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WHAT THE POLISH MOTHER DOES NOT SAY
ZBYLUT GRZYWACZ AGAINST THE MYTH

A reunion of Zbylut Grzywacz's works in a spring 2009 exhibition at the National Museum in Kraków, first after his death, was exceptional.¹ Well-known works next to dozens of paintings shown to a broader audience for the first time revealed the content that had remained on the margins of interpretation, or had even gone unnoticed hitherto. The surprising and creative way of arranging the exhibition produced a remarkable effect. It stimulated not only a deeper reflection on topics previously raised by art critics but also challenged some of the prior diagnoses and posed new questions. It was particularly interesting that Grzywacz's output managed to defend itself from being tagged as art strictly related to the legacy of communist Poland. The exhibition attracted the attention of both those who do not remember those times and those who lived back then. To achieve this effect was challenging indeed and proves the inspirational role of the sponsors of the exhibition

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I wish to thank Ms Joanna Boniecka for granting me free access to paintings reproduced in this article.

¹ *Zbylut Grzywacz 1939–2004*, ed. Joanna Boniecka (Kraków: Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie, 2009); curator: Joanna Boniecka, scenario: Joanna Boniecka, Tadeusz Nyczek and Jacek Waltoś; arrangement: Wojciech Kopeć. All references to image reproductions use the numbering convention from this publication. Nearly 450 works were shown. They made a great impression on both artist's fans and critics. Many people, including the author, revised their views about the exhibited art works. According to Joanna Boniecka, between 12 March and 31 May 2009, the exhibition was visited by almost 10 thousand people ("Wstęp," in *Artysta wobec siebie i społeczeństwa—twórczość Zbyluta Grzywacza i jej konteksty*, ed. Joanna Boniecka (Kraków: Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie, 2010, 11).

concept. Similar aspects of the exhibition are naturally not reflected in the carefully edited catalogue containing a timeline of Grzywacz's life and work as well as memories and analytical articles.² This does not mean that a traditional approach had become outdated, but the showcase at the National Museum clearly opened up new possibilities.

The material form of the exhibition is fugitive by nature and does not fully translate into the information contained in the catalogue, and it largely governed the audience's attention. Therefore, before I move on to the point of this paper, let me offer a context of those properties of the exhibition that encouraged a generalized interpretation of the art in question that goes beyond its historical relevance. Especially when this art is considered socially involved and, at the same time, shocks with its "licentious physicality," which naturally links to Grzywacz's imaging of a Polish woman.

In a classical way, a chronological order was employed for monographic flashbacks, but it was remarkably dynamic owing to the manner of space organization. New contexts were created by multiplying thematic and formal themes. They were made "dense," e.g. the images from the *Beef* cycle formed a narrow, two-level "corridor," through which the persistently obtrusive, bloody and aggressive red imposed itself on the viewers from above. It intensified a sense of oppression or being overwhelmed with cruelty. Skinned and mutilated animal carcasses should be dead and, yet, they are alive. No one in the canvas-filled space has any pity for them. The sensitivity of the audience, and not only of vegetarians (and there is no touch of irony in it), was put to the test.³

Analogous, narrowed (along a corridor) but relatively low hanging cycle, *Graphomanias*, forced the viewer to stoop and bring the eye closer to freely follow the intricate dash and varied gentleness of the line. Elsewhere, the space containing paintings of one series seemed to yield to the presented

² Although the volume significantly supplements the existing knowledge about the artist, still there is a peculiar gap that opened up between its texts and the actual exhibition, some kind of a significant disparity. The catalogue as a whole sets Grzywacz's works and axiological attitude towards the reality of communist Poland in a framework imposed by critics during the artist's life. The exhibition, however, went far beyond it.

³ As a meeting of Rembrandt's ox carcass in the vicinity of mass production of Dutch still lives from a kitchen backroom. Such where on the tables you do not have fine courses or leftovers but tons of meat at various stages of cutting and processing alluded to in the master's work. Remaining on the boundary between the memory of a living animal, life practice and the tradition of manifesting wealth and abundance, Rembrandt talks about cruelty and imperceptible forms of masking it in art forms, which can be identified if you know the context of the favourite genres of his epoch.

topic. Fragments of nudes from the *Puzzle* drawing cycle, occupying entire painting surfaces, “force” the viewer automatically to search for further elements of the subconsciously expected whole. It may have been the architecture of the building that forced the scattering of the works across a free space (as if around the viewer) and the necessity of passing them by on the stairs, yet their placement just at this point of the exhibition was disturbing because it made it difficult for the viewer to put the whole pieces of the nude together. In these oils, Grzywacz depicts the female body and the softness of its curves with exceptional subtlety. However, the oxymoronic juxtaposition of smooth skin with the fragmentary character of the figure reveals the brutal ambiguity of related phrases expressing the act of “cutting the canvas,” “cutting the painted nude” and “quartering the body.”

