

PERES PROJECTS

STANISLAVA KOVALCIKOVA, THE INDOMITABLE

Anke Kempkes in Conversation with The Artist, February 2021

I got first acquainted with the paintings of Stanislava Kovalcikova in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw “Paint, also known as blood”, curated by Natalia Sielewicz. “Misty” (2017) – one of the most striking and memorable paintings of the exhibition dedicated to contemporary female painters - is based on the classic motif of the ‘reclining nude’, a modern day ‘Olympia’. However, virtually every compositorial aspect established through history in terms of racial and gender relations is twisted and turned in Kovalcikova’s sheer impenetrable painting. The title attests to its riddled character and distancing atmosphere. The most disruptive element is the quasi cubist doubling of the face of the nude which is split into a profile of a female in bright light with delicate feminine features and long blonde hair, and a more masculine frontal portrait, its face overshadowed. The body is lit from an extreme angle dividing the surface of its skin into two spheres, one smooth and white, one dark and burned.

“I think I paint skin colour as some kind of outer shell, the face is the story and the skin colour is the voice telling it. Sometimes it evokes heat or burning, dryness, sometimes coldness and ice, rain and snow. The skin is very connected with the element water in my work...” (Stanislava Kovalcikova in conversation with the author, Feb 2021) That sensation of burning skin and gleaming landscape we see also in Tale of the Two Suns (2020), an intriguing painting inspired by Stefan Zweig’s novel “Land of the Future” (1941) reflecting on his immigration to Brazil. Escaping fascist oppression in Europe, Zweig projected on Brazil’s mixed-race society as a haven of tolerance, a vision far removed from the political realities of the country. Nonetheless, his fate led him to a ‘death in paradise’, as he soon after committed suicide with his younger partner, stating in a letter left behind that he was lacking the strength to reconstruct his life in the face of Europe’s destruction and spiritual fall. Kovalcikova’s painting depicting a beach scene is not only saturated by fiery colours but also with ambiguities and dualities. A dark coloured woman in bikini dominates one side of the composition while another more androgynous figure with similar ethnic features but lighter skin and blond hair foregrounds the other half of the painting, holding her/his one breast while the other is created by a real fried egg, a nod of the artist to the senior Sarah Lucas. The painting represents as much the desperate utopian drive of Zweig’s Brazil novel and his subsequent tragic fate, as it is a testimony to a moment of shared leisure between the two protagonists in a world that is on fire.

“Misty”, like most of Kovalcikova’s paintings, has a hidden personal narrative. It is dedicated to a friend of the artist, a co-worker from East Africa in a club where Kovalcikova worked as a bouncer. In many of Kovalcikova’s works we see this sense of social solidarity, friendship, and intimacy - and its flipside, a sense split identity, of borderline experience, psychological charge and political threat - introduced through unusual and uncanny stylistic interventions: like the cubist hybrids, a head leaning on the other’s shoulder, or a second demonic head growing out of a figure’s neck. There is a kind of unorthodox application of cubist and futurist features for the ends of a psychological (sur)realism thematizing non-normative intimate relationships, that we find preconfigured in the work of the ‘alternative’ modernist Pavel Tchelitchew, e.g. in his fascinating, radically eclectic painting “Exelsior” (1936) which was dedicated to his new lover Charles Henri Ford. A lot of Kovalcikova’s compositions parallel the peculiar abstract spaces Tchelitchew creates as a setting for his figures, as a void that could carry a threat, as well as a yet undefined sphere of uncharted possibilities.

We find many of Kovalcikova’s compositions characterized by the contrast and visual dialectics of abstract spatial structure and a dense almost old mastery painterly treatment of the female figure. Her feminist agenda is not one that sits comfortably within emancipatory visual politics of positive identification. Kovalcikova continues an important female lineage of dissident cultural production by proto-feminist writers and artists such as Djuna Barnes or Hannah Höch. In 1915 Barnes titled a collection of openly lesbian poems illustrated by her own unconventional drawings of monstrous female hybrids “The Book of Repulsive Women”.

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With this title Barnes was provocatively reappropriating the pejorative language used for women who conducted themselves in non-normative ways at the time, much like the political re-assessment of the formerly defamatory term “queer” in the late 1980s as one of positive identification for an oppositional movement. Höch used the traits of disfiguration and the grotesque to express the disruptive emergence of the ‘New Woman’ in the interwar period. The females in Kovalcikova’s paintings - appearing predominantly as nudes - have often distorted faces, their Rubenesque bodies are beyond any commodified and medialized beauty standards, and yet neither herald alternative ideals. Their poses and gestures, the way they carry themselves, often border on the unstable and even expressions of the joyously imbecile.

Many of her paintings complicate narratives of harassment and abuse, drawing these motifs into an interior world, a dark psychological and emotional realm like in “Victoria Secret” (2016). The painting – a vision of a postfeminist underworld - has a dark neo-symbolist atmosphere reminiscent of the apocalyptic visions of Surrealist Leonor Fini. The painting is also part of an ongoing series of works which are densely populated by a community of eccentric and deviant creatures, each existing in its own, and set in an abstract sphere much like in Pavel Tchelitchew’s 1930s paintings of “Bathers” or “The Concert”.

In “Victoria Secret” – the title breaking into the seemingly anachronistic Goya-esk style of the painting as a flash from the presence – is populated by dark animalistic and subhuman, mythological creatures and primitivist idols. A bearded centaur-type male figure throws a bucket of water at a central white female nude who seems as much to escape the violation as her mannerist arrested pose betrays such intention. Kovalcikova’s work reaches beyond the currents of ‘New Figuration’ in contemporary painting invested with acute politics of recognition. Her depictions of multi-ethnic, dark coloured figures and scenes reach - like the complications of her at times dystopian feminist investment – beyond representations of race, beyond representation as such. They are rather ciphers of a contemporary iconoclasm invested with its own path of emancipatory intentions of creating an alternative sociality.

Kovalcikova’s compositions have been described as ‘collaged’. But the complex compositorial dynamic of her works is rather dedicated to the process of the allegorical: a contemporary moment or motif – images of current female leadership or the violent postures of the U.S. presidential election debates – gets sent through a process of the unconscious, and coming alive again on the canvas, gaining a new life as motif that resonated on a deeper abstracted level. Such an operation was at work in the large tableau “Only Empty Palaces”, (2020), a street scene initially inspired by Jean Hélion’s “Au cycliste” (1939). Where Hélion’s composition expressed an utmost sense of abstracted equilibrium, Kovalcikova’s third man in the picture disrupts the tranquil scene, stepping out of a dark alley with an assertive gesticulation once canonized through political campaigning.

The complex surface treatments Kovalcikova undertakes in her paintings have a similar allegorical dimension: “I had a complicated idea how to produce the bodies – I worked with latex, dyed the canvas with black powder, then drew with ink, then took down the latex parts, then dyed three times – this process can take at least a few months...” (Stanislava Kovalcikova in conversation with the author, Feb 2021).

Far from testifying to a painter’s mastery, these processes operate on the same iconoclast level as the treatment of her subject matter, giving the work an allegorical dynamic, much like in the post-war movement of “Decollage” was expressing and undoing the current state of culture, a “visual force that breaks down outworn values and replaces them with thinking as a function distanced from media” (Vostell), or like the ‘embodied’ surfaces of the late Carol Rama.

- Anke Kempkes (Introduction to a larger text project in conversation with the artist, Feb 2021)