

Jan Merta: The Volunteer

28.01.–05.03.2022

Exhibition begin: Thursday, 27th January 2022, 4–8pm

Galerie Martin Janda is pleased to present the fourth solo exhibition of renowned Czech painter Jan Merta until 5th March 2022.

Jan Merta's paintings explore the boundaries between figurative depiction and abstract painting, whereby the topic or subject selected is conveyed employing a strikingly reduced formal vocabulary. Socialised in the 1980s at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, the attempt to depict the essence is regarded as integral to the respected artist's approach.

In his fourth solo exhibition at Galerie Martin Janda, under the title *The Volunteer* Jan Merta is showing new works revolving around the dispositive of power. The title of the exhibition is also the title of one of the works, which shows what could well be a helmet on a wall. This marks a departure into the unknown and is an allusion to current global flashpoints. As opposite poles, presence and absence define one another in each of Merta's paintings. While there is no concrete person in this painting, *Recruitment* shows the face of a woman wearing a helmet. At the same time, the colours of the steel helmet call to mind a fancy hat. This contrast is evoked by the pop-inspired colour scheme of a marketing aesthetic that adopts facets of beauty while juxtaposing them with the subject matter.

At first glance, Merta's painting is imbued with a lyrical and poetic quality, while prompting both unease and profound reflection on closer consideration. The works open up a space creating topical allusions, permitting the actual events to occur beyond the surface of the painting. For example, Merta deploys a military helmet as a recurrent motif in many of his paintings. Furthermore, rocks and surf, the coastline and the endless horizon at sea form recurring elements that bring with them uncertainty and danger. The latter is evident in a series of paintings entitled *Sheer Shore*, where exaggerated looking rocks are dissected in a quasi-Cubist idiom and look like multi-coloured prisms. While the oversized rock face is grey that features in the painting *School Trip II* looming menacingly over a group of students, making them look like miniature figures in the overall image.

The expressive power of Merta's paintings stems from allusions to the concrete, freed from useless additional elements and abstractly generating different narrative chains. The titles of the works are kept unambiguous while nevertheless creating as much space for thought as possible. The most reduced painting in this respect is *Lamp II*, in which a white globe hangs from the ceiling in front of an almost solid black background. Is the background a rock, a mountain, a partition or a wall, and what is happening at the edge, or behind the horizon? Questions like these define threatening contemporary scenarios featuring a potentially dangerous unknown.

Walter Seidl

Jan Merta, born in Sumperk (CZ) in 1952, lives and works in Prag and České Lhotice (CZ).