

## Nicely Painted, Perfectly Done, Well Sold

We have several spectacular worldwide careers of a number of Polish artists of the 1990s. The whole decade was characterized of a very good reception of Polish art. By any standards, three artists from the Krakow's based *Grupa Ładnie* (the "Nicely Done Group")<sup>1</sup> have achieved a phenomenal success, since Wilhelm Sasnal (1972), Marcin Maciejowski (1974) and Rafał Bujnowski (1974) are currently at the top of the international art scene. Sasnal was not only the hero of the Saatchi's Exhibition *Triumph of Painting* held in London in 2005, but is also the author of paintings with prices over 450 000 US dollars and still raising. The very title of the exhibition in itself is an indicator of his achievements, yet he has got awarded the Vincent van Gogh Biennial Award for Contemporary Art in Europe. His paintings and films are in several museums around the world. Maciejowski is represented by the Meyer Keiner Gallery – one of the best in Vienna – and had a one-man show at the Mark Fox Gallery in Los Angeles. Bujnowski is also quite busy with international exhibitions and residencies. The news on these artists' life and art is widely available on the Internet. Leon Tarasewicz, not the same generation (1957), has been working longer for his position, but now he has some contracts with the galleries in Milan, Vienna and Stockholm. The youngest one, Marzena Nowak (1977), former Tarasewicz's student, may be less known, but she is represented by a gallery in Vienna and Berlin. We can list some more successful Polish painters, but it seems to me that too many strange, "difficult Polish names" could be against the reader. Chosen examples are typical of the new approach and the rest of painters could find place in my typology.

The cover of the monthly *Znak* presenting the discussion on Polish art after the changes of 1989, published at the end of 1998, with three squares in rudiment colors and three brushes in different sizes, refers to the situation I find most attractive – the game with the painting. The discussion initiated by Jan Michalski has begun with his description of those crucial years: "the 1990s in Poland it's a time of progress and disappointments, time sublime and dynamic – seen from the outside; and egocentric, sharply pragmatic from the inside."<sup>2</sup> This sharp pragmatism gave the artists the strategy that could be described as "leaving out the sacred and going to the market," with a permanent confrontation with the mass media culture. Their pictures are mixtures

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<sup>1</sup> According to Marcin Maciejowski, the name was derived from the reaction of a professor at the Fine Art Academy during a show of his paintings: "He stood before my work, looked at it, and in order generally to say something (because he really had to give his opinion) he said 'Yes, OK. Nicely done.'" Rafał Bujnowski was probably the first one to notice. This is how the name of the group was invented.

<sup>2</sup> Michalski (1998: 5).

of commercial signs and signatures, traces of paint referring to “high art.” According to another participant of the discussion, Michał Gorczyca, the most important was the strategy game in which the artists played for the future, for a new century against the past, and the special role of the painting in this game depended on artists’ values and their attitude toward classical painting, including such great painters as Tarasewicz, the last one who believed in “pure art.”<sup>3</sup>

The last decade of the twentieth century brought about several paintings exhibitions, where painting itself was defined in various ways. The last one, *100% Painting*, was organized in 2000 in Białystok; there were also some others: *Painting borders. Painting in 1990s*, at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, in Warsaw in 1997; and in the same year and the same place – *Jerzy Nowosielski, Leon Tarasewicz, Mikołaj Smoczyński*, organized by Milada Slizinska to show artists associated with the spirit of the Orthodox Church and the “great painting traditions.” In 1996 there was an exhibition *Recognition. Paintings from the 1990s*, held in the Bunker of Art Gallery in Krakow. All these exhibitions attempted to search for special values to distinguish new painting from free expression of 1980s. The idea is still alive, as is testified by the exhibition at the Zacheta Gallery in 2006: *Polish Painting of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, based on similar assumptions, to verify a new set of the values, absent in the last decade of the twentieth century. Typical is such a need for defining through decade periods we can find inside institutional frames and connected with painting.

