

# On Dominika Kowynia's work for the exhibition *All These Waves*

by Giovanna Manzotti

A realm of inquiry and intuition where anything can suddenly happen: for Dominika Kowynia, painting is the most pressing manifestation of an inner flow of thoughts that courses relentlessly, dragging a portion of reality strongly linked to her personal history, uncertain and often vulnerable, along with it. Hers is a *harsh* iconography that does not hide some of the aesthetic influences that marked Poland during its period of political and economic transformation beginning in 1989, which have mixed over time, in Kowynia's artistic universe, with the imagery of 1980s Libya, where she lived in exile with her family as a child from 1982 to 1990.

It is possible that some aspects of Libyan reality were similar to Poland. Undoubtedly, Gaddafi's propaganda portraits influenced my perception of color and form."<sup>1</sup> And if by chance there are some visual references of a communist nature in her work, "it must be a coincidence or something unconscious."<sup>2</sup>

With a keen sensitivity that addresses issues that continue to afflict social and political conditions in Poland – such as feminist struggles, gender disparities, abortion, ethnic minorities, social injustice, widespread anti-immigrant sentiment, and the environmental crisis – in her paintings, the artist highlights the legacy of a patriarchal model that still seems to be attached to the community where she lives and works, without ever opposing it directly with a manifesto or a specific statement. What predominates in Kowynia is rather a reserved, almost intimate and subconscious force that speaks of *her* as a woman and of her experience, characterized since adolescence by a lack of role models capable of challenging the stereotypes traditionally associated with the female sphere. Also prevalent in her work is a *feeling* and a pictorial *recording* of a situation or condition that progresses through turmoil and deflection: reflections inevitably linked to the change in her way of facing life, now.

"Each painting is an attempt to understand the world; each painting is also a failure, which is why it is an endless work. [...] I have always liked the fact that painting is a kind of 'private' language, a type of communication different from the one that usually works between people. [...] However, painting remains for me the best way to talk to myself."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps it is precisely for this reason that the narrative structure of her scenes remains unsettled and enigmatic, caught in an emotional tension between gestures that are sometimes rigid – even when seemingly fragile or warmer – and movements and unsettling poses, often unnatural, where the shift in tone between realistic and figurative representation and the more abstract form becomes intuitive and abrupt, yet convincing. Kowynia appears to search out points of rigidity and rupture in the depiction of her women, portrayed in solitude or in company in stark settings, outlined by fields of colour that broadly structure their background and spatial volumes. These are the moments that stratify the work, opening it to mutability of thought and the gaze of the observer.

“When I have an idea for a painting or when I find or remember the existence of a photograph to start from or refer to, most of the time I see a combination of caring and violent gestures in it. For this reason, I often paint hand gestures or tension between characters that indicate a complicated relationship. In my perception of the world, this is visible in both the political and private sphere.”<sup>4</sup>

A compulsive reader of contemporary and classical literature and poetry, especially by female authors such as Virginia Woolf, Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, and Maggie Nelson – the title here pays homage to Woolf’s novel “The Waves” (1931) –, Kowynia does not make a plan, but lets perceptions flow like dazzling flashes of thought about a character, an idea, a theme, and slow it down, examine it, alter it, almost depersonalizing it, thus rendering it more impactfully on the canvas. Her idea of painting is double-locking, closing and opening to open and close, and vice versa, and goes through various phases, finding fertile ground in the dark area of mental passage, where these aforementioned thoughts crumble further and settle into personal and collective memory.

“During the creation of a painting, which is a lengthy process, things change, and I think intensely about the subject. Even if you have rational and in-depth insights, sooner or later the ‘great unknown’ emerges, or seemingly opposing theories begin to find common ground. In a way, these are inexplicable moments in the painting, in this type of intuitive painting, illogical to the viewer.”<sup>5</sup>

Like two sides of a coin tossed in the air, Kowynia’s painting is never just *one* in what it shows; it rather becomes a double, triple, and rewritable space, a place of absolute solitude or quiet companionship. It emerges from a nonlinear path where the imaginary appears and shines through, sinking only to resurface, dragging itself like a ghost on a wave “whose breath comes and goes, unconsciously.”<sup>6</sup>

