

Light Green - On the paintings of Agata Bogacka

By Carina Plath, Curator at the Sprengel Museum, Hanover, 2021. Translated from German by Camila McHugh.

When in good humor,
Give grass its green
Blazon sky blue, and endow the sun
With gold;
Yet, in my wintriest moods, I hold
Absolute power
To boycott color and forbid any flower
To be.

Sylvia Plath, Soliloquy of the Solipsist, 1956

If Agata Bogacka's abstraction recalls at first painting from the 1920s or the 1950s, a closer look reveals details foreign to the ethos of these earlier generations: underpainting left visible, geometric outlines not fully painted in, a sense of a flaw in the system. And a creeping colour – sometimes subtle, sometimes saturated – that strikes a range of tones, from pale green to violet to glowing red. She applies thinned acrylic to her plasterprimed canvases in a range of techniques varying from impasto surfaces textured with bits of pigment to hardedge, taped-off shapes, from blocks rendered in broad strokes to explosions of colour that appear like a lightly blown powder. Bogacka's abstraction is intuitive, leaving space for spontaneous composition. As such, her paintings reveal themselves as 21st century abstraction, where what is seemingly certain can quickly slip into something unpredictable.

Historically, the abstraction of 20th century Western Europe and North America has been seen as a kind of neutral, international language, while figurative painting is associated with historic specificity, as something locally-bound, narrative, emotional. The manifestos of the 1920s, the discourse surrounding the Darmstadt Talks in 1959 or the reception of the 'Neue Wilde' and the Bilderstreit of the 1980s, are a few notable examples of ideological discussions hinging on art's potential power. From an Eastern and Central European art historical perspective, however, these poles of abstraction and figuration are nearly inverted and are – post-breakdown of grand narratives and political systems – obscure if not obsolete.¹ While art and propaganda were previously closely intertwined, since 1989, if not earlier, it has become unclear which stands in for the other, what is a symbol for what or how to reconcile the relationship between art and state.

Similar to times of social and political unrest in the wake of Polish martial law, today, under the rule of the PiS government (in power since 2015) and the rise of nationalist, right-wing conservatism, contemporary art has once again come under fire for allegedly not representing the values of society. It has become a site of vehement polemics targeting minorities and people who think differently. So, how can an artist who works in this contemporary climate – an environment charged with renewed oppression of LGBTQ+ people and movements, ongoing discrimination against women and the labelling of protests as radical left – paint something that feels relevant? Or is this question of art's relevance merely a misunderstanding of its role as a sounding board for society, like a repetition of socialism's demands rehashed by a democratic society, ultimately rendering art just as 'liable'?

Agata Bogacka herself gives a clue as to her position here by citing Henryk Streng's *Demonstration of Pictures* (1933) as an exhibition title. Held in the collection of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, the painting depicts a group of artists holding their paintings overhead, next to a man holding a megaphone. Their works depict fallen soldiers and other war scenes, and as such, ascribe political power to painting, in this case as a mode of protesting against the war or for what is right or just. As artists in Warsaw are once again demonstrating against the new abortion court ruling with paintings in tow, Bogacka made a connection to Streng's painting.²

In Bogacka's installation, *Demonstration of Pictures*,³ visual fragments of the protests are abstracted in video works that capture the red and white Polish flag waving against a blue sky, or protesters wearing rainbowcoloured clothing. It is significant that this movement adopted the red on black lightning bolt sign by designer Ola Jasionowska as its emblem. Jasionowska picks up on the universal character of the lightning bolt as a design that is as popular as it is catchy, and as such, gets caught in an ambivalent zone between red and black protofascist signs and something as open and malleable as the Women's Strike movement defines itself.⁴

To what extent, however, can an artistic position characterized by differentiation and a multiplicity of meaning like that of Bogacka take a clear political stance? By drawing current events into her exhibition, Bogacka broaches the possibility of art that is at once politically engaged and independent, a question which has been relevant for Polish artists since the 1990s.

The Grupa Ładnie, a group of architecture students from the Technological University of Krakow, which was active from 1996-

¹ For more on this idea, introduced superficially here, see Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*. Reaktion Books, London 2009.

² Conversation with the artist on 27.01.2021.

³ *Demonstration of Pictures*, Pola Magnetyczne, Warsaw, 01.10.-14.11.2020.