The surge of popular interest in painting of the 1990s had originated – in my opinion – in the special attitude towards this medium. Artists were not interested in classical painting, or all paintings of all time, but rather each one penetrated chosen aspect, something special for him. One cell of the whole chain of affiliations, Thierry de Duve said, painting is tied to convention not because of the medium itself, but because of painting’s associations with historical tradition of the *métier*. According to him: “That an artist works in the medium of painting means that he questions painting for what it has to say about itself and hasn’t said yet. His definition of painting might be: what no painter has done yet. The *métier* gets practiced, the medium gets questioned; the *métier* gets transmitted, the medium communicates or gets communicated; the *métier* gets learnt, the medium gets discovered: the *métier* is a tradition, the medium is a language; the *métier* rests on experience, the medium relies on experimentation. [...] The *métier* is always received from the past; [...] The medium is received from nowhere; it purports to actualize transcendentals [...]”<sup>4</sup>

Undoubtedly, Leon Tarasewicz (b. 1957) is a painter who since the very beginning of his career in 1984 has been asking – through his own painting – rudimental questions about the nature of the medium. Some critics see him as an inventor of a new landscape tradition. His monumental paintings, on walls, floors or columns as well as on canvas and other more traditional surfaces stemmed from the close studies of nature, its rhythms and processes. They radiate the “power of live” and “power for live.” According to Adam Szymczyk, a curator and writer, rhythm can be used in painting

<sup>3</sup> Gorczyca (1998: 36–53).

<sup>4</sup> De Duve (2005: 23).

in two ways: a picture of it can be painted or it can be forced into the structure of composition. In Tarasewicz's paintings rhythm is not accompanied by a melody, it plays a solo part. "While looking for rhythm, Tarasewicz renders the 'ornamental' character of natural landscape: a network of merging time sequences, a series of recurring visual impressions."<sup>5</sup>

Pigments materiality depend on free visual needs. Artist, as a master, who knows what metier is like, and how operate with materiality of oil-colours, is searching for something called (many years ago) 'free paintings painting'. He refers to the sensual aspects of color, experimenting with various combinations, both these tested by many generations of painters and new ones, generated accidentally. He uses colors freely, revealing its microstructure when squeezes tubes of paint or splashes it directly from the can, waiting for new fortuitous combinations.

To the question about what painting is like, Tarasewicz used to respond: "For me, painting is like thinking reinforced by color. In order to be able to define color, one has to place it on a drawing, within a composition or construction. The rest will adjust itself."<sup>6</sup> The artist armed with a postmodern attitude refers openly to several traditions in modern Polish art, like Unism with its discipline, or Colorism with its hedonism – two poles which could meet successfully only in his art. Sometimes in his query he goes back to the nineteenth-century landscapes by such Polish painters as Józef Fałat, what I discovered in Tarasewicz's installation for the Venice Biennale. *To paint*, he had presented in Polish pavilion, we can see as total painting covering whole floor in the Gallery, with clear attribute to Fałat, when he was fascinated with divisionism. Several other projects were ephemeral, too. They are the interventions inside the space of gallery, public outdoor space or in the open nature. In the artist opinion, these events gave him the possibility to experience contact with ordinary people who were not 'art goers' at all.

Tarasewicz's art refers to, first of all, the modernist tradition with its "aesthetic autonomy" materialized by the means of abstraction, but not only. We can also find in it other great traditions, like monumental sacred painting, or 'sublime'. These references form and intensify a typical for Tarasewicz (and some of his pupils) "actualization of transcendence." Jean Baudrillard published in 1990 *Hot Painting: The Inevitable Fate of the Image*, where he emphasized abstract Expressionism as the last illumination in the darkness.<sup>7</sup> The book became very popular among Polish art critics. According to some critics, we could regard Tarasewicz as the last link in the chain of "hot painting."

The meaning of flatness and surface as modernist's legacy – with Greenbergian tradition of aesthetic withdrawal from representation and concentration on inner medium logic – within postmodern interpretations has got much more complex meanings. This is further emphasized in David Joselit's *Notes on Surface: toward a Genealogy of Flatness*, who takes up the issue of flatness, typically associated with teleological readings of modernist painting, and analyses the meaning of optical flatness in postmod-

<sup>5</sup> Szymczyk (2003: 31).

