

Agata Bogacka - *Inequality*

By Post Brothers, independent curator and writer, 2021

The distance from equality, from perfect agreement, is history.
Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

What is the origin of social inequality? The common refrain, typically inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1754 *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind*, goes something like this: early humans had egalitarian and communal societies, but as agriculture, cities, "civilization", and the "state" developed, private property rights and power relations brought about unequal social arrangements at all levels. Recent anthropological and archaeological scholarship (most notably in David Graeber and David Wengrow's recent book *The Dawn of Everything*), contest this linear narrative, arguing that not only have humans consistently moved back and forth between a wide range of political and social systems (alternating between moments of freedom and inequality) but also that this notion of a "fall" from primordial innocence treats inequality as a tragic effect of largescale civilization as such, and therefore unavoidable. The question remains, however, that given this variegation of human development, how have relations based on inequality, domination, hierarchy, patriarchy, and violence come to be so normalized and so grossly present in every aspect of our lives? And why is it so difficult to imagine another way of being?

Agata Bogacka's exhibition *Inequality* probes these difficult questions by visualizing uneven structural dynamics. Her remarkable abstract paintings demonstrate a commitment to art making as an object of knowledge, a form of analysis that is grounded in the scrutiny of base relationships. It is not simply that the painter "depicts" social situations and conflicts like a diagram, but rather that such relations are demonstrated as manifest material conditions on the canvas. The bare disposition of paint, the particular ways that graduated fields of colour come into contact, is at once a demonstration of a concrete and formal interchange and serve as nuanced allegories for social forces. Where abstract painting traditions often emphasize harmonies and compositional balances, Bogacka instead elaborates formal tensions, conflicts, frictions, and imbalances. Each of the works in the exhibition feature varying planes of colour and material that converge and spar for dominance. The canvas is used as a site of interaction and discord where territories are marked, surfaces are bifurcated, intensities distributed, and discrepancies and divergences are actualized. By depicting internal contradictions and oppositions within seemingly unified wholes, Bogacka's paintings can be regarded as dialectical, yet there is no synthesis here, no resolution, only persistent dissensus. Thus, the artist elaborates a fundamental asymmetry in relations, a certain incommensurability between opposing forces that gives a view into rudimentary dynamics of inequality.

It may seem hyperbolic to frame Bogacka's alluring abstractions as having a subversive political potential. We have come to expect politically or socially-oriented art practice to either represent politics as such or immerse the art work into lived realities. Yet it is precisely painting's perceived autonomy, its isolation from the world, its interiority, that allows the medium its critical potential. As a practice, painting is grounded in actual, material, relations of production. The painting serves as a site for concretely tabulating information, a frame for the emergence of "pure situations", as the artist has noted. Rather than requiring a conceptual leap from visual data to a referent, these pure situations reject the artificiality of representation by establishing concrete interactions. Abstraction in this case is not a means for depicting something universal, but drawing a parallel between situated, contingent, contexts, and elementary structures outside the frame. Her work pictures a very real operation: elaborating the omnipresent role of abstractions in our social reality, where real relations between people and between things are defined by ideological abstractions.

Bogacka's new series of white monochromes on unprimed canvas reduce painting to its essential components: surface, support, and substance. In the five-fold *Inequality* series, fluctuating white planes overlap and butt against each other across the canvas, generating diaphanous fields at the top and bottom of the horizontal compositions, and leaving the surface raw across the centre. Though the images present the conditions of their making as plainly as can be, there is still a minimal sense of spatial illusion, the insinuation of a horizon, the implication of light. Here, representation is teased as a material effect. Retaining a speculative spirit, the untouched material becomes an active element with the white paint functioning as raw sense datum, an inaugural mark that absorbs and reflects the world around it. Quantitative changes accumulate until a qualitative change is brought about. As the milky swathes taper off across the surface, they reveal the rugged materiality of the tightened textile, accentuating its warps and wefts, its peculiar absorption and repelling of substance. At their edges, a line between image and object is marked. *Inequality* is an exercise in base materialism, unabashedly disclosing the material conditions and operations at the underside of painting itself.

Like a mason laying fresh plaster on a wall with their trowel, the scraped bands of white imply a process of preparation, but the labour and movement of their manufacture is frozen, arrested, annulled, and dissipated. This preparation of a ground is the first step to image making, serving as a sort of universal substratum beneath all pictures. Yet here, white is exposed as a cover-up, a whitewash. White is commonly regarded as pure, neutral, colour-less, a substance without character preceding all colours, and Western thought has long given priority and primacy to whiteness in almost every sense of the term. By accentuating this intrusion of luminous white on the bare surface, Bogacka's *Inequality* makes visible that any professed "origin" is also a form of concealment and cancellation. Beginnings are uneven, unequal, they inflict a certain violence on the system, and proceed through phases and revisions.

The uneven distribution of pallid paint breaks up the horizontal objects into opposing sides. The duelling sectors grant the images an illusion of mirroring and equivalence, but closer inspection reveals subtle dissimilarities. As the rectangular fields repeat and rise and fall across the image, they generate a sense of movement that is less a directional push, and more an all-over spatial agitation, as if the figures are phalanxes assembling for immanent action. The hazy threshold between the painted zones, this liminal space of untouched material, serves as a site of possibility and reconciliation, but also a battlefield. One could

imagine these images as temporal maps of social movements: diverse figures congeal into a group, forming a mass line, a front, while the gradations can serve as a model for both the dissipation of energies over time, and the uneven and murky process of effecting concrete change.

Bogacka's masterful use of painterly gradients is a treatise on identity itself. The coloured expanses resist stability through subtle modulations of density, tone, intensity, luminosity, and saturation, thereby formalizing a fluctuating difference within any seemingly coherent form. Color is treated as an emergent, variable, event, a transition from one state to another. Yet Bogacka continuously intervenes in this smooth movement of information. At times, hard edges are juxtaposed with quick, painterly mark-making, while at other moments, delicate transitions are momentarily shattered, only to resume in another form. She initiates a system and then breaks it down, generating abrupt shifts by truncating the chromatic progressions, establishing ridges of different relief and value, and clashing the directionality of the gradients. The forceful severing of the planes from each other, the establishment of limits, disrupts the ethereal atmospheres of the gradients by imposing real gravity and mass. Bogacka rewards close inspection by retaining incidental deviations and slight imperfections in this process, eroding easy determinations between intention and error. The moments where the discrete planes collide are sites of communication, interaction, and difference, implying both a possibility for interchange and an insurmountable disparity. They mark a threshold, a boundary where territories rub against each other. This marking out of territorial domains is linked to the earth, to property relations, and to power.

Indeed, as the crisis at the Belarussian-Polish border has reminded us, the imposition of a border is an act of cruelty in service of establishing and maintaining inequality. Yet there is something also intimate at work in Bogacka's paintings. By alternating between the establishment of boundaries and their elimination, she also illustrates phases and patterns of intersubjective negotiation, making visible how any communication involves uneven moments of sharing and withholding. Through abstract forms, Bogacka gives space for metaphor and conceptualization, and uncovers an irreducible inequality that connects interpersonal relationships to socio-political, cultural, and economic arrangements. The critical capacity of her practice is not simply to describe existing relations, but also to actualize new possible relations between disparate terrains, breaking the hierarchies and inequalities integral to the abstractions defining our social world. Though there is a tendency to imagine social conflicts as disputes between evenly matched sides, Bogacka demonstrates a fundamental asymmetry between movements that maintain power and those that demand justice. Through her structural and materialist critique, she contests the naturalization of inequality in the public and private spheres, setting the stage for other ways of relating and being together.