

THE SLEEP OF REASON PRODUCES MONSTERS AND ANGELS

On the art of Maria Marachowska

Monsters, shapes, eyes and hands, bodies, thoughts, fears and bones. Those are the meaningful words initiating Maria Marachowska's probably most personal text she has written for the lyrics of her song "*Emotions*". Words that not only serve as a sound definition of her musical approach under the surface, but also are an expression of what determines her oeuvre as a painter in manifold variations.

From the spaces between colors, the dark gaps and the twilight, flashing eyes appear, wide open mouths scream and mysteriously shut lips keep silent, arms and hands writhe like snakes and reach for parts of the body or merge seamlessly into others. Inner demons are visualized. Dreadful faces stare at us with black lined eyes, frozen in a silent movie scenario, looking as if they wanted to talk to us. They speak the language of art and suggest something that we are able to comprehend through our own thoughts. We understand that – different from the first impression – we are not confronted with witches, abstract demons and weird mysterious creatures, but with our own personal subconscious, our own primordial fears and nightmares. In each of us, there is a little bit of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Long before Robert Louis Stevenson's symbolic novella, the topics of double identity and split personality had been introduced into art and literature in the most varying ways and in her images, Maria Marachowska adds a completely new dimension to this proven trick. It is far more, we are exposed to, than the fascination of evil, and even more than the simple unmasking of human abysses, no, as terrifying as these creatures are, we are able to sympathize with them and detect hurt souls, pain and loneliness behind these grotesque faces. Despite of all abstraction, it becomes obvious that we look into the mirror of our society.

In their dreadful truthfulness, expressing reality just in the surreal and hyperbolic, Maria Marachowska's paintings appear like a contemporary continuation of those insane and genius Capriccios wherein Francisco de Goya pointed to the horrors of war and the excesses of human cruelty.

Unlike Francis Bacon and his drastic visualization and literal incarnation of the Man of Sorrows, the decaying grimaces of James Ensor or Edvard Munch's terror-stricken creatures, Maria Marachowska's paintings are pervaded with beauty and strange aesthetics, that – despite of all gloominess and grotesque abnormality - have a life-affirming effect and defy death and its cold hand and call its inescapability into question. Like a passionate playwright, Maria Marachowska also loves the figures she creates and shows us and - in spite of all exposure- does not deprive them of their dignity.

It is as if her imagery had generated a new symbolism, relieved from the florid style of its late 19th-century representatives and without using religious motives, it comprises the vast subject areas of dream, spiritual reality, vision and hallucination and remains true to the classic ideal of not revealing the mystery of the inexplicable through graphic depiction, but lets the mysterious speak for itself. She gives way to the pure and sublime just as to the dark side.

It is remarkable to come across suchlike depth and artistic maturity in the work of a comparably young artist. Both the contents and the visualization give evidence of a great experience of life and the capability of leaving behind the pressure that generates from the already obvious achievements of art history, treading an entirely personal path that only follows the own feeling and the own personal imagination.

After having completed her studies of Fine Arts, during her initial years in Germany, Maria Marachowska used to work in a hospital, in fact in the operating theatre, not least

to gather impressions she could use in her art. It explains her competence in depicting the human matter, orifices and flowing body fluids, the essence of life, convoluted bodies, organic substance, the abstraction into a nose with a finger growing from its base like in her *"Monster's Eye"* or a hand extending into horns like in *"Angel"*. An experience putting her into the tradition of her artistic forefathers from the Renaissance era, who – then still illegal – gained admission to morgues and dissecting rooms, in order to study the human physiognomy.

Whereas Max Ernst created organic structures by means of his sophisticated frottage and grattage techniques, Maria Marachowska conjures them up on canvas with the refined stroke of her paint brush as if they were a particular form of Trompe-l'œil with figures and abstract forms bursting out from lines resembling roots, sinews and muscle strands become visible, spores are set free and float between the touching bodies, circular cells seem to merge and shove into the image gaps, blood shoots up like a sea of flames and milky fluids dissolve in a smoke trail. Those pictures emit a vibrating sensuality and similar to Max Ernst, the fury and roughness of the elements are a symbol of expressive emotions and human instincts. Whereas Ernst was concerned with the forest as the gloomy shrine of the mysterious and celebrated the transition from tree to human creature as a new evolution of the absurd, the embrace of the organic in Maria Marachowska's paintings comes close to deliverance.

