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Expeditions of a 'Picture Fighter'

Whoever enters the Berlin studio of artist Igor Oleinikov – born 1968 in the Russian city of Krasnodar -, automatically falls under the spell of the challenging melancholy of his large scale works. Far from any kind of fashionable attitude, in Oleinikov's asphalt-tinted pictures one encounters a pictorially perfected sublimation of self-analysis and perception of reality.

Any subject given denies a directly readable pictorial anecdote. Rather, the process of painting proves to be an existential exploration, in the course of which the artist articulates his emotions in a self-reflective manner. The more intensively one contemplates these tableaux, interspersed with chiaroscuro contrasts, the more one notes their tonal interconnectedness. One experiences them as a very personal determination of position, in a way that can only happen with a non-verbal language, comparable to the cyclical melodies of Schubert's 'Winterreise', in which the lyrics depict an effigy of nature, whilst on a meta-level the music score reveals a vivid drama of the soul.

Oleinikov's isolated figures are each faced with extraordinary psychological challenges, oscillating between resignation, the torment of goodbye, parting and nervous anticipation. This encounter with the world which the painter stages in his pictures appears alien to the observer, becoming a metaphor for the exploration of one's own existential orientation: sluggishly, a wanderer, left to his own devices, huddles up amidst a frosty barren land that spreads almost endlessly like a giant blank space between himself and his destination: a small settlement in the mountains (*Mountain*).

In another picture, the desperate attempt to escape from a bilious-green jungle of self-tormenting hopelessness comes to grief. Just as the melancholic angst enigma of the wanderer has inscribed itself as an apocalyptic mood into the rigorous abstractness of the white plain, this scenario of a perilous periphery, too, is an allegory visualizing a psychic condition (*Attempt to Escape*). In the painting, bearing the puzzling title *Years*, a veritably lonesome soul searches for direction in a labyrinth. The figure in a coat and hat, depicted in meticulous realism, and which we only see from a rear-perspective, pauses in front of a dimly drawn backdrop of a room whose walls are symbolically pierced by the maelstrom of dark windows as if through black holes. If one follows the track as described in the title of the painting, the hermetic box reveals itself as one's own life which the viewer must confront. His path is in equal measure retrospect and quest for departure. Yet, this carefully conceived composition is not the narration of an episode, but it compresses, with an oppressive aura, an oneiric abidance in which primordial sequences of life, removed from time and space, envision themselves.

Oleinikov's melancholic figures, wandering through inhospitable regions, evoke the association of the figure of Stalker from the homonymous movie, shot in 1978/79 by the Russian director Andrej Tarkowski, which was celebrated as a cinema masterpiece immediately after its western debut performance at the festival in Cannes due to its idiosyncratic pictorial language. There, what is initially conceived as a science-fiction adventure - the expedition of Stalker into post-apocalyptic,

forbidden zones -, soon emerges as an event with encoded symbolism in a dense atmosphere between dream and poetry. For, the expedition which Stalker undertakes with his companions ultimately turns out to be a journey to an inner world where memories, anxieties and wishes collide. The amorphous vegetation-carpet in Oleinikov's picture *Déjà-vu*, which surrounds the sleeping dream-like figures in a bizarre natural cave, is directly evocative of the scenarios of forbidden areas Stalker ventures to enter.

Like Tarkowski, Oleinikov allegorizes his existence as artist with the protagonist figure of his nomadic seeker for meaning, who has made an appearance in manifold masquerade in art and literature since the time of romanticism. With a rigorous curiosity he explores the deeper layers of this existence. Sketches, conceived like diaries prove to be revealing – in them he records the rhythms of his everyday life as an artist in all its nuances, simultaneously testing his work agenda in meticulous picture concepts. Aphorisms and word accumulations arranged as though by chance are interwoven with records of emotions that correspond with whole series of box-like miniature drawings. When contemplating them thoroughly, these sketches, rapidly jotted down with a pencil, turn out to be scenic Bozzetti, in which the artist composes architectural or scenic stages, at the same time confronting his own portrait in ever changing degrees of introspection.

Words such as 'shock, ecstasy, melancholy, loss, separation, hope, waiting' mingle with momentary personality profiles and allegoric state descriptions. This way, the margin columns of the sheets contain - alongside notations which serve as reminders of every day duties - profound thoughts which articulate a relentless try to interpret the trail at the junction of his own psyche.

