

# Mikołaj Kowalski

## Nothing Extraordinary

**Curator:** Waldemar Tatarczuk

**Cooperation:** Agnieszka Cieślak

**Exhibition opening:** January 27th, 2017 (Friday), 7 p.m.

**Exhibition open until:** February 19th, 2017 (Tuesday-Sunday, 12 a.m. – 7 p.m.)

**Free admission**

### **The landscape of everyday life and the artistic experiment**

That, what interests Mikołaj Kowalski the most is everyday life – its ordinariness, monotony, a distinct sort of constancy. Astute observation of the reality surrounding the artist is the first stage of his creative process, but what he presents on the canvass is never a direct transposition.

Most of the time he paints landscapes, which he creates as impressions or attempts at grasping a particular mood – monochromatically and slightly melancholically. Behind the conceptual layer of the image there is a deep reflection on artistic solutions, a consistent analysis of their structure and the physical properties of the paint.

The artistic experiment is incredibly important for Kowalski when it comes to examining the possible materials used while painting – apart from the substances typically used by painters he also resorts to, among other things, glass, flour, papier-mâché and wax. His drive towards semi-spatiality as well as emphasizing the objectiveness of the image links him to the artistic trend of structuralism – this refers to both early paintings, which imitate particular objects by way of optical illusion, as well as the later, more abstract, ones.

The seriousness which results from the call on the power of nature, its versatility and durability, is balanced by a wink to the viewer – the artist often introduces to his work elements of discrete humour and plays with the viewer's perception, upsetting his or her clichés of thinking about art. Kowalski's works are characterized by intentional ambiguity, understatement, as well as a subtle play of meanings.

His choice of studying art, as Mikołaj Kowalski recalls, was ultimately inspired by the teacher and artist, Zdzisław Kwiatkowski. Although Kwiatkowski is first and foremost a performer, Kowalski was inspired by his attitude toward painting, which he treated with subtle wittiness. Oskar Dawicki is yet another performer, whom he valued for the latter's frivolity intertwined with seriousness – perhaps due to these affinities one can find subtle humorous elements in the works of the young artist.

### **Painterly imitations of reality**

Mikołaj Kowalski used to go to the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Art Department on foot, on the way observing the cracked up pavement stones on Głęboka Street. This inspired an entire series of artistic imitations – *Slabs (Płytony)* (2013) which were able to evoke consternation among its viewers, forcing them to face a surprising illusion. The meticulous recreation of the texture of the paving tiles, cobblestones, a stone umbrella holder or wooden boards was not the only goal of the artist. He would transpose objects taken out of their typical context to the gallery, together with their distinct location, mood or even the mark of their presence. *The Umbrella Holder (Parasolnik)* (2013) was accompanied by the *The Anti-Umbrella Holder (Antyparasolnik)* (2013) – a sort of negative, a reflection, a symbol imprinted on canvas. The few works of the artist that are richer in colours are the paintings from the *Carpets (Dywany)* series done with oil paint, which when applied appropriately on the canvas perfectly imitates the soft texture of the fabric.

This sort of activity can seem akin to the artistic strategy of Wojciech Gilewicz, who imitates everyday reality by the way of hyper realistic camouflage. And yet, in contrast to Mikołaj Kowalski, he veils the actual objects or fragments of municipal landscape with their artistic equivalents, literarily inscribing images into a given context, thus changing the mechanisms of how they function. Gilewicz takes painting to the streets, creating imitations of reality, whereas Kowalski takes elements of everyday life and transposes them to the conventional realm of the gallery.

Despite the immense emphasis, which Kowalski links to the visual and technical side of his works, he tries to maintain the balance between their formal side and their content. "It's not just lumps of paint, there is also some sort of an idea behind it," he claims. Kowalski is also seeking a golden mean between the emotional and the intellectual reception of his art – the paintings veil a hidden meaning, which one must discover, they are also indistinctly ambiguous, for example cracked earth, which is at the same time flaky oil paint. The perpetual process of examining the image's structure leads to the creation of entire series, in which each one is a reaction to the previous one. Sometimes the inspiration for further exploration is the topic itself and sometimes the trickling streams of paint.

When the representation of the pavement tile was nearly transformed into a tile in itself (with an identical size, thickness and wax covered in paint reminiscent of a stone), Kowalski, as he admits

himself, started to lack space in his painting. The artist avoids linear perspective on purpose – he achieves depth thanks to colour, oblique perspective or optical manoeuvres, such as using glass and mirrors. There are moments when the texture on its own makes the piece of art three-dimensional and sometimes the image is literally transformed into a spatial object. A good example here is the cloth imitating tree bark that Kowalski formed into the shape of an actual tree-trunk, although he emphasizes that he is a painter and that painting remains at the centre of his artistic interests.

Kowalski is also interested in the role of randomness in art. When painting a series of *Genetic Paintings (Obrazy genetyczne)* he is influenced, among others, by the strategies of Ryszard Winiarski, a representative of indeterminism in the visual arts (for example creating an image with the aid of tosses of dice). These works, abstract at first glance, in fact reflect the shapes and colours of the fish he kept – the guppies, popular among aquarium owners. The way the particular images look like is intentionally determined by chance, or to be more precise – the genetical conditioning of the fish.

