

Ēriks Apaļais (b. 1981) is one of the most original and inventive painters of a younger generation to emerge from Latvia. This exhibition is a major survey of Apaļais' works to date and is split into five distinct chapters. The first part, or *Prelude*, introduces the artist's little-seen early paintings created in the latter part of the 2000s, set in a corridor specially designed by artist and designer Golf Clayderman. This body of work consists of a group of predominantly small, colourful, playful yet ominous, loosely executed figurative paintings, which are rooted in autobiographical references and draw upon childhood memories and traumas. The works, as in all of Apaļais' practice, do not propagate a linear narrative or specific meaning but function suggestively, through allusion, metaphor and symbolism. In these early works, several motifs appear that recur in a number of the later and more recent paintings: Santa Clauses, strawberries, teddy bears, swans, Christmas trees and snowmen. The latter three form a key element of Apaļais' personal iconography and recur throughout his oeuvre.

Many of the paintings oscillate between a sense of child-like innocence and a latent violence or sense of threat. *Pumpuri* (2007), executed in impressionistic brushstrokes and a pastel palette, depicts an ice cream cart on what appears to be a beach. The title refers to a residential area and neighbourhood of Jūrmala, the idyllic Latvian beach resort. One could say the painting represents the ultimate childhood fantasy: beach, play, and ice cream. By contrast, *Untitled* (2008) depicts a miniature Santa Claus with a chainsaw, sawing off the branch of a Christmas tree – an image as unlikely as it is unsettling. Many paintings evoke a natural idyll, a child-like Arcadia, devoid of human presence and flaw, and a sense of perfect harmony in the world. Works that belong in this category include *Spring* (2007), in which a lone swan takes centre-stage beneath an arcade of branches in bloom; and *Home* (2007) where a white cat takes a promenade in a bright green, radiant forest. Many of these works seem to intimate the longing for an uninterrupted innocent gaze. Others are more obviously dystopian or evoke a sense of unease, loneliness, or of being uncomfortable or out of place in the surrounding world. *Untitled* (2007), shows a teddy bear set in a sombre grey monochrome background. The expression on its face is a mixture of apprehension helplessness and sadness. Similarly, a smiling *Snowman* (2007) seems equally helpless in the midst of a snowstorm.

Whether seemingly cheery or more obviously dystopian, the majority of these paintings are populated by solitary figures, animate or inanimate, that are alone and vulnerable in the wilderness of the world. A sense of loss, alienation or disorientation pervades and co-exists with the evocation of positive childhood memories and symbols that recall the family hearth, warmth and togetherness. With their colourful and seemingly cheery child-like subjects, these paintings can be deceptive. Careful observation, however, and attention to the small but telling details hint at a more disturbing sub-text. There is a strong Freudian quality to these works, a sense of the uncanny, of strangeness in the ordinary, of fragments of a painful memory that has been repressed and then transformed into something sunny – but always with a slight latent

sense of disquiet. What these paintings seem to do, whether they are on the darker or lighter side, is suggest a longing for an uninterrupted innocent gaze.

The recurring motif of the Christmas tree, teddy bear and Santa Claus can all be archetypally associated with the warmth of the family hearth, joy and moments of familial bliss; whilst the recurrence of snow can be read as a metaphor for purity, cleanliness and the uncontaminated. And of course, nature offers the perfect refuge and route of escape. The Christmas symbols, which form a key part of Apałais' vocabulary, may seem saccharine and somewhat naïve – though they mostly come with a 'twist' – but in actual fact they are very ambivalent. Psychoanalytically speaking, for many people the experience of Christmas is not the picture-perfect fairy-tale scenario propagated by the media and consumer culture, but a period of unease and distress, even depression, where many of the family pathologies rise to the surface and often explode in traumatic ways, and where familial dysfunction becomes more pronounced precisely because it competes with the idealized public myth of Christmas.

The next series of paintings, *Memory Object Paintings (Mirror Stage)* form a bridge between what came before and what was to follow. It continues in a psychoanalytic vein, this time making reference to the French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan (1901–80) and more specifically the 'mirror stage' – his theory that that infants recognize themselves in a mirror or other symbolic contraption which induces apperception, that is, recognition or consciousness of the self, from the age of about six months old. Two paintings are very characteristic in this series *Mirror* (2011) and *I* (2011). In the first we see a pencil floating in space together with what appear to be some pencil sharpenings; and a disc, which seems like a mirror but could also be a clock. The state of human consciousness is here represented both by the mirror as a reflection of the awareness of self, but also the pencil, which refers to writing – which only humans who have an awareness of the self as a subject and object, can do. On the other hand, *I* more directly relates the question of self-consciousness and self-recognition through the presence of the mirror and the letter 'I' both of which seem to be hovering around each other – or even perhaps gravitating towards one another in a symbolic gesture.

