

My paintings constitute an attempt to enchant human body...
Interview with Magdalena Moskwa

Lena Wicherkiewicz: What does corporeality mean to you? Is it a notion important in your art? How do you understand it, how do you define it in relation to your paintings?

Magdalena Moskwa: Corporeality is a very important element in my artistic work, but not in isolation from the spirit. I'm interested in the body as a 'receptacle for the spirit', the body as a form of reliquary. I do not focus on corporeality to outline the similarity or externality of the body; to me, it is rather a physical form representing our mental layer and emotional states. In my paintings I never portray real-life people. My works constitute an 'assemblage' of images of different persons, often with my image interwoven into them, and thus they represent entirely new characters. I would describe them as the 'embodiments of interiority'. In one of my earliest paintings I put the following inscription: 'I am an incarnation of a sad adventure'. This illustrates well my thinking. My painting is about embodiment, incarnation. What interests me most in any painting is the energy, life. The painting technique I've been developing has always served only one purpose – to render 'life' in the truest and most lifelike possible way. Already in my earliest portraits I tried to make a portrayed character not so much resemble someone, but be as lifelike as possible; so that the portrayed character could send signals and initiate contact. My paintings constitute an attempt to cast a certain spell on the body, life, fears and feelings... And this is why I am fascinated by coffin portraits. For even these portraits, where the person was painted after his or her death and bears its clear hallmarks, you can feel this almost perverse energy of an enchanted life that had stopped. It is precisely this type of energy that I seek in painting. Since I've wanted to 'breathe life into' the image and get close to 'the living body', at one point I have replaced canvas with chalk-glue gesso. Chalk-glue ground – with its warm, off-white colour – gave me the possibility to render the impression of subcutaneous pulsation, of the softness and warmth of human body. This attempt to render corporality in the most illusive, sensory and painful way has also led to the development of the 'smooth' glaze painting technique. It 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. I want my paintings, when seen for the very first time, to elicit specific physical sensations, such as bodily compassion, empathy or shivers. 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. I experience quite similar feelings when looking at gothic crucifixes or such paintings as 'Flaying of Sisamnes' by Gerard David or 'Martyrdom of St. Erasmus' by Dirk Bouts. In case of my work, which often touches upon unpleasant and difficult issues that people generally do not want to think about, this 'capturing' them and their 'coming to a standstill' in front of a painting is very important.

Each of us is painfully aware of our body and skin. Our skin is an extremely sensitive organ receiving countless stimuli and collecting traces of life. Our attitude to the body is very complex: on the one hand, it inspires admiration, on the other – it arouses fear and loathing. The body is a disgusting sackful of stinking filth, rotting food, mucus and other secretions, as well as a hotbed of disease. However, it is also delightfully beautiful and perfect in its structure and functions. I try to include this duality in my paintings which are both beautiful and disgusting. We dwell in our bodies with a frightening consciousness that one day this corporeal sack will stop to hold its contents, thus ceasing to exist. We want to 'enchant' our bodies into eternal duration; we use different treatments, we look for the cure to make us immortal, we take care of our bodies: we nourish them, we treat and cure them for good health, we put on our make-up, we dress up, we undergo plastic surgeries, often achieving a grotesque appearance instead. We tend to forget that our body is merely a 'receptacle for the spirit', a form of reliquary – and that is precisely the way I treat human body in my paintings.

L: The reliquary exudes the same energy as the body parts 'immersed' in it. They stand for the entire man, but also for the power that he had, the power which other people believed in and could feel...

M: What fascinates me is the idea and the energy of reliquaries. At the heart of a reliquary lie the relics and the energy they exude, while the heart of a painting is its essence, that is the intention, the energy, the message which the artist puts into it. The form of a painting is the material presence of this energy. My aim is to make my paintings exude human power and energy. There are many references to votive art, reliquary forms and icon painting in my work. Similarly as in votive art, I use techniques which aim at condensing the contents, such as cropping, mental shortcuts, separations, placing abstract elements on a neutral background. Shortcuts in painting give a very strong visual effect, and that is why my paintings present so many separate body parts. I think there is no point in painting the whole man when a hand or a finger can be more meaningful and say more about this man's condition, character, intentions or feelings. 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. In the hollows covered with panes, small objects are immersed: hair, membranes, nails, organ models. Sometimes the orifices are covered with membranes, clogged with strands of hair or bandage plugs which symbolise the blockade, the lack of energy flow. I devote so much attention to corporeality in my paintings because I am convinced that it is easier to establish a relationship with the audience at the corporeal level.

