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The new simplicity

On twenty-first century Latvian painting

It's ironic, says a Latvian art critic, that the current saturation of the visual world by infinitely reproducible images via the Internet has driven artists back to older forms of representation.

Attempts at being a guide to art, whether of the past or present — giving names to styles, directions or trends — is as hopeless as it is seductive. Someone is always going to argue the opposite: was there even such a thing as the "severe style" in Latvia in the 1950s and 1960s? Just a few artists, who painted in "muddy" colours! In the 1970s, was there such a thing as photorealism? The number of works can be counted on the fingers of one hand. (More about this later.) Often enough, those arguing are the artists themselves or sometimes the researchers and critics of the next generation. This is because when identifying a current or a direction, each individual participant in the movement is examined according to common "road rules", not in terms of their individual track. The opponents are right: in the definition of each style, direction or phenomenon, one can see only too clearly an arbitrarily interpreted context, tendentious choice of examples, subjective personal interest and human error. Especially if one direction is proposed at a particular point as having been dominant for an entire period — a decade for instance. The entire artistic output of that time is never taken into account, not even most of it. It is completely justifiable that others also fight for their rights — those discriminated against, those marginalized and those not included.

However, in this century everything will be different. First, we've already been living in the new millennium for 10 years, but few new directions have been identified by name — at least not in Latvia. In the art of the 1990s there was "metaphoric documentaries" (Helena Demakova),¹ as well as message art (Inga Steimane);² the next decade deserved at least one other. In addition, neither of the above have anything to do with painting; one could be left with the impression that for 20 years painting has existed without a direction. Second, though many predicted the end of the world in 2000 yet survived, we can safely ignore the seriousness of the previous century, or even, with a kindly smile, poke a little fun at it.

So, onwards: in the first decade of the twenty-first century Latvian painting saw the emergence and development of a new simplicity;³ there was no new "ism" but something more like the new functionality of the 1920s. This introduction will now be followed by an arbitrary interpretation of history with tendentiously selected examples and a display of subjective personal interest with misconceptions woven into its fabric.

History

In the description "the new simplicity", the emphasis should be placed on "simplicity". It is "new" in the sense that it was not evident in the 1990s. It is true "the old simplicity" may be evident in, for example Aija Zarina's striving for an extraordinary laconicism, but that is not what we are dealing with here. Historically, Latvian painting in the 1990s was dictated by Soviet trends of that period: the disorientated search for the "new" and institutional discrimination. The forces that had been politically and institutionally supported had already developed their signature style in previous decades, while the most capable artists such as Helena and Ivars Heinrihsons, and Girts Muiznieks, were also looked upon as authoritative among their colleagues. This prevented newcomers from coming up with a radical alternative.

They also spent less time on their work. The poverty of the 1990s forced artists to do other things, private galleries were still new and weak, and the only supporting institution — the Soros Contemporary Art Centre in Riga founded in 1993 — although it didn't entirely ignore painting, didn't support it either. The concept of contemporary art was constructed through discourse: "Contemporary art is [...] oriented to contemporary, and therefore often technologically, new media and new possibilities of artistic communication."⁴ The understanding of contemporary new concepts was formed by contrasting them with "old fashioned" ones. In practice, it meant that contemporary art was differentiated from "non-contemporary" simply by its belonging to a certain medium.

It is true that painting had little new to offer. Exhibition halls were filled with eclectic compositions of enormous scale. Painters stylized borrowed motifs from the Renaissance (Normunds Braslins and Paulis Postazs) Art Nouveau (Artis Bute and Roberts Kolcovs) and postmodernism (Janis Mitrevics, and Franceska Kirke). In figurative painting, the symbolism which had begun during the Soviet period continued, but the images and their metaphorical meanings connected poorly with the complicated painterly effects used. Most of the works were executed on the flat plane, or surface, avoiding any dimension of depth. Many experimented with ornaments, collages and with gold. The painters that were regularly working tried to express themselves through multimedia — Ieva Iltnerne and Barbara Muizniece, for example, created land art works at Pedvale — but many young artists were embarrassed about working with "pure" painting. The situation slowly changed over the next 10 years, by which time the media associated with digital technology were no longer so new and the futuristic enthusiasm about its revolutionary role in art had abated.

The above historical overview was vital: without knowledge of the local historical context it is easy to be confused, as happened to the German art critic Norbert Weber. Having read in the notes to the Candy Bomber painting exhibition of 2007 that it was meant to promote this genre, ironically remarked: "Here I have to wonder which genre could be more popular than painting."⁵ Moreover, we should recall "the noisy nineties" so that we can contrast it with the new simplicity of the coming decade.

