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In Silence, or the Painterly Staging of Anxiety

Łukasz Korolkiewicz is one of the most outstanding Polish artists of the early 21st century. However, he works in a kind of penumbra, withdrawing to the fringes of the current art scene. Korolkiewicz does not participate in the inventions of new painting. For a long time, he has not expressed his opinion on public matters through his works.¹

Paintings can be “good” for various reasons (formal, cultural, historical, political), but one condition is inviolable: there must be a reason to paint a “good” picture. Of course, Łukasz Korolkiewicz has his reasons, his issues to address in a painting. The nature of these matters requires that they be dealt with in secluded, private places situated on the sidelines of social life. It is precisely such places, understood both literally and metaphorically, that become the scenes of Korolkiewicz’s painterly staging. The echoes of public debates are practically inaudible here; instead, there is silence, characteristic of Korolkiewicz’s paintings, in which the artist can develop his personal discourse. It is existentialist – the essence of Korolkiewicz’s art seems to be the work of gaining, through painterly means, a deeper insight into his own experience, himself and the meaning hidden behind the façade of everyday life. As for the recipient, they are both a witness to and a participant in these peregrinations. The painter is aware of his introspections, imperceptibly passing on his point of view to the viewer. Korolkiewicz’s painting achieves its full potential when the border between the observer’s own and the artist’s point of view becomes blurred. It is the ability to bring about such a moment that makes this painter so special.

Łukasz Korolkiewicz made his *début* in the 1970s, and it was in that decade that he worked out the outlines of his own painting formula. For Polish art at the beginning of the 21st century, the 1970s are an important point of reference – many artists debuting after the year 2000 look to the creators of that period as their artistic “ancestors” and masters. Artists, researchers and curators, however, focus mainly on the conceptual revolution of that decade, the performative turn and the neo-avant-garde movement. Korolkiewicz was not involved in these phenomena, which arouse so much interest today; he worked alongside them, searching for something different in art. He was closer to artists open to the lessons of American pop-art or David Hockney than to the paths charted by Beuys, Fluxus or Joseph Kosuth.

¹ An exception to this rule being the 1980s, when the artist got involved in the critical depiction of the reality of martial law.

² “Łukasz Korolkiewicz is considered the main representative of hyperrealist painting in Poland,” writes Wojciech Włodarczyk in the article “Art of Central and Eastern Europe and Poland” published in *Sztuka świata*. The

From the critical discourse of the 1970s, we have inherited a tendency to place Korolkiewicz in the trend of hyperrealism/photorealism. This classification, persistently repeated, has become well established, especially in the popular discourse.² Nevertheless, the notions of hyperrealism and photorealism shed a light on the artist's output that today obscures rather than allows one to see its essence more clearly. Historical photorealism was a formula deeply rooted in the conceptual paradigm of art at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as in structuralist reflection, focused on exploring the grammar and anatomy of the visual media. For the classics of this trend, such as Chuck Close or Richard Estes, painting was above all an analytical tool, a field of reflection on the status of the image in the age of mechanical reproduction. Korolkiewicz has never practised this kind of art; photography and the relationship to it have been neither a subject in itself, nor the object of his painting. Korolkiewicz paints on the basis of photographs, but he *does not paint* photographs – in the sense that Gerhard Richter did, for example, in his iconic works such as *Onkel Rudi* or the *October 18, 1977* series. Nor does Korolkiewicz use photography as a gateway through which painting, driven by a critical-polemical instinct, creeps into the field of political debate or historical revision – as is the case with Luc Tuymans, among others, or the Polish painters from the former Ładnie group who once followed in his footsteps.

In his works from the 1970s, Korolkiewicz often recreated, through painterly means par excellence, the photographic effect of a flash used at close distance, which makes it possible to capture a scene taking place in front of the lens (the artist's eyes) in an unnatural snapshot freeze – with the foreground brutally, flatly and shadowlessly lit and the farther background disappearing in the darkness. Nonetheless, the flash has not been operated in Korolkiewicz's paintings for a long time now. The visuality of his contemporary paintings is governed by natural light, abundant cascades of sunlight shining through the depicted scenes, dark light in the shadows, light falling through the window into the interior. In painterly nocturnes, there is the glow of the night, which makes everything it falls on unreal. The fascination with depicting countless incarnations of natural light can be described as a symptom of a kind of conservative turn in Korolkiewicz's art. The artist consciously moves away from formal inventions, in which 20th-century painting abounded in. In a way, he brings painting back to the state from before the modernist revolution, which won autonomy for the painting and liberated it from the links with the common experience of reality. Korolkiewicz, to a large extent, renounces this autonomy,

² “Łukasz Korolkiewicz is considered the main representative of hyperrealist painting in Poland,” writes Wojciech Włodarczyk in the article “Art of Central and Eastern Europe and Poland” published in *Sztuka świata*. The artist is also linked to hyperrealism by the popular Wikipedia.

drawing on a language that constitutes what we used to call realistic representation with its basic parameters, such as the similarity of the image to the object of representation, the avoidance of deformation, anatomical correctness in presenting figures, the modelling of motifs to show their three-dimensionality on the plane, or the construction of the depicted space according to the rules of perspective. From a formal point of view, Korolkiewicz has more common “topics” (painting issues) with Whistler, Malczewski or even Vermeer than with the paintings influenced by cubism and Malevich’s black square. If we were to look at his works in purely formalistic terms, we would see that Korolkiewicz, so fascinated with the study of light, shadow, reflection and gleam, moves within the circle of visual problems defined by post-impressionism.

