

**The Gloaming:
Narrative in Contemporary Painting**

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Abstract

The key to understanding my project lies in the assumption that the task of representation for contemporary painting is different from that of newer media such as photography and film. I see the role of painting as being the representation of the past; an engagement with history. Many of the painters who have inspired my way of seeing are artists who re-imagined the role of pre-modernist narrative painting and re-asserted it in contemporary practice. Contemporary narrative painting occupies a different role from that of its pre-modernist predecessors, such as Romantic painting. It also occupies a different role in relation to dominant narrative media of photography and film.

Both the old engagements of Romantic painting and the newer engagements of photography and film are, for the most part, transparent. Romantic painting operates on a pre-arranged set of symbols; its audience is aware of the meanings of the various symbols. Thus the artists' intentions were rooted in the use of these symbols as a means of communicating with their audience. The primary engagement of film and photography today is with a wider

mass audience. With some exceptions, most films today are clearly told stories aimed at a mass audience.

Contemporary narrative painters deliberately employ the outmoded approach of old painting forms; they situate their mode of narrative in the margins of contemporary storytelling to assert a revolutionary position.

These artists reconfigure and re-imagine history by preparing open ended narratives which conflict with our sense of the past. They work in an idiosyncratic manner, relying on personal characteristics that have been adopted from an earlier age. Perhaps in their marginalised arena these artists do not need to focus on the conventions of the dominant media, conventions prescribed by the expectations of a mass audience. The audiences of contemporary narrative painting are forced to discover new ways of seeing in order to interpret the complex motives and personal motifs of each artist. They need to alter their sense of memory and the role of history.

In Section I, I look at the context of history in the work of Takashi Murakami, Neo Rauch and Jockum Nordstrom. In their work each of these artists presents a unique sense of history. In this section of the thesis I pay special attention to the history of the future.

In Section II, I discuss my own methodology. I focus specifically on concepts surrounding imagination and revival in order to describe my working process within the framework of academic ideas.

In Section III, I give a detailed explanation of my artworks.

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Introduction

The world I paint has no future. It is a self-contained place without apparent movement. Yet on closer scrutiny, movement of a sort can be perceived. A receding pull from the past, to the past. This pull stems from the exploration of the old roads, an attempt to discover among these paths that which has been forgotten or overlooked. Strangely, when discovered, the relics that inspire my world carry with them qualities that resonate with the uncertainty we usually associate with the future; their unfamiliarity stems from their connection with a now distant world.

From the current moment, the future may be a distant place, but when Theodore Nelson stated that 'the future is not what it used to be' (Rosenberg & Harding 2004:59), he acknowledges that the future has its own history. Various writers of fiction, scientists, and futurists have attempted to give a form to the future. Each one is influenced by the ideologies of their own time. Thus, to look at the future means also to look at the past. Fictional futures are more descriptive of the 'then' present than they are indicative of times to come. For

example, George Orwell's *1984*, written in 1949, describes a dystopia that can be understood as an expression of his concerns about the political situation at the time of his writing. Science fiction writing has presented us with myriad definitions for this concept: dreams of utopias and dread of cataclysm.

Each generation and culture has had its own conjectures about the future, some of which have come to fruition and more that have not. The fears and desires associated with any given future are caused as much by the past as they are by the present; our knowledge of the future is both as full and as flawed as our understanding of our past (Rosenberg & Harding 2004: 59).

The artists I have chosen to discuss in my thesis draw on visual languages or imagery that is rooted in earlier contexts; in their interaction with these earlier contexts they disrupt historic narratives in order to produce alternative narratives. In the work of Takashi Murakami, Neo Rauch and Jockum Nordstrom, these alternatives acknowledge the artist's awareness of the original history and an intention to discover its hidden meanings.

In terms of my personal experience, the 'final moment', where the future ceases to facilitate a strand of possibilities, is situated in the experience of my leaving Poland when I was nine years old. As an artist I continually return to this point, and from it I look back at my past, not from the viewpoint of the child about to leave, but from that of the adult returning, remembering his expectations of what would come next. This return allows me to engage my past with the answer to the questions I had then. It allows me to engage with my past from a different perspective.

My aim is to describe the distance between the person I am now and the child I was then. There are cultural and political shifts that would seem to have shaped this development: the physical move from Poland to South Africa, from Communism to a (now) democratic environment. However, my investigation focuses on more personal changes. An anchoring point for my practice is my relationship to the comic book medium. As a child I found American comic books to be totally alien. Not only did they come from a different ideological background, but they were of a different visual tradition

from the comics I had grown up with in Poland.

My initial experience of American comics was when my father sent them to me from England, while my mother and I were still in Poland. The comics he sent me differed vastly from their Polish equivalents in both style and content. The strangeness of these comics fueled my obsession with finding out what they meant. The difference between comics from the western world and the eastern bloc, when analysed from a distance, can be variously interpreted on different levels. My interpretation was idiosyncratic because it was shaped by the particularities of my own experience. My first experience of them was as an outsider, unable to read the comics and forced to interpret them from the order of pictures. Many of my interpretations, I only discovered later, were wrong. Consequently my later experience is that of someone adjusting for the wrong interpretations of the first encounter. In terms of my work I seek a middle ground where both experiences play a vital role.

These American comics have to me become a symbol of the future; when I

was still in Poland they were pieces of the place I was going to.

The term I use to contextualise my own work in this thesis, is 'gloaming'. The gloaming is the moment following the sunset; it is a pause between the end of the day and the beginning of night. I see this as a moment where time hesitates and the future and past are equally distanced, both equally unfamiliar. In this moment there is a pause; the progressive day-to-day rhythm stops and waits. As such, a viewer from within the gloaming looks to two places, the future and the past, from the viewpoint of the present. I try to bring this duality to my pictures by being aware of the potential of both the future and the past. The audience is presented with an image from which they can imagine a further narrative, both preceding the moment depicted in the image, and following it.

My work is like a new chapter which has been secretly added in among the chapters of an old book describing the future. My chapter follows the logic of the old text but is shaped by the very knowledge that the old text tried to predict. I do not want my addition to stand out and, accordingly, I disguise it so that it will follow the style of the

original. I intentionally insert outlandish perspectives and rely on aesthetics that position my addition as part of the past.

Section I

The Context of History

In this section I focus on the gloaming as a means of situating history in the work of Takashi Murakami, Neo Rauch and Jockum Nordstrom. I wish to explore the links between Takashi Murakami's paintings and Japan's war legacy; how in spite of this topic becoming taboo in post-war Japan, the subject of war survived by being integrated into Japanese *otaku* culture. I look at how Neo Rauch engages with his changing environment through a visual mode cultivated by the previous, collapsed regime. Neo Rauch paints the changes in the former eastern bloc in the graphic traditions of social realism. He finds purpose in an utterly outmoded means by invigorating it with a personal idiosyncratic agenda. In Jockum Nordstrom's work I will focus on a practice which positions the artist in the vestiges before his time. Nordstrom uses old illustrations and novels from earlier centuries. He unearths the revolutionary energies of these icons of the distant past by energising their form with the momentum of our time. Nordstrom never positions his subject within a

coherent era; his work is a subjective interpretation of our haphazard history.

i. Past futures: Takashi Murakami

We want to see the newest things.
That is because we want to see the future, even if only momentarily. It is the moment in which, even if we don't completely understand what we have glimpsed, we are nonetheless touched by it. This is what we have come to call 'art.'
(Murakami. 2001:188)

The opening statement of Takashi Murakami's *Theory of Superflat Japanese Art* (2001) sums up his artistic and curatorial concerns over the previous five years. The new, a moment in which we see a depiction of the future, whether it be true or false, is where Murakami's interests intersect with the ideologies of *otaku*¹ culture; the idea of grasping an unattainable dream. This is the characteristic obsession of *otaku* culture, manifest in *manga*² and *anime*³.