The exhibition was accompanied by a conference attended by researchers representing several generations (from 1921 through 1986).⁴ This article is intended to seek parallels with the texts of the volume. I aim to reflect on one, in a sense “prepared” aspect of Grzywacz’s output while being aware of his links to other themes and formal solutions. I do not aspire to make it part of the broad spectrum of analysis of the artist’s work. I will only discuss the nature of the ambivalence of mutual relationships and denials of the “feeding mother” from Grzywacz’s paintings and drawings and the topos of the Polish Mother, or, more broadly, Polonia.⁵ This article discusses paintings from the 1970s and 1980s. The sculptural, or rather relief (plaster) series of female figures from the 1960s, although linking to the later painting works, are immersed in a different context and in a different character of the story of transitoriness. What is important here, however, is the way the painter thinks about the form of the female body: from sculpture (even though based on the

⁴ *Artysta wobec siebie i społeczeństwa*. Introductory remarks in several articles also emphasize how the audience was captivated by the exhibition. Some images were freed from their narrow historical context, some not. The inseparability of thinking about nature and history was highlighted: the history which is as much the history of human existence as of existence of matter. In view of the artist’s death, the issue of diversity of his roles cannot be ignored that become visible retrospectively. On the margin, there are also difficult-to-describe (because any theoretical model is out of question here) relationships between the artist’s biography and his output which combines the artist’s multidimensional self-portrait that goes far beyond literally understood self-image. Małgorzata Kitowska-Łysiak’s was confirmed that the power of these images would also prove attractive to the young generation who was not familiar with the time in which they had been created (“Pomiędzy ‘realnością’ świata i ‘realizmem’ dzieła sztuki. Grupa ‘Wprost’—konteksty,” in *Świat przedstawiony? O grupie „Wprost”*, selected, compiled and introduced by Małgorzata Kitowska-Łysiak (Lublin: TN KUL, 2006), 11).

⁵ See Dorota KUDELSKA, *Dukt pisma i pędzla. Biografia intelektualna Jacka Malczewskiego* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2008), 409–411, 426, 427, 510, 588, 600–601.

destruction of form) to the painting corporeality on the verge of sharp hyper-realism. This fleshy and robust form of bodies with perfectly captured proportions and the perceptible weight of mass in motion and inertia of immotion is like the fulfilment of Jacek Malczewski's dreams. The professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków understood that great art and rescue from decorativeness, which he considered the curse of figural painting, is in embedding figures in sculpture and in respect for drawing skills.

Zbylut Grzywacz would repeatedly delve into complicated interpretations of great masters' paintings. It was his way to outline the horizons of his own art. Not only did he study the history of painting in museums (technology and iconography) but was also qualified in professional analysis thanks to his extensive interests and reading.⁶ Equipped with knowledge and endowed with painter's sensitivity, he was also able to write great about individual works and trace convoluted transformations in the development of painting over long time sequences. All this surfaces from his own published texts and interviews.⁷ For those researching Grzywacz's work, no less important—and not only when considering the artist's contact with reality and art—is full access to his unpublished sketchbooks, notes and rarely reproduced calendars (where the artist kept posting painting sketches and notes). In this case, the content and the way they are managed significantly define the artist's self-portrait understood as an image of conscious and unconscious contact with reality through work. All the more so if we are confronted with an artist who was proactive in shaping his own image.⁸ His authorial "I"—along with

⁶ Rooted in old painting is already visible at the level of composition and iconography in such paintings as: *Woman Lying* (the *Spring* cycle)—Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of Dead Christ in the Tomb*; *The Woman Forlorn VIII*—George de La Tour, *Magdalena with the Smoking Flame* (with a skull). On relations with the historical sequence of transformation of the motif of *stages of woman's life* (from the Middle Ages to Klimt's *Frieze of Life*) relative to Grzywacz's *Queue (Seven Stages of Woman's Life)*, see Joanna BONIECKA ("Zbyluta Grzywacza rozmowa z mistrzami na przykładzie obrazu 'Kolejka (Siedem etapów z życia kobiety)'," in EADEM, *Zbylut Grzywacz 1939–2004* (Kraków: Muzeum Narodowe, 2009) 307–325). It is an adjusted and supplemented version of the text published in *Wielkie dzieła wielkie interpretacje*, ed. Maria Poprzęcka (Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki, 2007).

⁷ Of note is his not signed foreword to the catalogue of his own exhibition—[Zbylut Grzywacz], "Wstęp," in *Zbylut Grzywacz. Malarstwo* (Zamek Książąt Pomorskich, Szczecin: Galeria Osobliwości „Este”. Kraków, 1998), reprint in *Zbylut Grzywacz 1938–2004*, 35–36.

