

# *Blask* Karol Palczak

06 – 21 September 2024

Emalin is pleased to present *Blask*, a solo exhibition by Karol Palczak (b. 1987 in Przemyśl, Poland). This is the artist's first exhibition in the US and his first outside of Europe, following his debut in London at Emalin in 2023. In this exhibition, Palczak's oil paintings are interspersed with works laced with egg tempera and casein underneath the oil. His metal surfaces are affixed to wooden boards, cut by hand or found, alongside canvases stretched on wood and video works split across four screens. While Palczak's primary medium is oil paint on metal, each of the scenes in his paintings are generated through his films. Everything in front of us has been staged and shot in his home village of Krzywczka, in the rural region of Subcarpathia in southeastern Poland.

*Blask* is a Polish word meaning glow, brilliance or shine, especially one that is reflected off of a surface – it may describe moonlight, a glare ricocheting off of a mirror, or the strike of lightning. With this, Palczak sets up a challenge for himself. Each subject – a fire, a tree, a pig's skin, a butchered goose – he returns to, again and again, until their essence is technically and emotionally exhausted. Drawing technical and stylistic references from historic traditions of painting, Palczak mixes pigments with sun-exposed oils and primes metal sheets with garlic – a natural binding technique drawn from the local tradition of 16th century coffin portraits, popular in the heyday of baroque Subcarpathia.

This rural region of today's Poland, bordering Ukraine and Slovakia, is a challenging and complicated place that requires some explanation – this is on the one hand. On the other hand, Subcarpathia's history is painful – the kind of pain that amasses over centuries in a contested location, cut by the borders of empires, ethnic groups and feudal classes, economic interests and violence. It changed hands mostly without regard to the people working the land, which has been bought and sold, occupied and invaded, partitioned and named variously: Kyivan Rus, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Galicia, Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Pale of Settlement, the Eastern Borderlands, Voivodeship of Lviv, Polish People's Republic. The people rebelled and rose up regularly against feudal lords, taxes, occupiers, pogroms, and armies. They spoke Polish, Yiddish, Ukrainian, Armenian, Ruthenian, Tatar, and all their dialects. They attended synagogues, churches, tserkvas and mosques.

This is no longer – Subcarpathia has been cleansed almost entirely, now almost homogenically Polish and Roman Catholic, and in this arid spiritual landscape the remaining people somehow have to survive too. For some, there is nowhere to go; nothing happens but life going on. Nature holds up a backdrop to this existential drama – in Palczak's scenes, in paintings and films, he witnesses this hollowing out of a place. What we look at is not the act of violence itself, but the story of its passing – its dark glow, its reflection in the black surface of water. More tenderly, we are also looking at an observation of the experience of the people left behind in this landscape – how they fare with the reality they were brought into, one they often love, as we often love and perhaps forgive the places we are from.

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Palczak's desire is not necessarily to represent that place in particular. It serves as a vehicle – an intimate and genuine one – to carry emotional weight. Presenting this exhibition in the United States grants some comparisons to the American landscape: the Rust Belt, the political struggles of a land plowed through by colonization, impoverished agriculture, and the promise and collapse of industry. Nature remains everywhere, universally, a reluctant bystander to that which unfolds over decades – trees follow a different timeline to economies. Perhaps it feels that painting does, too.

At the largest scale he has ever worked, presented in this exhibition, is his tribute to a willow. These monumental paintings draw their titles from a carnivalesque ballad by Tom Waits, which carries a sense of intoxicated grief. After spending months in his studio, painting the willow from videos he shot from a makeshift boat on the river San, Palczak found that the tree – *his* tree – had been struck by lightning, making his films the only surviving material of it alive. But this material he captured will give generously: Palczak's practice is one of a returning, tender attention. The paintings' subjects haunt Palczak, prompting him to exercise a different focus each time. It is an almost obsessive study – each work a relearning of tone, reciting a chorus with differing emphasis.

