
CREATIVE STRATEGIES TOWARDS THE METAMODERNISM POGANKA

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Creative strategies towards the metamodernism. Poganka
Doctoral dissertation (Ph.D)

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The doctoral dissertation „Creative strategies towards the metamodernism”, associated with the exhibition titled ‘Poganka’, is a collection of painting works, objects and installations that refer to the world of nature, exploring subjects such as Gothicism, pop-culture inspirations based on the romantic sensitivity or recalling the notion of sublime. At the same time the dissertation is focused on my attempt to elaborate issues related to metamodernism.

The project recognizes the possibilities of creating relations between human being and natural world through artistic means and attempts to capture complex relations and dependencies between what is human and what belongs to the world of nature and between the real and the created.

An important element of the work is the introduction of ecological values into the creative activities, such as recycling and the possibility of metamorphosis of the object to be thrown away into the work. In such act of transformation, a process of adding meanings is marked.

The title of exhibition refers to the romance novel by Narcyza Żmichowska. Relating the works to the Romanticism and Gothicism is not deprived of a detachment, some of the works may be regarded as ironic. References to the world of nature and usage of the aforementioned elements are the base for a story, of which the background is complexity and lack of possibility to solve the problem of natural environment - the human existence. Simultaneously the following values are distinguished: respect for nature due its creative possibilities, biodiversity, as well as aesthetic values.

**DESCRIPTION
OF THE DOCTORAL
DISSERTATION
(PH.D)**

Nature

The doctoral dissertation raises the subject of nature that on one hand may express a romantic fascination over its elements but on the other hand connects contemporary ecological awareness foretelling enormous danger of devastating natural environment. That motif is related to the collage artwork I work on. My work consists in creating the collages from unnecessary materials, newspapers and books - rubbish that may have extraordinary artistic value.

The nature status is unique. That uniqueness is influenced by observation of nature through found photos, not through direct experience. This relation between the author and nature is full of misunderstandings, ambiguities and distortions. It is also due to the fact that the photos used for the works are marked by the passage of time; they are often out of focus, went yellow and faded.

In the shown, creative vision, wildlife subjects to anthropomorphization and each presented animal is a separate individual. Emphasis is placed on the diversity of species appearing on the paintings. Biodiversity is treated in a very subjective manner, as the highest value of nature. In accordance with the Living Planet Report 2014, drafted by the World Wild Life in the years 1970-2014, populations of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish decreased by 52%¹.

Implementation of the keynote 'Nature of the 21st century is going to be the nature created by us'² into the reality is very probable so the issue of the animal status that dynamically immersed in the world created by man is recognized. May that process be called as bringing together?

In his work 'An introduction to animals and visual culture'³ Randy Malamud describes the influence creating animal pictures has on treating them in the real life. The animal becomes visible in particular through its representation in the visual culture. Even in case of those creatures that do not want to be watched and noticed by man. Those are specimens that hide, are inaccessible, feel fear and use camouflage. Man can cause that they become noticed by other people. They are drawn from their natural context. Man imposes his rituals on them and in particular creates the image that is enriched by his own concepts and bias.

As written by Randy Malamud, it is difficult to understand the animal, learn about its identity and behavior. The image of the animal is disturbed by all cultural values that are imposed on them. On the paintings presented in the series, the animal is very visible although it sometimes emerges from the camouflaging surroundings. There are some scale disturbances, the animal is bigger or smaller than in the reality but it always draws the attention of recipients, it is often centrally positioned in the painting.

¹ *Half of Global Wildlife Lost, says new WWF Report*, [access: 16.08.2017, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/press-releases/half-of-global-wildlife-lost-says-new-wwf-report>]

² Fiedorczyk, J., *Cyborg w ogrodzie*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, Gdańsk, 2015, p. 65

³ Malamud, R., *An introduction to animals and visual culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012

Those creatures are silent, one may understand them only via emotional communication. The recipient is offered with an opportunity to make an attempt of an empathetic understanding. The animal appears as an individual. Despite being not named, being anonymous and in spite of the fact we know nothing about it. Not having any imposed name may be the manifestation of its freedom. However that situation is uncertain, so why the observer is supposed to make an emotional relationship with the animal in the picture and not with the real creature in the wild?