The *otaku* attach importance to their childhood experiences of watching *anime* and reading *manga*, which provided an escape, because these

¹ *Otaku* are members of a Japanese subculture obsessed with *manga* and *anime*.

² Japanese comic books.

³ Japanese animation films or television series.

fantasies revolve around the fictional future. The future here becomes real, a place that functions to remove the *otaku* audience from the drudgery and the problems of the present.

For the purpose of this thesis I wish to focus on the social function of *otaku* culture, as described by Murakami, specifically on how *otaku* culture, as a closed system, revolves around the fictions portrayed in *manga* and *anime*, and how these texts have in turn been defined by the interests of the *otaku* audience. I also wish to focus on how the themes of *otaku* culture, whilst deeply rooted in the past, specifically in the mentality of the survivors of the war, have become apprehensive of the future

In the *Theory of Superflat Japanese Art* (2001), Murakami heralds the work of Yoshinori Kanada, the chief animator for the *anime* miniseries *Space Cruiser Yamato*.¹ He compares Kanada's animation technique to the post-war Japanese painting tradition, as discussed in Nobou Tsuji's book *The Lineage of Eccentricity*. As in his writing, where Murakami engages with the social and historical strata of

Japanese society and culture, Murakami's artwork integrates diverse elements of Japanese popular culture and its traditions. He utilises the aesthetics of Japanese pop culture within the framework of Japanese traditional painting. In the process of unifying the divisions between popular culture and tradition, Murakami addresses issues relating to the dramatic rifts in Japan's post-war history.

Introduction to *otaku* subculture

Takashi Murakami's 2005 exhibition *Little Boy* was an event which exhibited aspects of *otaku*² culture alongside works of contemporary Japanese artists such as Yoshitomo Nara and Aya Takano, artists who are affiliated with Murakami's super flat movement. The exhibition focused on the social impact of the destruction by atomic bomb of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

¹ *Space Cruiser Yamato* (1974-1975) is one of the key series associated with *otaku* culture.

² Specifically classic *anime* films, action figures and *mangas*

In post-Pacific War Japan, the visual arts avoided dealing with war-related topics. In the *Theory of Superflat Japanese Art* Murakami points out that the paintings of Katsushika Hokusai and Ito Jakuchu were integral to Nobuo Tsuji's concept of eccentricity, a concept, which as Murakami puts it was 'revolutionary to the understanding of postwar Japanese art history' (Murakami 2001:188). It is interesting to note that these paintings come from the 19th century. Murakami abandons post-war Japanese art and focuses on aspects of Japanese culture which relate to the taboo topic of war or relate to Japanese culture which has not been westernised.

During the war, the Japanese government had commissioned Japan's most influential painters for works detailing the events of the conflict; these paintings constituted the function of art as propaganda. After the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki all such commissions ceased and Japan's fine arts abandoned the topic. The issue of the Pacific War only returned to high art in the 1990s through Japanese Neo-pop.

During their absence from the fine arts, themes relating to war and to Japan's

trauma and defeat were transplanted into Japan's *otaku* subculture (Sawaragi 2005: 200). Noi Sawaragi aligns the beginnings of *otaku* culture with the beginnings of mass media in Japan. He writes that through the 1964 Olympic Games 'individual families, eager to see live telecasts of the Olympic Games, rushed to acquire television sets. This turned the whole nation into a network of households sharing an influx of identical information.' (2005:188)

Through this network, Japanese children shared the same experiences of *anime* broadcast on television, which, according to Sawaragi (2005), provided the basis for the birth of the *otaku* subculture. Similarly *manga* gained popularity as a published version of the themes popularised through *anime*. Artists and writers who produced *anime* were also involved in the production of *manga* and many of the major *anime* titles ran parallel storylines in *manga* format. Despite *anime's* broader exposure, *manga* versions of major titles are often far more accomplished works.

Some of the children from this generation formed the first generation of *otaku*, adults who were still fascinated by their early experiences of *anime*, *manga* and *Tokusatsu*.¹ The initial task of *otaku* culture was to focus on the themes of the post-apocalyptic. These themes, while rooted in Japanese history; are a fictional retelling of an experience rather than the retelling of historical fact. These themes concentrated the attention of Japanese audiences on the traumatic past that was not to be forgotten. The first generation of children that experienced television broadcasts and mass media was exposed to *anime* and *manga* imbued with a latent antagonism towards the U.S, an antagonism that reflected the legacy of the Pacific War (Sawaragi 2005:197). The time of the *otaku*'s obsession with *manga* and *anime* spans the 1970s to the present. In their adulthood this same audience held *otaku* conventions, where *manga*, *anime* and science fiction were discussed.

To discuss *otaku* culture means to discuss *manga* and *anime*. Many *otaku*

¹ This term implies 'special filming'. It is the loose slang name given to the famous Japanese monster movies such as *Godzilla* (1954).

changed their role in this culture from recipients to creators by becoming directors, artists and writers who contributed to the development of previous themes, initiated by earlier artists whose work was influenced by the traumatic experiences of the nuclear bombings. Themes of a post-apocalyptic nature were recycled in new forms, the medium in some instances becoming highly aware of its *otaku* audiences. The shift by many *otaku* from audience to creator implies a desire to own an aspect of the medium and a concern that certain ideas born of the media should remain prevalent, these being the ideas initiated by post-war *manga* and *anime* artists such as Ozama Tezuku and Yoshinori Kanada.

Initially the label *otaku* was associated with adults, mainly men, who continued to read *manga* and *anime* into their adulthood. It was seen as unacceptable behaviour to engage with such media as an adult. The stories in *manga* and *anime* were regarded as childish, however, 'today *manga* and *anime* have become mainstream Japanese culture, the full length animated films of director Hayo Miyazuki are celebrated. Every subway is filled with commuters

Otaku of the 1970s to the 1990s took an anti-heroic stance; it functioned as a sub-culture which remained outside of the mainstream by indulging in deviant behaviour. Due to the acceptance of contemporary *anime* and *manga* by Japanese society, the post-apocalyptic themes that originally fuelled *otaku* culture are now cornerstones of Japanese popular culture and there remains no reason to conceal or marginalise them into a sub-cultural arena.

Some of the key concerns developed by the *otaku*'s traditional inquiries into *manga* and *anime* have filtered through to the artistic practices of contemporary Japanese fine artists. Takashi Murakami's *Theory of Superflat Japanese Art* (2001) explores Japanese identity through its stringent elevation of original Japanese concepts, such as *ukiyo-e* and *otaku* culture, into the global arena.

The traditional crafts of *ukiyo-e* focus typically on the lifestyle of Japan in the Edo period.¹ 'It is an art closely connected with the pleasures of theatres, restaurants, teahouses, geisha and courtesans in the city.' (Johansson

2002) Many *ukiyo-e* prints were in fact posters, advertising theatre performances, brothels, or idol portraits of popular actors and beautiful teahouse girls. But this more or less sophisticated world of urban pleasures was also informed by the traditional Japanese love of nature. Accordingly, this art form did not attribute any superior distinction currently given to art. Murakami upholds this belief, thus he is disseminating his practice into what would be the contemporary equivalent of the *ukiyo-e* tradition, i.e. Japanese pop culture. For example, Murakami's practice includes mass-produced plush toys available to the general public rather than only art collectors. Superflat offers a revision of *ukiyo-e* through the lens of Japanese contemporary popular culture.