In her early works, chaos still prevailed as the principle of compact, strangely labyrinthine matter with strong, gloomy colors appearing to be in competition for the highest intensity and similar as in Adolf Wölfli's meticulous psychiatry pictures or in the grimly psychological inner landscapes of New York underground artist Joe Coleman, she captured inferno on paper in geometric forms, obsessed with detail. In her works up from 2003, however, the opacity has started to dissolve and has given breath to the figures and shapes. Noticeably, the images start to breathe, both the organic and the illusionist elements gain the upper hand.

It is extremely captivating to see what emerges from the formerly white paper. Being questioned about her artistic inspiration, she preferably quotes her own poetic text from 2001, narrating about *"how the paper and she became friends"*. *"Prove me!"*, it asked her and she did just that. Whereas it was still *"smooth and clear and very straight"* at the first encounter, *"tormented and teased her"*, writhed as if trying to escape from treatment, *"it found her at the true moment."* This is a highly appropriate, almost tender paraphrase of the artist's eternal struggle against the unspoiled paper, as we also know from numerous reknown writers, who admitted how much will-power they needed to get over the first page of a new manuscript. In Fine Arts, colors come into play and black becomes a kind of mediator that settles the rivalry between the individual colors. In Maria Marachowska's imagination, it is black that gives *"safety, support, strength and energy"*, thus *"contrast"*. She calls it *"a strange thing between night and day"*, *"figures and details"* emerge, *"where before had been emptiness"* and this new matter *"is gifted with the shape of light by the brushes delicate hairs"*. The paper enjoyed it and *"offered her its friendship"*. It proves that each picture, not only the first one, is a new creative act, a new start that requires courage and in particular, the overcoming of physical emptiness. There can be hardly anything more satisfactory for an artist than to side with the paper, this rebellious creature – and bring out what is concealed under the white surface. It has been a natural development from the dense, gloomy pictures of her artistic grass-roots to the graphic works from 2008, flooded with light and consisting of dissolving forms and a sudden translucence, allowing the original, rough underground to show trough. Both canvas and paper become more open and reveal something of their innermost part, it is the discovery of reduction after a magnificent color experiment, after a long night of colors, the bright light breaks free.

Her magic number twelve can be frequently discovered in her pictures, whether contained within the circle of a clock face or floating freely as graphic characters. Her

clocks are mysterious symbols in a timeless universe, the hands indicate twelve o'clock and do not escape from time as Dali's clocks, they are frozen in it. Her protagonists seem to have come to a halt in search of lost time. In a certain way, the number twelve controls the course of time, a cosmic number that from antiquity has symbolized the rules of space and time, of the balance between chaos and cosmos in the most varied contexts. The number's mystic emergence within Maria Marachowska's imagery is not only irritating, but – as strange as it might appear – also has something deeply comforting. The existence of twelve reminds us of the fact that anything alive returns to its origins after having passed through the stages of its individual development and we sense that even the apparently repulsive never derives completely from evil. Twelve is also a symbol of sheer perfection and the regeneration of organism within the cycles of nature. Thus, not least the appearance of this magic number adds hope to these dreadful images. Whereas *"Born in Acryl"* (2003) still confronts us with a disturbing creative act between life and death as if conceived by the Marquis de Sade, in *"Music"* from 2007 – where the said number has seemingly dematerialized in the labyrinth of arising and spirally overlapping color tones and blended into the freely floating notes - this stage of agony has been overcome and a perfect universe seems to open up before us.

In her painting *"Wicked Pinocchio"* from 2002, Pinocchio is no longer the innocent wooden puppet that is put to a test and has to resist temptation through evil and corruption in order to become a human being, but a brutalized machine creature with wild animals' teeth, whose feelings seem to have given way to sheer mockery. We wonder who could be his creator, if it were a manifestation of this hypocritical Catholicism, on which Carlo Collodi's famous original from 19th-century Italy was based – a way of thinking that not even old Gepetto was able to avoid.

In Maria Marachowska's version, Pinocchio's face is fixed by nails that make him a brother of Frankenstein's unlucky creature. Often, clowns appear weird and wicked and behind it is deep grief. We laugh about what terrifies us, in order to cope with it. We are in need of a symbol onto which we can project our fears and the best is a machine that functions as predictable as we desire.

The fascination with the mechanical and the chance to imitate the creative act by these means, has already started in the Baroque era, the beautiful that was created this way, was at the same time appalling and inspired dark visions of the future, an early stage of science-fiction was born.