There is a coyness about the way his subjects come about – momentary havoc, the fires, and the eerie calm. He is staging them, but not quite. His video works give an idea of the true dynamic between his staged environments, the improvised drama of the living landscape, and the meticulous planning of cinematic compositions. There is room for chance and improvisation, and room for nature's sleight of hand: fire doubled by its reflection in water; the glow of sunlight on a pig's skin being exactly like light hitting his own skin. Palczak loves the pigs and how human they are, though he acknowledges they will die as farm animals; there is no protesting the natural order of life. Pigs are smart and sensitive, hungry, ravenous; it gives them a strange, incoherent symbolism, scapegoated for their squalor and the word wielded as an insult. They take up their role in these films and paintings as new characters, as he moves away from portraying the specific people of his surroundings and arranges scenes that are less and less literal.

Some of Palczak's previous works were populated by men: the region is disenfranchised and militarized, and his hometown is minutes from the Ukrainian border. The main employers in this area are the Polish army and border control force, as well as foreign weapons manufacturers – this is where Lockheed Martin's Black Hawk helicopters are built and whose labor they are built with. This has a gendered effect on the local population: most women have left the rural areas in pursuit of economic opportunities in larger cities, and many homes in the fields and forests stand empty. But people survive. As both a witness and a part of this story, Palczak speaks to a connection between modernity and the landscape, and he speaks to it through tenderness.

For the past few years, he has been painting subjects almost constricted to a five minute walk's radius from his house. A tree behind his shed, his blind dog pacing around the yard, friends and neighbors engaging in light, theatrical vandalism. Even closer: lightbulbs in the basement, snow melting on the ground, his feet in the mud, scarred after a childhood accident. This time, slowly, he started reaching

beyond his cottage. He procured and raised pigs, and slaughtered geese, in memory of those he had in his childhood and those needed for subsistence; he set off in search of a new tree to paint, one that is only accessible by boat, setting sail up the river San that flows through his yard. The last tree he worked with was named *Sweet Lady* – he painted it repeatedly over the years, each time with a different size and focus, a soul that shifts in each iteration, a changed thickness of gesture and texture, different emphasis weighed and felt in the work's presence.

For this exhibition, Palczak desired to find a new willow worthy of such returning. In this world, there is no law of diminishing returns – rather, the law of the land is that of nature. Indifferent to repetition, it demands no logic of closure: just birth and rebirth, each time transformed.

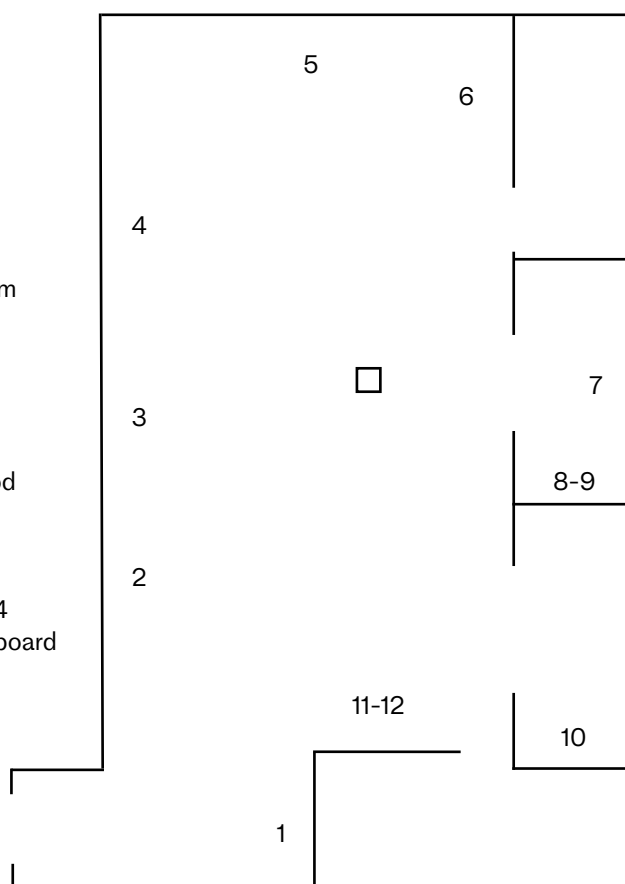
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Karol Palczak (b. 1987 in Przemyśl, Poland) lives and works in Krzywocza, Poland. He graduated with a BA from the Academy of Fine Arts, Kraków, PL, in 2015. Recent solo exhibitions include *San*, Emalin, London, UK (2023); *Śreżoga / Haze*, Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw, PL (2022); *Tym co teraz widzę / With what I see now*, Galeria Bielska BWA, Bielsko-Biała, PL; BWA Tarnów, Tarnów, PL (both 2021); *Zadymy / Pothers*, Gallery of the Academy of Fine Arts, Kraków, PL (2021); *Dym / Smoke*, Galeria Promocyjna, Warsaw, PL (2019); and *Baghvan*, Galeria Potencja, Kraków, PL (2017). Palczak's work has been included in group exhibitions at Emalin, London, UK (2024); Bolesław Biegas Museum, Warsaw, PL (2022); Gallery of the Academy of Fine Arts, Kraków, PL (2022); BWA Tarnów, Tarnów, PL (2021); National Gallery of Art, Sopot, PL (2021); 44th Biennale of Galeria Bielska BWA, Bielsko Biała, PL (2019); ZAMEK Center for Culture, Wrocław, PL (2019); 11th Triennial of Wozownia Gallery of Art, Toruń, PL (2019); BWA Przemyśl, PL (2019); Stefan Gierowski Foundation, Warsaw, PL (2018); Grand Prix of Franciszka Eibisch Foundation, Katarzyna Napiórkowska Gallery, Warsaw, PL (2015); and Palace of Fine Arts, Kraków, PL (2015).

