

## Breathing life into the painting's tissue

Katarzyna Kowalska: You can see in the works presented at the Corporeality of Image exhibition both the continuation of your previous activities and a fairly radical step towards nonfigurative art. Where have you taken the idea to penetrate through the corporeality of the painting?

Magdalena Moskwa: As you rightly pointed out, my most recent paintings are a continuation of the previous activities. Everything what lies at the core of my most recent paintings has already been present in the previous ones. Now, I have singled out some elements so that they can have a more powerful effect. For many years now, I have been using quite similar techniques, which aim at condensing the contents, such as cropping, mental shortcuts, separations, placing abstract elements against a neutral background. Shortcuts in painting give a very strong visual effect, and that is why my paintings portray so many separate body parts. I think there is no point in painting the entire human body when a hand or a finger can be more meaningful and say more about this man's condition, character, intentions or feelings. Anyway, such shortcuts are not unfamiliar to those acquainted with votive art or ancient painting – an excellent example is *The Mocking of Christ* by Fra Angelico.

One can also observe in my paintings the process of approaching an object and of intentional framing. In my earlier paintings, I used to paint my characters, by framing them eg from the waist down or from the knees down, with tight framing and hands folded in their lap. These efforts illustrate my way of thinking. One could say that I got closer and closer to my characters. Currently, I have reached right up to the surface of the skin, and I happen to even transgress it – although it is nothing new to me – this transgressing can be observed in many of my previous works.

Items that are now 'independent' have been appearing in my paintings at least since 2004, i.e. since the moment when I replaced canvas with chalk-glue gesso. Chalk-glue ground gave me the possibility to render the impression of pulsation, of the softness and warmth of human body, and above all, allowed me to reach deep into the painting and place small objects in it: hair, membranes, nails, organ models. In many of my works, the painting's support becomes the body itself, with openings leading deep into it and exposing parts of its interior, the orifices are covered with membranes, clogged with strands of hair or bandage plugs. All of these efforts have a symbolic or even magical meaning to me. The painting is a way of enchanting, but also of taming human body, life, fears, feelings, thoughts...

The surface of the chalk-glue gesso, appearing already in my previous paintings, with its warm off-white colour, resembles and refers to the form of wafer that symbolises the body and also has various scenes depicted on its surface. Similarly, the support in the paintings, symbolising the body, is covered with small, suggestively rendered abrasions, injuries and pulsating bumps. Thus, another, more narrative layer, presenting a minor character, is developed on this ground. In my earlier paintings, figures were accompanied by complementary elements which of course were never a futile decoration, even when the figure was surrounded by lush floral motifs. These elements have always had a specific and sometimes essential meaning. Now, when figures disappeared, the painting's support, created in relief, along with the symbolism it carries and the elements that have been accompanying figures so far, seems stronger.

My most recent paintings are the result of a slow process, so I wouldn't call my step towards non-figurative art radical, and certainly it is not a turnabout. I just went a step further in my experimenting and my striving to send out the strongest possible message.

Permeating into the corporeality of the painting was not a matter of idea, it just happened. I must admit that for me it strikes a new and interesting chord, and might even represent a breakthrough. I always felt that paintings are very much alive, but never to the extent I feel it now – especially during the creative process.

Katarzyna Kowalska: What were your motivations for this way of presenting corporeality?

Magdalena Moskwa: Corporeality has always interested me, and the way of presenting it has evolved with me. In my early work, the word 'incarnation' appeared as an inscription: 'I am an incarnation of a sad adventure'. Then, while attempting to paint human figures, I tried to render their corporeality in the most illusive, sensory and painful way. And that has led to the development of