Jacques Derrida has suggested that ours is the age of the postapocalyptic. By the time mass culture became cognizant of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Holocaust and Stalinist purges, the apocalypse was no longer the object of morbid speculation, but a familiar historical fact. The lesson was that the worst we might imagine happening already has. In this way, the apocalyptic fantasy constitutes a

¹ 1603-1867

restaging of historical trauma, permitting its sublimation into commodifiable packages. (Beshty 2005: 54)

The topic of war avoided exclusion from Japanese awareness by withdrawing from dominant discourse and playing a part in establishing post-war Japanese popular culture, a realm where the implications of violence and death are often translated into unreal, fictional, or comedic events. The retrieval of the subject of war from these events is to a large extent the subject of Takashi Murakami's art. He identifies the means of survival for this legacy as the *otaku* culture.

Murakami seeks to reveal to us the nature of *otaku* as a keeper of the war legacy. His paintings draw inspiration from *otaku*, from the images present in *anime* and *manga*. He also aims to extend the themes of *otaku* culture beyond their conventional media of *manga* and *anime*. He reworks the motifs of *otaku* culture through the conventions of traditional Japanese painting and also reconfigures the principles of this tradition through the conventions set by the founders of contemporary Japanese *anime*. The product of this approach is a hybrid

which cites a complex composition of Japanese expressions, a juxtaposition of various non-linear moments which in unison affirm similarities between elements that have usually been separated or ostracised. Murakami's work mediates a return of the topic of war to the central discourse. It is a middle ground where *otaku* culture intersects with Japanese high culture.

Murakami has stated that his fascination with *anime* stems from his love of drawings and *anime* puts drawings in motion (Cruz 1999:16). Despite this statement, Murakami makes paintings inspired by single static images taken from *anime* films and series, which communicate the harsh sentiments of the post-war era.



Takashi Murakami. *Time Bokan – Pink*. 2001

His 2001 painting *Time Bokan – Pink* is a rendition of a motif taken from an anime series *Time Bokan*.¹ The motif is an explosive cloud which in its zenith transforms into a human skull.



Still from the anime *Time Bokan*.

Murakami's painting is like a still frame – it separates the image of the explosion from the context of the anime series, the content of which was frivolously cute. Alone, the motif stands as a dark reminder of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Murakami retrieves a valuable aspect of Japanese history from *otaku* culture, takes it outside the exclusive context of the *otaku* and positions it before a broader audience.

While *Time Bokan – Pink* is a reference to a particular anime motif,

other paintings by Murakami explore general themes of *otaku* culture.



Takashi Murakami. *Tan Tan Bo Puking*. 2002

In *Tan Tan Bo Puking* (2002) Murakami portrays Tan Tan Bo, the artist's alter ego, in total meltdown. The character's state reflects the key theme of Inoshiro Honda's film *Godzilla* (1954) in which a sleeping dinosaur is awoken by the destructive power of a nuclear weapons test. The dinosaur rises from its sleep, maddened and mutated by the radioactive blasts. Since *Godzilla* the theme of bodily mutations has been prevalent in *manga* and *anime*. In *Tan Tan Bo Puking*, Murakami employs this theme with a similar intention to that of Honda, whose film is a description of post-war Japan. It captures the anger of the Japanese people, but also represents the actual damage inflicted by nuclear bombs in terms of the effects of radiation on survivors and the destruction of the city.

¹ Produced by Tatsunoko Production, 1975-1976.

Tan Tan Bo Puking also bears an affinity with the mutation of the character Tetsuo in the *manga* and *anime* story *Akira*.¹ Here, mutation occurs not from physical exposure to radiation, but due to psychic trauma, which results in a loss of mental and emotional control. In both *Akira* and *Tan Tan Bo Puking*, the abject, sickly aspects of the body are exaggerated.

Murakami's excavations of the past lead to the unification of disparate elements of Japanese history. The 'new' images with which Murakami presents us are in part still driven by the *otaku* purpose of creating a future with doubts and fears, anchored in the past. *Time Bokan – Pink* and *Tan Tan Bo Puking* are amplifications of the portents depicted in *otaku* culture that are definitely things of the past, yet their importance is certainly not diminished. It seems that these messages persistently reinvent themselves in new forms; their continued affirmation in the work of Takashi Murakami verifies their continuing role in the Japanese psyche.

¹ Written and directed by Katsuhiro Otomu. The *manga* was published in 1982-1990, and the *anime* film was released in 1988.

ii. The Present: Neo Rauch

The next artist I discuss is Neo Rauch. In the practices of Takashi Murakami and Neo Rauch there is a shared characteristic. Both of these artists refer to and reconstruct particular graphic styles. Murakami refers to the style of *manga* and *anime* and Rauch uses the style of social realism. Rauch and Murakami use these styles in order to situate their work in particular histories. Murakami does this in order to reveal the links between *otaku* culture and the post-war Japanese mentality, while Rauch does so in order to portray the after-images of the Eastern bloc. The difference between these two artists' approach is that while Murakami refers to an active style, Rauch refers to a totally outmoded graphic language. The purpose of Social Realism was deeply ingrained in the motives of the Eastern bloc. In its prime, Social Realist painting portrayed a utopian reality, a society of young workers, men and women working together to further social, political, and technological development. These dreams were propaganda for the Communist government. With its downfall, this purpose was extinguished.

In Rauch's paintings we find that this utopian world has lost its purpose, it has been sapped of its energy. The workers in the factories are resigned to obscure tasks, the roads and highways are empty of activity and the remaining citizens are often dwarfed by strange, animal, and mechanical forms.

Rauch is seemingly easily categorised as 'the painter of the failed Utopia of the Eastern bloc' (Gingeras 2002: 66), given his utilisation of the aesthetic style of Social Realist painting and illustration. However, Rauch's paintings are in fact a continuation of a long tradition of figurative and landscape painting (as he puts it, he paints 'in a fairly conventional, figurative style' [Rauch in Gingeras 2002: 68]), inserting subtle references to artists such as Balthus and Vermeer (Gingeras 2002: 66). However, Rauch insists that such references are no more important than other elements such as 'Tintin, Donald Judd, Donald Duck, agitprop, and cheap advertising garbage. (Rauch in Gingeras. 2002: 66) In this way he is similar to Murakami who does not discriminate between high and low culture as influential elements in his work.

This filtration of various widespread influences through personal experience, and the leveling of status among different influential sources which have traditionally been segregated by a hierarchy of values, is a common characteristic of contemporary painting. Painters such as Glenn Brown and John Currin rely on artistic tradition as a means of infusing their practice with layers of meaning. In many ways the boundaries developed by the historic progression of schools and movements has collapsed and painters today use this to their advantage. Elements of modernist abstraction are intermixed with figuration works in the paintings of Emily Brown; graphic styles are lifted from comic books and intertwined with formal aspects of Asiatic traditions in Inka Essenhigh's paintings.

In new painting there is often a determination to compete with modern methods of image making, such as photography or digital imaging, and to redefine painting as a contemporary medium. Rauch does not share this goal; he calls painting 'an extraordinarily natural form of discovering the world ... almost entirely without intention.' (Rauch in Gingeras 2002: 66) Rauch has no

agenda to make a mark on art history, neither specifically as a painter, or at all; rather, he sees his function as an artist as simply to express his understanding of the world in the medium he finds fit. However this does not stop him from raiding a range of visual sources.

