

VIN VIN

Paulina Semkowicz

BAIN - MARIE

Inauguration: Friday February 9, 2024, 6-8 p.m.

Duration: February 10 - 24, 2024

Five steps down and you're here. Now, focus on your breath and keep its rhythm stable, don't rush. Crowded color planes spill out on the gallery surfaces, and if I had the time, I could talk about all the precious contexts this situation activates. I could unpack the construction of the pool-like form and elaborate on how this liminal space is both a site of desire -hyper-visibility of elastic swimwear tightening on strategic body parts, and a site of disappearing, of free floating with all sounds and thoughts peacefully toned down. Among the flashes and eruptions of color, we could talk about pools as invisible biopower operating on bodies through self-regulatory practices, about sites and institutions of health and wellness. Or how here, in Vienna, the baths and democratic communal soaking speaks to the city's historical welfare culture. How encounters between serious swimmers and 'play swimmers' set up the vibe and the tensions; about leisure, or the cheerful panopticon-like mode of casual, yet well-targeted gazes. Among the shades of blue, dirt and algae sutured together, between one lap and the next, we could talk about pleasures, self-discipline and self-creation.

Wall painting, especially the non-figurative kind of free, shapeshifting forms, often refers to the background – a blank page to be filled with a story.

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Politics of the background is something the artist knows well, not only through her experience creating set designs, but also through balancing her own visual practice with occasional work with and for other artists due to her manual skillfulness. Navigating between the background and foreground, the stage, the wall and the canvas.

For years Paulina Semkowicz commuted between Vienna and Baden bei Wien, turning liters of paint into theater decorations. Baden, as you might know, is a spa town – a place of leisure for some and labor for others. What remains of the artist's after-work swims in Baden's pools, is a habit of taking underwater photographs – never exhibited, albeit helpful in studying the textures and shades. But the story goes further back than that – the pool motive has accompanied the artist at least since her diploma at the Fine Arts Academy in Cracow. A newspaper cut-out photograph of a woman reading while swimming became Semkowicz's signature image for a moment then, appearing on her graphic works and paintings. If there was time for it, I could talk more about both swimming and background, and connect them to the presence, visibility and labor of an artist.

Perpetually heated water bath, a culinary-alchemical metaphor suggested by the "Bain-marie" title, turns this ecstatic room into something different – a tale of normalized oppression, permanent melting and involuntary fall into formlessness. I could go on and although paint needs stories, no stories do it justice. The thick-colored afterimage presented to us denotes not only the sanitary space of chlorine-soaked control over bodies, nor the nostalgia of the Viennese bath community, but also, the failure of the former and the instability of the latter.

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I could go on, but these infectious stirred spills resist the expectation to tell stories in a linear, narrative way. Instead, they turn to the alchemical process of melting, playing with expectations and placing the background in the forefront. Now focus on your breath again.

Jakub Gawkowski

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PAULINA SEMKOWICZ

Paulina Semkowicz lives and works in Vienna. She graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków and FBAUP, Portugal.

Her practice is articulated through painting, installation and set design.

She exhibited at Galerie Laetitia Gorsy, Leipzig; Austrian Culture Forum, Warsaw; Galeria Presença, Porto, Belvedere 21, Vienna.