the 'smooth' glaze painting technique which, in my opinion, is best suited to present the human body. This technique enables me to create layers perfectly rendering skin, mucous membranes, generally the mortal shell of a human being, and all this in the most vivid and lifelike manner, so that my paintings, when seen for the very first time, elicit specific physical sensations, such as bodily compassion, or even shivers (I experience quite similar feelings when looking at gothic crucifixes or Gerard David's painting 'Flaying of Sisamnes'). I wish that the viewers could literally feel the painting with their body and skin. I want them to stop and establish a relation with the painting on many deeper levels. Each of us is painfully aware of our body and skin, no matter if we hate it or are fascinated by it, whether we are anxious about it or not. It is easier to establish a relationship with the audience at the corporeal level. The body is a tool that allows us to work with the spirit in the earthly conditions; it is the only medium that enables us to get closer to the spiritual. This topic has been widely discussed by the curator of my exhibition, Marta Smolińska, in a very accurate text included in the catalogue published by 'Wozownia' Art Gallery in Toruń.

Katarzyna Kowalska: Your works make up a macrocosm of that which is organic. How did you manage to breathe life into your art?

Magdalena Moskwa: As I said before, I always felt that paintings are very much alive. I cannot really say what this exactly means. I am certain, however, that when I paint, I exchange certain things with the painting. I simply get lost in creating and the paintings lead me along by sending out live signals. I learned to go along with the paintings and not to fight them. On the other hand, I do not feel that paintings are separate entities, that they can somehow be disassociated from me. I find it difficult to distance myself from the paintings that I am working on. I would compare it to 'leaving your body' and standing next to it. Talking about all this is not easy because it is all so subtle, elusive and quite complex. I consider paintings as a means of transition. I will explain this concept with a simple example: I always wear my nails closely trimmed and, one day, I wanted to see how my hands would look like with long fingernails, so I bought a set of artificial nails which I immediately glued to a set of hands on one of my paintings. This satisfied me fully. When I was putting polish on them, I felt as if I was doing it to my own fingernails. I did not do a very good job at it, as I am not exactly experienced in painting nails, and this surprised me quite a bit because of the precision and attention to detail that I achieve in painting. I am often so strongly fused with the object that I am painting, and it is so real to me, that I get a strong feeling of painting over one's body or face, and not painting a body or face, or the feeling that I am picking at a real wound. One thing is for certain - in such moments paint stops being just paint and painting becomes more than just painting. The life that you asked me about is also tied to the large dose of energy focused in my paintings, I really do give them my all, I feel that I am 'charging' a painting when I work on it. I focus on single spot, but remain aware of the complete painting, and I am often astonished by the end effect when I finish. I sometimes feel the painting 'sucking' me in. Anyhow, this activity is not about painting at all. Painting is only a process of materialisation and it comes to be on its own - that which is very vividly present in the imagination materialises during the process of painting, it 'comes into flesh'. In fact all of my paintings depict things that do not exist in the real world. This applies both to human figures as well as my latest paintings of bodies - these are combinations of things that I observed in the real world, but form entirely independent entities. You saying that I managed to breathe life into my paintings is the greatest praise that I could receive. I myself strongly sense whether a painting is alive or if it is 'dead' and I am not attracted to 'empty' pictures. A painting is certainly alive when it is able to spur the viewers' imagination and sharpen their perception.

Where did the macrocosm come from? I tend to analyse and adopt an in-depth approach, I scrutinize details, and this is probably visible in my art. When looking at my pictures, starting with my early works and continuing up to my latest ones, you may notice a constant approaching which can be compared to a film camera gradually closing up on a person and its surroundings, then filming the person from the waist up or waist down, then filming parts of the person's body, the person's internal organs, going as far as showing a magnified image of the surface of the person's skin and its pores. Currently I am breaking through to the other side of paintings and, thus, creating two-sided paintings. When you get so up close to details, a change of scale is inevitable. I am under the impression that I finally approached the 'corporeal painting', which is simply a transfer of

the human body, and I am starting to penetrate organic tissue resembling shapeless matter. Paradoxically, my attention to detail has made everything more general and universal. Specifics, particular human experiences, have disappeared and that which is the most important has emerged.