As mentioned earlier, Rauch's paintings derive their iconography partly from socialist propaganda, which served to show a utopian Communist future. The paintings are subversive in this respect because they displace the original functionality of this now defunct style, by using it to depict surreal and fragmentary images. Rauch also in a way finishes the work of the social realist artists by painting a version of a possible outcome of the goals of communism. But while the future envisioned by those artists, that would be our present, was purely imagined, the present that Rauch depicts is based on the observed physical changes of his immediate environment, Leipzig. For example, following the reunification of Germany in 1989, an improved new system of highways proliferated throughout the former East Germany. 'The mysterious roads in Neo Rauch's paintings reflect this network (harking back also to the

original autobahn system of the 1930s) and are powerful images of the flow of time.' (Little 2005: 5).

Rauch's paintings do not document actual historical events; rather they depict fictions which are shaped by moments, experiences of the time, and dreams which avoid being linked directly to important historical events. In this way Rauch negates the original function of socialist painting and provides a new illusion of the present tense. Rauch's work is shaped by his own narratives, defined by his experiences of the changes undergone in his environments. This process is intuitive, thorough, reflecting his 'mental and morphological idiosyncrasies' (Gingeras 2002: 68).

Various critics have labeled Rauch's work as 'retro', saying that his work evokes nostalgia for eastern Europe. His response to these accusations was to take the term 'retro' and reverse it, introducing the term 'orter' into his work. In a rarefied strain of high German, this means 'to be grounded' (ibid. 66). Rauch uses 'orter' as the title for some of his paintings.



Neo Rauch. *Orter*. 2001

In *Orter* (2001) Rauch painted a worried half-man, half-dinosaur running aimlessly in a bleak landscape whose only physical feature is two smouldering volcanoes. As a response to critics' comments, this painting embraces their criticism: Rauch admits his position in a comical manner, grossly exaggerating the apparently anachronistic qualities of his work and his role as a painter to a point where the criticism becomes devoid of any real bite. *Orter* lacks any nostalgic inclination towards the eastern bloc and denies the kind of historic, sociopolitical associations that have been made of his work.



Neo Rauch. *Amt*. 2004

In his recent work, Rauch has distanced himself from his now politically loaded environs of Leipzig. The new work often employs symbols associated with cultures other than that of Leipzig, such as the red pagoda in *Amt* (2004). His earlier evocations of illustrational stereotypes have also been modified – his new paintings host a diverse, unspecified cast of characters, which embrace a broad spectrum of associations to old cinema, illustrations, and comics. These changes show that the extended visual vocabulary that Rauch now employs are perhaps linked to the fact that the environment in which he works is now open to the free flow of global changes and fed by global information. Proof of this lies for instance in the way in which Rauch has changed the signification of petrol stations in his

work. In *Tankstelle* (1995), he paints a composition showing simultaneous multiple viewpoints of a petrol station, attached to a single road. The petrol station in *Tankstelle* is still, it seems to have been abandoned. This might be the petrol station that used to feed the highways mentioned earlier.



Neo Rauch. *Tankstelle*. 1995



Neo Rauch. *Trafo*. 2003

In *Trafo* (2003), a group of people watch as a cloud from an explosion rises in the distance. Beside this group is a large fuel station. This station assumes a dynamic symbolism; it is no longer a disengaged structure, part of a

secluded landscape, but part of a changing environment. 'As is always the case in Rauch's works, gas pumps, diesel, tar, and pots of paint stand for energetic substances that can have positive yet destructive effects. (Kunde 2004: 19)

The energies of the abandoned sites and personnel in Neo Rauch's paintings are directed at us in order to unsettle our sense of their function, or lack thereof, that have faded into the annals of history. In the scene of *Schicht* (1999), which in part we register as a construction site and in part as an excavation or a burial, uniformed figures are working around a deep trench. This trench cuts through the ground revealing strange metal capsules. A crane is lifting these capsules from, or perhaps into, the earth. When they are open, similar uniformed men rise from them as if awakened from a long sleep into a new place, or perhaps they are about to be buried. Whether the figures in the scene have been dug out and revived or are about to be buried, is an ambiguity that tells us that within the confines of a pictorial plane there lies a potential for more than one reading.

The world Rauch describes is made up of models of our past, yet the actions and events he orchestrates in this world are like images of the future beyond our rationale. These places, charged with the energetic substances such as paint, draw our attention to the surprising vitality of the past, specifically to painting's capacity as a tool for the vivid recollection of a future past.

iii. The Past: Old Myths:

Jockum Nordstrom



Jockum Nordstrom. *Talk Of The Town*. 1998

What is the temporality of a work of art? It is brought into existence – sometimes over years of hard labor, sometimes in a sudden moment of inspiration. But once it is there, how is its continuous existence to be grasped in temporal terms?

An artwork – be it a poem, painting, or musical composition – continues to be because it is continuously viewed, heard and read anew. It is read, re-read and misread and thus given birth to retroactively over and over again. This retroactive rewriting is sometimes so powerful that the original meaning – if such a concept still has any validity – disappears in favor of the new rendering. (Brinbaum 2001: 79)

In his essay *Late Arrivals*, Daniel Brinbaum describes the idea of how contemporary thought changes the reading of artists' original intentions. He suggests that the meaning of an artwork changes according to a development in discourse, particularly that the implications of early efforts may only be recognised at a later stage (Brinbaum 2001: 78). This later stage (the present) creates a vantage point from which some contemporary artists have revitalised old narratives and traditions.

Walter Benjamin wrote about the use of outmoded elements in Andre Breton's writing:

He (Breton) was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the outmoded, in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to become extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them. The relation of these things to revolution ... how destitutions not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects can be suddenly transformed

into revolutionary nihilism.
(Benjamin.1979: 239)

The recurrence of forms and rituals from earlier centuries in our present context is a strong theme in the drawings and collages of Swedish artist Jockum Nordstrom. His inclination toward these forms is identical to the one Benjamin ascribes to Breton, but in the case of Nordstrom, the Victorian age that fascinates him is even more distant than it was from Breton. This implies that Nordstrom's fixation on the past is fuelled by different motives. Breton lived through the changes of fashion, industry and attitudes of which he wrote. Nordstrom's pursuit of history extends far beyond his natural experience; it is a revision of forms which are no longer situated in our common day to day experience.

Sailors, horsemen and musicians, figure frequently, along with groups playing billiards or cards. The pictures of ships are evocative of the 17th century, with maps and charts, new discoveries, technical inventions and scientific breakthroughs. A man in an 18th century coat plays the piano or harpsichord as if it were a

pinball machine, 19th century cavalry charge forth on horseback like they were driving sports cars. In picture upon picture, chairs from different periods demonstrate his finely calibrated intuition for how styles influence the construction of the image. Jockum Nordstrom appears to distil types, styles and thoughts from earlier centuries that recur in our own era. (Gunnarsson 2005: 9)



Jockum Nordstrom. *The Bird and The Barbarian*. 2000



Jockum Nordstrom. *Touche this is a modern world*, 2004

Nordstrom makes it clear that his revision of the past is situated in the present by juxtaposing icons of the past with normative elements from our surroundings, mainly blocks of flats, occasionally guitar amps. Nordstrom thereby divorces the image from the conventions in which it would originally appear. When Gunnarsson observes that a 'harpichord (is played) as if it were a pinball machine (and) 19th century cavalry charge forth on horseback like they were driving sports cars' she is implying a fundamental change in Nordstrom's understanding of these forms; she suggests that the mobilisation of these objects and events is orchestrated by modern means, that our perspective of these objects allows us to compare them to devices of the present, or in Nordstrom's case, personify them in the guises of contemporary rituals and objects.

