

LENA SHAPOSHNIKOVA

Gli occhi hanno paura ma le mani fanno

17. Marzo – 10. Aprile 2022

“Art must be able to alienate, irritate, disturb, and, yes, even to be painful. It dwells somewhere else. It is at home in what is foreign. It is just this foreignness that accounts for the aura of the artwork.” Byung-Chun

Han, *The Palliative Society: Pain Today*

To explain this Russian saying, recalcitrant to literal translations, it could be said that “it contains multitudes”, like Walt Whitman’s expansive ego. It embodies the soul of an oppressed community, a way of living, a philosophy. It is a movement as dynamic as it is metaphorical. It is the will not to surrender to the circumstances of life and, by doing, to change one’s surroundings.

Acting, through the canvas and the brushes, Lena Shaposhnikova pictorially expresses imaginary visions. In sequences that seem dreamlike and unreal, Lena brings together the present with history, the private with the political, the individual with collective memory, the real with fiction. In the exhibition we see pieces of art created in the last three years, but which, seen through our contemporary eyes, seem to emerge from the rawness of the present. “In these terrible days for all of us I am often told that my paintings are war images inspired by reportage photographs” explains Shaposhnikova. “Apart from some paintings literally transposed from reality, I have never deliberately dealt with the subject. It must have stayed in our memories a long time ago, somewhere, there was that bad feeling in the air. On a subconscious level, images that were always in our peripheral vision entered in me. This must be the way the pain of injustice is poured out. Today, more than ever, the sensation of pain has become more intense: I’m suffering.”

If one were to look for the reason, we would find that at the center of Lena Shaposhnikova’s creations, lies the mysterious, which with its ethereal and elusive evanescence is responsible for the symbolic force of these images. Not contextualizable, enigmatic and evocative, the pieces of art approach the limits of the definable; like those of kneeling men or the vast landscapes populated by unknown figures. Lena Shaposhnikova’s truth cannot be found in encyclopedias or archives, but only on the canvas itself. There is no need for an explicatory guide to classify the paintings. It is only required the individual and personal perception of shapes, colors and of course the subjective experience. The artist does not try to give lessons to the spectators, but rather acts as a careful observer of her surroundings. Drawing partly inspiration from her own experiences and partly from the collective ones, Shaposhnikova manages to create a symbolic identity code that can be deciphered by anyone through the image itself. The artist’s personal experience in Siberia plays only a secondary role. In Shaposhnikova’s words: “I think that Siberia in general isn’t too different from other snowy landscapes, in fact I don’t think I have ever portrayed Siberia specifically in my work. It is a collective image, but it’s not made on purpose; it just happened. However, my country somehow influenced the image.”

Characteristic of her works of art is the de-individualization of man and color, which rarely coincides with its natural counterpart. The people in her paintings are anonymous, their faces are usually unrecognizable and are not identifiable in the space-time dimension. They don’t represent anyone in particular, but rather a universal idea of humanity. Their boundaries don’t give any precise spatial indication. The narration is deliberately avoided.

The scenic representation does not tell but makes a certain sensation tangible. All of this is evident in the piece of art *Yellow Snow I* (2020): The painting is divided into two sections by the horizon line, a characteristic of the artist; the sky is separated from the vast snowy landscape in which we recognize two

people in a ditch. As in many other pieces of art by the artist, the colors are dark, almost turbid. The mixture application of the acrylic paint allows the spectator to perceive the heaviness of the yellow snow and its ubiquity. “Most of the time they are associations or residual memories” says the artist. “Maybe if I lived in Russia, I wouldn’t think of painting snow like this, where obviously you see it white. I remember this dirty yellow snow in February, which I have always hated, but it’s the one I remember the most, probably because of the intensity of my feelings about it.” The figure in the shadows appears spectral as a *fatamorgana*. Their silhouette becomes an icon, a notion, an idea that seems to dissolve into the color of the surroundings at any time. Are they real or imaginary people? Beyond the ideologic trench warfare, Shaposhnikova’s painting virtually symbolizes the dissolution of writing and image, abstraction, and object in the continuum of painting.

The installation *Non returning Point* (2021)¹ combines the physicality of the sculpture with the pictorial medium. It consists of various polystyrene blocks that Shaposhnikova assembles in a 2 x 2-meter cube. A space within another space. We move between these two. To see the entire installation, the spectator is invited to move around it. The contexts are fragmented, and the spectator can perceive them only in a fragmentary way. “For me the submarine is a metaphor of my motherland” says the artist “A giant block which however is forced to be locked up and separated from the rest of the world.”

In the intimacy of their effect, Lena Shaposhnikova’s notebooks, exclusively in watercolor, can be combined with the large-size cube. They can be seen as dictionaries about feelings, or a sort of diary in an artistic form, in which to fix emotions in a few strokes. “Watercolor is the best way to maneuver between control and randomness in a work” says Shaposhnikova “I like to paint with that because there’s always space for randomness, and at the same time I can always intervene and decide. Sometimes acrylic paint is used for some details, nothing more. It is deaf and inert. It changes a lot of color. It seems to be too limited in its properties.”

In the current series of pieces of art *Look* (2021 - today), the artist focuses on anonymous faces, returning to the medium of watercolors. The transparency of the watercolor recalls the negative of a face, such as Turin’s Holy Shroud. The faces are then divided with paper cuts with sharp edges, painted in a contrasting color with the face. Overall, they recall scars, wounds, or permanent marks. As we move away from the image, the individual pieces fuse themselves more and more with the facial features, demanding from the spectator a question: does pain destroy, or does it create our identity?

Text by Evfrosiniya Bumazhova

Translation by Daniel Yeniss Unni

¹ : Explanation by Lena Shaposhnikova: 10 years after the fall of the URSS in 2000, Russia, despite a deep socio-economic crisis, was a country that was breathing for the first time a certain political and civil freedom. But in 2000, the tragedy of the Kursk submarine occurred, where soldiers died in the Barents Sea at a depth of one hundred meters. During this event the media allowed themselves to judge the management of the situation by the institutions. This led to compromising the image of the government in the eyes of the people who followed with interest the situation on TV. It is likely that at the moment the newly appointed president Putin, designed a plan of greater control over the media, and that the Kursk tragedy was the starting point in which freedom of the press began its new decline.