Within the series one may notice a schematism of composition. It is a stiff form, holding the presented animals in order. An issue of using the photo appears, the animals in the picture are unnaturally still. They appear in a 'life-like form' as if they were alive. Most often they are presented individually, if appear in groups, the relations between the species are not natural. As a result, we are provided with a situation contradictory to the one present in the natural, wild ecosystem. The animals are drawn from their natural context. Sometimes that change of the context leads to a grotesque or surrealism. That process may be regarded as colonizing the ecological space, need for the creative expansion on the ecological territory. Under that reasoning I am even more alienating the animal, changing its context to such extent that even our previous opinions on animals and their possibilities lose their point.

As the animals lost their original context, their new world is the one created and controlled by poganka. Some species are not given with a chance to be noticed. They are integrated with their visual background. They remain invisible not only due to the fact that they are too small or too quick when moving, hide in the grass or in some bush but also due to little space for 'famous' animals or species in the culture. The characters shown in the doctoral dissertation become visible, yet only in the cultural space what does not affect the fact that their vital strength is presented as a huge, mysterious power, incomprehensible to a human being. By associating with the unknown, a fetishizing exploitation appears. Animals in the picture are pleasant to watch. This is not a critical position, because taking pleasure in watching animals in the wild is important and necessary, thereby we can strengthen our sensitivity, establish a meaningful relationship with other species, as in the case of building relationships through empathy⁴.

Painting

A manner of painting is very intuitive and is based on an experiment. The images are very diverse. There are simple painting treatments such as blurring or glaze. I do my best to make them very natural. The paintings are given with a matte effect. I connect various artistic means. One may notice delineation, unpainted fragments and a dainty drawing in the paintings. Sometimes a gesture is important, sometimes a precise reconstruction of the project and appropriate selection of color. Mostly the paintings are focused on dealing with contrasts. A collage art appears.

⁴ Malamud, R., *An introduction to animals and visual culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012, p.12

Objects

The painting compositions are completed by the objects. I mainly pay attention to their materiality. The raw materials which they were made of are easily available, most often they are things to be thrown away, in this case they subject to recycling process. The objects comprise the collection of a random finds, such as plastic bags and other useless things. They are works that have been created as a result of a quick thought, draft, action or emotion. They let us take a breath from the thoughtful and multi-element painting compositions. Despite that material combination, i.e. the layer of the artwork, they penetrate into each other and enter into some systems, preserving simultaneously the original rawness of the material. The objects are the combination of sculpture and painting works. The paint and its structure is of great importance. The objects are tiny and may resemble a handicraft. As if they actually had a practical use, however it is hard to guess what they could be used for.

Among the works there is an object using the photograph taken by a mobile phone, including the following text:

**I went to 'Delfin'
I will be back in 20 minutes
phone no. 578886509**

I received the picture as a travel postcard. The text, its context and the fact that it has been taken by a mobile phone, connect 'Poganka' with the reality, i.e. connect the reality with the word created by me. Within the series there is also a black and white collage. On a patch of space, there are some fragments of trees that make an impression of being chaotically scattered. The composition seems to be empty in the face of animal portraits, one may have a feeling that something is missing or absent. It looks like an abandoned place after a rite or a crime scene.

Matter

At the first contact with the artwork one may notice the matter: furs, armor of insects, shells, hairs, rocks and a tree bark. They let us recognize the presented reality and from the moment of the recognition we look through their prism. The matter provides the base for the painting space. In my works the matter is to affect the senses and appeal to the material imagination. The materials combine on the principle of a sensual game, at some points they interpenetrate each other and at the other points their borderlines are clearly marked. Apart from the organic material, fragments of architecture also appear. The animal body plays a significant role, in particular its surface, skin. That skin is often slippery, slender, wet and of erotic character.

