

Tilman Stalleicken

Blazing darkness

„Art grows on paradoxical ground, and logic and biology fail in front of it.“

Gottfried Benn's words from his essay „The Way of an Intellectualist“ could serve as subtitle for the works assembled in this exhibition – after all, the quote describes the very essence of Igor Oleinikov's painting.

First of all, it is the characteristics specific to the genre of painting, which emerge primarily in Oleinikov's art: painting is inherently paradoxical because it brings about what it is not.

Contemplated formally, a picture is static, motionless; a piece of canvas, limited through its measurements, unchanging after its completion.

Opposed to this, is the effect painting is capable of producing in us. If we manage to relate to it and to find access to the painting, it produces a colourful life of its own in front of our intellectual eye, unfathomable widths present themselves and the image we see, again and again, appears familiar, yet at the same time unknown.

Thereby, access to Igor Oleinikov's art has to be understood in its literal sense.

His paintings contain an invitation for the viewer to enter them and to stride through their rooms. The viewer should bring along his own luggage on this excursion, for, the paintings contain more than one can see in them.

What you do not see in the pictures, the inarticulate, is their actual content; it is the viewer who has to fill the gaps, as well as to imagine the before and after.

Let us put this in concrete terms with the example of the picture *Opera Ball*: there, you can see the sleeping artist himself, wearing a tailcoat and sitting in a whitish void, surrounded by a deserted opera tribune. In view of this scenery, the painting's title *Opera Ball* appears paradoxical. The painting doesn't fulfil the expectations the title arouses. Instead of seeing colourful hustle and bustle, a packed crowd of pushing and shoving dancers in jolly union, the viewer looks into a black and white void.

However, the images you produce in your own imagination are still part of the actual painting. A dancing crowd *is not actually being depicted*, yet, that crowd *is there*. It is not the emptiness of the room that renders the protagonist so utterly lonely; it is an increased feeling of loneliness in society he experiences.

In Oleinikov's paintings it is not the space that forms the character; rather, the external world is expression of the inner state of its protagonists.

Not only the depicted human beings bear life in them, all objects in the paintings, too, pulsate, sprawl and decay.

To give an example: the opera tribune and the tailcoat possess a plant-like consistence – through the painterly brush stroke they deliver the impression of being exposed to a nature-like process of disintegration. We can encounter this phenomenon in all of Oleinikov's paintings:

Walls, floors, beds, cloths...all these objects have a morbid life of their own where we can perceive outlines of the inner processes of the depicted persons.

For his self-portrait in *Opera Ball*, Oleinikov uses an allegory which appears again and again in his pictures: the sleeping man as symbolisation for the artistic creator. The dream – man's artistic action – mirrors the working process of the artist. In this aspect, the artist distinguishes himself from his fellow men; awake he manages what

they only succeed asleep: to transform and specify his observations and experiences.

You also have to bear in mind this metaphor of the dream when it comes to the paradox in Oleinikov's paintings.

By means of reversion and reduction he manages to depict complex issues with humble devices. As happens in dreams, in Oleinikov's paintings the core of things is approached unconsciously. That is the *paradox of the paradox*: it conveys unexpected clarity. How these moments of signification are being produced in the pictures, remains undisclosed to the one who created them.

There is too little of *man* at work while he is creating art for him to be able to provide information on its result.

Like the dreamer he looks at his own creation with detached perplexity and asks himself who the author is.

The attempt to understand the origins of his own art leads Oleinikov to produce new works, which, again, hold the mystery of their genesis in them.

In his painting *Picture Fighter*, Oleinikov communicates how hard the struggle is to put oneself into the state of inventive creation. The painter allegorizes himself as a headless figure –the *Picture Fighter*–, surrounded by the ghosts of the outer world, his only weapon being a shovel with which he protrudes to the inner picture material. This is what is so utterly exhausting about the existence as an artist: the creator creates out of his own resources.

Thus, art presents a corrosive force for the one who produces it. What is conducive to art, for *man* means a dance at the abyss. The *Picture Fighter* has to go down to the depths in order to breathe refined air. The inner struggle *For Art* becomes, as can be seen in the picture of the same title, a physical show of strength leaving its marks.

As if soaked in blood, the artist perches in front of a red river, flowing through sparse scenery.

If one contemplates all these mundane contrarities inherent to the existence of an artist, it becomes clear that the artist's is driven by something transcending ordinary standards.

If the existence *For Art* gnaws on the *worldly being* of the artist, then this happens with the conscience of another gain. In order to experience beauty, one can take a walk at the beach or hike in rocky mountains.

One of the *worldly* contrarities the artist has to deal with is, as indicated in *Opera Ball*, loneliness. The ability to block the own ego from outer influences, is required for any form of artistic activity. While painting, the artist creates a hermetically closed space, which then gives birth to the widest_of imaginable systems: art.

This is the paradox of being an artist; as Goethe reflected in his maxims: 'You cannot avoid the world more effectively than through art and you cannot connect more effectively with the world than through art.' This idea of the ambiguity of the term loneliness is conveyed in Oleinkov's *Soloist*.

Solitary, only in the company of his mirror image, the artist stands in the corner of an entirely deserted room. Lost in reverie, the childlike figure seems to try to hide underneath his coat, yet, at the same time, radiating a dark dignity.

His distinction as *Soloist* assigns him a special position, his skill obliges him to act solitarily.

Nowhere does the painter appear lonelier, though, than in the painting *August*. Different from Gottfried Benn's poem, *Einsamer nie* in *August* it is not the easy bliss of humankind that contrasts the proud doubts of the artist.

The contrast to the huddled protagonist in *August* is constituted by the landscape painting hanging in the background (one of Oleinikov's earlier works *Poppy Field*). The artistic accomplishment does not protect against the doubts of the one serving the '*Gegenglück*' (contra felicity)

In its gentle sadness and three-dimensional liveliness, the figure in *August* appears like a sculpture by Tilman Riemenschneider. It is in these moments of disbelieving observation, that you can no longer withstand the magic of Igor Oleinikov's paintings. His reduced compositions are full of musicality. Paintings without a physic plot, which manage to deliver the inner life of their mostly motionless protagonists.

These paintings capture us, there is a lingering silence in them, a blazing darkness and tranquillity - a tranquillity in which a tempest rages.