

IN THE TENDER EMBRACE OF WONDER

When directed outward, self-discovery – an act which now defines the nature of humanity, replaces religion and tantalizes with the horror of dissatisfaction – makes us experience extremely diverse states. On the one hand, we give in to the promise of recognition of our own uniqueness, on the other – we risk facing the painful fact that projecting our personal experience onto the social plane may highlight our inner shortcomings.

With some persistence, one can control their analytical inclinations and quit decoding the spiritual instructions provided to each individual by his or her context, and thus avoid the immersion in a sensory chaos. You can see yourself from the outside for the pure pleasure of looking in, without trying to make a diagnosis, the way one observes a completed old-new work of creation whose form blurs the distinction between excess and deficit.

With his series *The Surroundings* Jacek Świągulski proves that he easily allows himself to be carried away by the idea of looking at (or rather: peeping at) familiar images with the highest possible degree of objectivity, to detect completely new semantic structures and aesthetic value. Subjecting private space to public review completes the joy of discovery – by initiating this collective voyeuristic adventure, the author and protagonist literally contemplates his own life through the eyes of other people.

In this kind of self-presentation, a mirror is indispensable – placed as close to the face as possible, as if hoping that sufficiently caressed with one's gaze the glass surface will reveal what the skin conceals. Świągulski scrutinizes the face from every aspect, inquisitively, but not clinically, rather like a child hypnotized by curiosity. It is a child of exceptionally mature sensibility who can't be bribed with details and doesn't focus its gaze on the pupil or wrinkle, but prompted by its seeker impulse hungrily absorbs the features of a face in the belief that one of them will reveal a completely new surprise. Unfortunately, fascination turns into boredom as it becomes clear that an individual pressured by a blank space also becomes void – fading, disintegrating and dwindling away. For the game to continue, some distance and a change of perspective are essential.

In his monumental work *The Book of Disquiet*, Fernando Pessoa, a brilliant apologist of potentiality and indecisiveness, declares that the surroundings constitute the spirit of things. Świągulski takes a humanistic step forward to find in his surroundings the source of human nature. The tale of it gains merit in this (non)autobiographical series only when a second character enters the stage and brings with it an infinite cosmos of interactions and relationships. It enters unexpectedly, emerging from the depths of canvas as a being fused to the body of another (*The Whispered Encounter* and *A Grey Memory of the Games*) only to leave the host (*Lyrical duo* series) and gain its own bodily form. An individual subjected to isolation is a coagulated ersatz of themselves and becomes truly alive only when close to another human being – and even if the two remain in an embrace so tight that they become one, they still trigger inner shifts, tremors, restlessness. For Świągulski, movement and the relationality it dictates form the most interesting and reliable peephole showing the reality. He thoughtfully observes as two people form configurations, as they converse balancing the load between them and mark their presence in space to ignite the painter's imagination with the thought that each shift hides some motivation: desire, hope or pain.

Świągulski explores each theme and chooses more daring formal experiments in an attempt to define the emotional conditions of dynamism as precisely as possible. The series becomes even more personal but Świągulski successfully finds a balance between the intimate overtone of his depictions and their clarity. However, in the context of the most intimate realm, it is difficult to maintain a journalistic matter-of-factness, which is why the artist's metaphysical inclinations soon become apparent. They may be expressed in each perpetuated brush stroke, a strong colour accent, or sometimes the title of a piece which suggests that human interactions hide something elusive and

indefinable but still extremely important. Where the eye does not guarantee perception at a satisfactory level, spiritualism arises demanding that reality be filtered through the (in this case: oriental) sacred. The photographic films of life's prose attain a fairy-tale panache, allowing us to separate them from superficial literalness and to reflect on the dichotomy of our choices (*The Afternoon Clash I and II*), lost dreams (*The Awakening, A life that didn't happen*), or the sense of absence (*Expectancy, Farewell*). All of these experiences lead to movement – even the motionless silhouettes seem to burst with motor potential that will free them from inertia at any minute.

By using his own micro-culture as the starting point and then gradually deconstructing it, Świąłski attempts to outline a number of basic values concerning the entire society and motivating each individual to act. Genre scenes without any characteristics pertaining to the period, space or identity become an *omninarative*, our collective history. Still, it is inadvisable to focus on any potential direction this process may take – what counts is the current opportunity to shape it at will and experience a sense of wonder. In a decade of widespread manipulation, ambiguity is closer to the truth than you might think.

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