

**“Paint, also known as Blood”**

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART IN WARSAW | MUSEUM ON THE VISTULA

The title “Paint, also known as Blood” was taken from a memoir by Zenon Kruczyński, a former hunter who at some point recognized the barbarism of killing and began campaigning against the practice. The phrase intimated that suffering, in this case an animal’s, can be eagerly and easily dismissed and rendered as something artificial. Natalia Sielewicz, a rising star in the Polish curatorial scene, who has been pushing a strictly feminist and progressive agenda into the already refreshing program of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, achieved a new level of insight with this show of recent painting by women, which featured mostly emerging painters from Poland and Central Europe, along with a few better-known artists from the region such as Agata Bogacka and Paulina Ołowska. Also included were several international stars, such as Dana Schutz, Tschabalala Self, and Amelie von Wulffen. The curatorial concept suggested that painting as practiced by women is both a sacrifice and a means of redemption. Dwelling on the scars left on female creativity under patriarchy, Sielewicz in her wall text invoked a poem by Marlene Dumas about how the artist finds the act of painting a sensual pleasure, even if it is underlined by suffering.

Poland has become an especially difficult country for women to live in since the 2015 clampdown on women’s reproductive and other rights by a far-right government. While the #MeToo movement has had some effect, Polish women exist in an increasingly intolerant environment. This has prompted a second-wave style of feminism, whose adherents do not shy away from being political. Women have been campaigning and demonstrating, and discovering that their subjectivity matters even after having been violated for years—in a country that has never experienced a mass women’s movement. Yet the painters Sielewicz chose are not afraid of having fun, of grotesquerie, comedy, or kitsch—elements that were especially notable in the works of Martyna Czech and Karolina Jabłońska—even as they tackle the subtle ways in which bodies are mediatized and surveilled. In this respect, they also show a third-wave influence, where the pleasures of the body, the importance of its image, and even consumerism are not dismissed but are considered empowering.

Dumas was thus a perfect choice of godmother. Young women feel the burden of living in a politically conservative era, in which their gender or social class makes them likely “prey,” to borrow another term from Kruczyński’s memoirs. But they refuse to be victims and laughingly turn their blood into paint. Suffering in the work on view here was never heavy-handed. After years in which figurative painting was often dismissed as too literal and banal, young Polish painters are again making unashamedly representational work, mixing faux naïveté with the most brutal and visceral content. Their art is informed by the proliferation of images on Instagram and by the constant, ubiquitous stream of porn, contexts in which women have to “constantly optimize,” as the American writer Jia Tolentino has put it.

Gutsy, political, and extreme, these canvases speak of the unspeakable: rape, violence, mental disorder, child abuse, betrayal, poverty, social isolation. Particularly noteworthy was the bold work of Monika Misztal, whose “Pornoerotyki” (Porno-Erotica) series, 2019–, focused on shame and hunger, and Stanislava Kovalcikova, whose playful sex scenes recalled the work of the Belgian Surrealist Paul Delvaux. These artists add something to our understanding of the subconscious activity of image consumption and of how porn and the internet merge in our perceptions. If there was a single aesthetic thread here, it would have been the return of the body and the triumph of materiality—a theme raised by artists of different generations, from one in her fifties such as Magdalena Moskwa, with her labor-intensive, extremely realistic semisculptural renditions of bleeding wounds, to twenty-five-year-old Agata Słowak, who showed Love, 2019, an approximately four-and-a-half-by-four-foot painting of a woman equipped with a succulent orange penis.

— Agata Pyzik