Marek Pokorný:
Barbora Lungová and the gift of painting

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Curatorial text for the exhibition by Barbora Lungová: Charisma (17/10/2024–26/1/2025, PLATO).

Painting – at least in the Western tradition and since the Renaissance at the latest – has been a charismatic medium. It possesses a certain kind of attraction and authority, while also provoking the manifestation of resistance. Painting induces both devotion and revolt by institutionalizing its power, which has – through great narratives, art history, critics‘ reviews, but also through academies and schools and its specific presence in the public space – become part of the viewers' average expectations. Proponents of its exceptional status are forced to defend themselves, sometimes well beyond good taste. And although its end is repeatedly and loudly announced, painting regularly rises from the dead.

It is no coincidence that both the history of painting as a medium and the history of painting as an institution have been governed by men. Women painters become exceptions, an alternative to the predominant show of daring and brilliance; their contribution to the revival of lesser genres is appreciated but it is seldom evaluated as a radical innovation. To be a queer female artist and ask the audience questions on gender identity and non-normative desire, or to depict human relationships in a subversive way via paintings, is, sadly, still unusual.[1] Even more so if it is figurative painting, i.e. painting whose composition and symbolism are laden with meaning; whose realism adopts and parodies strategies of various styles of storytelling, including the magical, allegorical and postmodern ones. It's also true of a painting style that has an almost repertoire-like quality, that quotes and combines familiar genres, characters, icons, and stories, both allegorical and cinematic, and mixes pop culture with archetypes of sacredness. Such an approach is not accepted without reservations even in the context of engaged, feminism-oriented art, whereas in the Czech environment it is often ignored with a timid silence.[2] And this is true even though Barbora Lungová has openly reflected in her paintings on her transformation from a hetero to queer identity in the last few years, and also dealt with gender issues with unusual radicalism and criticism in her previous works.

In Lungová's case, the part of her activity that's perceived as adequate and up-to-date is her activity as an environmental activist and – in compliance with the peak of the wave of interest in everything that is related to caretaking – attention is paid to her activities in the field of alternative gardening and cultivation as a critical social practice. For various reasons though, Lungová's paintings, which I believe have no parallel in the present-day Czech context, are still somewhere on the edge. "Burdened" with allegoric realism, her paintings keep on missing the main trends; that is if we regard the practice of painting as something genderless, a medium where gender is not the decisive factor. For feminist circles, however, Lungová's

work is also problematic, and for similar reasons. Now I will dare to venture into the field of speculation.

Lungová's paintings are based on concepts related to second-wave feminism that linked the motives of equality and solidarity to the promotion of the right to decide about one own's body and to achieve sexual liberation, and that defined the personal as political. For the purpose of interpretation of the artist's paintings, I consider of equal importance the discussions from early third-wave feminism which stressed the importance of researching how masculinity and femininity and their stereotypical representations are constructed socially and culturally. It studied mechanisms of control of and symbolic violence against (not only) women, and – of course – the key role of patriarchy in setting and preserving the inequalities, norms, and the requirements placed on different sexes, genders, races, and classes. Lungová's critical perspective weaved gendered expressions of embodiment into historical, social, cultural and political contexts, thus greatly contributing to the understanding of gender as a performative act. The particular self-evident nature of these theses in contemporary feminism seems to deprive the works of art that draw their imaginative freedom from them of their gravity.

On top of that there are the difficulties with painting as a charismatic medium whose ability to criticize the existing order is questionable, since we intuitively associate it with male dominance (and the potential danger of taking over its language and structure). This suspicion, further enhanced by the technique the author uses, i.e. the traditional underpainting which increases the impression of the colours used, and by her quoting of compositions and themes of great (male) masterpieces, is – in my view – a reason why Lungová's paintings haven't yet received the attention they deserve.[3] The exhibitions held in established institutions typically include her works that thematize the traditions of her native Moravian Slovakia region, works with specific aesthetics that overcome the gender sting, and in the context of exhibitions looking for remnants of or inspiration from folk traditions, its queer interpretation, so essential for the artist, disappears.

If we assume that a common repertoire of critical exhibitions in this country includes exposing corporeality in performance, in film and documentary techniques, in photography and video, and in environments; or that it includes sculptural invention that develops modernist tradition through nostalgic returns accentuating caring and mutuality; or even the shift of engaged art's iconography and the legacy of the avantgarde towards a feminist form, then Lungová's spectacular paintings have been overlooked until now. It is as if it is a problem when criticism and subversion are accompanied by an affirmative attitude towards a medium. However, we don't necessarily have to view the charisma of the medium of painting only within the limits of the irresistibility, power, and authority that demand subordination and following. The tradition of such explanation originates in Max Weber's use of the term "charisma" in sociology and later on in the trivialized forms in the psychology of personality. The original Greek meaning[4] and the way the word "charisma" is used in the Bible, especially by Apostle Paul in his First Epistle to the Corinthians written in Greek, is closer to what we imagine as the meaning of the words favour, gift, or grace, which are always somewhat ambivalent when looked at from the perspective of how they can be dealt with.

Lungová's extensive series of male portraits, which led to the title of the exhibition, portrays personalities we attribute that charisma to, regardless of how they dealt with their gift. Some

of them can be instantly recognized by the viewer, while the identity of others remains hidden. Yet the ambivalent attraction of those depicted and of the way of depicting, i.e. the theme or the scene and the medium of painting, is characteristic of all the works exhibited and – as a hardly noticeable shadow – complements their critical or, on the contrary, joyfully self-affirming impression. Scenes constructed in order to reference the world of the cinema screen (young and old Clint Eastwood or Mr Tau), the clash of characters from the world of pop culture and representatives of critical sociology (David Bowie versus Pierre Bourdieu in a composition based on Titian's painting Apollo and Marsyas), or thematizing the great narratives of the Western tradition (the painting Jesus Was a Dandy and God is a Woman) attract us regardless of whether we understand the exact message or not. And they offer us a powerful experience that raises doubts but also (for someone like me, an older white heterosexual male) a slightly guilty pleasure in just being able to look at them. And to think about them.

Marek Pokorný, August 2024

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1. I would be interested in a Bourdieu-esque research on the reception of the different media employed by female artists and on the different types of painting they opted for, in relation to the prevailing theoretical discussions and the positions of their representatives in the field of art. ↩
2. Typically, the much-discussed exhibition of works by the Portuguese-British painter Paula Rego at the Tate Modern (2021) did not resonate among the young generation in this country. Her retrospective was mentioned only by Hana Janečková in the annual Artalk poll. ↩
3. The artist had two solo exhibitions in Ostrava (in Jáma Gallery in 2017 and in Beseda Gallery in 2012), yet without a major response from the audience or the critics. ↩
4. We must remember the Charites or charis, a base of the word chairein is translated as "to rejoice". See, for example, Karl Krerényi's Mythology of Greeks. ↩