⁸ Recently published *Memlary* (Zbylut GRZYWACZ, *Memlary i inne teksty przy życiu i sztuce*, selected, compiled and edited by Tadeusz Nyczek (Kraków: Universitas, 2010)) were partly prepared by the painter himself (he selected parts of his memoirs for publication). Naturally, the editor also took into account the publication of the text, and therefore the likelihood of violating the privacy and beliefs of the artist's relatives, and controversial assessment of the artistic circles,

private aspects materializing in his works—is, after all, a filter of contact with the outside world which creates and lends shape to paintings, drawings and sculptures. The artist's ways of experiencing community or alienation of various kinds, e.g. national, emotional or personal (with people or objects), as well as intellectual, affect his themes in different ways. Less conspicuously, they also allude to the physical nature of form. The shape of existence of the painting matter, and of the matter of corporeality in it (understood more broadly than just sexuality) is, as it is known, of importance for the artist's considerations about "woman." Inside his canvases, the relationships between shapes and colours sometimes challenging the obviousness of first impressions governed by iconographic patterns.⁹

Fatigued women from Grzywacz's paintings of the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. from the *Beef* and *Forlorn* cycle) can be described as a diagnosis of the situation of women in communist Poland rewritten into many characters and allusive forms. This, however, is a narrow interpretation. Paradoxically, a point of exit for having a broader look at it is the historical context, which is also behind the aforesaid limited interpretation. For it can be understood as ad hoc intervention or, more broadly, as a conversation with the forms and content of culture *topi*, and here we have the figure of the Polish Mother and Polonia. They are both, of course, naturally associated with other threads of the traditional forms of female presence in public discourse. In its native variant, as mentioned elsewhere, the node is a woman as an embodiment of statehood and/or nation. The combined ideological forces of these creations are one of the founding myths of the nation as an imagined community.¹⁰ The literary mother conveys Polishness in an intimate context and

etc. The lack of opportunity to reflect on all the available material and a certain time distance should not lead to hasty conclusions.

⁹ On the importance of careful observation of painting matter and physicality of objects in Grzywacz's paintings, see Wojciech BALUS, "Pomoc Zbulyta Grzywacza. Albo o metaforze i metonimii w 'czasie marnym'," in *Artysta wobec siebie i społeczeństwa*, 205–218.

¹⁰ See, for example, on literary references: Jan PROKOP, "Kobieta Polka," in *Słownik literatury polskiej XIX wieku*, ed. Józef Bachórz, Alina Kowalczykova (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1991), 414–417; on the nationally mythologizing reception distorting the meaning of Mickiewicz's *Do Matki Polki*, see Jan WALC, *Architekt Arki* (Chotomów: Verba, 1991), 128–130; Maria JANION, *Kobiety i duch inności* (Warszawa: Sic!, 1996); idem *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna. Fantazmaty literatury* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006) (especially the chapter, "Polonia powielona"); Elżbieta OSTROWSKA, "Matki polki i ich synowie. Kilka uwag o genezie obrazów kobiecości i męskości w kulturze polskiej," in *Gender. Konteksty*, ed. Małgorzata Radkiewicz (Kraków: Rabid, 2004); on the forms of female existence in the socio-cultural space: Sławomira WALCZEWSKA, *Damy, rycerze i feministki. Kobięcy dyskurs emancypacyjny w Polsce* (Kraków: eFKa, 1999); on the nation as an imagined community: Edward SAID, *Orientalizm* (Warszawa: PIW,

protects the custom. The woman makes sacrifices (as a mother, wife, daughter for her son, father, husband). As a Polish woman, she is not torn internally between the duty and the voice of the heart—for her this is one thing: homeland (hence she is a rather one-dimensional character psychologically). She is also a brave and mentally strong woman; she accepts sacrifice and hardships, at the same time being an Angel of Relief for men (basically, she has no chance of taking care of her adult daughters—she bids farewell to her sons going to war and weeps over their fate); she can also provide for the family. The women of Romanticism, outside the salon, are by no means “down sleazy”—they are brave, often display attributes that their associates do not have; unlike others, they can sacrifice themselves for people (such as Mickiewicz’s Aldona) while male heroes do it only for ideas.¹¹ In iconography, emotional nuances are less subtle and give way to the motifs of victim and surrender to violence. Women in the scenes of farewells with insurgents or exiles to Siberia are beautiful and young or behave with the dignity of a matron. Despite changing fashions, they are mostly shown in dark outfit. After 1863, they show off black jewellery, a symbol of the weapon of Polishness (as in Matejko). Later, as social attitudes evolved, Polish women were often portrayed accompanied by children to whom, as it was reflected in the literature, they hand over their native customs as well as offering education to ordinary people (a positivist motif). Certainly, Polishness in the 19th-century ethos is shouldered by women representing the nobility or intelligentsia (a similar pedigree back then) or an indefinite middle class (as the women on protest in Grottger’s cycles).¹²

In Grzywacz’s paintings, women face the sketched pattern of the patriotic myth and the pattern of the nude. In both of them, the figure’s attributes are vital (age, type of beauty, dress, way of being dressed, move, relations with men, etc.) This is where the most important feature of Grzywacz’s work becomes conspicuous: the brutalization of forms, i.e. the figure’s appearance and behaviour, and the uncompromising tale of various stages of body

1991); Roman WAPIŃSKI, *Polska na styku narodów i kultur. W kręgu przeobrażeń narodowościowych i cywilizacyjnych w XIX i XX wieku* (Gdańsk: Stepan Design, 2002).