However, what is the purpose of rebuilding and perfecting this traditional painting language, in the use of which Korolkiewicz has reached mastery in his own way? Looking for an answer to this question, it may be helpful to return to the considerations on the relationships between the artist’s imagining and photography. This relationship seems to be not so much conceptual, as in the case of hyperrealists, but rather existential – Korolkiewicz’s photographic vision has the dimension of a specific strategy of gaining access to his own experience.

Even if we agree to write the artist out of the photorealist discourse, the photographic roots of his images remain obvious. It is not possible, with the naked eye, to see the world in the way Korolkiewicz presents it. This is partly to blame for the overwhelming impression of realism which accompanies the viewing of his works; saturated with photographic images, we believe them more than our own eyesight. Thus, Korolkiewicz translates the depth of field, typical for a camera (but not for the eye after all), into the language of painting – fuzzy, blurred foregrounds contrasting with clear backgrounds to which the focus is shifted, as well as elements which “entered the frame”, seemingly by accident.

These elements, taken from the optics of camera vision, not only reveal the photographic roots of the image, but also point to something more significant in my opinion: the photographic, snapshot nature of the time presented in Korolkiewicz’s works. The artist depicts only one short moment in each canvas, a captured ephemeral instant in which reality temporarily reveals its deeper meaning, earlier and later hidden behind the appearances of everyday life.

The snapshot time of the scenes represented by Korolkiewicz is the most “photographic” moment of his painting. Paradoxically, however, at the same moment the paths of photography and painting diverge – starting from the same point (in space-time), they go in opposite directions.

Photography, as proved by its great theoreticians, including first and foremost Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, is a medium deeply involved in relations with death. The photographic image, just like death, stops time and is an irrefutable proof of transience: photographed figures freeze (come to a standstill) for eternity; the photograph becomes an allegory of a body deprived of soul and life.

Korolkiewicz's paintings, although so similar to photographs, have an opposite effect – instead of freezing the present forever in a dead image of the past, they revive it and extend it into infinity (or, more precisely, into the time of studying the image). One of the parameters of human existence is the impossibility of being in the present, which constantly changes into the past (into memory) before we manage to experience it. In Korolkiewicz's art, painting becomes a method of accessing this experience.

What happens in these moments, fleeting yet stretched into indefinite time, which Łukasz Korolkiewicz depicts? Before we answer this question, let us take a look at *where* the action of these paintings takes place. There is a strictly defined – and quite rigorously limited – category of places depicted by the artist. Sometimes these are fragments of an urban landscape enclosed in a tight frame, but most often the painter takes us to two types of space. The first begins behind closed doors. These are private places, inaccessible to outsiders, interiors of houses (belonging to the artist or his friends), living rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms, verandas. The rooms Korolkiewicz presents are usually rooms with a view – windows, as well as mirrors, occupy an important place in the painter's iconography. Outside the window there is generally a garden. This view leads us to the second type of space most often painted by the artist: gardens and parks.

In a purely formal sense, these two types of space – interiors and gardens – help Korolkiewicz address different painting problems (especially those connected with the study of light). On the symbolic level, however, they are identical in terms of the microcosm they form. The house, the flat, as well as the garden are models of the universe, universes tailored to fit the human being (the painter), who can fill them with his consciousness and his gaze.

Moments of the present in closed, isolated microcosms of houses, apartments and gardens – this is how one could describe the basic space-time of Korolkiewicz's paintings.

There is one more parameter to the artist's universe: silence. His works are “silent” paintings. Looking at them, you can be sure that the figures depicted – as well as the painter depicting them – remain silent. Instead of words, the space is filled with glances, and the silence becomes the background against which one of Korolkiewicz's leading themes resounds: anxiety.

What is its source? Seemingly, not much is happening in Korolkiewicz's paintings, and what is happening are ordinary events. A tree in the park casts a thick shadow over the grass on a summer afternoon. The painter is resting on a chaise longue, a girl is playing with a doll in a room. There is a vase with flowers on a wooden table. These representations could be taken almost as pretexts for a formal game with the issues of purely painterly nature, were it not for the intuition of their allegorical dimension, the hidden sense that was for a moment revealed from behind the mask of everyday life.

Anxiety is born when confronted with the ambiguity of what we see in paintings. Is life what we become aware of, or does it have another dimension that remains a mystery, the key to which lies just outside of consciousness – a mystery to which we only gain access at exceptional moments of glimpses of self-knowledge?