L: You mean, to express through the body what is really going on inside a human person, rather than just to present its exterior.

M: Yes, that's right. 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. It bears the traces of a complex inner life that comes out and manifests itself in deformities, wrinkles, skin colour, movements, posture, gaze, etc.

L: And how do you perceive your 'non-painting' works in this context: the 'corsets', the photographs? Did they also lead you to what is now happening in your artistic activity? Or do you see them as a distinct path?

M: It is not a distinct path. It is just another form of expression. I have sewn clothes since the very beginning. To me, they represent a form of 'mental suit', an 'imprint' of somebody's personal aura or energy. Clothes are very closely connected to us, eventually becoming our second skin, bearing our body traces, scents and imprints. That is precisely why it is an ideal form through which one should talk about man in general. When I am sewing clothes, I usually have a specific person in my mind, with their 'inner appearance'. The forms of the clothes sewn by me act in two ways. On the one hand, they represent the material shape of the 'internal appearance', while on the other hand – everyone can get 'wrapped' in them and feel a bit like in someone else's 'skin'. This effect is enhanced by the structure of clothes, which usually forces us to assume a certain posture, such as a hunched back, huddled chest or stiffened neck. It is well-known that when assuming a wrong posture, people have trouble breathing, and this, in turn, has an immense impact on the functioning of the body and our well-being. My clothes, which have over time started to resemble rigid corsets, referring to the forms of 'shirts' from my paintings, were also to render certain mental states and, in a sense, induce such states. I used this experience while designing costumes for 'Macbeth' directed by Mariusz Grzegorzek. I've managed to put this concept of mine into practice when preparing the costumes of Hecate, partially also in the case of the costumes of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, but primarily – the costumes of the witches. To a large extent these outfits determined the actors' modes of artistic expression. I especially like the costumes of witches which were designed with the sleeves moved to the front and sewn along the sides. These costumes, restricting hand movement, 'defined' well the whole character and not only the way the character moved. They caused discomfort, or even claustrophobia, which I think had a big impact on the actresses' well-being and acting. This theatre episode was a very valuable experience for me, because finally my clothes started to function in motion, worn by a living human being. It seems to me that this project has best revealed my way of thinking about clothes as being our 'mental suit'. According to some, our

outfit becomes a visible form of who we are deep inside. I think there is definitely something true in this statement. The way we dress says a lot about us; it is a manifestation of our expressiveness and creativity. As I've mentioned earlier, our clothes – through their form – say a lot about a person. If we look at clothes in this way, they themselves can already constitute a kind of portrait, or complement one perfectly. In my early portraits, the outfit or its components, together with the motifs surrounding the character, play an extremely important role and complete the entire image. At the beginning, photographing clothes was for me a form of documentation. I did not like presenting my clothes in motion on models because it was difficult to get the models to present them according to my vision. I obtained a much better result through the photographs. Most of these clothes cannot be shown on rigid tailor's dummies, precisely because of their structure which requires the body to adjust accordingly. Over time, my photographs began to serve a different function – they were no longer of documentary nature but became a separate mode of my artistic expression. Clothing is still an important element but gesture, a kind of energy a model exudes and emotions have become increasingly important to me – most often I pose myself for these photographs.

L: The clothes you create are very strongly 'identified' with your body...