There is one key painting on view in the exhibition, *Mirror Grave* (2011), which crystallises the transition from the first body of work, the *Childhood* paintings, to the subsequent *Letter* paintings. Here the last vestige of colour is banished from Apałais' palette for many years (only to return recently), while the key symbolic references such as the Christmas tree remain. In the *Letter* paintings Apałais comes entirely unto himself. Here, he confidently consolidates his signature style of understated greyscale colour-fields, and a minimal – conceptual painterly approach still deploys the use of charged symbols, but this time in a manner that is more precise, with deliberately set boundaries and an almost clinical methodology, which eschews any display of overly gestural painterly 'virtuosity'. These enigmatic paintings have been informed by Apałais' extensive readings – from Lacan to Mallarmé – and his study of philology. Here letters hover and glide in the empty pictorial space, intimating the interrelated elements of

reading and writing, meaning and signification, literature and linguistics. In these paintings that, as Apałais says, ‘oscillate between the seeable and the readable’, deconstructed elements – letters torn from words, images separated from context – mutedly occupy the canvas as unearthed fragments of forgotten memories, episodes, experiences. This body of work was pivotal for Apałais since it consolidated his highly distinctive style – one that combines conceptualism, symbolism, abstraction and figuration.

The writings of the French symbolist poet Stephan Mallarmé (1842–98) have been of seminal importance for this body of work. Mallarmé’s interest in the relationship between content and form, between the text and the arrangement of words and spaces on the page, the sound of words rather than only their meaning, and the phonetic ambiguities this produces – all find their painterly translation in Apałais’ *Letter* paintings. One could say that these paintings constitute the painterly equivalent of the concept of hypertext – of which Mallarmé was a precursor with his purposeful use of blank space and careful placement of words on the page, allowing multiple non-linear readings. *In the Beginning was the Word* (2013) depicts a book with blank pages floating in space, like a bird in flight. Apałais toys with the biblical phrase but the meaning of the painting is not to be literally interpreted as religious, but rather is more rooted in ancient Greek philosophy. In ancient Greek culture the ‘Word’ or *Logos* was used to refer to the bridge between the transcendent and material universe. *Abyss* (2015) on the other hand, plays with the idea of linguistic tautology. We can see the letters ‘A’ and ‘Y’ detached from the word, tumbling down a crevasse. Finally, the timeless empty space that Apałais’ words are situated in might also be read as a reference to the evolution of the human species and human history and the pivotal place that language, text, writing and knowledge have come to play in our dominance as a species.

It is therefore no surprise that the motifs of the book and the typewriter recur as archetypal symbols in Apałais’ oeuvre. While the typewriter has become obsolete, the physical book is being superseded with the rise of digital publishing. The implications of this are not only related to changes in our material culture but in how we read, write, create meaning and comprehend. As an artist whose practice is deeply rooted in literary and philosophical readings – from St. Augustine to Nietzsche, Sartre and Mallarmé – Apałais practice creates an ambience for peace, quiet, stillness and meditation. These are also the conditions that are necessary to engage in the act of reading, but that are increasingly rare for most people in our accelerated, attention-deficit times. Apałais’ work seems to claim a space for time, contemplation and deceleration. Similarly, his emptying out of the painting both in terms of colour and in terms of information is a reaction to the age of information-overload and the inflation of images, objects and products. As Apałais asserts, ‘I want to be in control of the image, not the image of me’.

An important part of this series are the paintings that make reference to Mallarmé’s seminal poem ‘Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui’ also known as his Swan Sonnet. The poem refers to the death of a swan, encapsulated in ice and toys with

the acoustic similarity of the French words *signe* (sign) and *cygne* (swan). The poem itself plays with the homophonic sounds of the words, which allow for different ways of hearing or reading. The death of the swan (*cygne*) in the poem might refer to the ‘death’ of the *signe* (sign), while the whiteness of snow and ice in the poem might refer to the fear of the white page (writer's block), the emptying out of language, and the death of writing as such. It certainly refers to the ‘death of author’ (Roland Barthes was influenced by Mallarmé), as the poet steps aside in order to privilege words themselves.