With special thanks to S& Projects.

## LIST OF WORKS

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|---|---|----|--|
| 1 | <i>Oskubane gęsi na strychu</i> , 2024<br>oil on aluminium fixed on plywood<br>41 × 29 cm<br>16 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches   | 9  | <i>Jabłko na aluminium</i> , 2024<br>oil on aluminium fixed on plywood<br>13 × 9 cm<br>5 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches  |
| 2 | <i>Hej ptaszku mam wiadomość złą /<br/>Twój dom się pali a dzieci same są<br/>(Hey little bird, fly away home /<br/>Your house is on fire, your children<br/>all alone)</i> , 2024<br>oil on aluminium<br>200 × 231 cm<br>78 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 91 inches                          | 10 | <i>Hej ptaszku mam wiadomość złą /<br/>Twój dom się pali a dzieci same są<br/>(Hey little bird, fly away home /<br/>Your house is on fire, your children<br/>all alone)</i> , 2024<br>oil on aluminium<br>180 × 138 cm<br>70 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 54 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches |
| 3 | <i>Żarząca się głowa</i> , 2024<br>oil and egg tempera on aluminium<br>nailed to plywood<br>22.5 × 40 cm<br>8 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches   | 11 | <i>Świnia w stajni</i> , 2024<br>oil on aluminium nailed to found board<br>35 × 45 cm<br>13 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches  |
| 4 | <i>Hej ptaszku mam wiadomość złą /<br/>Twój dom się pali a dzieci same są<br/>(Hey little bird, fly away home /<br/>Your house is on fire, your children<br/>all alone)</i> , 2024<br>casein and oil on aluminium<br>243 × 200 cm<br>95 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 78 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches | 12 | <i>Świnia</i> , 2024<br>oil on aluminium fixed on plywood<br>42 × 50 cm<br>16 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches  |
| 5 | <i>Blask</i> , 2024<br>video, sound<br>duration: 10:44 min  |    |  |
| 6 | <i>Lep na muchy w stajni</i> , 2024<br>oil and egg tempera on aluminium<br>nailed to plywood, insects<br>54.5 × 14.5 cm<br>21 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches  |    |  |
| 7 | <i>Wiszące gęsi na strychu</i> , 2024<br>oil on aluminium fixed on plywood<br>90 × 68 cm<br>35 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 26 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches  |    |  |
| 8 | <i>Gnijący pomidor na szybie</i> , 2024<br>oil on aluminium nailed to MFC board<br>18.5 × 16 cm<br>7 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches   |    |  |



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