

Between Spheres - On the recent works of Agata Bogacka

By Dávid Fehér, Curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 2021. Translated from Hungarian by Steve Kane.

When attending an exhibition, standing in front of each picture, we find ourselves involuntarily asking the same questions, over and over again: What is in the picture and what is behind the picture? What does it conceal, and what does it reveal? These almost clichéd questions occurred to me as I stood before the latest abstract works by Agata Bogacka, but in this case, perhaps, they are not merely rhetorical questions, but actual dilemmas. Contemplating the cumulated layers of paint and the blank patches of canvas, I felt that here, the duality of revelation and concealment represented a key problem of existential profundity.

Viewed from her present-day, meditative abstraction, it is almost astonishing that the starting point for Bogacka's career was a kind of Post-Pop visuality. In her early paintings, characterised by meticulously contoured, reduced systems of forms, reality was transposed to the plane of fiction. Observing the methodology of her formal reduction and the graphic-art feel of her nevertheless painted surfaces, the loose formal associations range from classic examples of Pop Art to Gary Hume, although unlike most Pop or Post-Pop artists, one important and ever-present aspect of Bogacka's art is its personal nature: her struggle with her own body and her personal experiences, a kind of search for identity, which also transcends personal matters to attain universal validity. The issue of female art connected Bogacka's early works both to the Female Pop Art of the 1960s and to Tracey Emin's subversive series of photos exposing her own body in various studio situations. Bogacka's sequence of self-revealing photos could also be interpreted as studies for her paintings, and as such, even in her early paintings she juxtaposed different levels and planes of reality and fiction, projecting them onto one another. She made a gradual reduction of the photographic image, and this gesture of reduction was essentially abstraction, although her move away from mimesis, rather than toning down her existential questioning, made it even louder.

It must have come as a shock to many, around 2007, to witness Agata Bogacka's sharp turn, when the process of discreet abstraction and reduction in her art was replaced with abstraction itself, or rather with a semi-abstract visual language, poised between readable signs and abstracted surfaces. At first sight, her increasingly abstract forms seem to fit in with a long line of artistic strategies that blurred the boundaries between abstraction and figuration – in the Polish context, the trajectory arcs from Andrzej Wróblewski to Wilhelm Sasnal and Rafał Bujnowski –, but Bogacka's works are radically different from any analogies that may arise, mostly, perhaps, in that they fuse the most intimately personal with the universal. The works themselves are projections of planes of existence, senses and emotions, and objectivisations of a mental process.

Among the monumental key works she has produced in the last few years is *Hair with Geometric Composition* (2016), recently acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. The dark gestures, painted with a broad brush, conjure up a barren landscape: a sea of windswept grass, or a mass of crashing waves. What it actually shows are human hairs in extreme close-up, where the act of magnification results in abstraction. Hair – on the head or on the body –, indicated with wide brushstrokes (taches), has become the defining motif in Bogacka's art, its form representing the volatile border between abstraction and figuration. The gesture of magnification is a subtle nod back to the tools of Pop Art, while the hair motif opens up a rich seam of iconographic meanings and associations: Bogacka uses it as a motif of transience, but it can also be applied to human strength (Samson's strength), while simultaneously with all this, dense body hair and long, free-flowing hair can – depending on context – refer to both masculinity and female sensuality (consider, for instance, Meret Oppenheim's iconic fur objects).

The painting, however, is not dominated solely by the all-over structure of a mass of hair, formed using taches, because the geometric figures that can be discerned beneath it – squares, rectangles and circular forms – are also oddly emphatic. The fundamental motifs of Suprematism appear in the work both as partly concealed traces and as unique painterly pentimenti. The layers of paint arranged above or beneath one another (the phantom images that appear below, between or over the layers) are important motifs in Bogacka's semi-abstraction, which, on the one hand, allow the painting process to be retraced and played out in one's imagination, unveiling the temporality of the artwork, while on the other hand, they also lead us towards art historical depths: in this specific instance, they recall the utopias and traditions of geometric abstraction and confront it with alternative methods of creating imagery. The barely perceptible geometric shapes could perhaps be interpreted as a playful art historical reference, bringing to mind the homogeneous surface of Kazimir Malevich's iconic black square, which very soon became covered in cracks, and the layers of paint that emerged from beneath the surface, the contours of the overpainted-and-eliminated compositions, as though reminding us that concealment can also be regarded as creation, and the act of erasure can become one of construction.