¹¹ See Maria Cieśla-Korytowska’s paper delivered at the session devoted to: “Hic mulier? O męźnych kobietach romantyzmu,” in *Persefona, czyli dwie strony rzeczywistości*, ed. Maria Cieśla-Korytowska, Małgorzata Sokalska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 2010), 321–246.

¹² In the process of evolution or expansion of the scope of the concept, World War II marks a major breakthrough due to the change in the nature of oppression suffered by Poles (mass deportations into the Soviet Union, German and Soviet concentration camps). It involved iconographic changes and often aesthetic degradation, which I will leave without a comment.

destruction. Stories about the life of the matter are distressingly connected with the symbolic aspect (as in *Orants* or famous *Queue*) which saves the meaning of human existence (or maybe only women?), yet not fully unambiguously.

In an academic nude, there is basically no personal attitude towards the model as in the classic portrait which involves the psychological portrayal of the figure. In Grzywacz's works, many the so-called studio paintings with models resemble portrait images, also in nudes. It does not follow, however, that his approach questioning conventions strives for realistic objectivity. Rejected idealization is replaced by the naturalistic principle of selecting specific elements of reality deprived of beauty and difficult. The female figures are similar in terms of the body structure, have no charm regardless of age, are always slightly obese, with their feet and knees awkwardly inwards. They present an "anti-beauty" type of the body. That it was the conscious choice of the artist, who feared the imposition of the form, is evidenced by the variety of representation methods and features of the construction of female figures in sketches and genre-pure oil portraits. Here, they are more subtle, almost always slimmer, showing different gestures and behaviours and stylistic types. This is also seen in the few portraits presented at the exhibition and placed in the catalogue only for review.

In the so-called socially engaged paintings from the 1960s and 1970s and from the years 1980-1981, Grzywacz's women have next to no dignity or noble simplicity. Carelessly dressed in line with the trashy contemporary fashion, sloppy, always tired. Nobody knows for whom they want to do their best. It is characteristic that there are no children in this world; there are only men standing in lines or packed in a grey mass, or workers in helmets involved in political agitation at a different level of commitment. Hence, women try to do their best either for men or for an unspecified part of the nation (white and red, together and separately, can be seen in many canvas, their symbolism being uncertain). To what extent does their striving have to do with a desire to maintain Polishness and national sovereignty?

We know little about their work, everyday routines, interests, or sensitivity because the artist often shows them through nudity only with the repetitive motif of an imprint of elastic band panties on skin, unless the interpretation is suggested by the title (*Magdalenas* from the *Forlorn* cycles). The figures in the *Forlorn* cycles are women from Grzywacz's other paintings. These paintings, like many others, sometimes make unconventional references to religious motifs. The abused women are not converted Magdalenas, at most they rest tired as if in a drunk sleep [*Woman Forlorn XI* (according

to *Caravaggio*), cat. 199, fig. 1]. Meanwhile, within the classical repertoire of Polish female iconography, a comparison to the biblical wanton is out of question. The Polish woman never falls of her own fault, "...she has always been immaculate Polishness: she does not have to purify herself in order to transform into an angel ["convert" to Polishness, like Gustaw-Konrad, Kordian, Sopllica or Kmicic—D.K.]. Always cut out from one block, the Polish woman almost never happens to be a fallen woman like Dumas's *La Dame aux Camélias*.¹³ Grzywacz makes you ponder upon the existential (and social) situation of women who cannot be called ladies.

In *Women Forlorn*, naked women, lying on the pavement and ignored by grey people in trench coats, try to grab male passers-by by the legs [*Women Forlorn IV (Blue Sky)*, cat. 177, fig. 2]. Rarely, but there are also Grzywacz's partings without a male figure departing, for example *Women Forlorn VIII* [cat. 185, fig. 3]. Anyway, it is hard to tell whether the grey, half-seen (on the frame border) woman walking with shopping bags is more on the side of life than the naked one sitting on the ground. The flesh-coloured tone of the seated woman is linked with a gesture and an abstract colourful strip with the uniform-shaded sky breaking the greyness of the line of houses. In the grey colour shrouding everyday life there is no life that only awakes in the colour that reflects the immateriality of the figure's existence.

Even if the parting of the mysterious characters is witnessed by the spectre passers-by, they do not notice the moving scenes. The reasons for these tragedies are not fully defined; references to religion are only one of the possible interpretations. In the human dimension, can it be death, sacrifice for an idea or leaving for another woman? Exposure in the city space makes the image figures vulnerable (their physical and mental intimacy is exposed to the public view) and also makes the universal dimension the most important: the indifference of passers-by to the ongoing tragedy. Being forlorn concerns only women but not only in public places. However, scenes in which the interior characterizes a character and existing situation in a traditional way, e.g. inside a house, are definitely rare. Naked *Woman Forlorn X (In the kitchen)* clearly introduces the notion of voyeurism [cat. 198]. It is also one of the few (if not the only?) paintings in which the narrative realism of the scene enters into a dialogue with abstract painting hung in the centre of the kitchen mess.¹⁴

¹³ PROKOP, "Kobieta," 415.