Like Mallarmé, Apałais probes the associative networks, relationships and contradictions between words. Mallarmé’s poetry has been described by writer Alex Ross as being ‘engulfed in fine mist’ and indeed they are allusive and enigmatic, opaque, obscure. They resist interpretation much in the same way as the hard lake (‘*lac dur*’) resists penetration in the Swan Sonnet. The same could be said of Apałais’ paintings, which privilege syntax over meaning and suggesting a looming sense of alienation and impenetrability. Just as Jacques Rancière suggested in his book *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren* that Mallarmé’s poetry was a form of opposition to worn-out language, Apałais’ paintings are set in opposition to the difficulty of language to convey the tangible experience of reality. Mallarmé’s influence on Apałais recurs in some later works including the video *Le Cygne* (2015) and a series of electric blue paintings from the same year, seen in the last room of the exhibition. This work is impressionistic, hard-to-read; the image almost dissolves into the screen. If we look closely we can discern a young girl trying to speak the words ‘*le cygne*’ underwater, intimating the difficulties that often plague language and its translation or interpretation, as well as raising the question of how far an image, word or sign can convey meaning.

With the *Letter* paintings, Apałais consolidates his signature style: monochrome colour fields where figures and objects float in space and in which allusive, elliptical narratives unfold on the basis of minimal pictorial ‘clues’. This stylistic distinction continues boldly in the next section of the exhibition, *Diaries from Earth*, which feature earthly objects levitating in what appears to be the blackness of outer space. In these paintings Apałais again evades literal meaning. Snowmen, mirrors, boots and piano keys are singled out and abstracted, and used as visual puns. They are akin to pictograms and are the tools by which Apałais attempts to transform subjective experience into objective and material (in the painterly sense) translation. Two *Untitled* works from 2018 feature snowmen adrift in a totally black space. These recall the terrifying emptiness of outer space, the everlasting isolation of floating space debris, or iconic images such as Kubrik’s 2001 *Space Odyssey*. In fact, what we see are fragments of childhood memories that Apałais calls ‘memory objects’. However, Apałais leaves the field of interpretation open. The empty space in his canvas can be likened to a *tabula rasa* where the viewer can project their interpretation or meaning.

*Diaries from Earth* (2018), the painting that lends its name to the whole series, depicts two ambiguous looking circular shapes and the outline of a leaf, also enveloped by total blackness, floating in a space that is akin to the infinite, awe-inspiring blackness

of outer space. The circles are difficult to pinpoint: they could be mirrors, moons or even the head of a decapitated snowman. The image of a leaf is a deep-rooted memory from Apaļais' childhood when he would visit a lake in winter and observe the leaves trapped in its frozen surface. In all these paintings one senses a feeling of loss, of being violently torn from something. But it is also as though Apaļais wished to purge these objects of their personal meaning, to liberate them from the weight of trauma that they carry for him. What we witness, therefore, is the *residue* of memory, its discarded debris, a faint echo of the pain these objects signify.

Finally the exhibition also presents a series of new works, *Siberia (or Tukums-Tomsk)* series (2019–20), created by Apaļais especially for the exhibition where he digs further into the past, into both family and collective history, and which re-corporates colour into the canvas. The paintings refer to the infamous deportations of Latvians to Siberia by the Soviet occupiers during the Second World War, of which Apaļais' grandmother was also a victim. *Tukums-Tomsk (green armchair)*, 2019, is inspired by a letter written by his grandmother where she describes how she, her mother and her grandmother were taken to the Tukums 2 train station and loaded in animal wagons. In the text she remembers the lush green forest of Siberia, and the beautiful landscape there. In the painting these recollections are abstracted into sparse visual clues. The background remains monochrome, but this time it is not black or grey but green, recalling the Siberian forest as well as the colour of his grandmother's somewhat sickly yellow-green curtains in the countryside, as well as an old armchair. There is a twig floating adrift but also the shape of a fir tree, which upon closer examination consists of a text that recounts a fragment of the experience: 'We were taken to Tukums 2. There was a long, long line along the tracks with animal wagons. Loaded us up and guarded zealously.' Alongside the twig and fir tree there is a yellow orb that, like the sun, is an ever-present 'eye' of nature; but Apaļais also sees this as a golden all-seeing eye, a metaphor for the ideology that drove the Soviets to deport people in order to maintain control.

Other paintings feature carefully selected pictograms, each of which is especially charged for the artist. His personal memories are interwoven into the canvas in works such as *Tukums-Tomsk (puppet)*, 2019, which includes the likeness of a dog (the title hints that it may be a toy one); or *Tukums-Tomsk (pine cone)*, 2019, which includes a gingerbread house. The gingerbread house is also recreated in reality in the installation at the exhibition's entrance hall. Its title: *Home*. This work is part of a three-dimensional collage of many of the iconic objects that recur in Apaļais' work. Here, he brings these repressed memories further to the fore, giving them – so-to-speak – flesh and bones. The *Tukums-Tomsk* series, on the other hand, is treated almost as a fairy tale, as the artist does not have direct experience of it. He can only conjure the recounted memories as reconstructed narratives of his own. At the same time, as the memories of his grandmother's generation retreat further into the past and into oblivion, Apaļais attempts to rescue them, whilst at the same time acknowledging they are beyond his grasp. This body of work, as a whole, occupies a hazy space between memory and its difficult reconstruction, history and myth-making, reality and imagination.