Examples

A number of excellent artists who came to painting in the 1990s are still working. Tatjana Krivenkova and Kristine Keire, for instance. Although they've earned some degree of recognition — Tatjana won the Agija Suna

Gallery competition Gada glezna 2002 (Painting of the Year 2002) and Kristine represented Latvia at the 11th Vilnius Painting Triennial in 2000 — but they've never enjoyed widespread fame, by being interviewed in *Studija* magazine as that issue's artist, for example; the discourse was dominated by other priorities. However, both Krivenkova's as well as Keire's art demonstrates that in the chaotic legacy of the 1990s, the most vigorous tendency proved to be an interest in the abstract; other explorations are already looking hopelessly antiquated. Krivenkova has let the titles of her works determine the subject, turning to a nuanced colourful geometry deriving from a transparent prism's capacity to refract light and transform it into colours. Keire, who has also painted expressive figures, specifically those the Latvian National Museum of Art has purchased, in her other works develops the subject from light reflected off the canvas and the transparency of layers of colour, which she masterfully "manages" in order to achieve, for example, an impression of dusty glass. Characteristic of both artists is their tendency to focus more on the unique capacity of paintings to create images and less on their significance.

Artists at the front of "the new simplicity" were those who, shortly after 2000, renewed an interest in ordinary subjects, spatiality and the photographic aspect of painting. At least two of these three features are characteristic of Andris Vitolins, Vineta Kaulaca, Andris Eglitis — Professor Eduards Klavins has placed the last two among the followers of realism⁶ — and Janis Avotins. For a short time they were joined by Sigita Daugule and later also by Marite Guscika, Patricija Brekte and several completely new artists. A painterly asceticism, where the arsenal of specifically painterly weapons is substantially reduced in the name of integrity of contents is also typical of this trend: for example, Vitolins paints flatly, Kaulaca spatially, but both paint "hard" and "smoothly" without emphasis on brushwork. Guscika's works are black and white, Daugule's and Avotins almost monochrome. Avotins, currently the best-known Latvian artist internationally, greatly reduces drawing and paint, modelling spaces and figural forms with a tonally nuanced layering of fields. He is also the most consistent in his use of photographs, seeking to renew, with painterly resources, the sentience of scenes photographed many years ago. Inga Meldere uses photographic materials in a slightly different way, distilling from photographic documentation only that which is pictorially valuable and the most important in content. She, too, uses very similar tones and a narrow range of colour. In various series Andris Eglitis has tried different approaches, but a certain inattention to the pictorial "expressiveness" of individual fields and details, which seemed so fundamental in the previous period of art, is common to all his works.

It is symptomatic that it is difficult to verbalize this kind of painting. The titles of Eglitis' exhibitions "Zem debess juma" (Under the Cupola of the Sky, 2008) and "Es gribu but tur..." (I want to be thereŠ", 2009) are evidence that in his art it is vital to concentrate on the intervening space, the distance between those parts of reality which are to be objectivized. Without artists giving indications towards clear metaphors, curators and critics make do with allusions to "memories", "atmosphere" and "stillness".⁷

Meanwhile, colour and energy dominate on a different wing of the new simplicity; this also defines its identity through the sacrifice of a large number of painting instruments, primarily those used by the above artists. Some of the artists confine themselves to rather narrow gesticulation, concentrating on undiluted expression. Daiga Kruze invests a few dabs of colour with great power; her landscapes and portraits are more reminiscent of laconic

hieroglyphs than images of reality. Anda Lace creates shapes of human creatures, swirling up black and greyish brushstrokes against a light background. Evija Kiršone heightens the dynamics in landscape impressions, spreading bright colours directly with her palms. The subject matter of Otto Zitmanis' paintings could be viewed as conventionally figural, if the brushwork weren't so impulsively panicky and the nature of the images aesthetically hooligan-like. Verners Lazdāns also paints quickly and thickly, as if battling with a fear of missing something, and this is expressed in the contents of his painting. Local hooligan of Latvian contemporary art Kristians Brekte is more an experimenter in painting, visualizing the phantoms of imagination in trickles and spatters of paint with minimal intervention of the brush. Eriks Apalāis remains a little distanced from the others, and with analytical curiosity explores how a painter's most simple gestures could liberate the viewer's creative perception.

The spirit of "less is more" of the new simplicity is increasingly gaining a response from new painters. For example, one could mention Ronalds Rusmanis and Magone Sarkovska, who each in their own way have cast aside the infinite possibilities of painting in favour of a narrow, precisely oriented approach. Rusmanis uses simplified drawing and pictorially scanty colour solutions to produce small scenes of aeroplane life with a vein of black humour. Sarkovska, in turn, finds rhythmic structures in mundane fragments of reality.

Subjective personal interest

So that you shouldn't suspect me of having a personal interest in the identification of "the new simplicity" and am formulating it rather arbitrarily, offering what is desirable as though it already existed, I will acknowledge that this is indeed the case. The desirable in art often takes on the greatest variety of forms, even though the beauty of motivation, effort and intention are usually left in the boring shadow of cataloguing results.