The closer one follows the traces of these verbal records and the scenic genesis of the picture design, the more one gains access to the significance of the motives which otherwise present riddles to the observer. This also comprises a magic Hermetism which draws the observer into the internal dynamics of these metaphoric paintings und which inspires ones own imagination.

Oleinikov's painting denies any connection to socialist art, centred in Moscow, and represented by his fellow countrymen who load their post-soviet art with a wondering glance at contrary worlds. They connect the criticism of their stricken native civilization with a blatant staginess, ranking between banality, pathos and irony. Oleinikov, however, had the guts to expose himself to a process of radical self-discovery: ten years ago - after having completed a degree in fine art in Krasnodar, having undergone military service and after having jobbed as „Agit-Prop-painter“ in a leather goods factory- he came to Germany and decided on further studies of painting at the academies of art in Karlsruhe and Düsseldorf. Instead of conforming to prescribed pictorial concepts, he searched for an appropriate style of painting to achieve his independent artistic existence which had committed itself to his own vision and which called for an expressive creation.

During his time at the academy of art in Düsseldorf, Oleinikov is promoted as 'Meisterschüler' (master pupil) of Markus Lüpertz. The latter recognizes his extraordinary talent and originality: 'It would be too easy to see the Russian in Igor Oleinikov's paintings, yet still, one is induced – out of convenience – to explain a lot out of it. Igor's paintings provoke melancholy, breadth and soul – attributes that, only from a thematical point of view, merge with this Russian soul. Certainly, Igor paints for many, for other and for these reasons.' Indeed, the cultivation of an individual

painterly concept becomes congruent with a process-related expressivity that, in its cathartic self-purification, unfolds a rigour which resembles Dostoyevsky's analysis of the soul.

The actual power of these paintings, emanates from their venture to approach the dark reverses of beauty there where out of the chaotic, the inspirational meditation over something new emerges.

Two paintings from 2006, *Light* and *Picture Fighter*, in an allegoric actionism show the obsessive vehemence with which the artistic self-discovery occurs.

In both paintings, a Prometheus-like figure, in a show of strength seizes the illuminative fire and defends itself against a concentrated phalanx of armed assaulters which, appearing from spooky wafts of mist, attack him aggressively. This mythologically encrypted soliloquy of the painter on his existence as artist evokes a Kafkaesque mood that is reminiscent of Goya's Black Paintings. There, for the first time, we encounter the nightmarish atmosphere of rigorous soliloquy, the complementary tension between the dark and light in whose inescapable disunity creativity finds its source. Oleinikov, too, expertly contrives to endow his paintings with a dramatic spatial depth by means of interplay between grey and glistening areas of light and by projecting his auto-portraits into them. A subtly painted mist of floating colour dispersions envelops the figuration meshwork as well as the aggressors which appear as a cumulative bulk in the painting *Light*, coming from a barren industrial landscape absconding into profundity. In the vanishing point of their bayonets stands the one figure who has stepped out of their ranks. In this vision, the artist once again recalls the act of self-discovery as utterly violent to his psyche.

In a series of dream images a red colour flow appears and powerfully holds its ground against the maelstrom of the dark pictorial space. Whereas the paintings *Decision* and *Break* recapitulate stages of farewell and departure in dream-analytic retrospect, the impulses of the monochrome pure red colour increasingly replace the figures and landscape prospects of the memory paintings.

Instead, an area of meditation unfurls, to which the artist-ego commits. The abstract transparency of this area records artistic hopes, wishes and expectations for the future; however, during the process of painting it also transforms bitter experiences into a poetic sphere of reverie and melancholy.

As stated at the beginning, Oleinikov portrays himself as a wanderer, whose quest for meaning refuses to flow smoothly.

In notations on his sketches and in his introspections, he always probes anew what it means to him to "entirely opt for art". The painting *Break* sheds light on the fact that the phalanx who attack the *Picture Fighter* are not strangers, but – equipped with the significant physiognomy of the seeker – emerge as his disconcerting revenants from other phases of life. In the painting *Break*, for a moment's pause, they are, just like the seeker, immersed in a deep sleep.