Not only in her *"Wicked Pinocchio"*, but also in her painting *"Mechanic Dog"* and further pictures, deducted from a classic portrait style, Maria Marachowska takes up this subject and confronts us with the dehumanization of matter. Whereas in an era of progressive scientific Enlightenment, fighting church dogmas, Hieronymus Bosch equipped his grotesque creatures with the most varying tools and instruments replacing parts of their bodies, Maria Marachowska confronts us clearly with the transformation of living beings into machines after the turn of the 20th-century. It is no coincidence that also the *"Devil"* in her painting of the same name has a brain that is divided into control spaces, here we see the complex inner mechanism of an intelligent robot, functioning according to satanic logics, unknown to us. Just as well, we could be facing the confused brains of a runner amok, we are unaware of what is going on in these kaleidoscopically split heads and of which atrocious lines of thought they are capable. Even alleged technical perfection can suddenly change into malfunctionings and turn against its ruler. We find ourselves in a disturbing wonderland, the Wizard of Oz has lost his innocence, his magic machinery has fallen apart, with the strings under his control, he guides terrible monstrosities.

These cartoon-like, distorted human depictions remind us less of Keith Haring with his figures reduced to rudimentary symbols, who lifted graffiti from the everyday context

into the spheres of art, than of Otto Dix and his bitter résumés of war. The elements, Haring tends to simplify and summarize in rough outlines through the deliberate usage of advertising aesthetics, borrowed from the world of commerce, aiming to signalize whatever happens and doing so without further ado, are refined in Maria Marachowska's work and provided with individual features far from any popular-cultural allusion. This is where it comes full circle with the surprising discovery that Dix' mutilated body fragments are related to the stylistic elements of Maya codices. In a certain way, Maria Marachowska's early works evoke even more of this ornamental pre-Columbian imagery anticipating modern comic art elements and thus refer to the fact that all art is originally based on the archaic, indicating that she as an artist is fully aware of the basic style of our forefathers. She takes us on a journey into the heart of darkness, where the ferocious human sacrifices, produced by wars - as well as in the figurative sense by the fatalist philosophy of life and decadence specific to advanced cultures from the Ancient World to modern age -, take on symbolic character. A distant echo to a mysterious, lost culture, these images slightly reflect a "*Paradise Lost*" and are at the same time an unusual reminiscence of Dante's "*Inferno*", transformed into a timeless, cartoon-like explosion of colors.

Maria Marachowska's childhood and adolescence were marked by frequent change of location. The mask-like faces that appear in varied of her works, express the inevitable feeling of strangeness and disorientation, creatures that speak a different language and who cannot be approached. It is as if we had entered a foreign galaxy whose inhabitants sent signals from the abysses of Interzone through their deeply grieved eyes.

In all her paintings, Maria Marachowska follows a strict geometry of bodies, the black outlines add more intensity to the colors and at the same time emphasize the shady sides that hide between the aesthetic design. Looking at her works in an overall view, her color palette can be assigned to the elements: fire, water, air and earth. The subtly graded tones, she draws out of these color combinations, hardly to be found in contemporary art, give energy to the spectator and make it hard to take one's eyes off. If there was anything in her paintings, reminiscent of her Russian origins, it would be this amazing brilliance of lacquerwork that makes even the darkest colors shine in a supernatural way. Without ever dealing with the traditional forms of folk art, she slips this phenomenon into her paintings.

Maria Marachowska's art, however, has another, less gloomy side, although it does not contradict the particular kind of Fantastic Realism, mentioned before. It is the subject of music, evoked in many of her works. This artist's deep affinity to this other, acoustic art form is obvious. Her second profession as well as vocation is musician and her images, using musicians and their instruments as a motive for a complex ornamentation of bodies and forms, rest within themselves and give a stirring sense of harmony.

In her masterpiece "*Violonist*", the physical rules of the body are abrogated, in a smooth bend, the waist of the gracefully built musician merges into the violin bow and a third arm envelops the musician and his violin in a wide, protective arc, like a frame, creating a sheltered space of its own for the world of music. It seems as if Maria Marachowska had created a completely new and very personal interpretation of Leonardo da Vinci's "*Vitruvian Man*" through her image.

The same applies to her picture "*Faceless Musician*". In contrast to the rich tones of green, blue and red used in the "*Violonist*", it only consists of shades of grey and black and the player's body is lost entirely in the music, it apparently merges with it, his body becomes music. He has created a protective cocoon around himself, a kind of womb, wherein the tones are generated before the inner eye that makes up the core of the image and at the same time is also the sound opening of an imaginary instrument, touched by the musician's tenderly led bow, like in a creative act. As Leonardo's

genious example, the series of Maria Marachowska's music images, also including "Cello", "Duett", "Sad Song", "Conductor" and "Inspiration", can be understood as a kind of proportional studies of human physiognomy, reaching the epitome of harmony through their contact with music.