<sup>6</sup> Tarasewicz (2003: 55).

<sup>7</sup> Baudrillard (1990: 250–259).

ernism. He finds the connection in Greenbergian modernism between optical flatness and psychological depth.<sup>8</sup> The best example of these on the Polish ground, in my opinion, are works by Polish female artist, Marzena Nowak.

Nowak is a young painter, video artist, and sculptor. She used to draw patterns on canvas. Her first solo exhibition *Patterns* took place at the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw in 2003. She is “known for her post-structural artworks transforming obsolete patterns and designs of waste fabrics into the fine art of abstraction. By disrobing these old-fashioned, the human body abstracted patterns from their original functions and using them as modern constructions for her art.”<sup>9</sup>

We can see the lines which form a pattern, a structure, but these lines are in some parts so thin and delicate that the surface seems to be losing its materiality and acquiring special atmosphere. I do not mean “atmosphere” in its spatially illusionist sense, but in association to colorist atmosphere (similar to Agnes Martin’s diaphanous monochromatic surfaces overlaid with graphite pencil grids paintings of 1959). Through the grey lines the canvas seems to dematerialize, although the effect depends on the viewer’s distance. It is the middle-distance view that gives these atmospheric effects, then, as you step back, the painting looses them. The artist herself suggests the best viewing distances by the lines on the surface which transform the experience from intuitional into a system. Rosalind Krauss observed: “Since this figure/ground fluctuation varies with the stance of the viewer one might argue that the object, now fully dependent upon its perceiver, has become entirely subjectivized.”<sup>10</sup>

Nowak is playing with the viewers when she “copies” the patterns: they are not devoid of their function and there is no “clear silhouette” on the canvas. This fragility of form does not require viewers’ movement. Artist emphasizes their ambiguity.

In her art, Nowak refers to her childhood, particularly to her mother being a seamstress. Her mother and grandmother were working during the communist period and their sewing patterns, taken from Western journals (or the East German monthly *Burda*), were the objects of desire and indications of modernity and actuality. New, modern fashion clothes were ‘homemade’ for clients and sewers as well.

Nowak still remembers her mother cutting out patterns drawn on fabric. Although she herself does not sew, hates it really, she still is so impressed and obsessed by the procedure that feel forced to record it. Her video investigates the simple process of sewing. Viewers can watch in close up fingers motion and monotony needle movement piercing tissue and listen to sewing-machine. The simplicity and obviousness of the process changes during projection. We are beginning almost to see the kind of oppression, waiting for blood. This collaboration between screening images and fragile paintings on canvas persists.

For a few years works based on her drawn patterns are – generally – on ‘pictures;’ they acquired a historical meaning of the medium and are dealing with images. Some of them are on ‘masterpieces’, some on icons. We also can find pure ornamental solu-

<sup>8</sup> Joselit (2000: 292–308).

<sup>9</sup> Text, kunstlerhaus k/haus, Wien, [www.k-haus.at](http://www.k-haus.at).

<sup>10</sup> R. Krauss, *Agnes Martin: The Cloud Kraus* (2000: 87).

tion. Thicket of crossing patterns lines she used as a base for a kind of form-haunts like treasure-haunt. When I am thinking about the procedure she chooses, first of all I imagine her as puzzle constructor. She searches out a form and fulfills or stuffing with color. First one is the deepest – or like in famous song now by Sheryl Crow, ‘for me’ by Cat Stevens *First cut is the deepest*. Nowak’s art makes us think about Warhol’s *Do It Yourself Painting*, which “inscribe the viewer literally, almost physically into the plane of visual representation in what one could call a ‘bodily synecdoche’ – a heroic tradition of twentieth-century avant-garde practice that would instigate active identification of the reader/viewer with the representation and replace the passive contemplative mode of aesthetic experience by an activating participatory mode.”<sup>11</sup> Not only Marzena Nowak realized how attractive and exciting the strategy is.