What we see therefore has a double meaning – the accessible and the hidden. Korolkiewicz multiplies the figures of this duality (or perhaps he only perceives it? It is difficult to decide whether the artist is staging the ambiguity of reality to a greater extent, or – like Benjamin's allegoric – deciphering hidden meanings. Contrary to appearances, between the two does not have to be a contradiction). The image is a reflection of reality (mediated by photography), but it does not stop there; in the world depicted, the game of reflections continues. The painter likes to place mirrors, glass balls, sheets of water, mirror surfaces in the frame of his representations, which multiply the world shown. Almost as important in Łukasz Korolkiewicz's iconography are dolls – the painter seems to share the fascination that mannequins and puppets aroused in modernists of the Bellmer and Schulz generation. What role does this ambiguous staffage play, these soulless appearances of the body? Are they sexual fetishes? Emblems? Beings that infect the animistic aura with other objects in the paintings that, in the vicinity of dolls, no longer seem so completely *inanimate*? Doppelgangers?

The dolls are a reflection of the body, and their faces are reflected in yet another of the painter's favourite prop-emblems – the mask. Korolkiewicz's paintings are full of masks. The masks sometimes wait for someone to put them on (as in the painting *The Dark Place Behind the Door*, in which the Mickey Mouse mask is a kind of echo of the face of the girl sitting on the edge of the bathtub, an emblem suggesting the model's *double* nature). On other occasions, the face of the artist himself is hidden behind the mask, disguising his true face.

It is the (omni)presence of the artist in the image that seems to be the key to understanding the sense of Korolkiewicz's paintings, the meaning intuitively perceived by the

viewer from the very beginning. One of the reasons for the anxiety mixed with the pleasure of communing with these paintings are the conditions under which the artist allows the viewer to enter the closed, intimate world of gardens, private interiors and his own epiphanies. We get this access, but on the ambiguous rights of a watcher, a voyeur. The specific (suspicious) point of view the painter offers is characteristic; peering from one room to another, observing someone through the window, looking from behind a flowerpot in the foreground or through a deforming fragment of a vase, following someone in the park – from a long distance that allows only eye contact. Tension, also erotic, is heightened when girls, frequent subjects of Korolkiewicz's paintings, become the objects of these observations. If, by recalling the puppet theme, the painter displayed the affinity of sensitivity with Bellmer, now he approaches Balthus and Nabokov. And if the presence of underage models (symbols of innocence? nymphets? objects of forbidden lust? emblems of the soul?) raises the level of anxiety filling the artist's paintings, this feeling reaches its zenith when the image of the painter himself appears in the frame of the picture. Of course, he is not so much the main character, but indeed the only real one of this painterly discourse. In paintings from recent years, Korolkiewicz sometimes self-portrays himself as a noble old man with a neatly trimmed beard and glasses – a gentleman whose image could be associated more with a professor of literature than with a figure of bohemian art. More often, however, the artist poses for nudes by himself – he lounges naked or throws off his clothes, flits around the apartment or sneaks out into the garden. Sometimes he is just a shadow, other times we watch him when he himself stares at someone else. This disturbing figure also sometimes appears disguised. Nudity is an attribute of truth, but also a manifestation of the liberation of human nature (instincts, desires, cravings) from the costume of culture, its norms, prohibitions and appearances. The mask, in turn, is a sign that behind the face we perceive, there is another, the *true* face of the masked person. On the other hand, in primitive cultures, putting on a mask made it possible to establish contact with dimensions of reality inaccessible from the everyday level – also with demonic dimensions or, as a psychoanalyst would say, the subconscious. The masks that Korolkiewicz uses as props in his paintings are not ritual artifacts, but usually ordinary toys, cheap plastic animal or clown costumes. We would like to believe that by putting them on, the artist is only *entertaining himself*, and he certainly is – and yet this game is by no means innocent or deprived of magical power (or, if you prefer, psychoanalytically meaningful), just as the shadow cast by the artist in his paintings does not cease to be a shadow in the sense of Jungian only

because it also falls within the rules of using light and shadow in a realistic painting representation.

The perversity of Łukasz Korolkiewicz's painting reaches the viewer fully when we realize whose gaze we are using, when we look at these beautifully painted, ambiguous pictures, pleasing to the eye and disturbing the spirit. We watch a painter who sometimes enjoys the afternoon sun, but he strips himself even more often, masks his face and at the same time tries to expose himself. We spy on him when he himself spies (on others, but also himself). We observe him as he walks on the muddiest ground, casting a shadow over the innocence embodied by the figures of adolescent girls (and dolls). The perversity lies in the fact that even (and especially) when it seems to us that we caught the *artist* in risky dialogues with his own shadow, instincts or desires, we do not stop seeing with his eyes. Here is the ultimate duality that establishes the intriguing ambiguity of this painting. The artist (his delights, sudden intense experience of passing, insight into the darkness he carries within himself) is both the subject and the object of cognition – he is both inside and outside of this silent discourse made of glances. He is himself and someone completely Other (and therefore also one of us, the viewer to whom the painter shows the painting). Painting turns out to be a necessary, perhaps even the only possible medium that makes it possible to look at that Other, whose identity is the key to an existential mystery, presented both to the painter and the viewer.



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