The apparently naïve, childlike style of Nordstrom's drawing is modern, bearing an affinity to the epic drawings of outsider artist Henry Darger and other artists that have been categorised under the label 'Art Brut'. In the 17th or 18th century, Nordstrom's work would probably have been dismissed, but after the 20th century, particularly after the Surrealists recognised the expressive power of outsider art, his drawings are accepted without hesitation.

Nordstrom's collections of books and the physical location of his studio are key factors in the production of his drawings and collages. His studio is located on the top floor of an apartment block and the views from his window feature in many of his drawings, in which rows of houses and tall blocks of flats are either the foregrounding subject or a backdrop to other compositions. The spaces flanked by these modern buildings are never governed by the same strict order of their architecture – they are packed with chaotic moments of horseback-riders, uncensored sex, and madness. These spaces seem to be ruled by an internal logic. Whereas Nordstrom's drawings of flats and houses are

observations of his immediate surroundings, the in-between spaces are ruled by the highly self-reflective fictions of his imagination, a terrain which relies solely on memory and inspiration.

As mentioned previously, these moments in Nordstrom's pictures that do not rely on observational drawing are naïve and reminiscent of the natural untrained narratives a child might draw of its surroundings and family. But Nordstrom has in many ways perfected this faux naïve style of drawing into a demanding art. He undermines the idea that the naïve handling of forms actually indicates naivety by assigning to this otherwise sketchy and fleeting form of drawing the task of representation of highly complex compositions.

In Nordstrom's hands, the various moments of historic character lose their status by serving new roles in a somewhat generalised vision of a single individual. The new narratives formed by these histories are far more personal and lofty, filled with lewd activities not associated (because of denial of their existence, rather than their actual absence) with the historic periods referenced by Nordstrom.

Nordstrom and Rauch both integrate elements of the past into the present, without being nostalgic or sentimental. Both artists imbue their engagement with the past with an idiosyncratic sense of that time. In this way they liberate the past from its normative place in historic narrative.

iv. Conclusion

Manga and *anime* directors and artists associated with the *otaku* subculture created a tradition that maintained important themes, themes first explored by the founders of a medium who had first-hand experience of the devastating effects of war and, more importantly, the effects of nuclear destruction on the human body, the mind, and society as a whole. These directors constructed a tradition that focused on evolving the primary themes through the progress of time. As such, the *otaku* tradition is fixed within a set of parameters which acknowledge this pursuit as an evolving tradition.

In comparison with the continuing evolution of *otaku* culture, Neo Rauch's art is the aftermath of the end of a traditional practice. There is no

single set of rules to define his work apart from its formation of a narrative, a natural process in which conclusions and beginnings are placed out of sequence. Rauch gives us the tools to read his work as a narrative through a consistent repetition of characters and events. Since the late 1990s his work has developed into a cohesive aesthetic – a piece from 2001 may appear to be similarly painted to one made in 2006. This similarity disrupts our ability to read the natural progression of the work as the sequence of events in a narrative. In this way Rauch manages to create a body of work which speaks of the present – each new painting finds a place in a grand narrative, but not necessarily where the last painting left off.

Rauch works with many dated sources but presents his narrative in the idiom of Social Realism, a style associated with the portrayal of a futuristic vision, a potential way of life. The present that Rauch constructs in his painting bears specifically on its relationship to its past.

Nordstrom's practice is particularly aligned to a reading of the past and specifically to the faded glory of earlier times' symbols. In his work there is an

awareness of aging and fading – pieces documenting specific objects in the artist's environment seem to be stripped of an essential realism or vitality that would declare them real or important to the present.

His sense of history is gauged by his interaction with it, with images and symbols which denote particular trends or periods. It often seems that a key to understanding his work lies in specifying the goal of his efforts as a struggle to draw certain pasts into a parallel existence with the present. The objective of this process would be to create confusion between what we read as the past and what as the present.

With the so-called end of the *otaku* tradition, another set of futures becomes the past. It is still designated in our minds as a futuristic text, but a futuristic text of the past, of which there are many, the same way the innovations and discoveries which feature in Nordstrom's works were once themselves full of potential, keys to the future. The future ultimately passes through the present and is dissipated into the vaults of the past.

Ultimately the past is left behind and becomes as strange and alien to the

present as the future is. The understanding of this dynamic is present in the work of both Neo Rauch and Jockum Nordstrom who question the histories of the future, present and past in the same breath.

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Section II

The World to Come

The new isn't simply something that is different from what went before in terms of its randomness or contingency. Rather, it is the necessarily new. Art hinges on what has never been before, which accords with the circumstances of the day, on a differentness for which people waited. The new in art is discursive, an appeal to contribute to the logic of history. (Metzger 2005: 57)

What Metzger points out in this statement is that the new is not an object of distant unimaginable horizons, rather it is inherently present in our past; it emerges when the past is recomposed in a way it has never been seen before. This kind of occurrence is only possible when we look back, because by looking back we are able to infuse the past not with its own ideologies but with the logic of contemporary thought. In other words, we draw the past into the present. When we look at the past from the present we assess it in accordance with the terms of our time.

The idea that the past is a source of the new is an idea which is integral to my work and specifically important to my perspective of the future. I say in the introduction to this thesis that the world I paint has no future, and by this I mean that the world I paint is removed from an active future, from a changing future. The future as such is fixed because it is defined by the prescriptions of the past. The future of my world is essentially a thing of the past.

Yet when I look back, when I address these past futures, I do so with the intention of bringing them back, using them as reference points for storytelling, as beginnings, as middles or as endings. In this way my work reflects Neo Rauch's approach to painting in that I like to work on a grand narrative with each new work fitting in with, but not necessarily following on from, the last work. This act of going back to the calcified 'times to come' allows me to change what I see; it allows me to assert my own vision upon the discarded remnants that I find.

In this essay I will describe my creative process and production. With

the use of Walter Benjamin's¹ writing on imagination and Daniel Brinbaum's² writing on retroactivity I hope to position this process within an academic framework.

Creative process: Imagination

...and in fact imagination has nothing to do with forms or formations. It does indeed take its manifestations from them, but the connection between them and the imagination is so far from inexorable that we might rather describe the manifestations of the imagination as the de-formation of what has been formed.

Walter Benjamin (Bullock & Jennings 1996: 280)

This deformation of forms implies the presence of an outside force. We can identify this presence as the artist who brings a particular insight, a personalised perspective. What is seen and how it is described may differ greatly. The peculiarities of the artist's distinct standing point resonates within his or her description.

In documentary footage, the 'facts' of the event sought are limited by the cameraman's gaze and the editor's cuts, Yet to say that something is lost in the process means ignoring the possibilities of the transformation that takes place between the experience and the document. In the examples of work I use in the first essay of this thesis, the act of telling is expanded imaginatively. The imagination deforms an event or original image yet the artist's subsequent visual account creates a new event or image that can be experienced first hand by the viewer.

Sometimes the deformation enacted by the artist's imagination is so extreme that the original event or image is not even recognisable in the artwork. We are barely able to identify the forms of the nuclear holocaust in post-war Japanese *manga*. Artists and writers of this era were aware of the original forms of their subject; the conventions of their time necessitated the need for them to obscure that origin. In the tableaux of Neo Rauch and Jockum Nordstrom, imagination's deformative ability acts as a principal tool in the reconstruction of history.

¹ Bullock & Jennings 1996

² Brinbaum 2001

I begin my own work by looking for inspiration in specific places, My main source is old comic books and photographs. I set certain parameters so that I may be able to focus on a particular subject by focusing on multiple different influences that have in common an affiliation with my subject.