Looking at one of Nowak’s paintings we can see how similar it is to Kandinsky’s – with a lot of empty space. We recognize the composition, it looks familiar at first glance, but after some time we realize that it is the destruction of Wassily Kandinsky’s legacy. Nowak’s picture evokes the essence of Kandinsky’s abstraction but it is not a critical reevaluation of this tradition. She uses the fragments of Kandinsky’s picture for a different purpose, her abstraction refers only to the masterpiece. In reality, it has no original. Like on Cindy Sherman’s *Film Stills*, there is no original as we already know.

Nowak’s paintings condition of being copies without originals deal with well known, high art masterpieces, or pop icons seen through fragments. These fragments could not be regarded as a reservoir of the masterpiece’s unique identity, but rather as the trace of loss. In her art-historical series she uses the procedure of fragmentation: it is to us – the viewers/readers – to put the fragments together and fill up the rest. During that process we could realize the importance of the pattern made of the fragments of a picture where colors are organized according to strict rules inside cells. These cells form a kind of a grid – seen as modernistic topic. Nowak proposes her own grid concept, born from her very feminine childhood memories. It relates also to the body which makes her paintings more sensitive. The geometrically defined field derived from constructivist abstraction in her paintings could be experienced differently. In all her works she emphasizes parody as a strategy to make art more “feminine.” We already know from Bakhtin that parody is dialogical: “In parody two languages (the one being parodied, and the one that parodies) are crossed with each other, as well as two styles, two linguistic points of view.”<sup>12</sup> What is being parodied? Modern masterpiece, grid, abstraction, mastery. What is the language of parody? We can look for inside crafts, fabric, patterns. Where is the place for Pattern and Decoration Movement of the 1970s? I find these questions problematic and ambiguous. To me, her pictures present both the benefits of the pattern and decoration strategy and the parody of it. The movement legalized the existence of fabric and cloth within “high art.” For Nowak, however, more important was the aspect of valorization of losses and added meanings of materials and patterns. Her parodist appropriation operates within the signifying system.

<sup>11</sup> Buchloh (2001: 13–14).

<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin (1981: 76).

Marzena Nowak openly exploits the cliché of feminist art and high modernism. Her canvas that provides the fabric of its being emphasizes the affinity between patterns and paintings. Both are used as quotations from different fields. We could see that, “Its seemingly radical denial of authorship, in fact, proposes a voluntary submission to, and passive acceptance of, the hierarchical ordering systems of a code [...] It remains open whether those who pursue strategies of parodist appropriation know, in advance, that they will emerge victorious from the game of self-denial, once they have been processed through the rules of cultural industry. Or whether their apparent negation of subjectivity and authorship is ultimately only a device to encourage passive acceptance of the limitations that the ideological molds of society holds for its subjects.”<sup>13</sup> Nowak’s art poses the questions rather than offers answers.

First of all, we can place her art within the aesthetic order which, according to Jacques Renciere, is based on permanent mixture of all aesthetic orders formed by modernism. This strategy is crucial also for the artists gathered in *Grupa Ładnie*. Not only did they refer in their art to different aesthetics but also deal with variety of art spaces that not long ago were perceived separately. Their paintings seemed to record artists’ everyday experiences and their attitude toward the communist iconosphere, although the latter is not obvious at first glance. They used to repaint motives from various photographs, both private ones and printed in magazines, sometimes of very bad quality, and transform these frozen images of life in Poland into much more credible and real pictures. The form of their paintings combines the visual language of commercials rooted in pop art – which does not exist in Polish art – with some tricks used in propaganda posters, namely monumental portraits of communist officials which were commonly used in any propaganda event.

Each member of *Grupa Ładnie* has achieved his own signature style in a short time. Generally during *Grupa Ładnie* time they tried to propose a new attitude, where a signature was the necessary logo in the “culture industry” rather than the sign of genius or talent. We can see this in their strategy “from zero to hero,” new in Poland at that time. And they have succeeded (with a little help from some friendly galleries) in making spectacular careers in a very short time what could be seen as a new chance in new time, after the political system broke.

