

Kunsthalle Basel is delighted to present the first comprehensive solo show in Switzerland devoted to the work of Polish artist Paulina Ołowska (*1976 Gdansk, PL). At the centre of the Pavilionesque exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel is a wooden pavilion, which has been installed in the Oberlichtsaal. The word 'pavilion', which comes from the French, is derived from the word 'papillon', butterfly. The ephemeral and delicate character of the butterfly finds an echo in the concept of the pavilion as a free-standing, temporary architecture, often made of light-weight materials and simple in its construction. A pavilion can also be described as a mobile, casual structure or even as a free-standing sculpture, intended for quiet reflection and other leisurely pursuits. Often only erected or opened up for seasonal use, pavilions have never fulfilled an existential need, but are places of culture and social interaction.

Ołowska's wooden pavilion in the Oberlichtsaal at Kunsthalle Basel appears as an intermediary form of sculptural work and actual building. Constructed for the artist by Mieczysław Teofil Golenski, a local carpenter in her native Poland, it recalls a children's playhouse scaled up for adults. A three-dimensional model or sketch, a functional sculpture and a 'pavilionesque' building within a building, it serves as a possible backdrop for performances and for the presentation of new paintings, ceramics, sculptures and marionettes. The works in the exhibition testify to the wide range of media employed by the artist and hint at the idea of creating a contemporary puppet show or cabaret theatre. Ołowska's installation is a homage to the vanishing forms of vernacular architecture such as the kiosk, the market stall, the fairground booth and even the 'gypsy caravan', in other words to architecture at its smallest and simplest, and to the equally fleeting appearance of the mobile, travelling theatre.

Earlier works by the artist reveal this same interest in functional backdrops. The multilayered perspectives that Ołowska wishes to achieve call to mind theatre scenery, stage sets and tableaux vivants. In the work *Sie musste die Idee eines Hauses als Metapher verwerfen* ('She had to discard the idea of a house as metaphor'), conceived for an exhibition at Kunstverein Braunschweig in 2004, Ołowska created a largescale installation that provided the imaginary setting for possible or already completed actions. Props such as items of furniture from different epochs, architectural models, murals and an audioguide transformed the building into a complex laboratory of ideas, which fused fragments of memory and references to the present into a collage of art and cultural history. The work thereby revolved in particular around the various strands of modernism, from the Russian avantgarde to the Bauhaus and American post-war art, for example referencing Friedrich Kiesler's theatrical exhibition architecture and the interactive concepts of display in the shows mounted by the Surrealists. As in all her exhibitions, moreover, Ołowska also trained her spotlight on female protagonists. She presented large-scale portraits of important women from the sphere of

literature and the arts, including Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Charlotte Perriand, Nina Hamnett, Peggy Moffat and the Polish sculptress and graphic artist Alina Szapocznikow, which were based on illustrations from the book *Women Artists and Writers: Modernist (Im)positionings* by Bridget Elliott and Jo-Ann Wallace. These paintings were displayed on large panels with coasters, which could be wheeled through the gallery and thus created a sort of modern-day salon de femmes.

Ołowska incorporated architecture directly into her work in her project *Nova Popularna* (2003), too. In collaboration with Scottish artist Lucy McKenzie, she transformed the building formerly home to the Society of Friends of the Fine Arts in Warsaw – where Poland's first happening, *Cricotage* by Tadeusz Kantor, took place in 1965 – into a temporary artist's salon and Bohemian café. Ołowska and McKenzie created a multifunctional location in which artists and young people could meet and where concerts and readings were held, and where the two artists themselves (wo)manned the bar. By decorating the room with murals and furniture (some of it specially made, some of it found), the location also became a sort of three-dimensional painting. The artists married the aesthetic of Polish folk art with Art Deco, with the aim of reviving the disappearing form of the art salon.

In the last few years Ołowska has increasingly engaged with traditional Polish crafts, using materials such as metal and ceramic in works that incorporate a modernist vocabulary. She has also worked with the *Rabcio* Puppet Theatre, which has been running since the 1950s in Rabka-Zdrój, close to her current home in Raba Nizna in Poland. Ołowska reproduced beautifully designed posters from *Rabcio*'s early days and created new stage sets and props for possible puppet performances, in order to inject new life into this tradition of experimental theatre.