My subject during my 4th year of study was my emigration from Poland, so I focused on comics and photographs from that time. I wanted to see this time of my life as a story and in old photographs I found parts of this story in terms of my family history; old comics from this time reminded me of how I associated them with the place I was going. I believed that partially the differences between the world depicted in western comic books and in Polish comic books reflected the difference between Kielce and the western world.

At this time I was unable to read comics, which were in an unknown language, so what I did was to try to find my own meanings for the events and characters depicted in them. Later when I could read English I found out

that my original interpretation of these comics had been a misreading.

During this time I saw the potential of using my apparent misreading of these comics as the more profound reading. This approach changed the way I looked at my sources and it transformed my work by making what could have been a simple reconstruction of my past into an experience of it.

I found it easy to incorporate the fantastic stories from the *Cosmic Odyssey*¹ into the real stories from my family. As I no longer looked at my work as an account of the past, I could see my family history as a fiction. It makes sense to me to think that my family stories are fictional because they are experiences and accounts that have no universal standing in terms of broader history. They are useful though, because they exhibit a sense of my experience of living in Kielce: the cold environment and the dark, long winters. These works exhibit events in such a way that viewers of my work can reflect on my paintings of the way I experienced my home town of Kielce, on their own terms.

¹ A comic book by Jim Starling, published in 1998 by DC Comics.

When I began my Masters degree I had to solve the problem of how to continue from my previous body of work. I think that this was another chapter and essentially a new aspect of what I had started in my final undergraduate year. I looked at continuing my story from different points. I was aware that up until now my work had been looking directly back at the past, and that the new work was in some way going to be like my plane trip to South Africa – a step into the future. I recognised within this conception that this was not a step into my future in active time. It was a step into a future prescribed by the past. This realisation put me in a strange position – in some ways I was still looking at forms from my past but at the same time I was looking at a desire, at an expectancy for the world to come. I termed this position ‘the gloaming’ because it was a space between light and dark, a space where my own ruminations played a prevalent role in understanding the potential flow of narrative.

I found that working with ‘past futures’ created a space with which I was no longer familiar. Previously I had negotiated an imaginary space using elements from my childhood: my

familiarity with images from old photographs and old, almost forgotten comic books, which had generated a nostalgic drive for my practice. This new course was an important step for me, it stripped the working system I had developed in my previous project of its nostalgia.

In negotiating a new space for this project, I set new parameters. I began using different sources, for instance found photographs that belonged to others. I specifically liked other families’ photograph albums because in them I was able to find some kind of story-like order. I also began to use a larger range of old comic books¹ for inspiration. I felt that these were important blueprints for my work because when I looked at them I saw that they described an image of the future that was designed by the past, not my own present. In a way this reflected what I was trying to do.

Creative Process: Retroactivity and Revival.

I began to think about what it actually meant to excavate these past futures. Simply, this action could be seen as a

¹ For example, *Weird Science* and *Tales from the Crypt* (Both published by E.C. Comics).

revival, as the reinvigoration of discarded stories from photographs and comics, but I found that the idea of revival was not suitable to the way I worked.

I changed my sources constantly; the very act was deformative and deformation is essentially the key to bringing it back, a means of adapting the sources to the climate of the present. I see revival as an event when something returns without having to change its original form. What interested me more than the idea of revival was Daniel Brinbaum's idea of retroactivity:

An artwork – be it a poem, painting, or musical composition – continues to be because it is continuously viewed, heard, and read anew. It is read, re-read, misread, and thus given birth retroactively over and over again. This retroactive rewriting is sometimes so powerful that the original meaning – if such a concept still has any validity – disappears in favour of the new rendering. (Brinbaum 2001:78)

Whereas conventional revival is a reiteration or a repetition, retroactivity assumes that revival occurs when the

object at hand assumes a contemporary role. More importantly the revival orchestrates a change, imbuing the object with a function in the present context. Brinbaum's example of this is the identification of similarity between a passage of Beethoven's C Minor Sonata, Opus 111 and ragtime music. Brinbaum notes that this feature of the composition must have remained hidden to the composer as well as his contemporaries and only a generation familiar with ragtime music was able to identify this anomaly (Brinbaum 2001: 79).

Brinbaum's idea of retroactivity is relevant to my method of working with my source material: I orchestrate a kind of forced retroactivity in which careful analysis, sampling, and recombination of materials leads me to a moment of inspiration in which an image appears. This image becomes the starting point for my watercolours and oil paintings. I do not adhere strictly to the initial image – during the working process things change. This tends to happen more often with my oil painting, because the long working process is essentially an open door for input from other creative processes, namely the more quickly developing drawings and watercolours.

With my watercolours this kind of extension of the image occurs through the deferral of the completion of the image to the next image, and so on. I see my watercolours as a continuing story.

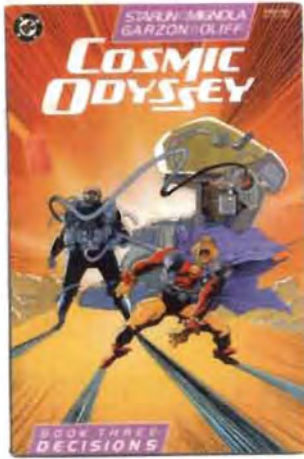
Field of sources

My projects so far have all begun with an interest in a particular group of found images. While working, I try continuously to expand this group of images by collecting additional references. For this project I was interested in old photographs and old comic books that originate from a time before my own. I initially sought photographs from my parents' childhoods but later moved on to photographs and postcards I found in second-hand and antique stores. Most of these images were old family, group photos, and holiday shots. The comics I looked for at this time were the precursors of the comic books of my childhood, they were mostly not superhero comics but old issues of *Tales from the Crypt* and *Weird Science*, comic book short stories of the horror and science fiction genres.

When I work with old photographs and comic books, I continuously cross-reference them. Initially I see these two categories as two very different participants in a project which tried to unify them.

Art making begins when I start to see similarities between these categories. What I want to find are new images which are born not from direct study of compositions but from the fragments in my memory of these images.

I rarely work directly from my source materials. I prefer to spend time looking at my sources, putting them in various orders and then leaving them aside. The ideas I have for the images that one sees in my work come when I am away from the images that influence me.



1



2



6



3



5



4

Selection of Source Images

1. The cover to *Cosmic Odyssey Book Three: Decisions*
Starlin, J. 1988. *Cosmic Odyssey Book Three: Decisions*. New York. DC Comics.
2. Detail from *Cosmic Odyssey Book Three: Decisions* portraying encounter between Darkseid and the Anti-life.
3. Found Postcard.
4. Found photograph.
5. Old photographic negative.
6. Old family photograph of me and my grandfather.

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Section III

Practical work

This body of work was executed primarily in the media of watercolour, gouache and oil paint. The significant difference between the works in oil and the watercolours is the focus of my production. Production of watercolours is immediate. Pieces are complete after a few hours work, while the production of oils is a long drawn out process. There are many watercolours and only a few oil paintings but the oils are larger. I use the watercolour medium as a means for the construction of narrative. When I exhibit my watercolours I hang them in a cluster, and the configuration of this cluster changes each time it is shown.

i. Watercolours

My approach to watercolour painting is founded in the approach of the Mission School artists, specifically their method of hanging images in clusters. The Mission School is a name loosely attributed to a group of San Francisco artists, including Margaret Kilgallen, Barry McGee, Chris Johanson and Ed Templeton. Their method of installing works in large clusters made me feel as

if the content of an individual piece could not explicate itself, rather its meaning was part of a collective meaning inherent in it in combination with all the other pieces. This sensibility is particularly strong in Barry McGee's clusters where many of the pieces would seem insignificant on their own.

