

THE BARE EXPERIENCE

I get the impression that Jacek Świgulski's art revolves around something simple, yet hard to capture. It is about the human need to give meaning to one's experience. It sounds innocent. Unfortunately, meaning has a sad tendency to wear out. In a way, it is a price we pay for efficiency. We learn not to notice what we already know, e.g. to get to work: marveling at the light on frost-covered grass may be demotivating. If we break the routine, it is usually in favor of preplanned attractions. Thus, we are mentally stuck in a rut: everyday life is what it is and you admire what you are supposed to. We no longer seem to be able to let our thoughts wander. We can no longer afford the luxury of becoming mesmerized. Only a tiny bit of freedom, a slip road off the thought-perception mental highway towards much slower and less comfortable rough terrain, makes it possible to renew meaning and ask basic existential questions. And that is, I believe, what Świgulski seeks with his art.

While his works form a number of separate series, they all share a universal theme: "I" in the world. The "I" should be interpreted in general terms, it is not about artistic testimony pertaining to individual experience, but rather paintings that record the condition of a contemporary everyman. All that is tangible becomes a means to search for order, or to reflect on interpersonal relations. The recurrence of a similar theme in various paintings gives the impression of careful consideration and a calm dialog with the audience.

The composition of each piece is very often based on landscape. In the paintings where it constitutes the main motif (*Returns. Internal Landscape* series) it becomes apparent that the artist seeks metaphysical confirmation in nature. Intriguing frames provide a starting point to build harmonious, non-figurative, open spaces on canvas. It means simplifying the depicted landscapes, stripping them off information noise, until they verge on abstraction. It is as if someone who remains unseen asked the painted motif: what is really important here?

A world seen through narrowed eyes transforms into relationships between spots of color, like in colorist painting, which many of Świgulski's techniques seem to originate from. A game of contrast, brightness, texture, selection of complementary overtones, elimination of a single color from the palette, a careful arrangement of the planes, in other words, a number of deliberate artistic choices serve not as a means to paint a scenery, but rather to immerse in it. The art's language is a tool to measure the pulse, the basic rhythm of the landscape. These paintings oscillate between the observation of what is and testing how far that which exists is narratable.

Whether it is the lofty Himalayas or the regular rhythm of furrows in the Polish Jurassic Highland, what really counts is a record of perception so intense that it makes the observer disappear. While walking through the spaces portrayed by Świgulski, one may almost synchronize their breath with that which lasts longer and regardless of human admiration or dislike. In a way, it is a manner of imagining the world without us, or even an attempt at a contemplative departure from the "I" category.

If the features of a landscape provide a kind of framework, figures disrupt its calm stability. Interestingly, silhouettes of people, animals or dreamy images become ontologically equal. The non-figurativeness of these shapes reduced to patches of color delineated from the background with simplified contours, their phantasmagorical nature makes the question of who or what they are

irrelevant. It is about the presence. Only in the case of cats (a series by the same title) the purely physical presence – an intriguing mystery of nearly impossible moves and bizarre twists – becomes the main motif. Other shapes, including the dog in *The Surroundings* series (several consecutive paintings entitled *A Family Episode* and *The Golden Moment*), describe relations. The early *Self-Portraits with a Shadow* are about a difficult relationship man has with the self, a struggle with the dark, the overwhelming. *Conversations*, in turn, are a record of failed attempts at a dialogue. The inability of two people to communicate is highlighted by a simple solution: each work consists of two separate canvas. Each of the two contains a single, distinct, contrastingly painted figure. While forming an entity, the two also seem to repel one another. Although they share the background and color palette, merging in some of the works into a single two-headed patch, it still makes them appear to be both doomed and fiercely reluctant to suffer each other's company. These conversations boil down to misunderstandings.

However, what seems to particularly fascinate the artist in recent paintings is intimacy. In line with the title of a series devoted to closeness, all the events centered around a creative effort contribute to it. People's everyday lives: mornings spent together, when the dog demands to be walked, arguments, moments of intimacy and instants promising an almost metaphysical fulfillment. These last instances somewhat constitute the opposite side of the landscape's silence. Here, an individual goes beyond the limits of the self, not to disappear in the empty space, but rather to be able to connect with another person (several paintings entitled *On the Ellipse of Intimacy*, *Family Episodes*, *The Golden Moments*). It seems to me that these works oscillate between the two extremes of vital experience. The first one is the epiphanous immersion in the observed nature, the other one – the brief periods when one enters another human's world. Indeed, one should rather say: other creatures' world, since there is also a dog which plays such a crucial role in the images of domestic bliss.

Given the chronology of these paintings, ascetic landscapes and deepened intimacy turn out to be the result of many years of searching. The creative process appears to be a fascinating journey during which the artist tests different records of his own experiences and gradually improves the free flow between a busy moment and motionless canvas. He consistently breaks ready-made rationalizations. He rejects what is already known about the depicted situation and aims to immerse in the bare experience, in the kind of existence he faces at a given moment. Once he achieves that state, the creative act becomes synonymous with the act of recovering the sense. It allows one to experience the self more vividly, look around more honestly. It uncovers traces of harmony in the world and interpersonal relations. It exposes or finds them, but doesn't create them since the starting point of each painting is perpetually that which is perceived, noticed. That which exists.

Jacek Świgulski's journey leads, therefore, to a conscious artistic choice: the silencing of individual emotions and almost loving trust in the order we form a part of, even though we cannot fully explain or reproduce it. In our clamorous, narcissistic times, it is not necessarily an obvious direction of artistic pursuit.

Agnieszka Skolasińska
translation: Dobrochna Jagiełło