Existence *For Art*, as one painting is titled, implies isolation, experiencing loss and the loss of memories - conditions Oleinikov conveys in a multi-faceted way through allegoric parables. Mysterious imaginations rise from the inner memory, their cause concealed in the depths of the unconscious and finding their valve in the act of painting.

This way, when contemplating the painting *Poppy Field*, the question may arise, whether behind the red colour flow there isn't a historic space for association beyond

its allegoric function referring to the artistic relinquishing of the self, concealing a transfigured reminiscence of the home town Krasnodar.

Translated literally, Krasnodar means „red present“. The Soviet communists used to call it this way in 1920. It had been founded in 1794 under the name of Jekaterinodar by the Tsarina Katherine the Great, formerly German Princess von Anhalt-Zerbst, as a military fort of the Black Sea Cossacks, who still fought for their independence and liberation under the Soviet-Russian regime.

The strength with which Oleinikov identifies himself in this tradition, one can gather from the fact that – even though disguised in his style of painting- he occasionally sets himself into the picture as a Cossack.

The scenery in the region of Krasnodar, at the foot of the Caucasus Mountains, is marked by vast, fertile grain fields, which are flooded by a sea of poppy seed blossoms in the summer.

Immersed halfway into this idyllic souvenir picture, in the painting *August* a self-confident artist-ego looks back melancholically to his alter ego remaining in desperation.

With his metaphor of the poppy field, Oleinikov suggests the comparison between the ambivalent connotation of loss and yearning with the emphatic image of tragedy and newly arising hope, which the lyric poet Paul Celan evoked in his anthology “Poppy and Memory”(published 1952).

Just like in Celan’s work, where a poetic self-reflection emerges from the aesthetic power of the symbol of nature, Oleinikov, too, sets his traumatic experiences and expectations towards his artistic self-realization, into a sensible web of imagery, in order to fathom out a level of encounter between consciousness and unconsciousness.

Studio, a forlorn room in pure red, is a gate for transformation where imaginations from the past amalgamate with new projections. Here, paintings are produced, in which Oleinikov explores the gaps between societal alienation and lonesome identification processes in backdrop-like settings.

Thereby, he prepares each and every detail of the scenic and figural picture compositions in drawings.

Just as the pencil notations of his sketches examine scenic motives that are focused on suggesting a deep effect, in the drawing, too, phenomena inherent to the medium, bold details of rooms and postures get pre-formulated in a meticulous way.

The interweaving of subtle strokes, which are pencilled onto the picture carrier, and compact compartments of oil paint, results in a cleverly staged interplay between light and shadow areas. With these effects, Oleinikov not only constructs body positions in extreme skewness, but also differentiates levels of space and illuminates different material textures with photographic precision (see drawings *Palpation*, *Cold*, *Glass* or *Wood*).

As a viewer, one is inclined to construe one’s own ideas into Oleinikov’s mysterious visual world and its sensual magic.

However, you still refrain from actually interpreting, because any concretion would destroy the essence of these pictures – their mysterious appeal.

Especially those paintings that deliver an intimate dialogue between their architectural setting and the mental state of the figure that populates this world, deny a narrative reading and achieve the aesthetic perception of their mysterious aura by means of gentle force.

In the painting *Corridor*, due to the three steps of the staircase in the foreground and the flare at the end of the narrow aisle, the viewer feels prompted to enter the depths of the corridor.

Yet, at the same time, a counter movement effuses from the structure of the painting. This counter movement emanates from the old man who - struggling for a footing - clings to the corridor wall in order to escape from the brightness coming from the profundity of the room.

Nightmare and fascination merge into an atmospheric symbiosis that intrinsically emerges from the pictorial procedure.

If you approach the painting, its subtle composition can be read in the technical detail.

This way, the amorphous, short brush strokes form blurred scenic areas, whereas architectural compartments feature a carefully balanced construction of different shades of grey – this is true regardless of whether they depict an inconspicuous interior, an ensemble of ruins or a portico with staircase in a dilapidated stately building (*Garden*).

Due to these pictorial modalities of hue and the conceptual composition of space, Oleinikov's visualizations create a world of their own, in whose melancholic poetry the subtle mood from the literary works of Anton Chekhov or the Chamois photographs lingers on.

Into this resonating space, created through the power of imagination typical of his art, Oleinikov embeds, in the shape of parable-like figurations, the non-verbal, analytical expeditions of his existence as an artist.