Time

To my work I use albums presenting nature that I usually find at used book seller's. Although we are aware of many changes that take place in the world of nature as the result of the creative work of the genetic code at the micro level, as well as of the human activity that may have an effect on the natural environment on a larger scale, the nature is still familiar and close. Despite the flow of time, the nature seems to be immutable, constant, always filling up the empty space in the same way.

It is not possible to define precisely the time that is taken for the presented situations. The time indicator may be, among others, the period in the history of life on the Earth, regulated by the occurrence of an animal species that one may recognize on canvas. On the other hand the paintings may be in some way detached from the Earth time and take place in some alternative reality of a dream, another planet or a fairy tale. It is not certain whether it is the time controlled by humanity and its advances technologies or the past time when the homo sapiens lost its dominant position.

Gothicism

The book by Tomasz Plata 'Pośmiertne życie romantyzmu (The post-mortem life of romanticism) confirms that the romanticism in 21st century is still alive, sometimes it camouflages well reaching subconsciously to our desires, where it functions, even when we are not aware of it. A romantic individualism and subjectivism in the series of 'Poganka' has been replaced by searching an inner world that in that case has been formed in a very natural and intuitive manner.

Referring to the theory of Romanticism by Novalis we can see that the romanticism is reflected in *potenzierung*, so in the intensity⁵. Sensuality and eroticism of images significantly affect the romantic intensification of feelings. Another important emotion may be a fear of a scaled animal and its otherness. The presented nature hides something unnatural in itself and may be perceived as active and transforming. The works show also the hesitation within the feelings such as restlessness, sensuality, melancholia, sublime and thus I am keen on the specific type of the romantic sensitivity that may be defined as Gothicism.

Gothicism may be felt in the general atmosphere of works, evoked by the coloring, static composition, shadow, as well as by the presented image of nature. The emotions visible in paintings are subtle and melancholic at the first glance, yet one may discover an inner tension in their presentation. The dynamics of the composition has been significantly limited, even if there is a movement, it is frozen. The terror appears in the unnatural vision of nature, nature domination over humanity and in the presence of dangerous animals or animals that have been made to look like being dangerous.

The bodies suggest some kind of deviation and unnaturalness, they are modified. That modification is evoked by a range of activities, including those that go beyond the artistic creation and begin in the process of selecting materials for the image. The process of modification begins with capturing the body of the animal through the lens of the photographer. The photographer chooses the angle of view and the appropriate moment of the release of the shutter. The photography is printed in the album and then other modifications take place, caused by the print depending on the quality of paint, paper and used machine. Subsequent changes are made as the result of time impact; the albums I use for my work have been available for several decades. I cut the pho-

⁵ Red. Morley, S., *The Sublime*, Whitechapel, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2010

10 tos out of the album and use them in my collage compositions as the projects for the artworks. The last stage of the process is the painting work and transferring the project on the canvas, then the painting is blended together and interpreted by the painting means. The final effect has something of an erotic macabre. The said macabre contains in a numerous modifications of the animal image and the effect of eroticism in the aestheticization and extraction of the sensuality of this image.

The appearance of the sublime in the doctoral dissertations is influenced by the sense of time and also by the presented place, of which seriousness and mystery may suggest that it is a liminal place in where the slow metamorphosis of the presented figure takes place. The way the sublime is formed, based on the transformation of living creatures into monuments or golems, plays also significant role. Appearance of all aforementioned elements and some kind of complication as well as layering occurring due to them, give a sense of the sublime. At the same time, the distance towards the excessive seriousness of the work is preserved and some of the works contain a camouflaged irony. The combination of the sublime and irony is possible if the way those two elements are developed in the work is subtle and balanced enough.

