

INTERNAL LANDSCAPE

Time has dealt brutally with the hierarchy of painting themes. The order established in the 17th century by the French Royal Academy recognized the historical and religious motifs as the most important (because they were related to the measure of everything – man and his most important achievements). They were followed by the portrait and genre scenes (also due to the references to human figure). The lowest steps of this ladder were occupied by the landscape and still life, because they could not reflect human heroism and propagate higher values. If we move the story forward more than 300 years, it will turn out that the historical and religious subject matter is practically dead, while the landscape and still life are still alive and well. We can indicate many reasons for this state of affairs. However, it seems that in the era of emancipated art, in which individualism is valued and the form is an autonomous substantiation of the work's existence, the landscape freed from the burden of anecdote – not needing a pretext in the form of a plot and didactics – turns out to be still a vast testing ground for different artistic concepts.

Jacek Świągulski uses this testing ground in his latest cycle "Returns", testing painting issues that manifest themselves in the confrontation with a rich landscape of the Kraków-Częstochowa Upland and the Bieszczady mountains. In this painting, space comes to the forefront. Yet, it is not developed in a conventional way. Such space has no respect for Alberti's perspective – it does not let the lines to join on the horizon and it does not thicken the air at a distance. The artist does not try to trick a viewer in a straightforward manner, projecting the depth on a flat screen of stretcher. It keeps respect for physical properties of the painting substrate, which was once so rightly defined by Maurice Denis. We achieve compositions that are based on a zone system – mutual relationship of successive plan designs and shapes contained within them. The artist does justice to nature as the source of inspiration, finding in it hidden proportions of lines and planes and unnoticed sets of colors. He aims at presenting a raw, intuitive image of nature on the canvas, which is why he brings the landscape extending before his eyes to basic formal elements. In essence, the world is geometrical. Or at least it can be perceived as such. While watching these painting we are waiting for a farming field to become a chessboard, and a mountain range – a cascade of triangles. Świągulski, although obviously attracted to abstraction, does not venture thus far because he is not satisfied with clear-cut solutions. His fuel is not absolute radicalism. It is rather a joy of experimenting which preserves awareness of advantages and limitations of the painting matter.

When painting nature, should we consider what we see or what we know? We know that seeing is a complex process based to the same degree on an optical instrument such as the eye as on the knowledge that determines perception. Privileging one tool means suppressing the other. On the line between these poles, Jacek Świągulski locates nearer to the eye. As an intuitive artist, he chooses impressionality for his guide. He does not allow the excess of information about the surrounding world to blur the clarity of his vision. He rejects components that are obvious and, at the same time, unnecessarily complicate composition – he synthesizes. He neglects buildings, animals, people. He focuses on the rhythm that emerges from the observed fragment of reality – he examines its structure. He emphasizes some shapes – he outlines hills and valleys, extracts outliers that stand out with their whiteness. He allows rivers and trails meander as long as their task is to illustrate some general phenomena – patterns found in nature. On the painting level, planes exist in the service of division.

Simplified canvases leave room for breathing, act on the imagination with their colour. The color tells us about the air temperature; it suggests the time of day and the season. Sometimes the whole story is concluded with a concise brush stroke – a red reflection of the setting sun in a river or a brighter line of the horizon between the dark navy sky and earth. Sometimes we only get a suggestion of a natural fact. The rest is for us to add. Finding yourself in such painting requires a certain dose of independent (and abstract) thinking. Jacek Świągulski does not serve us postcard-like truisms about the most beautiful corners of Poland. He appeals to our experience, our capacity to identify phenomena and, above all, to our imagination which, as in music, will further specify the observed events or read them out again.

In Jacek Świągulski's paintings, it is not about the views only, but about the way of perceiving nature. Through his painting, the artist externalises feelings – both these that entail a contact with nature and these that accompany him during his creative process. By doing that, he teaches us to experience landscape and space in a new way. We talk a lot about how nature inspires art, but we forget that this mechanism works both ways. Art inspires nature. It creates a visual language which affects our perception. We learn to notice aesthetic aspects of surrounding world from pictures and photos. Oscar Wilde claimed that James Whistler “invented” fog. It had accompanied people for centuries but they really saw it only thanks to art. This is of course an example of “heavyweight” painting. However, many similar discoveries (regardless of their scale) can be made on one’s own, through contact with this or other work – I mean here both artists as well as audience. That is why landscape painting, thanks to openness to sensitivity and subjectivism, will always have something to tell us. It is not only a story about nature but rather a story about experiencing it. Jacek Świągulski uses this advantage in his latest cycle. By transferring an image of surrounding world onto canvas, he at the same time paints an inner landscape.

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