What do I wish to approach? It surely is not the body itself. The body is only the gateway and, let us say, the 'tool of cognition'. When I welcome guests to my exhibitions, I say that when I paint my corporeal paintings I always keep in mind that the body is only a 'receptacle for the soul' and I ask them to hold onto this thought when looking at my works. The body is a type of reliquary and paintings are too, in a sense, because they contain the artists' intentions, message and energy. This is what may contribute to the life of a painting. Or maybe the artists is only a channel or a kind of filter through which energy passes and materialises in a form that is specific to only this single person?

Katarzyna Kowalska: Could you explain where the boundary of life runs in an immaterial art form which is painting?

Magdalena Moskwa: This is a great secret, a very elusive secret, even for artists themselves. But I think that I already gave you the answer. This is how I currently understand it.

Katarzyna Kowalska: The works that make up the Corporeality of Image exhibition are very multi-dimensional. What inspired you to create them?

Magdalena Moskwa: Human beings, with their inherent complexity, are my main source of inspiration. This also explains the multidimensional aspect.

As regards artistic inspirations, I was always interested in art focusing on humans and spirituality: ancient, sacral, magic, votive, icons, reliquaries, coffin portraits. However, I do not focus on specific works or artists, but rather on the essence, principle and impact of these forms.

Katarzyna Kowalska: You also create art with fabrics. Could you explain the ways in which clothing may correspond with painting?

Magdalena Moskwa: I would not say that it corresponds with painting itself, I simply consider it a different form of expression. Some claim that clothes become the visible form of our essence. I think this may be true. The clothes that I make are a sort of 'mental jumpsuit', a 'print' of the aura or energy that radiates from a person.

Clothes are very closely tied to the person who is wearing them, in time they become their second skin which bears marks, smells, impressions of the body. Therefore, it is a form that is ideally suited to speaking about humans. When sewing, I usually think of a specific person and their 'outwardly appearance'. The form that comes into being is an embodiment of this 'outwardly appearance'. Sometimes I use some of my old clothes when making new ones. I am so attached to them that I cannot just throw them out. So I used two old wool overcoats to make two pieces of clothing with the lining on the outside. The life of an overcoat's lining is truly fascinating. Old clothes do have a special aura about them and this can be best seen at historic fashion shows. Back in the day clothes were worn longer than they are today and, thus, were becoming incredibly intertwined with their owners. When we look at old clothes we can nearly sense the presence of the person who wore them. Such shows fire up my imagination. The forms that I give to my clothes branch out in two directions. On the one hand, they are a way of emancipating the person who is being portrayed and, on the other, everyone may 'wrap' themselves in these clothes and feel as if they are 'wearing the skin' of someone else.

Clothes need to have a special structure to achieve this effect, usually it requires the wearer to change their body posture, for example hunch their back, tuck their chest in, stiffen up their neck, etc. By assuming uncomfortable body positions, we may have trouble breathing and this, obviously, has an enormous impact on our physical and mental well-being.

I put my experience to work when designing costumes for Mariusz Grzegorzek's adaptation of 'Macbeth'. The costumes of Hecate, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth and especially the Witches allowed me to carry out my idea - the costumes played a major part in shaping the actors' portrayal of their characters. I especially like the Witches' costumes. The sleeves were moved forward and sewn across the sides. Therefore, they bound the actors' arms and 'set' the entire character up, not only in terms of movement. They were very uncomfortable to wear, claustrophobic even, and this, in my

opinion, had a profound impact on the way the actors felt and acted. My involvement with theatre was worthwhile because I finally had the opportunity to see my clothes move and affect a human being. I believe that this performance was the perfect embodiment of my idea of clothing as a 'mental jumpsuit'.

Katarzyna Kowalska: Are today's casual viewers, in your opinion, ready for this type of art?