¹⁴ See a very interesting publication by Marek MAKSYM CZAK, "Namalować ciało. O przedstawieniach 'Opuszczonych' Zbyluta Grzywacza" (in *Artysta wobec siebie i społeczeństwa*, 135–147) which uncovers the stylistic duality of this image (and others within the series).

The women in these paintings do not enjoy life, do not make friends with other women or men, are not impressed by the lures of the world. We do not know if they are energetic, smart, sensitive, nonchalant or original in their choices.¹⁵ It is hardly possible to define their relationship with historical everyday life, so different from the kitchen and queue routine that they yield to for one reason or another. Unlike men, they do not act as agitators and do not work for a “cause.” In this aspect, they are similar to their 19th-century predecessors, with Emilia Plater being only an exception that proves the rule. There is a constant separation of the spheres into a female one—entangled in materiality and related to privacy—and a male one—public, i.e. essential for the world and revolving around ideas.

In fact, in the world of Grzywacz’s paintings from the 1970s and 1980s, women can be said to be representatives of the species—their biological affiliation seems to come to the fore. Their sensuality is defined by mass, weight and destruction of the body. Their life activity is limited to getting food; they also happen to be abandoned lovers. A woman associated with the cultural requirements of such roles (a kind of “servant of survival”) is not graceful, nor is she tender for anyone. However, an emotionally lonely woman also reveals a specific, persistent and sometimes predatory desire to survive.

Given that (it is historically obvious for those who lived in those times consciously) during the “middle and late Polish People’s Republic,” basically everybody would queue for everything, and especially women would, it should also be borne in mind that the queuing torture had many faces. Some were more concerned about the shortage of goods, some complained more about their quality, and still others struggled with fatigue, uncertainty, or crowd. Some gave away their meat ration stamps or tried to stay away from that reality despite everything; others would discuss their shopping trophies on and on. And I do not mean those who were queueing in front of bookstores: they are not present in Grzywacz’s world.¹⁶ Grzywacz’s characters—constantly busy with securing provisions, neglected, middle-aged, even very modest, or shown in humiliation—do not have good taste or no class of iconographic models of Polish women representing the endurance and dignity of the nation. However, next to ordinary products, they sometimes carry

¹⁵ Such features exist in portraits.

¹⁶ It should be noted here that the theme and rebelliousness of the mood of Grzywacz’s paintings correspond to the poems by Stanisław BARAŃCZAK, *Dojść do lady. Wiersze nabywcze*. The mentality of their characters can also be frightening.

human skulls in their bags. The strength of this *vanitas* motif can relate to their own existential “life baggage” as well as to the recipients of the everyday and hard-to-acquire items. That dramatic clash of meanings is both lofty and pathetic.

It would be a simplification to say that the mental reaction to the terrifying greyness of subordination, broken with the bloody red lumps of meat, was shaped only by the actions of authorities. The man spread between the banner sticks is exhausted but, at the same time, he stretches canvas tense [cat. fig. 155]. The grotesque employed to describe the woman’s situation and characteristics rests its devastating strength on at least two elements: on what it does and what it looks like. First of all, housewife’s chores and duties and very mundane problems were elevated to the public, lofty context, which ridicules this encounter of ideas. The quality of the stallion in *Frenzy* (according to *W. Podkowiński’s Frenzy of Exultations*) [cat. 117] corresponds to the mentality and poor knowledge of the sources of tradition by the ecstatic figure. The ludic component clashing with the authority of the myth diminishes its rank. The meanings in *Abduction of Europa* [cat. 118] are juxtaposed in a similar ironic manner. *Ursus* (according to *Quo Vadis* by Henryk Sienkiewicz), just as with the novel, also holds a dialogue with the well-established paragon of beauty (both the woman and the bull) in Siemiradzki’s *Christian Dirce*.

From the 1960s until the times of the Solidarity movement, the artist, repeatedly and in various forms, supported the opposition against the system and authorities (also as a source of absurdity in the official forms of organization of the artistic circles). Perhaps the assumption not made *expressis verbis* in artistic criticism has its source here since the “opponent” (acting against the nation and freedom) is defined, a positive assessment of compatriots suffering from political oppression is obvious. However, a strive for generalization and universalization, which are undoubtedly very important in these paintings, suppress such a simple ambiguity of assessment.¹⁷ The artist’s life aversion to the ruling authorities cannot translate directly into full approval of the way of life and behaviour of his fellow citizens who are also subjected to the “dictatorship of the dumb.” Images tend to be more complicated

¹⁷ I think that there is a level of such interpretation also in relation to works from the *Man without Quality* cycles or installations from the 1970s [cat. 163]. Historically, there is some physical similarity to the communist party leader Gomułka, to the “type” of a party apparatchik, also using the relevant arrangement of props. Generalization, at that stage of the artist’s work, comes, among other things, from the sustained absence of any sign of disagreement to the existing reality, apart from making it more “dreadful.”

than political declarations. The artist does not like his characters degraded to “meat” imagination.¹⁸