The first solo exhibition of the Polish artist hosted at the gallery, *All These Waves* presents a series of newly produced oil paintings. At first glance all characterized by prospectively different scenarios – and sometimes contradictory as they are realistically not possible in terms of proportions and postures of the depicted bodies – they immediately appear as elusive spaces that welcome and engulf, repel and attract. As in *Things* (the only canvas on display inspired by a family snapshot), where Kowynia’s mother dances in the arms of a male figure that inevitably transforms into a threatening presence in the eyes of the artist. It feels as though we’ve ended up in a crime scene immersed in time – the blue water of time, of waves – where an embrace morphs into a moment of forced physical closeness, almost a strangulation. Someone observes from the sidelines, a witness to what? She seems like a victim, and here “my mind struggles to see her as a woman beyond her role as a mother;”<sup>7</sup> the artist points out. A similar structure is also found in *Backbone*, where an unbalanced figure with its back turned is attempting to perform a gesture that is unclear and decidedly improbable in a similarly alarming situation. An arm and a hand lack logic in their pose, while red drops turn into a long limb or the garment of an ashen-faced, likely dead body. The artist’s words are clear and precise once again: “There is a war right there beside me, and the magnitude of the problems makes me lose the sense of my actions”.<sup>8</sup> Do you see it?

That apparent pink bow descending onto the hair of the female character seated in the foreground of *Ruffles and Bows* is unlikely, however, to suggest anything serene. The shapes here are not seductive and ornamental, as the title seems to imply, but instead are stark and devoid of frills. Everything is metaphor; it’s a false embellishment, behind which a man tills the ground, covering his face as if not wanting to witness such disintegration not only before his eyes but also beneath his feet. He, like *us*.

*Eating Rego and Following Artemisia*, on the other hand, shift the focus onto the devotional aspect of art history, presenting a tribute to two female figures who have greatly inspired Kowynia: Paula Rego and Artemisia Gentileschi. The first is a double self-portrait in which the artist herself feeds off of the main character in *The Policeman’s Daughter* (1987) by Rego, depicted here in the centre of the scene making a symbolic gesture testifying to the dysfunctionality in the relationship between fathers and daughters during the Portuguese fascist regime (1935–1974): “I try to absorb her achievements, to eat them, so that the knowledge she has accumulated becomes my capital, so that I don’t have to start over from scratch,”<sup>9</sup> she metaphorically states. In the second painting, on the other hand, the female face on the right and her hairstyle are a variation of the figure on the left side of the canvas. It is a vague reference to the famous *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1638–39) by Gentileschi, the mother of all female painters for her courage and perseverance. Here, hands come together, as do faces, in a silent exchange of growth and

support, all female. *Pink Mask* also takes hold of women's stories, echoing a sense of loneliness and separation from *others*, from the group, something Kowynia has experienced since adolescence, to then, with *Sisters*, slip into a canonical depiction of two sisters absorbed in reading, reinforcing the importance feminist novels had in her upbringing, often acting as a surrogate for real friendly relationships with other women. The concept of developing and nurturing the mind returns again in *Inner Practice*, a work that opens up to the inner and private side of creative work, which must necessarily progress silently, withdrawn from chaos. In front of a girl, viewed from above, there is a table with a book and a plate that resembles a palette of shrubs and spots of color: with reading and painting as the primary tools the artist has used to discover the world, and still uses to experience it today. It feels like one can taste the flavour of these ingredients in her.

One situation and its potential opposite, like the two sides of the same coin again, are evident in *Squeezed*, where two hands cradle and caress a sleeping female face. This little head resembles a painted terracotta sculpture, handled with care and attention. Here, the hands don't seem to exert great pressure on the head, but if we imagine their force as opposite, the situation becomes oppressive. "It reminds me of being pushed through the birth canal,"<sup>10</sup> says the artist. And while in *Movie*, instead, what is striking is the solemnity of a face that fills the space, protruding from the right side of the canvas like a sort of theatrical apparition, in *A Monument of Collective Entwining*, the meticulous work of many hands weaving the same braid together transforms into a collective hope here only partially visible in the image of another large hand acting as an obelisk, investing the female figure with notes of aggregation, solidarity, and protection, which Kowynia has always been a spokesperson for in her work and life as a woman.

1 See interview with Dominika Kowynia – *Painting as a method to understand life*, *Metal*, 17 February 2020. <https://metalmagazine.eu/post/dominika-kowynia>

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Email exchange with the author, February 2024.

5 Dominika Kowynia – *Painting as a method to understand life*.

6 *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf, 1931.

7 Email exchange with the author, February 2024.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.