M: My first 'clothes' were created from my old coats which were 'gutted' and turned inside out. Life of a coat under the lining is really fascinating. I had my favourite worn out clothes that I simply could not throw away and hence the idea. In fact, it all really started with an old coat. I put it on the table. I knew that I would not wear it again but somehow I could not part with it because it was almost as an old friend; and collecting old clothes did not seem 'healthy' to me. I took the scissors and started to cut out the lining, and on the spot I sewed a dress out of it; and from the outer fabric – I sewed a two-piece outfit. I must add that there is a big difference between sewing with the use of old clothes and sewing with new fabrics. Old clothes can simply say a lot. Clothes sewn from old clothing are cut and sewn by themselves. In general, there's something unusual about old clothes, as best can be seen at the exhibitions displaying historical pieces of clothing. In the past, clothes were worn longer than nowadays and they were 'soaked through' with their owner. When looking at old clothes, we can almost feel the living presence of the person who wore them, and we can sense some imperceptible scent. Old, worn-out clothes really stimulate my imagination and raise a series of questions about the person who wore them; they're almost able to sketch out this man's alleged portrait. Many clothes sewn by me are certainly strongly 'identified' with my body and charged with my energy; this is true particularly for those remade garments which are resewn from my old clothes, but not only. I sew very few clothes but I spend a lot of time on each piece. I use fabrics designed by me and my hand-embroidered, printed or hand-knitted textiles. I use also a free-hand stitching technique to complete large pieces of clothing. Some pieces are sewn on my body, thus the fit is adjusted to my body measurements. These clothes are just this personal form of expression, my 'mental suit'. Perhaps I need this form of expression because normally I wear clothes which allow me to be invisible; that is precisely how I treat clothing – as some type of camouflage.

L: Have you also thought about the fact that since the clothes were literally 'fitted to your body shape', connected with you, sewn from your old clothes and tailored to your measurements, then when someone else was putting them on, assuming the shape of your body, they might have felt what you had felt, since they symbolically impersonated you?

M: Yes, that's right. What I meant was to make them feel like they were 'in my shoes'. The models who put on the clothes had to 'adjust themselves' to them, in order not to stretch or deform the outfits. They had to literally adjust to my form, both physically and also symbolically – as mentioned before, these clothes were to render certain mental states or to induce them. I would like at this point to refer to a situation when we borrow a piece of clothing from someone and we put it on; then we somehow 'take away' a little bit of that person's look, we symbolically

'get into their shoes'. The clothes of our deceased loved ones that often remain in the wardrobe after those persons are gone are a very poignant example. And when someone tries such clothes on in a gesture of farewell or longing, this is accompanied by very intense emotions. I myself would probably never want to do that. I have never borrowed clothes from anyone, nor have I lent mine. However, in my artistic works I often use this 'ritual', as I feel it is very powerful.

L: In psychology, there is a term 'armour'. We all build 'armours' around our bodies in order to defend ourselves against those feelings that are difficult to cope with, in order to ward off the things that could hurt us, and in order to protect what is sensitive and very personal in us, the things that we do not always want to share with anyone else. That is how we protect ourselves with such 'armour': over the years we keep building our own 'form' of the body, a form in which we can survive. It is some form of 'deformation', and of 'individuality' as well – our unique shape.

M: I am very much interested in people's body postures, different rigidifications, deformities, asymmetries. Most people wear a mask on their face when communicating with others; some even undergo training in how to keep an inscrutable facial expression or not to betray themselves with gestures. A good observer, however, cannot be fooled. In our body, all the emotions and our accumulated experiences rigidify with time... They just solidify and each of them has a specific posture, movements, shape... Everything permeates into our bones, hands, feet, and of course becomes apparent on our faces. However, there's no doubt we manage best to control our face. Therefore, in my paintings I often leave out the face altogether, even though it is the face which is most strongly associated with portraits. I think that in portrait painting, the face may well be replaced by hands or even legs that often betray what the face is trying to hide. Body parts or viscera can also constitute some form of portrait, a much more intimate one than the typical face portrait.

We protect ourselves by 'armour' in order to survive. In my artistic work, I devote a lot of attention to this issue.

Our body is very delicate, fragile and constantly vulnerable to damage – either minor or fatal. We need to look after it and care for it, protect it and shield it. Thus, in my paintings, there are many separate hands performing protective, tender gestures, and sometimes on the contrary – the paintings are about bad touch. We protect ourselves by creating physical and mental 'armours'. In my paintings, that armour is symbolised by the forms of convex T-shirts in which the characters are 'wrapped'. This technique has more to it than merely its symbolic meaning. In my opinion, this 'stiffening' also imparts a strong emotional charge and expression. With this method of treating a character, when the entire form is 'buckled-up' and restrained, every slight hand gesture, or even finger gesture, a loose hair strand, minor wounds, and scratches of silver in the background, acquire significance and add to the expressiveness of the painting. This confinement in a cramped, rigid form aims also at arousing empathy, by making the viewers feel the discomfort, a sense of suffocation, claustrophobia and imprisonment. The role of the protective layer is fulfilled also by the schlag metal aluminium leaves covering the painting's support made of chalk-glue gesso symbolising the body, which often 'oozes' from beneath the silver layer. Whereas in clothing, the armour is depicted by the form of a rigid corset that, on the one hand, holds the person captive, but on the other – it protects them as well.