A Polish woman in Grzywacz’s paintings dwells in urban space but in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.¹⁹ This is a fundamental change compared with the stereotype mentioned above where the natural environment for a woman representing Poland was the court or sometimes the palace (this distinction is important as an indication of the habitat of national traditions). In the discussed paintings, the barred sky borrows colour both from propaganda posters and the *Trybuna Ludu* communist daily, which alludes to the symbolic colour of the system, and from the cut carcasses of the *Beef* cycles. The sky and meat, so craved by the inhabitants of this land, originate in the same point in the author’s colour palette. It is a horizon of dreams and aspirations, not necessarily imposed by hostile forces. Such a mentality, like the ageing of the body, helplessness in the face of fate, succession (from the perspective of the individual) and simultaneity (from the perspective of the community) of childhood, youth, maturity and old age coexist regardless of any political background. Thus, national myths, subjected to oppression “from the outside and from the inside,” attempt to find a new place because the city becomes a representative space for the collective.

In Grzywacz’s urban world, architecture is made up of ugly houses with peeling walls, which is a testimony of communist Poland’s mediocrity misery and negligence of the present towards history. But there are also places where façades painted halfway up strike with artificiality of theatrical decorations. There are also houses that scare with hollow window openings or gates leading to nowhere, or rather to some vast emptiness [*House and Heaps*, cat. 105]. This is especially striking in the *Silesia* cycles.²⁰ These

¹⁸ See Elżbieta MORAWIEC, “AntyArkadia Zbyluta Grzywacza,” in *Malarstwo* [Zbylut Grzywacz’s exhibition catalogue], Galeria 37,2 (Radom: KMPiK, 1980), non-numbered sheet 1, reprint in *Świat przedstawiony?*, 165-168. The publication date counters the potential argument that the author of the opinion was not familiar with the most important, as some believe, political context of the discussed images.

¹⁹ Earlier (the *Graphomanias* cycles) and later, from the 1980s, she can also be seen outdoors. I also consider the artist’s studio as part of the urban space.

²⁰ Katowice is an important and quite mysterious location in Grzywacz’s biography and on his map of artistic meetings with pure art and life necessities. As he recalled, he started to make so much money on interior design in public buildings that it threatened his artistic development. That is why he abandoned lucrative contracts. In his private comments, Grzywacz clearly belittles that period of his life, which critics seem to pick up because there are no accounts on where and what he was actually doing in Katowice. Meanwhile, the only photograph in the catalogue showing his works of the time [cat. 47] shows an interesting, abstract wall decoration, very dif-

paintings can be said to expose the scale of landscape degradation by industry but, at the same time, they sharpen the poetics of absence (but not only here because images of Kraków's Kazimierz or Podgórze also show a similar description approach). Through architectural motifs, the artist depicts Silesia only as a degraded place. And the concept of "house" also covers the interior—literally (descriptively) and metaphorically (as warm feelings, care, safety, family, etc.). The Silesian "house" so understood is also intertwined with a beautiful tradition of sustaining Polishness.²¹ Grzywacz leaves the viewer in front of the façades; he refuses to invade privacy. He remains true to this principle also in his paintings of New York [*Manhattan (Baker Street)*, cat. 127] where the streets are deserted, and the industrial architecture, with hollow windows as in Poland, also creates a lifeless and off-putting environment. The relationship with the city as a people's natural environment in Grzywacz's paintings is therefore not founded exclusively on a reference to the political and state system.²²

After 1982 Grzywacz gradually departs from social issues. He wrote that his painting was increasingly becoming his private matter.²³ He was passing into his world of imagination. But to what extent had the world presented earlier been his world? To what extent and when does the artist actually allow us to peep into the world of his values?

The discussed area of artist's creativity also began to dwindle naturally. The woman remained one of the key subjects in his work, but the change of the pursued form of realism made Grzywacz review his attitude to the theme.

In the interview with Adam Czyżewski, the author anecdotally referred to his famous painting, *Queue. Seven Stages in Woman's Life* [cat. 280, fig. 4]²⁴

ferent from the artist's formal interests surfacing in other works. His geometric decorations add dynamics to the surface in an interesting fashion.

²¹ Indeed, when it comes to national identity, relations in Silesia are complicated, but I ignore this question because it does not seem relevant for the discussed set of paintings.

²² This undoubtedly deserves a broader discussion together with the forms of landscape presence in Grzywacz's paintings.

²³ Artist's statement in *Cóż po artyście w czasie marnym... Sztuka niezależna lat 80.* [Exhibition catalogue], ed. Małgorzata Kurasiak (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Galerii Zachęta, 1991), 26. It goes without saying that the sense of historical defeat during the 1981 martial law affected the painter. To the same extent, it is also very likely that an artistic soul does not easily tolerate seclusion and a forced total community of everyday life (with whom?). Traces of that existentially difficult situation (seclusion, loss of control over life, feelings of imagined community, a dense need to adapt) are scarce, at least in Grzywacz's well-known writings.