The cluster method was the basis for my watercolours. I began by collecting old frames, which is what I imagined to be the way Barry McGee would start. The process of replacing the content of these frames (family and school photographs, certificates etc.) with my work interested me because while I was actively discarding the frames' previous function, I sought to retain their particular aesthetic and the sense that the frames maintain a link with their original domestic function. In a way I like to pretend that it was possible for someone to find one of these frames at a junk sale, with one of my pictures in it.

The cluster method also plays a vital role in the sense of narrative I try to instill within my work. I see the conventional method of hanging pictures in a row as a means of asserting a certain order before the

the viewer. In a cluster, linear movement is removed and we are unable to read a narrative in the conventional sense. I try to instill narrative in my watercolours solely by repeating characters and scenes, but I do not connect these in the way they are displayed as I want the viewer to make those connections, or others that they imagine, on their own.

I have chosen to discuss this group of watercolours because they illustrate the primary concerns of my practice. I do not discuss every single one because they are works that have been made for the better part without specific intention.

Earliest Watercolours

My first watercolour works from 2005 are made in a fashion which is similar to those I did in my undergraduate year. The frames are all black, some have chips in the wood which reveal the original colour of the frame. The painting was also handled in a similar way to those I did in my undergraduate year; there is a leaning towards use of desaturated colours, hues of blue and green, and grey and black. In these works I dealt with the theme of departure; I was concerned with the

direction in which I was going to take my work and this concern is depicted in these pieces.



Fig 1 *Untitled*

In Fig. 1 a giant grey figure of a man is sitting in a bleak autumn landscape; there is a large hole in his torso which has been made by the path of the floating uprooted tree. The uprooted tree is a symbol of uprooting that I designed from the image of an airplane and an image of the anti-life¹, an element from the *Cosmic Odyssey* graphic novel. I had the idea of making this symbol a tree rather than the amorphous mass which I encountered in the *Cosmic Odyssey* because when I saw the strange form in the *Cosmic Odyssey* it reminded me of a tree. The uprooted tree in my work takes certain qualities from the strange form in the

¹ The anti-life is a character from *Cosmic Odyssey*

comic book, particularly the pink eyes which I paint onto it.



Fig 2 *Untitled*

I repeated the motif of the tree passing through a person in Fig. 2. This work incorporates a person familiar to me in it; the image was taken from a photograph of my mother when she was a child. These two works embodied my sense of dislocation from my 4th year work but also the dislocation from Poland which influenced my previous body of work. The root passing through someone's body is not a depiction of a physical act but the depiction of a transformation which I imagine to take place through emigration. It is a

transformation of one's memory and imagination. The root takes a certain aspect of the person it passes through, and, like a photograph, this aspect carries a different meaning for a different viewer. For me, family photographs from Poland unlock memories of the people they depict and the places in which they were taken. Because I am familiar with these people and these places I am able, through remembering, to extend the boundaries of the picture frame and attempt a depiction of that which was not captured in the photograph. In this kind of engagement I often find that the image that lies beyond the photograph is a blurred shifting form, and is highly resistant to being captured. The immediacy of the watercolor medium is useful for capturing these unclear images.

There was a desire on my part in my previous work to capture the total image; this meant not just the images outside the focused boundaries of an old family photograph but also other experiences; it was a desire to pay homage to the activities of my mind at that stage of my life. In my new work this motive has changed: after having returned to my past in an effort to recreate it, I wish to reconsider and

rearticulate my environment in terms of my current imaginative state.



Fig 3 *Untitled*

In Fig. 3 I depict the first sparks of the new resolve. In this watercolour there are two children in surroundings that are partially interior and partially exterior landscape. They are witness to the submergence of Darksied, a character from the *Cosmic Odyssey* that played a key role in my undergraduate work. In light of his submergence a new form emerges: firstly the two new figures of the boys play up to the strange fantastic nature of Darksied who is himself a comic book villain, but unlike Darksied they are not appropriated from a found source, rather they are newly created. Their purpose is determined by the tools they carry: one carries a camera and he is apparently filming Darksied's disappearance. This boy's action mimics my own working process – his

filming is an acknowledgement that the world he inhabits is unfamiliar, that it needs to be captured and defined. The second boy is meant to show that we too are unable to understand this world or its people. The strange device on his chest emits a weird red ectoplasmic form. When I was painting this image I felt that in a way this form was a playback of a recording, perhaps in a holographic form. As a recording its potential could be endless but I understood that this recording would be of an event that had taken place in another part of the world that I was trying to define for myself. Because of this uncertainty I chose to depict this recording as a shape-shifting form. In all aspects this is a depiction of my imagination stripping and remoulding other images in order to make them my own.

Second Stage



Fig 4. *Wolves*

As I continued working images of recording began to interest me more. I continued the theme of Fig. 3 in Fig. 4, in which a giant figure with a recorder and microphone lies in the snow, apparently remaining still so as not to scare away a group of wolves. The three wolves in the picture are clearly aware of the man. For me this image indicates that the ability to see within oneself without our own awareness of this is impossible; thus the wolves are aware of the giant.



Fig 5 *Untitled*

In keeping with this theme, Fig. 5 depicts a figure who has been cut out of the picture by the frame and is recording a small natural outcrop, which is separate from any other form of nature. Here I indicate that this is a constructed artifice; above this little land feature there is an opaque pink cloud which is a reference to the ectoplasmic form from Fig. 3.



Fig 6 *Untitled*

Fig. 6 depicts a seated boy who is speaking into a microphone; what is being recorded here is perhaps a description. Unlike the other pieces where recording was a prevalent theme, this piece does not describe any features that might locate the scene of this event. The work is mostly abstract apart from the clearly described horizon. But in spite of this horizon we are unable to access whether the space above the horizon line is a wall or a sky. In this work I acknowledge the fact that a watercolour offers a limited description of an imagined event. We will never know what the figure in this work is describing. My other works describe events illustratively but despite their presumed clarity I still see them as personal descriptions, like the boy in this image. When I make my watercolors I describe things that I best relate to, though I do not reject others'

interpretations of these events. I do not validate them nor do I judge them in terms of one being right or wrong.

The evolution from this point onwards revolved around the invention of new characters, narrative guides and the creation of new scenes with these figures. Initially these characters were not human; they took on cartoon-like forms of black smog or floating heads.



Fig 7 *Untitled*

These figures floated because they had been dislocated from the static landscapes that had been derived from old photographs and comic books. Because they are original imagined forms they are the only animated thing in these pictures. I came upon the idea for the heads in Fig. 7 by looking at the rows of children's heads in a school photograph. I imagined them to be the dislocated minds of dreams wandering among new landscapes.



Fig 8 *Untitled*

In Fig. 8 I painted one such head examining a knocked down tree; it appears to be examining the damage it has delivered to the stump of the tree. With the exception of those in Fig. 11, most of my floating characters extend beyond the picture frame. The logic behind the floating heads in Fig. 7 is that these are coils that connect them to their origins, so that they may have a means of returning once the dream is complete.



Fig 9 *Untitled*

The black smog figure in Fig. 9 is meant to be a cartoon of smoke which spreads far from an unknown fire.



Fig 10 *Untitled*

In Fig. 10 the floating heads and the smog meet.

Pools

When I was young and it was summer my family and I used to go to a public swimming pool in Poland. One of my most vivid memories from Kielce is of a day at this swimming pool. On that day my father split open his eyebrow when he jumped into the pool.