The year 2000 serves as a convenient starting point for my observations about the decade. This is when I had decided to paint some black and white landscapes. I remember clearly that I wasn't really sure if I'd be able to pass it off as art, as at that time virtually everyone in my generation aspired to be colourful and flat. Not counting some classic painters, only Rīdums Ivanovs painted realistically, spatially and in monochrome, and was, therefore, ranked as a salonist by those refined women who understand art. Gallery owner Ivonna Veiherde invited Helena Heinrihsone to help her examine my work. Characteristically, this most notable representative of "pure colour materiality painting"⁸ proved to be so tolerant that she expressed an appreciation for a completely opposing approach. Evidence of the dynamics of the situation is that by 2004, this kind of expertise was no longer needed and some of my works were even included in the annual exhibition organized by the Contemporary Art Centre where, up to that point, painting hadn't been noticeable. Even though I have moved from works to words since then, I don't wish to observe processes "from the sidelines" and am glad that for a short while I, too, lost myself in the same direction as some of the best artists of the decade. Furthermore, the view from within is not in competition with the view from outside since each has its own irreplaceable magic.

Fallacies

Each new step in art and in art criticism, if it doesn't lead us backwards, can be compared to being lost; the territory is still undiscovered and the goal unknown and I shall conclude with a few thoughts on the painting of the past decade.

First, it should be regarded neither as a continuation nor a denial of exhibition practices of the 1990s, but of an older tradition that is personified by the Art Academy of Latvia (LMA). As we know, for years students there learned to paint using live models "from nature" and used a rich assortment of technical approaches. But even Professor Kaspars Zarins of the Academy, in an interview with Inga Steimane, admitted that "the painting from models is completely outdated".⁹ Actually, it's not so much from nature as from knowledge, that students learn to paint various poses of the human body credibly and to make them conform to a certain stylization. I myself remember the negative attitude of the Academy to the too naturalistic imitation of nature. For decades, artists after completing their studies attempted to paint "from memory", varying what they had learned, studying the experiences of others, attempting to find their style and so on. It is only in this century that painting "from a photograph" has really made its presence felt, even though, as mentioned at the beginning of this essay, photorealism in Latvia was known in the early-1970s.

One could speculate at this point as to why it didn't take on at the Academy, or at exhibitions: how might it have been if Miervaldis Polis or Liga Purmale had had their own students? Why do the older generation of painters at times hide the fact that they have used photographs for their work, even when it's patently obvious? After all, throughout the twentieth century photography was a technologically complex art which, however, respected painting. Preconditions for the turnabout were created not so much by the birth of the new digital photography, as its unpredictably swift spread, together with the equally explosive pervasiveness of the Internet in visual communication. Only the positive saturation by these infinitely reproducible images created the necessity for a new attitude towards them. The so-called "soap-dish" style of photographic art (so-called after the low-tech cameras common in Latvia in the 1990s, often still preferred among amateurs and professionals because of their ease of use — ed.) stands out as a kind of dividing line, a style that in Latvia was represented most strikingly by the "Myself, Friends, Lovers and Others" series, developed over 2001–2002 by Arnis Balcus. The simplicity with which images could be multiplied forced artists to position themselves against them, either by studying and criticizing them, or, conversely, searching for forms of expression unavailable to digital image culture. And painting, without doubt, is one of these. A consciousness of the inimitable and non-reproducible qualities of painting quite naturally leads to the abandonment of all others and, inevitably, to a new simplicity.

¹ Demakova, Helena. Citas sarunas. ("Other Conversations") Riga: Visual Communication Department, 2002, p. 371.

² Steimane, Inga. Janis Vinkelis. Riga: Neputns, 2003, p. 14.

³ The term new simplicity previously used to describe trends in German music in the late-1970s and early-1980s, also the design direction of this century which breaks with the shape of brevity.

⁴ Klavins, Eduards. Par laikmetigas maksas jedzienu. ("About the concept of contemporary art") From: SCAC-Riga 1993-1999. Riga: SCAC-Riga, 2000, p. 3.

⁵ Weber, Norbert. Time Will Show ("Laiks radis"). Studija, 2008, No. 59, April-May, p. 92.

⁶ Klavins, Eduards. Virziena noturiba. ("Stability of the direction") Studija, 2007, No. 53, April-May, p. 72.

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Rudovska, Maija. A few words about the latest developments in Latvian painting. Epifanio, 2009, No. 10, pp. 6-9.

⁸ Klavins, Eduards. "Heinrihsone nav/ir Heinrihsone" (Heinrihsone isn't/Heinrihsone is), in Helena Heinrihsone, Catalogue. Riga: Maksla XO Gallery, 2007, p. 7.

⁹ Steimane, Inga. Ko grib iekseja balss? ("What does the inner voice want?") Kulturas Forums, 2010, 10 March, p. 12.

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