²⁴ "Malarstwo posiada swój język.' Ze Zbylutem Grzywaczem rozmawia Adam Czyżewski," in *Świat nieprzedstawiony?*, 138. The interview was recorded in 1985; it has not been published

as the monument to the Polish Mother. That repeatedly discussed monumental canvas is stylistically, at least when it comes to emphasizing the biological imperfection of the body, linked to the series mentioned above. However, its metaphorical character and the adopted method of dialogue with old art is clearly gazing in another direction of painting contact with reality.²⁵

A farewell with the discussed motif is also, to some extent, *Woman Lying* (from the *Spring '82* cycles [cat. 281, fig. 5]). The detail-rich Hopper-like realism imposed on Holbein's depressing composition of *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* serves a description of a dead woman lying on a shroud woven from cold, lead-like white paint. We do not see her face but, we do get to know the rest of her body with realistic detail. What makes her similar to other characters from Grzywacz's earlier paintings is the imprint of elastic band panties that reminds the viewer that she is not so much naked as undressed. Painter's attention and diligence devoted to corporeality put the reflection on who the figure was aside. Here death seems truer than life.

The fading shapes of idea are seen in the provocative *Design of the Monument to the Polish Mother* [cat. 284, fig. 6] made in pencil. An old, chunky woman with a sad and resigned face, captured in slightly turned to the left contrapposto, wears a dress made of a white and red flag. From the waist down, the colours create a straight, above-knee skirt; from the waist up, they cover the nude body while maintaining the proportional division of the cloth sides. On her left forearm, the woman carries a purse and a bag containing a human skull and some other items. Standing heavily on bare feet, he tilts slightly to the darkened side of the image corresponding to the red section of the flag. At the first glance, you can say that it is quite an avant-garde outfit. However, the mismatch between the original dress and the woman's character dispels the aforesaid impression. Similarly, the

to date. A detailed interpretation of this image is provided by Joanna Boniecka in the text, *Zbyluta Grzywacza rozmowa z mistrzami*.

²⁵ The artist says that a stimulus for making this painting was only the desire to deal uncompromisingly with the idea of General Jaruzelski who wanted to erect the Monument to the Polish Mother ("Malarstwo posiada swój język," 138). *Queue* was supposed to clearly demonstrate woman's biological dependencies and life burdens in a pitiless and naturalistic manner. The above-mentioned Boniecka's interpretation reveals shows a double bottom of this canvas: its autobiographical character, seemingly seen only in the characteristic glasses (the author's property) worn by the "woman" holding the child. Tadeusz Boruta pointed to a similar discrepancy (attributed to internal anxiety) between the artist's declarations and recurring sacred motifs ("Niepokorny ogrodnik sztuki," in *Świat nieprzedstawiony?*, 178, first print *Tygodnik Powszechny* 32 (2004), 14). Such peculiar gaps in painter's statements about his own art and his works and bios are definitely more.

exposed breasts of the older woman cannot be associated with the tradition of heroic nudity, so it is not easy to find vital energy of the nation's survival inside the figure with no internal power.

The symbolic painting of the naked body brings to mind some primeval customs and links back to tribal communities. This transition from an outfit that can be put on and taken off to a "second skin" reveals the ambiguity of the relationship of that particular woman (here not corresponding to the ideal appearance and behaviour expected from the topos) with objectification by the national community of identity. This potential monument oscillates on the verge of respect for and devaluation of the idea. This mixed matter entails uncertainty: to what extent this submission to the myth is internalized by women, and to what extent it is an external description responding to the requirements of everyday life and their true self-reflection. And if such doubts arise at all, the idea is lost. Either because the model no longer fits reality or because the contemporaries have not grown up to the ancestors' ethos. In the discussed drawing, but also in other Grzywacz's paintings with a similar type of composition, the latter reason seems to be more relevant. The set of artistic means employed and the loftiness of the theme (together with the seriousness of the representative nature of the monument) border on kitsch, but you cannot say that kitsch is the art of happiness in this case.

The last reference to the public discourse about Polish woman's female duties set in the social context is the *Go Away* cycles. Although to recognize one of the sources of limitations of her personal freedom is right, the monotonous and propaganda-like cursoriness of expression does not serve the artistic quality of the cycles.²⁶

In later paintings, the stories of women's loneliness also become the stories of men's solitude and of loneliness of the two [*Foil*, from the *Spring'82* series, cat. 213].²⁷ The relationship between the biological and predatory aspect of being as a dominant of the female element is seen both in the *Heads* and in *Erotics* cycles.

²⁶ Connection with the debate on amending the law on admissibility of abortion, which erupted in Poland in the 1990s, has only a purposefully simplified character here. As in some of the earlier paintings speaking against Gomułka's propaganda (especially those "quoting" propaganda materials, which the members of the Wprost group also did).

²⁷ The same "significance" of both corporealities was noted by Jacek Bomba ("Zbylut Grzywacz wobec kobiecości," in *Artysta wobec siebie i społeczeństwa*, 55).