⁴ "I also wanted to create something universal that women could identify with regardless of their place of residence, character or expression," she said. The image is also meant as a symbol of caution. "Be careful, we warn you. We don't agree with women being deprived of their basic human rights." Right-wing commentators have noted, however, that the symbol can be read through the prism of Nazi ideology (the party used a lightning bolt as a logo for the Hitler Youth). A presenter on Polish national TV recently compared the pro-choice activists to the Nazi youth group. Responding to this, Jasionowska says that the logo has the opposite intention. "It was created for the Polish women's strike, whose views are extremely opposed to any fascist behaviour," she says. According to Sebastian Cichocki, Deputy Director and Chief Curator at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, the cultural entanglement of the demonstrations are as popular as they are diverse. "This is a different kind of protest, throngs of angry young people use simple cardboard signs with slogans," he says, noting that the symbol has been adopted by groups such as Extinction Rebellion, Antifa and even football fans who are present at the demonstrations. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/what-s-behind-the-red-lightning-bolt-the-main-symbol-of-poland-s-pro-choice-marches>

2001, is a significant example of this dynamic.⁵ In protest against the traditional academic art world and what they found to be its ridiculous codes of conduct, and in response to the proliferation of media at the time, the group published fanzines, dealt artworks and painted emphatically 'banal' paintings. Their attitude was one of extreme distrust of the circulation of easily-packaged narratives and art histories, prompting them to create their own images to reflect the times. As such, the group drew on Pop Art strategies – they were also deemed representatives of 'Popbanality' – in a self-reflectively ironic stance, being the first generation of artists who no longer had to leave Poland to find recognition and success as the country began to open up. Wilhelm Sasnal's *Everyday life in Poland 1999-2001* (2001), a comic with an enclosed cassette tape that has now attained cult status, perfectly demonstrates this kind of practice. A sense of relativism, which Grupa Ładnie, and in particular, its founding member Wilhelm Sasnal, took to the extreme by almost dissolving the connection between the signified and signifier, has become something of a tenet of Polish art.⁶ This posture was spurred by the globalization of art in the 1990s, as well as a general sense of uncertainty as an era of 'grand narratives' had come to an end. This environment produced art with something essentially transient about it, as if by holding on to a state of relativity, art could easily adapt and react to a changing society.

Bogacka's practice can be understood in this lineage, but she has recently started working with another inheritance: that of abstract painting, with all its values and tradition. By working with error as a technique – what was referred to as 'pentimento', from the Italian to repent, in earlier times – and tolerating and including mistakes, she gets at the way in which what is in the wrong system cannot (any longer/ever again) be right. In this way, she also responds to the current political climate and specifically her position as a female painter, forming a bridge to the anti-authoritarian Krakow group of the previous generation.

Bogacka questions, and as such, subtly undermines, the status quo by way of an openness that can respond spontaneously to the everyday. Her paintings continually manage to surprise, whether through their freshness, a haphazard overpainting of boundaries or the liberated status of supposed mistakes. Similarly, her palette is only antiquated on a superficial level. Atop a beige or linen background, as in the *Relationships* series, the paintings' colourfulness conjures a sense of vintage attractiveness, rendering them approachable, like something personal with its own individuality.

The portrait format and the form of the head seem to have guided Bogacka's step from graphic and popish, figurative realism to abstraction. Initially conceived of in portrait format, she tipped paintings with the depiction of a head, such as *Portrait Composition 2*, on its side, a rotation à la Baselitz, so that the image becomes abstract. The portrait transforms into something non-figurative and freed from discernible attributions. This gesture was not a one-off but rather an action that developed between 2017 and 2019 across several groups of works. Initially, the titles of the works such as *Relationships*, *Opposition*, *Negotiations*, *Expectations* and *Promises* situated the works as relationships, as the paintings shifted between the concrete or personal and abstract forms. In the 2017 painting *Negotiations*, a half-oval atop a half circle still bears some resemblance to a head with a covering, as on one hand, the title draws out a tension between forms which are not fully fleshed out, and on the other hand, a broader negotiation between the abstract and the figurative. *Head in Clouds 1* (2018) clarifies this question in an almost naive, radiant light blue, as the title transports the work at once to the giddiness of new love, while also suggesting a perspective from a great height.

Horizontally-oriented and nearly square paintings became Bogacka's subsequent field of experimentation. In an astonishing short and very productive period of time, she found a zone in which she can create surprisingly open and simultaneously consistent paintings. The artist, trained as a graphic designer, painted herself free from any prescriptive subject matter and her previous focus on representation of the female body, which some critics tried to demand she return to in a questionable insinuation that the female painter is better off painting the female body. She addressed this dynamic explicitly in an Instagram post in which she shared *Legs*, a painting from 2018 that depicts a woman's legs and abdomen, alongside a caption that transformed the painting into a protest image. Similarly, the rainbow colours of *Equality Dream* (2019) take a stance against virulent homophobia.

