

THE LANGUAGE OF THE NIGHT BY MASHA SILCHENKO

Solo Exhibition at Import Export

21.11.2024 - 29.03.2025

Essay by Romain Noël

The language of the night

„The proposal here is just to be able to listen to what needs to be mourned. Ask yourself this question: what's changing? Because, in fact, that's what mourning is: being with what's changing. So what's changing right now in my life? What's changing? What am I losing? What may never be the same again? Is it possible to ask yourself this question? And it could be people who are dying or who have died. It could be people or things that died a long time ago too. And it's not necessarily people who are dead: it can also be places or things that were possible, and then those possibilities are no longer there, and so I mourn that too.”¹

I met Masha in October 2019, and have been interested in her work ever since. In a way, it was tears that brought us together, tears and their transformative power, the mystique of tears. Rivers, lakes, torrents, seas, oceans. And in the swirls of water, in the foam of waves, in the dark abyss: the world in the process of transformation.

It was like something out of a fairy tale. I honestly couldn't believe it. To tell you the truth, I was even terrified. Because yes, fairy tales aren't always fairy tales. There are also nightmares. And even worse, waking nightmares. Just like now. Just like always.

When Masha asked me to write a text for this exhibition, I accepted enthusiastically, although I knew it wouldn't be easy. And for good reason, I felt that all kinds of conscious and unconscious content were running through her latest pieces, and that I would have to dialogue with them in order to find the right tone.

Where I come from, people who have experienced great suffering are said to have great powers, in the magical sense of the word. When I hear this, I think I must be surrounded by magicians. But I ask myself: at what point do these magical powers manifest themselves in these people's lives? Is it an immediate process, or a gradual one? I don't have the answer, but I believe it's all linked to tears, i.e. pain turned into liquid. Tears are the first potion, but something else is needed for the initiation to take place.

How do you unravel the mystery of a work whose structuring principles remain undefined? For some years now, I've been using a technique that involves plunging into a state of mediumistic trance that enables me to enter into direct dialogue with the works, and thus indirectly with the artist who produced them. This mediumistic trance has nothing specifically spiritual about it, but is rather rooted in a form of hypersensitivity. It's as if the heart, laid bare, becomes a platform for emotional connection, a place

¹ Léa Rivière, PROMOURNING, transcription by Emma Bigé in Deuiller au travers : Pertes et affects trans*espèces, Trou noir n°3, 2024

of emotional magic. This method is actually of romantic origin. It was inspired by the English poet John Keats, who defined Negative Capability as the ability of „being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” And so I close my eyes, and let myself be carried along by the phantom flows.

I walked to the river and thought of Virginia Woolf's suicide. I could almost feel the stones in my pockets, and the call of living water. I wondered how such a nightmare could coincide with such splendor. I sat on the bank for a while, watching the ballet of birds in the sky. Then the plumage turned to fur, and I realized that the bats were out.

Before long, Masha's exhibition took on an esoteric, not to say paranormal, quality. I would close my eyes and see the painted, sculpted or drawn figures come to life, and it was clear to me that something very specific was trying to express itself between the lit lamps, the playful bats, the skeletons risen from their graves and the haunted houses. Not to mention, of course, the figure of Freddy Krueger, with his burnt face and blade-like hands. In France, Freddy had made his first appearance in 1984 in a film entitled „Les Griffes de la Nuit”, whose original title was A Nightmare on Elm Street. The fact that Masha felt the need to dress up as Freddy immediately appealed to me. What could she possibly accomplish with such a costume? The summer months passed and my questions remained unanswered.

I'm looking for signs in the world that can help me. I don't need help any more than anyone else. I think everyone needs help. But I always find myself a little over-dramatic when I look my loved ones in the eye and gently tell them that the world is simultaneously lost and saved, and that there's nothing we can do about it except sail into troubled waters.

Then I came to understand that Masha had always worked in this very place: where darkness blurs our perceptions and the claws of night begin to glitter. Where dreams and nightmares intertwine until they sometimes become indistinguishable. Where the most difficult questions - and the most important ones - are posed.

These are things people tell, stories peddled by quite ordinary creatures. In a sense, these stories are survival strategies. Like everyone else, I'm doing everything I can to ease my pain and give meaning to my life. And yet I feel that something is slipping away from me. I close my eyes and my whole existence appears to me in the form of a dream house. I move from room to room, and it's clear to me that my wandering is both temporal and spatial.

More recently, Masha came back to me to tell me about the series of numbers on one of her paintings. These numbers had been handed down to her by her grandmother, as a talisman or magic shield. I then wondered whether the whole exhibition was not based on the opposition between the reality of fear and the need to protect oneself from it, i.e. between the nightmarish emergence of reality (loss, mourning, war) and the profoundly magical ability to resist this reality through dreams and through the forms of love that bind us to those who matter to us, whether dead or alive. As Léa Rivière says in her

opening words, „to mourn is to be with what changes”. I think everything here speaks of mourning, of grieving, in this broader sense. I also believe that being with what changes can be terrifying, especially when the change is made in violence and through violence.

The house diffracts, transforms, integrates into its walls all the walls I've known in my life, reassuring walls as well as oppressive ones. All the walls. But also all the doors, all the windows, all the frames hung on nails, all the furniture, all the objects, all the people who come and go between the rooms, and who no longer know what they're doing.

