

**THE MYTH AND THE PERSON,
OR AN ARTIST IN THE BOUDOIRS AND VESTIBULES OF THE MEMORY**

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Our human memory consists in tracing and remembering our imaginations and, at the same time, in tempting our imagination skills. With them we can save what we have in excess or what's squandered. Irrespective of that fact, however, the very operation of saving carries certain contradiction and ambiguity: saving is, in effect, a conspiracy with mourning. We reach for an image in spite of it is – as contemporary phenomenology defines it – the nothingness of the object. What did happen cannot exist now. Culture is nothing more than the memory of all the texts and images – those experienced directly in life and those we experience in result of reading. If we tried, in this context, to include the multi-layered structure of Jacek Rykała's creation, we could say that on the basis of those experiences the artist articulates both the cognitive and celebrating aspect. The first one is an attempt of making topographical definitions and creating the significant elements of space and the sequences of time from memory. The other is their esthetical and conceptual celebration. Works made by this artist from Sosnowiec – what's also important – seem to have never been the realisation of any regionalist postulate, even though they correspond with certain climate and a 'spirit' of the place in which they had come to being. Rykała has never joined to any regional or local stream and the friendly inclinations resulting from it. His creation has never respected the dominants of what we call current artistic practices. Spiritually or rather identically, this creation has never been free from the specificity, unique fragrances and temperatures of the place, I mean of the region of Silesia, and in particular of Zagłębie coal basin. Just from his *topography* and *geography* comes the whole *mythography* of that space, which Rykała has consistently developed for the past three decades. Therefore, seemingly the point is only in the prefixes, I would say, of the metaphysical tensions within the area of what we call *graphy*. This semantic (not solely, however) collision is the supplement and the

development of the fact that the artist started the painting discourse commented by photography and printmaking, using the elements of the myth and the person to join them. The theme is as old as time and as vast as water. But can we step into the same river twice?

The place and space context in Rykała can be seen as early as in his first works he made just after his graduation. They, and also the cycle of *Benches* that came to being a bit later, show his almost organic receptivity and fascination with situations in which the artist's viewpoint is narrowed to some particular existential observations. In the case of *Benches* it's usually the loneliness of a man, who is inscribed into the margin of the space given to him. The bench – usually a meeting place – becomes in Rykała an area of breaking the communication with the world. It is the figure that symbolises the resignation and alienation of an individual. Paradoxically, in the artist's hands the narrowed presentation becomes a great openness for human poverty and at the same time a multiplication of the metaphor. Those verist and actually cruel works are constructing a world of abandoned people and objects, which the viewer can associate with the poetics of turpism in Stanisław Grochowiak's poems or with Bohumil Hrabal's early prose.

In the cycle of *Courtyards* which is continued up to now, as well as in *Windows* and *Balconies* that come from late seventies, Rykała has penetrated the world of marginalia, ugliness and the feeling of being trapped, slowly eliminating the moulded figure of man from his pictures. After years the human figure would appear again in the photographic portraits made by the artist. Before it happened, however, the artist used the light as a specific compositional counterpoint and metaphoric syntax of his pictures. The degraded reality became sanctified and confabulated. In courtyards visited by nobody, where only some forgotten or abandoned requisites and cars are kept, where plaster is coming off the walls that are rotten and overgrown with weeds... the memories can revive. The erstwhile mining family houses that had been once vibrant with life, where plenty of children and gossips had been gathering around – have become an iconic sign in Rykała. However this iconographic dictatorship doesn't get a nostalgic and