If someone has an eye for the essential part and is capable of transforming it into the appropriate forms, it is an unmistakable expression of artistic maturity. Not only the images related to the topic of music, using the reduction from bodies to eyes and hands as well as the merging of limbs with the played instruments, make us recognize this ability in Maria Marachowska's works, it is rather a stylistic feature that marks her entire oeuvre.

Not least in her portraits of women, is a grace of forms, corresponding with the delicate hands and elegant pianist fingers of her music images. Black shadow lines and edges, as delicate as by an ink pen, make contours emerge from the colors, figures appear which, due to their subliminal eroticism, resemble the brilliant literary illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley who seems to have made a leap to the 21st-century.

The image series "Red", "Black" and "White" from 2006 plays in a sophisticated way with the art form of triptych, each of the paintings is assigned to a minimalist, almost monochrome color range, emphasizing the respective type of woman and her individual aura. We had hardly seen any tone-on-tone painting as beautiful, strange and mysterious, since H.R. Giger and his fantastic, metal-colored biomechanical creatures.

Also in pictures as "Oh, isn't it", "Masturbation" and "Blue Heart", we are able to perceive this lascivious sensuality, we can see fragments of figures, suggestions, a mask-like, cropped face with Mona Lisa's mysterious smile upon the lips, portraits, evident of the love of women, disturbingly beautiful fairy-tales for adults, creatures, cold as ice and at the same time full of passion, filled with the essence of life, displayed in their pulsating cells and their abstracted flow of blood. In spite of all their gracefulness, these creatures have something ominous and ambiguous upon them, on account of their decadent air, they could have derived from the thoughts of Joris-Karl Huysmans, the famous chronicler of Decadence. If he desired in "À Rebours" to prove that there was no explanation for the mysteries surrounding us, this also applies in a wonderful way to the enigmatic aesthetics of these art works. In Maria Marachowska's artistic universe, the sleep of reason that inspires all genuine artists to follow their fantasy, produces not only monsters, but also angels.

Thereby, Jekyll and Hyde are absolutely able to change parts with a pretty woman and a supposed witch, it is a play of identities, not unlike those clever early 19th-century picture puzzles with the meanwhile strained depiction of a hideous old woman, who at the same time possesses the features of a seductive young lady, an image that has long been an icon of modern popular culture.

In her gloomy painting "Desert Window" from 2003, the shadows of the past catch up with us, it is like a déjà vu of our dreams and thoughts, spectres, stuck in the air and transformed into light, visible only by their glowing outlines, highlighting the essential parts in the surrounding darkness as does the sparingly applied candlelight in the paintings of the old masters. Both in her images and her music, Maria Marachowska narrates stories.

The genre of body art deserves a special mention within her work. In addition to the traditional techniques of painting and graphic art, she thereby also uses the possibilities offered by modern digital technology, in order to show her body paintings, realized on live models, in a favourable light and preserve them as individual works of art. Through the combination of these techniques, significant works like "Chess Queen" and "Plasticine", were created, merging photography and painting into an integral whole.

The theatrical elements in Maria Marachowska's work, combined with the sense of space, design and distance effect, could return some of its lost magic to contemporary theatre. Apart from Jonathan Meese's avant-garde art spectacles at the Berlin Volksbühne, it is long since we have seen the visions of a painter on stage. Robert Wilson has become a living legend and the stage decorations realized by the representatives of the Vienna School of Fantastic Realism and their great predecessors like Marc Chagall or Pablo Picasso, went down in theatre history. The emptiness, celebrated on international stages since decades, has long degenerated from a revolutionary statement to the absence of inspiration and calls for a strong visual concept, capable of filling it. For a start, we will be able shortly to see spatial projections of Maria Marachowska's art work, both as stage backdrops for her live-performances as a singer-songwriter and as a visual enhancement for the soon-to-be-realized music videos. It is a first step towards a total art work, making us curious to see more.

Knowing that she is concerned with filmic experiments, we secretly desire that one day she will follow the footsteps of great painter-directors as Peter Greenaway, Derek Jarman or David Lynch, giving her imagination full rein through living pictures made of light and colors, in this special case, underlaid with her own spheric music of "*Siberian Blues*".

To view Maria Marachowska's hitherto oeuvre in chronological order, please visit:



www.marachowska.com

Videos of her art work, combined with her music of "*Siberian Blues*" on:



<http://www.youtube.com/user/MARACHOWSKA>

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