The group as an artistic unit was generally flexible. In contrast to the art of the 1980s, which often had to be discreetly exhibited in small private galleries, *Grupa Ładnie* active between 1996 and 2001, exhibited the works of its members outdoors, in public places. At that time it was popular to exhibit in unusual locations, such as on concrete slabs among blocks of flats. The Open Gallery which operated from 1998 to 2000 and was sponsored by the Art Marketing Syndicate, the largest advertising group in Poland, realized the idea of a gallery open for twenty four hours a day and attracting large audience. Smaller canvases were exhibited at the private Bumper Gallery in Krakow. The next step, in accordance with the logic of the Polish art scene, was made in Warsaw, and for this reason the meeting between *Grupa Ładnie* and the critics from the Raster Gallery in Warsaw in 1998 could be regarded as historical. Since that

<sup>13</sup> Buchloh (2000: 351).

time, Polish critical discourse has consumed “pop banalism” or “nice-ism” and artists from Krakow have achieved the star status in a short time, while their paintings have become the most wanted. An exhibition of 2000 held in Krakow at the Bunker of Art Gallery under the title of *Pop Elite – New Class of Polish Art* showed them as a new elite and at the same time an identity card of deep changes in Polish art structures. At that time, Polish public was ready for attractive, nice-looking art; ready for art to be sold as a product.

The iconography associated with everyday life and themes referring to the period of the Polish People’s Republic, very attractive for the public, were taken from second hand. *Grupa Ładnie* artist’s used to copy all kinds of “ready-made” pictures: photographs published in journals or from private archives, TV screen pictures etc. They referred to the society based on media images of the world, who acquired the knowledge mainly from television, despite general mistrust of official media. Those painters considered the familiarity of television images as the most attractive and efficient, especially in communication with young audience. Those painters were able to successfully adopt every kind of image and almost every kind of representation could be an attractive illustration of the recent history. At first glance, the viewer can see only some parts of the image, as in close-up, their attention is attracted by every coded motif. Play with Polish identity, the revival of market interest and easel painting, were prominent in this narrative.

Wilhelm Sasnal and Marcin Maciejowski painted on borrowed images, ordinarily banal and pretty kitsch sometimes. Critic Adam Budak has constructed a typology of a bored society taking examples from Maciejowski’s fiction.<sup>14</sup> Looking at the art of *Grupa Ładnie* from the outside, from foreign perspective, we can say that the art of its members gives us an intriguing expression of Polishness, when according to the conventional view “Polishness” was synonymous with provincialism. Their witty irony, actuality of used language and games with quotations gave those typical Polish images more universal value. For the Viennese Gallery even a banal sorrow on Maciejowski’s paintings is pretty and seductive (*Traurig, schön – Sad and Beautiful*). In paintings with machine gun constructors as well as on reproduced *Mahmud Ali*, Maciejowski underlines the character of the appropriated image. The pictures painted from newspaper photos in a simplified graphic style are dealing with comics stripes and a very specific technique called in Polish *wcierka* (oil color – or ink is rubbed onto raft canvas with dry brush) invented for propaganda portraits. Those paintings – as well as many others – are meant to be not the representation but the transfiguration of pictures.

Goshka Gawlik (a Viennese freelance curator) sees nicely painted images of pop culture as a painters’ journey to the periphery and the margin.<sup>15</sup> Painter’s attachment to the medium provoked him continuously to confront appropriated images with “real high art paintings.” His comments written on canvases – some sarcastic, some just funny – are always very important part of the picture. The strategy of ‘crashing’ image and text has acquired an additional meaning due to the special focus on the written and

<sup>14</sup> Budak (2003: 98–121).

