal answer in my works whether the decision to give birth is an act of heroism or egoism. Those are individual matters.

A woman's impurity related to pregnancy and childbirth is also something rooted in the symbolism of magic and superstition. Have you tried to analyze the issue of human purity and impurity in your works? Impurity understood this way means close contact with an otherworldly world.

Several of my canvases are concerned with the issue of purity and impurity, particularly in relation to the sexual sphere. In the painting Scapegoat there is a sex scene between an old woman and a goat. Urszulka is a pubescent girl in fishnet stockings, entwined by a snake. Similar motifs appear in the paintings Love,

Self-portrait, and All Poles. However, if such things as menstruation, homoeroticism or even onanism are considered impure, as in the old beliefs and superstitions, I definitely disagree with such opinions. The images are meant to remain open questions rather than ready-made answers to questions regarding human morality.

Agata Słowak is a visual artist creating oil paintings, spatial objects, and textiles. In her work, she engages with autobiographical themes and issues of cultural anthropology and feminism. She reflects on the role of women in society, the causes of exclusion, and the history of madness. She strives to bring out the expressive qualities of the body and to create an anxious mood rife with tensions that escape clear definition. A recurring motif in Słowak's art is the role of ritual and magic as alternative forms of conveying knowledge and creating female communities. The space of the canvas becomes a meeting place for animal instincts, dark desires, and carnal drives.

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