In *Pavilionesque*, the artist focuses in particular upon the very specific aesthetic of the puppet and marionette theatre. The artist travelled to the Museo Internazionale delle Marionette in Palermo, Sicily, and to the Institut International de la Marionnette in Charleville-Mézières, France, in order to study the subject in greater depth. She also consulted the archives of several Polish puppet theatres, including the *Teatr Groteska* in Krakow, the *Teatr Baj* in Warsaw and the *Teatr Lalek Banialuka* in Bielsko-Biala, and spent time, too, in probably the best-known archive of them all, the *Cricoteka* centre in Krakow, devoted to the documentation of the art of Tadeusz Kantor (1915–1990). Kantor is considered one of the most important Polish representatives of experimental theatre, which was closely linked with the artistic avant-garde and which aimed to break down the barrier between public and stage. With his *Theatre of Death*, Kantor created a theatrical form of sculpture that simultaneously combined happening, performance and play, and in which real actors were joined by life-sized mannequins. Kantor thereby presented an emptied body in which it was nonetheless possible to see archetypal traits of human existence, albeit in an unsettling and menacing way.

In the new paintings and graphic works that Paulina Ołowska has produced as part of *Pavilionesque*, the artist presents a selection of ‘stills’ in which the relationships between actor and puppet, and between puppet and abstraction, are held up to view. Although the puppet or marionette plays a prominent role, it also appears in direct connection with its puppeteer. A mysterious collaboration arises between the expressive hands of the puppeteer and the imaginary body of the puppet. The marionette can be seen as an allegory of human existence: voiceless, it only acquires a voice when moved by the puppeteer. At the same time, it is free from all human and physical limitations and can express the inexpressible. It acts as a representative of childish innocence and nevertheless harbours something disturbing and strange.

In the thirteen works in gouache and oil on show in *Pavilionesque*, Ołowska takes up this ‘disturbing’ quality and paints an overall portrait of the puppet theatre at several levels – some documentary, others emotional and personal. We see theatrical backdrops, stage sets and puppeteers. Works in a more documentary vein can be seen alongside Ołowska’s wooden pavilion in Room 10, and include the monumental gouaches *Beauty Life* (2013), *Niebieski Ptak* (Jan Dorman wg M. Maeterlincka 1963)/*Blue Bird* (Jan Dorman after M. Maeterlinck 1963) (2013), and the slightly smaller *Groteska I* (2013) and *Groteska II* (2013).

Herta Frankel, y sus marionetas (2013) is a monumental portrait of the Spanish puppeteer Herta Frankel (1913–1996). Alongside Emmy Hennings, Margo Rose, Lotte Pritzel and Maria Signorelli, Frankel is considered one of the leading female representatives of the genre and in the 1960s was a pioneer of children’s programmes on Spanish television with her marionette shows. Ołowska focuses upon the representation of the woman with her marionette, the person and the figure, the artist and her artwork.

Ołowska shifts into a more personal key in room 11 with *Mały nieznany teatr/Small Unknown Theatre* (2013) or *Teatr/The Theatre* (2013), a portrait of two anonymous puppeteers with their marionettes. The figures in the foreground appear against a backcloth belonging to the theatre in which they are performing. The focus falls on the representation of person and marionette, and the relationship between puppeteer and puppet. The aesthetic is very similar to that of Ołowska’s *Applied fantastic series* (2010), in which the artist made large-format paintings based on postcards of homeknitting patterns from late Communist Poland in the 1970s.

The emotional connection between viewer and puppet, and above all between child and doll, is thematized in *Biały Łos/The White Moose* (2013) and *Laleczka/ The Dolly* (2013), on display in

Room 12. These paintings revolve around the playful relationship between the child and the eerie universe of the theatre.

Rooms 11 also present ceramic works and several painted posters that are based on original posters advertising performances by the Rabcio Puppet Theatre. The nine ceramic houses, which were produced in a local pottery in Raba Nizna, show reproductions of buildings from Olowska's neighbourhood. Their titles document the activity housed in the original building, such as Hairdresser, Optician and Photographer, and hence form a sort of continuation of the backdrop or stage set created by Room 10. They also represent provincial Poland, with its rudimentary forms of architecture, and convey a picture of Rabka-Zdrój, the town in which Olowska's fascination with puppets and marionettes was born. Like the wooden pavilion in Room 10, Olowska's ceramic sculptures also exude an elementary air, not unlike the shapes of houses modelled out of sand or kneaded dough and retaining traces of the natural processes by which they were made.

Visitors to the Pavilionesque exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel become not only extras in Paulina Olowska's theatre, but its main protagonists. Historical encounters, subjective experiences and a stage-like setting are placed, by their ironic inconsistencies and contradictions, in a suggestive relationship that permits multiple levels of narration, and at the same time reveals and revives notable aspects of historical developments, undiscovered art forms and a forgotten aesthetic. Pavilionesque is a narration that integrates all these themes and greets us as a multi-faceted art work embracing diverse genres, one we can not only look at but also step inside.

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