<sup>15</sup> Gawlik (2004: 36–45).

painted texts. Some associations with propaganda language made Maciejowski's references more concrete. At the same time he was engaged in a discussion with another contemporary Polish text painter Paweł Susid. They both deal with the construction of new Polishness images. Maciejowski's cycle *Let's Behave Normally* was an important part of it. The pictures from the cycle are not pretty any more – we can see them as beautiful. “Beauty became insolent, arrogant, aggressive. No longer innocent, beauty exerts pressure, shapes us, leaving no room for free breathing. Since beauty ceased to serve the truth, lofty ideals have been soiled. Although sometimes beauty does serve the truth, this service is depraved, degenerated, tantamount to propaganda and obtrusive persuasion”, Sebastian Cichocki wrote in the catalogue of an exhibition *Beauty or Painting Effects*. Although there were no painters from *Grupa Ładnie*, there were some other Polish artists with similar attitude to the medium.<sup>16</sup>

Nothing compares, however, to the written critics of Wilhelm Sasnal's painting – not only in quantity but also in quality. The painter used to characterize himself as a person very sensitive to images. Sasnal from the *Grupa Ładnie* period was regarded as the most important voice of his generation, not only in the opinion of the art historian and critic Andrzej Szczerski of the same generation. Sasnal, in his opinion, not only repainted the past and present. According to Szczerski, “the multilevel attitude to memory characterizes the diverse works. They seem to record the everyday experience of the artist, which often serves as the basis of his work [...] The idea of an inquiry informs the choice of subject matter and the very act of painting the focus on individual experience also introduces the Communist past into the paintings, depicting a society enclosed in ritual habits [...] does not position himself beyond the painting but rather tries to find his own sense of belonging in the bygone world.”<sup>17</sup>

Later on, Sasnal's painting evolved – the images from everyday life were replaced by others, associated with the Holocaust. Drastic iconographical shift and ‘touching the shame’ based on repainted images. Most popular are pictures based on the stills from Claude Lanzmann film *Shoah*. Sasnal's paintings addressing the role of Poles in the Holocaust are specific and transferred the artist into the taboo terrain. Swiss critic Gregor Jansen wrote: “the artist's brutal symbolic references, couched in the aesthetic of Pop Art abstraction, effectively parry the critique [...] Sasnal assimilates visual culture and removes it from the confines of mediatized understanding.” When we look at *The Translator*, a portrait taken from the *Shoah*, we see the face, probably female, deformed and blurred as a sign of the past: “the painting acts as an intermediary in order to translate distant events into the present visual message.”<sup>18</sup>

Sasnal's art was commented upon also by philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who interpreted it as “the impossibility of representation” and saw his paintings as a culmination of the logic of contemporary art. In his opinion, Sasnal's painting *Atomic Bomb* is not “the

<sup>16</sup> Cichocki (2004).

<sup>17</sup> Szczerski (2009: 85–96).

<sup>18</sup> Jansen (2004: 89–93).

image of the total destruction, but the destruction of the coordinates we realized as reality.”<sup>19</sup>

Bujnowski, who also “paints nicely,” expresses in his works some important general questions about a medium and its values. He deals with the function of art, its institutional life – including art market – in Poland after the transformation. He repaints images from common pop imaginary and simplifies their forms, presenting them as black and grey flat shapes, coming from photographs. Occasionally, he paints on walls or canvas only the marks of paintings which had hung there once or the smudges made by some unknown factors. He appealed to the viewers’ unconscious or conscious imaginary. He plays with audience not only when he proposes unfinished paintings quality but also proposes on canvas some evident unpropertiousness. When he was building his own painting concept, he penetrated almost all medium’s conventions. He had made a search query on the consciousness of all painting of all times in the context of Polish specificity and expecting the audience with very different aesthetic habits.

Close reading of the paintings by once Nicely Done Group painters goes far away from representation, images and narration (most in Maciejowski’s case). The critics analyzed canvas themselves, their painted surfaces, fulfilled with colours, or left empty.

The flatness, which is – as has been already said – associated with teleological readings of modernist painting, forms the prime element in each picture of *Grupa Ładnie*. Postmodernism has also served as its negation, toward self-referentiality within modern painting. As Fredric Jameson said once: “A new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense [is] perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernism to which will have occasion to return.”<sup>20</sup> If we agree with Joselit, for whom the flatness and surface are the examples of the interrelationship between content and form at the complex ideological juncture of modernity and postmodernity, we have to rethink the artworks by some Polish contemporary artists. They are really sophisticated in their play with modern and postmodern pictoriality.

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<sup>19</sup> Žižek (2008: 66–87).

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