By donning the mask of Freddy Krueger, Masha also appropriates the claws of the night. With these claws, she plays an instrument that the world placed in her path after she vowed to learn music. I close my eyes and feel the drama unfolding here. I feel that the world is changing and that these changes are affecting me. I feel fear in my throat. I feel in my body the ghostly presence of what seems to have disappeared forever, and which nothing and no-one can resurrect. I feel the need for transformation rising up inside me, but I realize that it's scary to transform oneself. The whole exhibition is about this fear of transformation. And of the need to transform oneself in spite of everything. Of the need to invent all kinds of stratagems to not let fear paralyze us. The tears must keep flowing. The heart must keep beating. The world is not ready to end.

I'm particularly attentive to signs of the apocalypse. A friend pointed out to me that this is a pathology identified by psychiatry, something like apocalyptic hypervigilance, which manifests itself when a person facing too much pain feels the psychic need to put an end to the world. Of course, this is a secret need, for who could confess to wanting to hasten the end of time?

All the works presented here should be considered with the utmost attention, and understood for what they really are: an arrangement of forms more or less consciously composing a survival manual answering the question already formulated by Samuel Beckett: how to get out without getting out? How to find a way out other than death? How to mourn? How to transform oneself? How to live again?

I'm looking for a way out. A light on in the most remote room in the house. I'm looking for a mirror too. A lamp and a mirror. And a broken watch. I'm looking for my reflection in this mirror. And for good reason, I'm wondering about my true face.

In „Freddy, Les Griffes de la nuit”, the characters come to understand that the only way to protect themselves is to stay awake. But no one can escape sleep, except by risking madness. Masha invents a way out: she becomes Freddy, she transforms and reconciles. She's no longer afraid. Like her grandmother before her, she makes magic. And when night falls, she twirls in the air with the bats.

I need time to answer the questions that beset me. I need light to see my reflection in the mirror. I need shade to support the atrocious reality in which I find myself. Need to find the smallest room in the house, and in that room find a little bed to lie on. Need to

open the window to add the darkness of the night to the darkness of the house. Need to let the bats inside. Maybe they'll make their way into my head? Maybe their sonar will help me find my way through all this?

This world is too brutal for us, and yet we remain capable of transformation, that is, capable of love. This love is stronger than anything. It transcends all boundaries. It does not resurrect the dead, but it abolishes the very opposition between life and death. It allows us to enter into an infinite dialogue with the invisible.

I'm talking about a world where all kinds of magical acts are constantly changing the texture of reality. I feel that this world wants something from me, but I don't know what it is. They say that to grow up is to learn to control your fear, but I'm not sure I believe it. Maybe I'm actually cultivating this fear. Maybe my fear ties me to the ones I love. Who would I be without my fear? Would I have the same voice, the same eyes, the same gestures?

Masha goes back to the roots of fear. To the world of childhood and night. To the world of fear and nightmares. By becoming Freddie, she conjures up what terrifies her. She invents a way out: another destiny for Freddie, and another destiny for herself. She reconciles herself with the worst. I'm also thinking of what popular culture teaches us about becoming a monster. The monster symbolizes the shadow. And in life, as in fairy tales, we need shadows.

I wear my fear like a mask, like a costume. Every morning I put on this costume because it helps me to see the world in its truth. But my fear is like a muscle that I strengthen by practicing. The more I practice fear, the more powerful it becomes. And yet in the end, something happens, like a reversal of fortune. For fear, now overpowered, tells a different story.

In a text entitled *The Child and the Shadow*, Ursula Le Guin offers some valuable insights on this subject. The shadow is not merely evil," she writes, "it is inferior, primitive, left, bestial, childish, but also powerful, vital, spontaneous [...] it is dark, shaggy and indecent. But we are nothing without it. What is a body that casts no shadow? [...] Anyone who denies their deep connection with evil denies their own reality. He cannot make or create; he can only undo, destroy."² I think this concept of the shadow helps us to understand the immense work, both conscious and unconscious, that goes on in Masha's art practice. For her, it's not a matter of mobilizing the nightmare motif with a certain critical distance, but of becoming, for a moment, like the nightmare. To let it settle inside you and observe it attentively.

Everything I'd taken for granted slips away before my eyes, and I realize that my mind can go wherever it wants. I realize that fear is bound up with the unknown. The creature who learns to cherish the unknown no longer fears anything, and miracles abound all around. I'm in the shadows, and even if I'm afraid, I'm ready.

² Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Child and the Shadow", in *The Language of Night. Essays on Science Fiction and Fantasy [1973-1977]*, trans. from English (U.S.) by Francis Guévremont, Paris, Les Éditions Aux Forges de Vulcain, 2016.

IMPORT ↘ EXPORT ↗

As Le Guin again writes, the shadow is a guide, leading us to the heart of evil, but also enabling us to make the return journey, i.e. to get back to where we started, where calm reigns and the sun shines. But the shadow remains. The presence of shadow. The claws of night. And it's at this precise level, at this place of reconciliation, that we discover ourselves capable of magic.

I'm not sure I understand what's going on here. The waters rise, the tears continue to flow. But I feel strange stirrings in my belly, like an inner chill, or like inflammation of the membranes enveloping my heart. It's a strange, pleasant feeling. And the more I feel it, the more I realize that I, too, am capable of magic.

Romain Noël is a French writer. His latest book, „La Grande Conspiration Affective - un thriller theoretic” (The Great Affective Conspiracy - a theoretical thriller), was published last October. He also works as an artist under the name Yuri Johnson.