While Apałais' work is highly personal, it is not so much about a bold articulation of 'personal artistic expression' in the Modernist sense, but is rather, a semantic and semiotic approach to painting, in that his interest lies both in the meaning and reference of linguistic expressions, as well as the study of signs. In order to shed light on some of Apałais' formative references and influences, the exhibition includes a number of guest artists whose oeuvre has been pivotal for the artist. First of these is the Belgian conceptual artist Marcel Broodthaers (1924–76) whose preoccupation with language as a symbol that conveys meaning and his creation of symbolic systems has been very influential for Apałais. Broodthaers was also preoccupied with the notion of the artistic signature, another issue that Apałais problematises in his own work. The question of the value of the artist's signature as proof of the authenticity of a work, as well as sign of the artistic super-ego, is something that recurs throughout Broodthaers' oeuvre – from drawings, serigraphs, to film and slide works. In *Signatures*, 1971, the work included here, the artist's hand-written initials M.B. are projected repetitively. Broodthaers once stated that the foundation of artistic creation rests on narcissism and so this work seems both to glorify and ridicule his signature. Here the letter becomes icon, something we also recognize in some of Apałais' works, especially in his *Letter* paintings.

Also included is one of Vija Celmins (b. 1938) signature *Night Sky* works *Starfield*, 2010, which depicts an expanse of stars burning in the night sky. Celmins mastered the act of obtaining distance from the image, in the conceptual sense, but also in conveying notions of time. The desert, the ocean and the sky are the open spaces that Celmins studied and depicted extensively in her oeuvre. All are devoid of human presence, and convey a sense of infinity that is both boundless and overwhelming. The sense of distance, infinity, and the ungraspable aspects of these natural forces are also issues that Apałais grapples with.

Apart from the importance of literature, cinema has also had an influence on Apałais' evolution as an artist. The exhibition contains a number of carefully selected and highly symbolic film clips and stills which carry special weight in relation to the subject matter and particularly the mood of many of Apałais' paintings. The first of these is a still from the end of the Orson Welles 1941 film *Citizen Kane*, just before that mysterious moment where the protagonist (Welles himself) utters the word 'Rosebud' on his deathbed. Immediately preceding this is a scene where we see a snow globe fall out of the hands of the bed-ridden Kane, shatter and break. The Rosebud scene, which many critics have pondered upon, is a flashback into Kane's childhood memory, and a time of innocence, before his life became hardened by power and money. Also included is a still from Ingmar Bergman's 1982 family drama *Fanny and Alexander*, which zooms in on the funeral of Alexander's father and the boy's reaction to the hypocritical spectacle by swearing 'Piss, shit, cock, fart'. The film is semi-autobiographical and is as much an ode to childhood as it is about trauma and the creation of ghosts. However, it also reminds us that as adults we can exorcise these very demons by tapping into what once made us happy. We can see why the film's plot but also its structure of combining factual and

fictional elements have been of interest to Apałais. Finally, the exhibition also includes a film clip that from Andrej Tarkovsky's 1975 film *Mirror*. The film revolves around the memories of a dying poet and combines past and present, dream and reality, with some particularly haunting childhood memories such as the scene selected for the exhibition where the protagonist ventures into the forest as a boy, discovering what seems to be an abandoned cabin, a particularly eerie scene.

Apałais' practice demonstrates the subtle manner in which the artist navigates the slippery territory of memory and the past, how he negotiates the slippages and gaps of the act of remembrance. Never literal, the strength of his work lies in his power of allusion, of understatement and enigma. Apałais manages to achieve the painterly equivalent of what Leo Strauss has called 'esoteric writing' in reference to the written word, that is, an oblique manner of communication which eschews both linear narrative and literal description. The artist attempts to translate into visual form that which is unspoken, or that which cannot or should not be spoken. The meaning underlying Apałais' paintings is not easy to pin down, and this is precisely what makes his work so intriguing and evocative. The artist provides us with clues, but it is up to us to decipher what we see, and up to us to relate it to our own personal subjective experience. The only clue Apałais provides is a hint into an autobiographical domain, hence also the title of the exhibition *FAMILY*. From then on, it is up to the viewer to use their imagination, to create meaning, and to fill in the semantic gaps of voided memory.

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