Using the aforementioned Romantic measures and Gothicism I suggest that supernatural, magical and even occult acts are happening in this world. It is the reality in which supernatural powers, unnatural light and mystery exist. However, the emphasis is not on the cruelty of nature, but on the relationship between what is human and animal, true and created. In the background a figure of 'Poganka' appears, so an entity without which wonderful nature has no creative and magical power. The act of faith has again a driving force.

Poganka

The title 'Poganka' refers to the romantic story by Narcyza Żmichowska, of which focus is a female character - cruel and immersed in the world of feelings, fantasies and pleasure Aspasia that I find an embodiment of strength related to nature and also strength needed to form a creative vision and separate, inner world.

Simultaneously the choice of the exhibition title that refers to the pagan practices causes that the attention is paid to the zone of intimate experiences, to look inside, to small interesting things and to isolated and focused work - the necessary ingredients to make the spell. Apart from that, poganka is a character that controls the situation, animates the ghosts of animals and makes them have a secret power. One may recognize the motif of ecofeminism. The feminine nature and natural powers become inseparable. Poganka inspires and refers to the inner strength, intuitive powers and wildness. It stands against the patriarchal order. It creates its own religion which has no strict form but numerous manifestations, where it may freely use the powers of nature.

Metamodernism

Metamodernism is a term defining the contemporary times, generally called the post-postmodernism. The key text for me is the work by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin

van Akker 'Notes on metamodernism', published in 2010. The authors describe the metamodernism as an epoch acting on the principle of a pendulum, circling between modernism and postmodernism. I find the *circling* an appropriate word here because the authors of the 'Notes on metamodernism' think it is not a straightforward movement but a two-way one. Metamodernism is understood as a definition of an epoch returning to the romantic sensitivity that is against the postmodernistic assumptions of negations and breaking everything into individual parts. The epoch tries to rebuild a coherent narrative from scattered remains but the process of building has not a modernistic, rational and positive sense. Metamodernism means creating from innumerable quantity of pieces. A metamodernistic man tries to face the mass of everything, chooses its own way although he is aware of his little chance to win with the dismembered reality⁶. In my case this marked path is a created image of world, in which a strange place, most frequently being under the control of nature, plays the main role. This world has been built and re-composed from some intuitively selected parts.

Doubts concerning the accuracy of the aforementioned term that one may have after reading the collection of essays by Dick Higgins 'Modernism since postmodernism' are caused by the fact that each new epoch is a result of the combination of the previous ones so is emphasizing that the contemporaneity uses the experiences of modernism and postmodernism reasonable?⁷ Returns to the Romanticism, being still present within the art, are nothing special as well. Yet distinguishing the artistic means such as narrative being the manifestation of optimism, sublime, irony co-existing with the awareness of breaking up the reality and of magnitude of choice is very convincing. Therefore my works include elements that could be classified as metamodernistic. This is the result of combining the fascination of nature in the field of romantic sensitivity with practical approach to ecology, based on associating the artistic activity with recycling. Simultaneously there is a possibility to combine the sublime with irony by the imposition of references and accumulation of artistic treatments. Another element I find important is the creation of a strange place, alarming space. It is the place that I transfer from the areas of literature, films and computer games am keen on.

In the series of the works titled 'Poganka', metamodernism may occur as a free use of all available creative opportunities, ways of thinking that are used to express the artistic message. Reaching for various literary sources, objects that I can find in the space that surrounds me, irony, narrative and simultaneously synthesis and minimalism, combination of precision of performance and carelessness - it may all become a metamodern development and thinking. This thinking is accompanied by deep awareness of the past, new solutions and the current scene lie in the individual way of building relations and connections between certain works as well as chosen artistic means.

⁶ Vermeulen, T. van den Akker, R., *Notes on Metamodernism*, *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, Vol. 2 (2010): 1-14. Retrieved 28 July 2014

⁷ Higgins, D., *Nowoczesność od czasu postmodernizmu oraz inne eseje*, *Słowo/Obraz Terytoria*, Gdańsk, 2000

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