In her most recent works, Agata Bogacka confronts the universal forms of pure sensation with the individuality of gestures painted with broad hand movements. In her abstract paintings – like Malevich –, she seeks the forms of sensation, she understands painting as a projection of the forms of emotions and relationships (expectations, promises and wishes), and in this way she seeks answers to questions that are similar to the ones she posed in her earlier, figurative works, examining her own identity and exploring her relationships towards people and objects. As Bogacka herself has stated, in her pictures she paints "pure situations"; her compositions give form to existential situations, and she experiences the act of creating as a process analogous to existing – a sequence of predictable and unpredictable occurrences and interactions.

Compared with her previous "hair" compositions, her latest works take her even further along the path of abstraction. In the newest paintings, there is hardly any scope left for figurative associations, the hair-like forms are more smoothed out, and the broad brushstrokes have been tamed into delicate, modulated tonal transitions. In some cases, the titles still refer to the objective world, for example on the paintings titled *Head in Clouds* 1-3 (2018), where the central motif is a barely tangible, fragmented contour of a circle that is rhythmically repeated on the picture plane as a moving ghost-image. Bogacka's imaginary heads evoke the heads of the figures painted by Malevich after his return to figuration (*Head in Clouds* 4-5, 2019), but they also include cosmic allusions – they are like moving celestial bodies or atmospheric illusions, mirages in the sky. The paintings are neither portraits, nor landscapes, but rather mental images of relations. Sensual depictions of an ethereal balance between

figures and grounds, objects and ideas, curves and lines, presence and absence, corporeality and incorporeality. Bogacka's new abstract works can be described as *Compositions of Dependencies*, to quote the title of a recent exhibition of her art, and constitute a series of paintings that dissolve the differences between the figure and the ground, the inside and the outside, the geometric and the gestural, and create (visually) interdependent structures through subtle optical illusions (*Dependency*, 2018). In her recent paintings Bogacka paints dependencies and interconnections, relationships that may allude both to human relations and to the relationship between the individual and the universe.

The works are sometimes spiritual, even psychedelic in form, and yet I see them as nothing other than *mental landscapes*. The delicacy in her tonal transitions may hint at associations with such classical artists as Wojciech Fangor or Stefan Gierowski. It would be dangerous, however, to cling too strongly to historical handholds of this kind, by invoking, for example, Op Art forebears; it would also be foolhardy to make conscious reference to exponents of new abstract art, such as Tomma Abts.

It is far more important to behold the paintings up close and at length, following the (visual and mental) stories they tell through to their conclusions, observing the dialectic connection between the blank patches of raw canvas and the delicate tonal transitions (horizon line? sky?) painted onto the canvas, or between the dark, coloured silhouettes, bands and negative forms (*Relationship 6-7*, 2019). The title of *Relationship* (given to one group of works) may refer to these formal relations and brushwork games, but it may equally concern human-to-human relations, the connection between people and landscape, and even the system of connections between the image and reality and between reality and abstraction: consider, for instance, the pieces in the *Relationship* series where the contours of the stretcher frame seem to show through the bare canvas as faint, transitory ghost-images or after-images, as light phenomena, as illusion, or even as hallucination.