### **Nothing extraordinary... or maybe**

*Nothing Extraordinary (Nic nadzwyczajnego)* is the first individual exhibition for Mikołaj Kowalski, who graduated painting at the Art Department at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin in 2016. His works were created between 2015 and 2017 and explore the theme of the landscape, which is very dear for him in various ways. These are experiments of a formal nature, which stand out due to their distinct approach to the motif of a tree, a view of a setting sun, as well as a reflection on the very essence of nature and the arts. The paintings from the *Tops (Czubki)* (2017) series show the tops of coniferous trees in the streaks of pouring rain in such a manner that the paint itself is blurred and seems to trickle down from the lower end of the canvass. The impression on the verge of abstraction ideally captures the mood of a rainy night, while paying attention to interesting painting solutions: an unusual frame, a synthetic approach to the presented motif as well as a brave approach to the painting material.

The artist treated nature in a completely different way in the art installation *Paint-Hedge (Farbopłót)* (2015-2017). On large-format canvasses he presented a row of majestic, oval edged shapes, which make an eerie or even ominous impression. After a moment of reflection one can recognize thujas in them, which are plants used often to fend off the peeping glance of one's neighbours. The silhouettes of the trees were painted using a thick layer of dark-green and gold coloured paint, which bear clear traces of paintbrush smudges – the thujas are simultaneously plants as well as their material representation. The steel blue, smooth background contrasts with the massive hedge, which introduces an impression of space to the painting. The artist additionally used an interesting treatment by hanging on the juxtaposing side a piece of glass covered in dark green paint. The image is reflected in it as in a mirror, thus creating a suggestive illusion of infinity.

Mirror covered surfaces play a large role as well in his *Bright Tree (Jasne drzewo)* (2017) and *Dark Tree (Ciemne drzewo)* (2017) pieces. Realistic, three-dimensional tree trunks covered with bark are actually wooden constructions made out of cloth, papier-mâché and acrylic enamel. Objects are reflected in the huge planes flanking them, which magnifies the impression of their spatiality. The motif of the mirror in an artistic installation brings to mind the spatial projects of Leon Tarasewicz

– much like the latter, Mikołaj Kowalski consistently explores the limits of painting. However, the young artist points to his inspiration with Gerhard Richter, the author of, among others, an art installation compiled exclusively of glass and mirrors.

In a miniature piece entitled *Laser Sunshine (Laserowe słoneczko)* (2016), in a humorous, slightly ironic fashion Kowalski refers to the convention of a kitschy postcard with a summer holiday photograph. The view of the sun setting beneath the horizon was represented in a lapidary fashion typical for him. The canvass, similarly to Tomasz Ciecierski's landscapes, is divided into two spaces: two thirds of it are smoothly covered in paint – the blue sky, and the rest – the dark depths of the sea – is depicted using short, impasto smudges of a paintbrush. Above its surface we can notice a pink spot – a symbol of the setting sun. It seems to be nothing extraordinary before we notice that it is not a physical mark of paint, but a laser beam.

Whereas in the series called simply *Untitled (Bez tytułu)* (2016) Mikołaj Kowalski carefully examines the structure of the painting material, reflecting on the essence of painting as such. A series of miniature paintings created based on the observation of “scrubs”, which constantly accumulate in an emptied jar of paint. Colourful, organic lumps of oil paint emerge from the surface of old boards like arboreal polypores, unmasking the physicality of the object, and simultaneously – in a perverse way presenting the very essence of painting.

The counterpoint for the aforementioned works is *The Timeless Image (Obraz ponadczasowy)* (2017): an object compiled of an old clock as well as a canvass covered with wax. The clock, whilst measuring the passage of time, with the aid of a thin metal wire mauls a deeper and deeper streak in the lair of wax – the physical trace of the fleeting hours. Kowalski was inspired to this experiment by Paul Klee or more precisely – by the artist's concepts referring to the concept of time.

In Mikołaj Kowalski's painting we shall never notice any human figures, which the artist considers to be an accidental element, for he is focused on the universality and constancy of reality. Paradoxically, *The Timeless Image (Obraz ponadczasowy)* tells the story of the human being and the perpetual process of destruction and degradation which accompanies him. Kowalski juxtaposes ephemeral human nature with the natural world and its continuous cycle of rebirths, the power of which incessantly clashes with humanity's destructive activities.

**Agnieszka Cieślak**

**Mikołaj Kowalski** (b. 1991 in Lublin) – graduated painting from the Art Department at the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin in 2016 (his diploma was gained under the supervision of professor Jacek Wojciechowski). Kowalski places great emphasis on the visual side of his paintings, constantly experimenting with their form and the structure of the materials used in the painting process. The subject matter of his works is no less significant for him – the landscape of everyday life derived from his observation of the surrounding world, slightly melancholic, with elements of subtle humour as well as a play on the viewer's perception.