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Grzywacz's manifested and radical rejection of "pretty" academic nude as a false reality turns not only against the soothing beauty of the myth of the Polish Mother or Polonia. It questions the reason for its existence in the modern world and, more intensely, shows how the message—regarded as one of the founding myths of the nation as an imagined community—destroys its bearers, even those unaware of its sources. Why, however, to paraphrase Joanna Boniecka's question on *Queues*, do women hardly accept this, in Boniecka's opinion, clearly humanistic message?²⁸

Woman gives life but it fails to safeguard *Orants* not only from the dramatic disintegration of the form but also from the uncertainty of meaning, and perhaps hopelessness of prayer. The story of existence, of the decay of the body as a material shape of time, and of the human pursuit of death, could be told using the stereotypes of male forms of presence in national myths. They are governed by the same false stereotypes anyway, and a provocative, veristic description of the ageing of a man with sagging muscles, weight gain and awkwardness—as countering the monumental heroism of a knight—could be equally moving.

I think that Grzywacz is more keen on deheroization of the myth (as he put it, "the fanfare idea of the Polish Mother"²⁹), on showing how much it does not work when confronted with everyday life, rather than on how this model is seen and received by women. By abandoning the ideological, academic "angeling," the author goes to the other extreme. He focuses on how women can be seen through this pattern. By falsifying all conventionally beautiful forms (academic ones, propaganda posters or advertisements for all goods, as in *Dolls*), he encloses a woman, as he put it, in biologicality, ugliness and dying,³⁰ which he conveys through the originally defined form of corporeality. Still, however, the form is in control, but one that is shaped differently. However, both these matrices are hollow on the inside.

If existing schemas do not tell the whole truth, then who are these Polish Mothers? If they are not as shown and shaped by the myth-building national community, then what do they think of themselves, how do they perceive and feel reality, how do they really exist in it, what is behind their suffering? Not only feminists would like to have answer even to such a simplified set

²⁸ Joanna Boniecka, "Zbyluta Grzywacza rozmowa z mistrzami," 322.

²⁹ "Malarstwo posiada swój język," 138.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 141.

of questions. However, this is not the best way to frame questions to Grzywacz's paintings.

Intrusive presence of the female element—the theme discussed here is only one of its ingredients—again brings us back to Tadeusz Boruta's observation. The bluntness and pictorial materiality covers a "crack" in the presented world, inside the multitude of Grzywacz's paintings so difficult to embrace today. When looking "behind" this layer of the main story, which is emphasized in all schematic biographical notes about the artist, we may perhaps find another "world not seen," a world in which the author constantly tells us about his painful existence without the anaesthesia of grotesque.

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WHAT THE POLISH MOTHER DOES NOT SAY
ZBYLUT GRZYWACZ AGAINST THE MYTH

Summary

The article presents the art of Zbylut Grzywacz in the context of his post-mortem exhibition in the Kraków National Museum in 2009. The subjects of the analysis are his paintings from the 1970s and 1980s, presenting women through a simple rough treatment of human body form, without an academic idealization. The destruction of the form conforms to the deconstruction of the myth of a Polish Mother. It is due to the change of a social position of the figures whom Grzywacz gives the roles of guardians of tradition, as well as due to their mental and moral degradation. The artist uses an irony in showing his knowledge of the tradition of showing a human body in an academic nude (what he denies), in a Flemish art of showing torn animal meat (with the Rembrandt's reflection) and Holbein's tradition of the post-mortem decay (*The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*). One of the main themes in Grzywacz's paintings is the loneliness, especially distinct in a representation of symbolically naked persons among insensible pedestrians. The Polish Mother—here she doesn't belong to any society.

The explicitness and the picturesque materiality covers a certain "crack" in the world presented inside the hard-to-comprehend present-day multitude of Grzywacz's paintings. Behind the cover of the foreground tale, as one could think on the basis of the sketchbooks, there is a kind of an "unpresented world", in which the author incessantly tells us about the pain of his existence with no anaesthetization by grotesque.

Key words: Zbylut Grzywacz; woman; Polish Mother—deconstruction of the myth; brutalization of the body form; Holbein; Rembrandt; communist Poland iconography.

Translated by Konrad Szulga



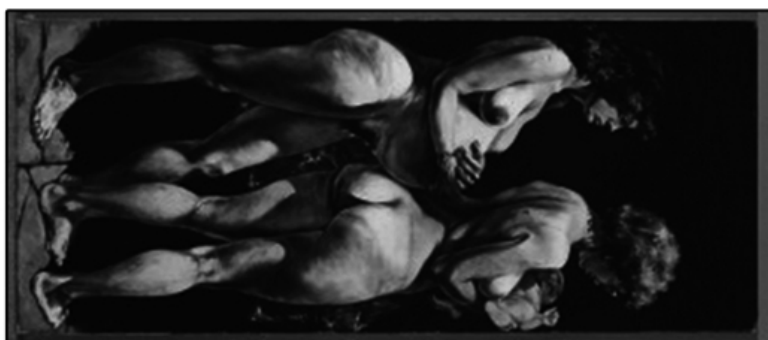
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