The trace of a picture appears within the picture. Here, Bogacka is continuing a great tradition in the history of painting. This is essentially the same thing that she did in her pentimenti-themed works, although I feel that the problem has now entered the context of contemporary media theory and epistemology. In the delicate tonal transitions of the quasi-landscapes, squares can be discerned. This new transfiguration of the Malevichian form is an ethereally translucent, imaginary building motif, which is in fact none other than a picture within a picture (*Divided View 3*, 2020). In the painting, Bogacka divides the picture plane in much the same way as people arrange the information they need in a kind of virtual, divided screen. The split screens that have become such an extraordinarily defining part of our everyday lives are perfectly austere, aesthetic and well thought-out, and yet they are also immaterial, despite having become the most important interface for human contact. Bogacka rematerialises these interfaces, which alleviates the austerity that arises out of immateriality. The brushstrokes almost move and emit gentle noises, and yet the imperfect, sometimes apparently incomplete – and as such open – composition continues to convey a sense of fragile harmony.

The title of the paintings – *Divided View* – speaks volumes. On the divided picture plane it appears that divided attention is objectified and the relationships between different perspectives, spheres and planes are materialised. The mutually supplementary and contrapuntal surfaces can be interpreted as visual manifestations of connections and relationships (*Divided View 2*, 2020). What the pictures seem to show us are the complementary and reciprocal relationships between subject and subject, subject and object, and abstraction and reality, with some often slyly concealed social messages coded into them, such as the rainbow-coloured prism forms in *Equality Dream*, which – albeit obliquely – continues a thread from Bogacka's earlier gender-themed works.

Bogacka gives form to the imaginary-illusory movements – and “blur effects” – of multiplying images and planes, which come into contact with each other like clusters or bubbles. She seems to be searching for the nature of physical contact and the apprehensibility of points of contact. Her latest tondi are projections of such inner spheres (*Promises 9-10*, 2020); despite their small size they are monumental and literally universal in effect. It is like watching auratic manifestations sublimating into atmospheric phenomena in bubbles of air.

Demonstration of Pictures (2020) is the title of a recent painting by Bogacka. The surface of the painting is defined by the polyphony of different pictorial qualities and stylistic layers. The composition is built up of imaginary fragments of pictures, tile-like units arranged according to a broken grid. Some parts evoke the dripping technique of the abstract expressionists, others recall Bogacka's own meditative paintings of tonal transitions, certain details resemble monochrome paintings, and the grid itself seems to reflect the spirit of geometric painting. The multi-layered, fragmented picture plane is like an archaeological excavation that demonstrates the possible modes of (abstract) painting, a presentation of intentional and unintentional pentimenti (defined by the dialectics of construction and destruction), a self-reflection and an art historical panorama that investigates the fate of the medium. Bogacka creates a polyphonic structure of pictures within and beyond pictures, which is a sensual palimpsest of divided views and visual layers. She creates a fragmented and “broken” composition that seems to be “unfinished” and open, like her ethereal painting *Unfinished View* (2019), which can be seen as the cold, bluish counterpart of such red-dominated works as *Demonstration of Pictures* or *Relationship 12* (2020). Bogacka presents polar opposites in her works: some paintings are dominated by ice-cold, crystallized blue structures and others by bloody red and fleshy pink warm tones. In a few rare cases she confronts the two tonal poles within one composition (*Reconstruction*, 2018), and thus investigates the visual “negotiations” (*Negotiations 1-2*, 2017) and interdependencies of the opposing fields and principles (*Opposition 2*, 2019). *Demonstration of Pictures* is a sensual landscape made of red and pink tones evoking blood and flesh, presenting the body of the landscape, or even more the landscape of the body, in which the skin of the surface is nothing but paint. Bogacka's work is a “demonstration of pictures” as bodies, but it also refers to experiences beyond the body, and the imaginary movements between different spheres.

In her latest works, Bogacka uniquely combines gesture and geometry, randomness and intention, the virtual and the material, the personal and the universal. By progressing consistently along the path of abstraction, she provides passageways for crossing between the different spheres. The circle may be closing, but it continues to spin. What conceals reveals, and what reveals conceals – in exactly the same way as the different levels and planes of Bogacka's own work and of the history of art are revealed and concealed between and behind the sometimes thin, sometimes thicker layers of paint.