

Magdalena Moskwa

born in 1967 in Poddębice

She studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Lodz. In 1996 she completed her degree in the Studio of Painting and the Studio of Decorative Print. Besides painting, she is also involved in clothes and embroidery design. She is a member of the Open Exhibition Society.

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The core of Magdalena Moskwa's art is the force and intensity with which the visible materializes in the painting. The form itself is instrumental: it is intended to conceal the force and conceal it well, intensely, ostentatiously, like an inaccessible but at the same time evident secret. This force hides on the surface of form, in the line of the contour which differentiates it from the background, as well as in the striking, sometimes veristic clarity, in its intense luminosity and the haptic quality – the textural or even relief-like three-dimensionality of her matter.

It could be argued that the paintings – invariably untitled – do not originate in a concept, a project or artistic strategy, nor in a desire to convey particular content or to design an open semantic game; rather, they are initiated by pure, indeterminate force. The painting allows the artist to grasp this unsettling force, to determine, master and liberate it, as well as liberate herself from it; to reveal it as hidden in the form. The latter is long in the making, shaped arduously and meticulously, with the use of a constantly increasing array of traditional pictorial techniques. Its ultimate shape is never given a priori. It imposes and presents itself gradually, in a process of singular interaction between the artist and the emergent painting.

Moskwa's art is predominantly concerned with self-portraiture. Nevertheless, her paintings are highly unusual self-portraits. Indeed, they may be described as 'hetero-self-portraits', because Moskwa – in a gesture of uncompromising vivisection – depicts herself as an alien, eerie, 'other-self' figure. This figure is often seemingly composed of fragments borrowed from other people's bodies and is thus discreetly hybrid. Such is the origin of the entities which the artist calls "Nomany" ("Normans"). They are women of pale, deathly coun-

tenances who turn fervently – sometimes also with a touch of melancholy – towards the viewer. Some of them are bald: remains of damaged hair may also cover a balding scalp, or sprout above an unnaturally high forehead. Their stocky, ungainly bodies seem at times prematurely touched by old age: hunched, they lean forward, carrying the weight of sagging, naked breasts. Other "Nomans", in their prime, have broad, sturdy shoulders, disproportionately slender and long arms, as well as rough-hewn, 'masculine' faces which contrast disquietingly with the long, wavy hair and the infantile, colorful ribbons decorating it.

These hieratic figures are emphatically differentiated from the background, which is homogeneous, empty or else tightly and evenly filled (as if out of *horror vacui*) with ornamental, floral motifs. It is lush flora, enchanted with its own vivacity, which is simultaneously overripe, announcing its imminent withering, already under way: its labyrinthine tangles and coils seem to determine, bind and overpower themselves. The function of this ornament is by no means decorative. Rather, it indicates figuratively the tension inherent in the painted figures: a stiffened force – a vitality which turns against itself, transforming into a death drive.

The figure is not the only element to be sharply contrasted with the background. Moskwa uses various devices to differentiate certain fragments of the body, or elements of the attire which drapes the figures – or possibly restricts their movements. The isolating contour, the amplified luminosity, the verism bordering on visionariness and the relief featured in the most recent works all cause certain depicted elements to present and impose themselves more intensely, individually forcing the viewer to focus on them. As a result, the painting is more a sum of particular elements than a 'synthetic' compositional whole. This singular 'summary' or 'additive' nature brings to mind the medieval panel painting, the Polish coffin portraits of the baroque era, or naïve art – all important points of reference for the artist. Undoubtedly, Moskwa is fascinated by the power of fragmenting and isolating perception which is common to all three. Such is also the origin of the motif of 'solitary' fingers, hands and internal organs, separated – as in holy relics or votive offerings – from the rest of the body, which in this case becomes 'unnecessary'. They can be treated as expressions of the body's singular self-experience. The latter term ought to be understood as consciousness confronting the fact

of the body's physicality; as the body experiencing itself as something 'unusual', familiar and yet alien; finally, as self-mutilation – accidental, inadvertent, resulting from casual, everyday activities. Indeed, in Moskwa's paintings one notices numerous signs of mutilation – mostly grazed knuckles, seemingly a consequence of the hand coming in contact with a rough, injurious surface.

The function of these scars is to provoke instinctive, almost bodily 'compassion' in the viewer: seeing it, one may actually experience imaginary or phantom pain. The painting's intense communicability – 'pathetic' in the strict sense – is also engendered by the veristic impertunity with which certain body parts, e.g. the hands, are depicted. Furthermore, in the most recent works the entire surface of the painting imposes itself on the viewer as flesh-colored matter which sprouts relief protuberances, growths, as well as folds which surround the painting's concavities and apertures (one of those contains an actual hairball). The works evoke the presence of the entrails, at times seemingly allowing the body to be seen from the inside. Arguably, they give the viewer access to the body as something that is too close not to be simultaneously repulsive.

In Moskwa's painterly idiom, the body and the consciousness of the depicted figures are swayed by life absorbed with its own intimate inertia, finality and death. This dual force of life and death also determines the suggestive impact of those numerous motifs in which beauty interpenetrates, and is inextricably linked with, ugliness. The artist creates an array of enigmatic, notionally elusive configurations of these two elements, operating within the narrow space between ugly beauty and beautiful ugliness.

Tomasz Żaluski (transl. Krzysztof Majer)