L: Your recent works are, as a matter of fact, objects, that is, they are still paintings but they actually resemble objects, and thus the exhibition turns into an installation. How do you see it? Is this still the path of a painter? Or its further stage? Or is it about entering the field of new medium?

M: The heart of an object or an installation is always a painting in its pure form, painted using a classic oil technique on the support made of chalk-glue gesso. I draw from old recipes and refer to old techniques because they are very inspiring and to me they seem to be adequate to what I do; besides that, they also create enormous opportunities for the painting itself. And although I draw from old painting techniques, I have noticed that the paintings, especially the ones on the support made of chalk-glue gesso, have acquired a quite modern look. This is most apparent precisely when

they become part of a greater whole – an exposition or an installation. A ground applied to a board support allowed me to explore a new space and to freely shape the support that I prepare in relief. Recently, I have created double-sided paintings. I think that will lead me to the sculptural form on the support level. I do not set myself any restrictions. I just follow the painting. If I introduce some accompanying elements, it is just to make it appear in a special way, for example – a painting enclosed in a glass case resembles a piece of human body and acquires the look of a preparation. You can once again evoke the form of reliquary. I often display my paintings by hanging them against white fabrics or placing them in a hole cut out in a white cloth. The sterility of the fabric surrounding the painting ‘enhances its effect’, reinforces the impression of soft, warm, pulsating flesh, which I wish to convey. The fabric brings purity to the fore; the painting placed against such background acquires ‘exceptional’ importance. With such white fabric, I refer to liturgical linen which, together with other elements – such as creaky benches, claustrophobic confessionals, the smell of incense and the chill of the church – have always had a strong effect on me.

L: This church context also made me think about the fabric accompanying the paintings as indicating some festivity, solemnity of the moment, so that the painting encompassed in it was symbolically placed in the realm of the sacred. In case of your paintings, the fabric can also serve a similar function: when we are looking at them, we commune with a very special reality...

M: Yes, that is precisely the impression I want to achieve. Linen, whether liturgical or simply table linen, serves some specific functions and carries its own symbolism, and above all – it is associated with purity, with celebration...

L: I would like to go back to your idea of painting. I think that a painting represents a body in some sense; its nature is corporeal... It reminds me also of the first panel paintings, icons painted on wooden panels in such a way as to give them a personal identity...

M: There is definitely something to it. I have always perceived a painting as something alive, something sending impulses – both throughout the process of its creation, and afterwards. I also see the art of painting as a process of materialisation; the concepts that are very vivid in our imagination materialise during this process and become ‘flesh’, so to speak. It is in a way a process of creating new entities. Almost nothing that I paint exists in its form in the real world; this applies to both my earlier portraits, as well as to the recent paintings of the human body. These are the syntheses of some things I have observed, but with no counterpart in reality. As I have already said, in my paintings, the support symbolises the body. Already in my earlier paintings on canvas, some similar effects appeared, such as the paint scraped off the support leaving ‘bloody scratches’. In many paintings there appears a layer of silver which, through minor ‘injuries’, reveals a layer of the ‘body of the painting’ imitated by the chalk-glue gesso under the silver, oozing plasma and blood. When watching my paintings, from the early ones to my recent works, you can notice the constant process of getting closer to man. It is like zooming in of the camera: starting with the most general plan, that is the frame encompassing the entire human figure and its surroundings, through medium shots, from the waist up or from the waist down, body parts and intestines, to close-ups and zooming in to present the surface of the skin and its openings. Actually, I have just come as near the surface of the skin as possible, I have even crossed it and peeped inside the body. I feel that I have finally met with the ‘body of the painting’, which is simply a transferred form of the human body, and I begin to penetrate its organic tissue, which resembles some formless matter. Paradoxically, this maximum close-up and the associated focus on the details have made it all more general and universal. There is no distraction by the image or by the appearance of a figure. Concrete images have disappeared, together with individual human cases. Instead, there has appeared what seems most important – the feeling of an organic presence...