On a technical level, the painter now works with open planes and highly diluted acrylic paints that imbue her paintings with an airy lightness. This new direction, alongside a vibrant palette of reds and blues, lends her works a kind of liberating breath and light transparency. In *Relationship 11* (2020), block-like swathes of colour that fade gradually to a lighter hue are arranged around an empty centre of un-primed canvas. Abstraction seems to indicate its own sense of freedom here by referring both to the background and its continuation, thus remaining temporally open towards both the past and the future. This group of work sets a kind of provisionality in motion, as one work connects to the next, like a sequence of pictorial forms continuing by osmosis. The relationships between the paintings enacted by the exhibition's spatial constellations are just as dynamic. In the exhibition this provisional dimension is emphasised by way of the mentioned protest videos, which demonstrate abstraction at a high level via cutting and cropping. In the video, the waving red and white Polish flag becomes two moving blocks of colour, visually approximating the artist's paintings and anchoring them to lived experience.

At the same time, surface and materiality are also of particular significance in Bogacka's solid and skilfully rendered paintings. In this way, her paintings recall those of Constructivist artists of the classical avant-garde, which, from today's perspective, as hand-painted icons, demonstrate a historically grown and hand-crafted materiality. *Black Square* (1915) by Kazimir Malevich is nowadays no less impressive for its radical abstraction, which must be understood in its historical context, as for the craquelure of black painted matter or the yellowing photographs of the work staged in the artist's studio. His characterization of his paintings as 'deserts of pure sensation' defines abstraction as perception made concrete. Rather than the experiences of nature that inspired the Romantic sublime, here, the experience of an elevated sensitivity is conjured instead.⁷ "Suprematist aesthetics opens up a "phenomenal world" free from all conceptualism and therefore no longer capable of being grasped intellectually, (...) whereby man moves from the dead Object-World to living experience, from the essence of things to their surface, from the

5 Its members were Rafał Bujnowski (b. 1974), Marek Firek (b. 1958), Józef Tomczyk "Kurosawa" (1941-2006), Marcin Maciejowski (b. 1974) and Wilhelm Sasnal (b. 1972).

6 I elaborated on this extreme tension at the edge of the loss of the relation of signifier and signified in my text on Wilhelm Sasnal. See Mościce in: Carina Plath, Beatrix Ruf (eds.), *Wilhelm Sasnal: Night Day Night*. Ausst.-Kat. Kunsthalle Zürich, Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster 2002, pp. 9-16.

7 See the outstanding essay by Felix Philipp Ingold, "Welt und Bild. On the Justification of Suprematist Aesthetics in Kazimir Malevič." In: *What is an Image?* Ed. Gottfried Boehm. Munich: Fink, 1994, pp. 367-407.

reason produced by the process of civilization to the corporeality and sensuality displaced by the process of civilization, in short - to a "life in the light".⁸ And thus art declared its autonomy, in political terms still serving the ideological superstructure, but at the same time, maintaining an inherent power.⁹

For Agata Bogacka, painting abstractly today, after figuration seemed to no longer serve her, is also a refusal of immediacy in communication. She retreats from the noise to create paintings that are instead concentrated and inward looking. In so doing, she taps into a liberating space beyond the pressures of opinion, pointing the viewer to both the boundaries and possibilities of her own perception, unencumbered by concrete references. Bogacka does not cite histories of abstraction per se, filtering her own thoughts and emotions through the physicality of painting and the materiality of paint.¹⁰ Similarly, she conceives of her groups of paintings within the framework of an overarching statement – something like a concept album – as the connection between works (and potential works) continues to change and develop. As this text is being written, these relationships continue to fluctuate, evolving by way of new groups of work and approaches to the painted canvas.

A text on Bogacka's work is therefore as much a snapshot as the works themselves. Now, they seem at once as fragile as life, and on trend, with the colour of light green now popular in the fashion world as sign of hope for new beginnings after the Covid-19 Pandemic. The paintings are more optimistic than the reality of life in Poland seems to call for at the moment, and they advocate for a retreat into a quiet happiness, like the small delight of walking barefoot in a garden – cool morning dew underfoot, sending a slight shiver through the body – and the joy, the sense of wonder, that this still exists.

8 Ebda, S. 405.

9 It is interesting to consider in connection with Bogacka that in Malevich's earlier works, he replaced the head or chest of a human figure with small black squares, thus also working with a close connection between the human figure and abstraction. Ibid, p. 378f.

10 Theo van Doesburg's concept of concrete art, which the art historian Max Imdahl drew upon when developing his methodology of "the Iconic", could be useful here. In contrast to Mondrian's abstraction, where landscapes are reduced to the vertical and horizontal, the concrete artist created a world from the first stroke, which is not derived from the living world, but rather stands parallel to it.