Magdalena Moskwa: I think that we should avoid generalisations. I never think of viewers as 'casual' or 'involved'. Viewers are different, they have differing needs and capabilities. Obviously, not everyone is going to be interested in my works. When composing a painting, I try to do it in a manner that would allow every viewer to discover something that speaks to him. I use simple language to speak out about issues that are dear to every human being. My paintings are visually attractive and this most certainly helps engage the viewers. Once the painting has their attention, the viewers are usually willing to uncover its deeper, more difficult and often uncomfortable message. I was happy to discover that articles devoted to my art described it as 'hypnotising', 'overwhelming' and 'mesmerising'. This means that I was able to achieve my goal. The 'capturing' and 'engaging' effect of a painting is especially important in the case of works that touch upon sad and difficult issues which we often try to ignore. The rest is dependent solely on the viewers – they will only see that which they are capable of seeing: some will only give the painting a superficial look, others will delve deeper. I strive to include many layers in my works, thus giving the viewers great interpretative freedom. I feel that a good painting is like a mirror, allowing viewers to see their reflection, and this is what I try to achieve with my works. I am reluctant to speak out about the meanings of my paintings as this would limit their scope – not everything can be expressed with words and not everything has to be said. A painting is meant to give direction to viewers' thoughts and spark reflection. Plus, I think I have used a gentle and gradual approach when introducing viewers to my style of painting and, therefore, I am convinced that they are ready to progress into the next stage. And those who were not familiar with my earlier paintings, maybe they did not miss anything? I believe that being consistent and following the path I chose has great significance and this can be seen in my paintings. My latest works build upon the themes contained in my earlier paintings. They capture the essence of my message. I always felt that I am working on one painting. I change, my views on certain issues change, and my paintings change along with me. My latest works are a natural effect of this slow process and I think they reflect the experiences that I have accumulated thus far. The most important facet of my art is that you do not really need to understand it, it eludes an intellectual approach, a rational analysis, you do not have to have a rich background in art theory and history to enjoy it. However, if you do have such a background, you might be able to see more, but, on the other hand, knowledge often acts as an obstacle that obscures your view. My style of painting requires an intuitive or emotional approach, one may rely solely on their gut feelings, therefore I believe that it is suitable for all kinds of viewers, however they may interpret it on different levels, just as it is with everything in life.

Katarzyna Kowalska: Do you believe that art may encourage viewers to reflect upon metaphysical themes, or is it rather the spiritual side that fuels artistic impressions?

Magdalena Moskwa: The answer to this question seems obvious. Certain aspects of art certainly evoke metaphysical reflection in viewers. Whereas spirituality fuels all kinds of impressions.

Katarzyna Kowalska: What do you value more about your work: the creative process or the effects of your work?

Magdalena Moskwa: The creative process is what I value the most. However, the end effect is a testament to this process, so it is also important, mainly because it forms a means of communication between me and the viewers who may become involved in the process.

Katarzyna Kowalska: Your works demonstrate enormous progress and a kind of consistency in the manner that you approach form with increasing maturity and daring. How do you see your future artistic plans in this context?

Magdalena Moskwa: I do not really make artistic plans embodied by projects. As I said before, in my case it is a process, there is something that I keep on following. This applies both to specific paintings as well as the entirety of my artistic work. When I paint a picture I never make sketches, however I sometimes do draft simple symbols and notes. I use my imagination to 'erect' a painting

and, at a certain moment, this becomes so vivid that it starts 'leading me' and I follow suit.

I do not really focus on form. Form gives material being to the message.

As concerns the general character of my work, I believe that a painting spawns another painting and, sometimes, ideas come to me spontaneously. Of course I do have certain predictions about the future of my work. I will continue painting on panels and use chalk primer. The general trend that I have mentioned before is visible in my finished works. I think that I will someday return to figure painting because I love painting humans and because I am aware that it will give me access to new areas of painting.

I have already prepared supports which are even more spatial, two-sided and with deeper relief. This may lead me to approaching supports as a form of sculpture. I am under the impression that my current works are focusing on objects, as could clearly be seen at my last exhibition, but I do adhere to the principles of pure form in painting. Plus, I would like to picture details in much bigger scale. These are the things I am currently working on.

Katarzyna Kowalska: Thank you for your time.