In addition, with regard to my paintings, the reference to the body can also be found on another, purely physical level. The painting is truly alive: it breathes and sweats. Canvas substrate, paper, board, ground – they all react to external conditions: they shrink and stretch. The colours change,

react to light, while oil paints change volume in the process of drying; the painting is subject to incessant chemical processes. The paintings are aging and dying just as people do, and likewise people they have their doctors – i.e. conservators who work under hospital or laboratory conditions, often using medical equipment and carrying out very complex operations on the body of the painting.

L: You have disclosed this 'hospital' context at two of your recent exhibitions: in Elbląg and in Toruń. I would like to ask you about your last paintings: you have mentioned that you have already cleansed your paintings of all unnecessary elements and that now they have been reduced to the very essence of painting, the essence of your idea of painting. I do not know whether this is not a paradox, but as a result of this cleansing process and reaching to the heart of the matter, the paintings have become flesh-coloured, corporeal, concrete, tangible, sensuous. The paintings have become flesh.

M: The body is very important to all of us. In fact, there are probably no people who would not be focused on the body, because even if they ignore it, it is still a point of reference to them. We perceive the reality from the point of view of our body. That is why I believe that I have the best chance to reach the viewer precisely through the body. I want to create a situation in which the viewer begins to construe the painting with their own body, on the basis of feeling sympathy for others, compassion and empathy. Sometimes, when we look at something, it hurts so much that we feel it deep inside our body. I want the viewers looking at my paintings to feel their body and its pulsating presence, to ask themselves the question about its limits and its meaning. About the source of life. Human figures have completely disappeared from my recent paintings, while the support, prepared in relief and carrying its symbolism, have started to resound stronger. The paintings look like body parts and skin surface; the organicity of the body has been transferred to the surface of the painting and the literal identification with the body has occurred.

L: Your paintings, especially the recent ones, are to a large extent, directly and literally, on the one hand, painful and poignant, and when we look at them, we feel discomfort, pain, as there are holes in them, wounds, injuries; but on the other hand, there is an extraordinary beauty, verism and truth in them, something fascinating and hypnotising.

M: Actually, in all my artistic work, I try to transform what has been recognised as repulsive into something which we want to keep looking at and even find it delightful. I force myself and others to look at things from which we avert our eyes and which we do not accept. We have been told that something is disgusting and very often these are the things associated with the body, for instance, the idea that the viscera are revolting. All the things I am afraid of, for example, a putrefying body or bodily injuries – I'm trying to present it in a beautiful way, so that sometimes I myself cannot take my eyes off of it. I want to demystify it and demythologise it for me and for others. The intestines and the mucous membranes from my paintings shine with pearly glow and sparkle with rainbow colours; they are almost as perfect precious relics or jewels. And after all, it is not an invented or added beauty, it does actually exist. It is enough to forget that the intestines are disgusting to see their true, though disturbing, beauty. In my paintings, what draws the attention are also the numerous details, provided that someone actually dares to cross this boundary in order to 'get inside' such a small painting. Then they are 'absorbed' by it, 'engrossed' with it, they must come near and bend forward to examine it. This impression is enhanced by the plurality of cavities and orifices which constitute a kind of 'doors leading inside', showing what is on the other side of the skin. In order to appreciate these meticulously designed structures, the viewer is forced to come into close contact with the painting, while the intensifying haptic quality, as well as smooth and softly shaped surfaces, arouses the desire to touch the painting. People often avoid close contact with another person, especially when this person's appearance is not attractive or if this person is sick. My recent paintings constitute an attempt to transfer the human body and to establish an organic presence. They constitute an attempt to 'demystify' the dark recesses of one's

corporeality which entice with their perverse beauty, they force us to look at them and familiarise ourselves with the reality of the body.

L: I wonder to what extent the attitude to the body that we have nowadays is associated with the natural anxiety and strangeness related to what is inside the body, under the skin, and to what extent it results from the impact of our culture. Has it always been like that? After all, the body is always with us, we go through life in it or with it, depending on how we identify ourselves with our corporeality... Why do we have to adapt our body and victimise it?

M: I think it is largely a product of culture, and results from the fact that we are threatened with the body... In my artistic work, there is much thought and consideration concerning this subject.

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