meaningless formula – what is usually the case in similar painting narrations – but becomes examined by light. The light stretches aggressively on the smoked patches of mould and water stains on the walls. Without any physical justification, like in Chirico, it makes that the viewer feels in this extravagant entourage like protagonists of Stanley Kubrick's film *The Gleam*. Maybe only accidentally – I don't know it for sure – this title is also the name of the next cycle the artist has realised since the nineties. The light, gleaming and saturated with vivid yellow, spreads in the world that is hermetically closed for the living. Hence we may assume that those works have as much in common with realism as a tourist map with the physical area. They can be associated – what proves the above-mentioned thesis in a way – with some pictures made by American hyperrealists. In this context the pictures of John Salt, who has also portrayed ruins and shacks, courtyards and clapped-out cars, seem to be particularly close to Rykała. The same we could say about the painting of Don Eddy, who has built – just like sometimes Rykała has – new postmodern unities from triptychs and polyptychs. All those works have something in common, namely the issues of undermining the world of reference, the nostalgic diction and superrealism. This is the reason why we could call them the 'Matrix' of the memory and visibility.

The artist has gradually deprived these pictures of man's figures. It was unusual; however the fact that the procedure of making this absence present caused the doubling of the person could seem even more surprising. In his early works referring to the stylistics of pop-art, and in some later ones signed *Benches*, we have the painting presentations of human figures, however in later pictures and in his latest works man appears only through representation, evoked usually by old photographs and objects (keys, plates, and traces). Reflections of reflections are neither making wonders nor blessings. Therefore the true enchantments amongst those *Gleams* are the epiphanies of light and shadow. The symbolically marked light – gold, rust-coloured, and significant as in the icon writing – becomes here the carrier of sense, the motorway of myth and the transcendence. This makes that Środula or Sielec are as magical walk as the old quarters of Buenos Aires described by Borges

and Sabato. Their unreal light – paradoxically – is amazingly intensive and sensual. It comes through corners and cobblestones, ornamenting and sculpturing the space-time of myth and picture. Thanks to its glitter the motives and ideas appear, showing what's dark, covered, and apparently absent. Let's remember that light shows everything almost immediately. Objects can spend decades or even centuries in the darkness, but only one artistic gesture is enough to free them from oblivion. The artist, but also the viewer, are those who cast a shaft of light on non-being. No space of being can exist without them.

However, what is the area of being and where is it? No doubt we have here a poor and degenerated reality – some forgotten courtyards, blind alleys and unkempt greens, as well as thresholds of abandoned homesteads, where no lovers would take cover... They are the walks and enclaves of the dead province which became the syntagma of memory. The artist is building his grammar from such a syntax. It is neither peripheral nor fragmentary. After all the central figure appears before our very eyes from those dead worlds, from their marginality and sometimes from their scraps only. Perhaps that centre is not the axis of the world, but rather a kind of non-located small mental figure, the rhetoric of lonely choices and the disagreement about the irony of distance in today's world which distances from everything.

Sacred figures – the cross, a cathedral, a basilica, the Way of the Cross, the Pietà or the Last Supper – had been the main motive of painting for most centuries. They were as if the leading and tried-and-tested metaphysical 'standby' topics. Meanwhile Jacek Rykała has 'built' a cathedral in Sielec and reconstructed the Way of the Cross in Środula, where the Jewish ghetto existed at one time. Therefore it is both confabulation and reconstruction, the recording of mental and real wanderings in the space and time of quarters and towns that sound exotic to us. Is there anybody who could localise Pogoń, Sielec or Środula today, being from outside the coal basin of Zagłębie? The hustle and bustle of their past everyday life is carried in silent echoes of whispered names. Antonina, Edward, Karol, Lońka, Marysia, the family, acquaintances and strangers – all of them can appear by the magic

power of reflection. Portrait photographs are commenting the default and depicted places. They are the commentaries and evidences. However, the viewer is not able to verify the story they tell. Therefore it isn't difficult to agree that Rykała is a painter and a mythographer to the same extent. In his hands the history of ideas becomes a pack of photographs and pictures, from which he creates his small patience and universal myth.

The artist uses photographs, not treating them, however, in a documentary way, but rather making the occasional and coffin portraits from them. The repeatability of this practice, its constant character and its subordination to the *parergon* of the picture (or object) can recall the order of mourning with its rhythm and continuity. Besides, we couldn't deny that we might associate these works with the language of tomb photography and the succinctness of the epitaphs. Contrary to those latter, however, they are shining with the light of the present, even though they are the cumulating the past. In practice Rykała uses this procedure a bit like Christian Boltanski. They both use amateur black-and-white pictures, not attaching the weight to the extent of their wear and age. The patina is not at stake here, of course, because for both artists the photograph is neither a knick-knack nor an ornament, and the photography doesn't function as a means of documenting (recording) the reality. For them the photograph is rather an after-view, an interpretation, which simultaneously can show the author's choice. Rykała presents pictures that refer to the rituals and festivities of local societies – usually christening parties, first communions, festivities, weddings, Christmas Eves – that is the customs that impose a definite form and ceremony. The photographed people are inscribed in that iconic and iconographic scheme, and even more, in many cases we can guess that they didn't leave any other evidence. The artist, instead, treats these poses as the initiation for new narrations. Sometimes they become an inspiration for deriving from them something what's unofficial, perverted, fearful and tragic. Therefore we can assume that painting developments are some personal transgressions of artistic subjects, that they are the boudoirs and vestibules of the artist's memory. They are surrounded with the aura and climate of

metaphysics that are as if corresponding to the pictures painted by Giorgio de Chirico. In that famous Italian painter they are the emblems taken from the Mediterranean imagination, while in Rykała the mythology feeds on the local character of existence. In both cases, however, it's not the genealogy, but rather the current context what decides about the final reception and the direction of interpretation. The movement and the vector of imagination become the reassumption of the *Instigations*, which can come both from Los Angeles and from the quarter of Sielec...

The nostalgia that appears in this artist from Sosnowiec is therefore a diction which is clearly postmodern in sound. The swansong connected with the paradise lost is distinctive for regionalists, who raise ghosts from the past, thereby reanimating the 'corpse' from the wardrobe. Instead, Rykała melodiously plays the motives and is not afraid of being distanced. Thus, it is a kind of language strategy that finds the present as the sum of what happened and what will happen. History is here – just like in Starobinski – a cumulatively present internal knowledge and simultaneously the painfully vivid anamnesis...

The reminder is the expression of tradition, that is certain cultural *continuum*. It can appear also through the form, composition, and the arrangement. Rykała has often arranged his objects and pictures into narrative sequences, creating diptychs, triptychs and polyptychs. They are building the metaphorical and spatial story. We can associate this hierarchization and arrangement with the tradition of iconostasis, which joined the 'picture' and the 'location' functionally and transcendently. This aspect is also present in works made by the above-mentioned Boltanski. However in both artists the fact that the picture is self-referential seems to be the decisive motive. It is worth paying attention that in Rykała even if the motive of the window or gate allows us assuming and creating in our imagination everything what's hidden or spread behind it, the viewer would concentrate also on its surface, that is on the specific 'grating' of the icon. Pane friezes that often appear in his works seem to function as an opaque 'window', that is the self-referential picture that indicates at its esthetical and

semantic values, and the syntax of its language. The same is the role of faded photographs and stripped frames. By the way we should mention that Rykała was the first artist in Poland, who used window frames and later door fragments and whole doorcases in pictures. Introducing additional elements – for example enamel plates with numbers, as well as keys, picklocks, and small planks – the artist provided those collage works with new dimension, as if of assemblage value. Three-dimensionality, however, is not only a formal aspect here. The multidimensional structure is also the equivalent of palimpsest. The image, like the Book, presents and represents – the views, layers, growth rings, genealogy, and provisional character. All of them can build the identity of the work and of the artist. And from them comes also certain biographic character which is the transfer of ideas that flow from both sides – I mean from life and from art. When a biography realizes again in a work, it is first of all a rhetoric and repetition. An overwhelming impression which we cannot translate into any picture or alphabet is the most important thing behind them. We should simply fluently enter the place and the time. “Sunday afternoons, tense with the silence of empty streets and squares...” are hovering over them. The remaining is the boudoir and the vestibule of the world of (and) the memory...