Fig 12 *Night Pool*

Fig. 12 is an evocation of this memory. The figure in this painting is about to dive into a pool and he is wearing a helmet for protection.



Fig 13 *Doom Pool*

In Fig. 13 the motif of a pool is repeated. This time a figure emerges from the pool as if to catch its breath. It is revealed here that the emptiness left in its lungs by the time spent underwater has been filled by the ectoplasmic form. The motif of the pool represents wandering into the unknown. I know that when my father dove into the pool he had his eyes closed. When I imagine the things I paint I do not see my subject – the working process is a blind process. In Fig. 12 the diver expects injury.

Squidman

One of the key characters in both my oil paintings and watercolours is a squid man. This strange figure has little to do with sea life and is a figurative embodiment of a tree root. I came up with this character when I read about dendrology. Invented by Andrew Ellicott Douglas, chrono-dendrology is 'a system whereby known sequences of events (floating chronologies) can be fixed to specific years (absolute chronologies via the scientific analysis of tree rings)' (Archibald & Rosenberg 2004: 90).

What interested me most in this article was the image of a woman looking at a cross section of a tree trunk and the various markings that ran across its diameter. I was inspired by the idea that an abstract pattern such as the tree's rings was a carrier of information. I thought that this was similar to the ectoplasmic form I had conjured in other works.

Thus the squid man is essentially a descendent of the other form except I felt that in giving it a fixed shape I was still able to avoid a fixed definition of what that shape meant.

As a form relative to the ectoplasm, the squid man also stands for some kind of

knowledge, specifically history, his origin being the growth and development of a field of tree rings, and his point of materialisation the particularities of an individual inquiry.



Fig 14 *Untitled*

His birth is presented in Fig. 14 in which a woman wearing a lab coat extracts the squid figure from a tree ring. The lab coat is indicative of a test, perhaps a process of elimination and discovery of potential facts. In another picture the same woman that appeared in the first work is holding the squid figure. She is taking care of him in the way a vet might nurse an animal cub.

I have two senses of the role that this figure plays. It is mostly a docile, still figure but in some works it takes on an active role, particularly in Fig. 15 in which it has evidently lost a duel, and

in Fig.16 in which it is apparently feeding a tree with a cloudy substance.



Fig 15 *Rapiet*



Fig 16 *untitled*

ii. Oils

While the watercolours allow me to produce a loose series of events, my oil paintings are the result of many

different focused strains of thought. They are bolstered by some of the key parts of my watercolours and in this way the content of the works in both media play off one another. The motions of the watercolours play off the needs of the oil paintings and the oil paintings absorb and reconfigure some of the ideas started in the watercolours to a greater level. For me oil painting presents a manner of working with a particular event for a long period of time, which is the opposite to the process of making a watercolour where an idea is transferred onto paper quickly and any of its flaws are usually rectified in the following work, albeit in the depiction of a different event. In oil painting I find that the initial event that inspires a painting undergoes a process of expansion and contraction, a process which develops the capacity of painting in terms of how much is put into focus.

There are a few cornerstones in my painting that have been carried from one work to the next. These are the squid figure and the caravan, which symbolise finding and searching respectively. As I discussed earlier, the squid man is a symbol of knowledge and the caravan is a portable home or

laboratory which moves from one place to the next and acts as base of operation from which the events and locations that feature in my paintings are examined.

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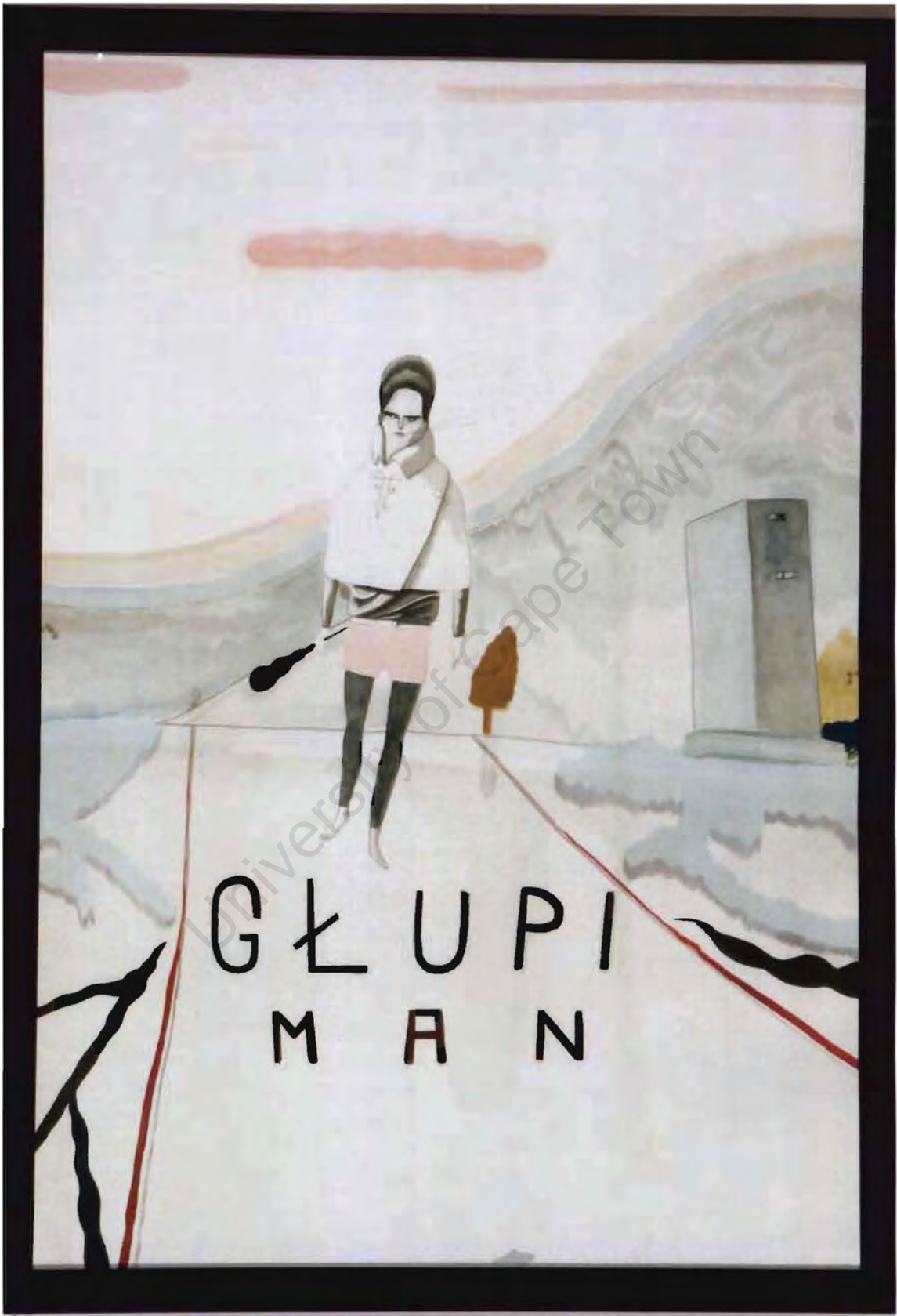


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Watercolours

1. 11cm x 11cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
2. 14cm x 16.5cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
3. 12.5cm x 17.5cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
4. 12.5cm x 17.5cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
5. 15.5cm x 20.5cm, *Untitled*, Watercolour on Cotton Paper
6. 24.5cm x 17cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
7. 17cm x 22cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
8. 24cm x 19cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
9. 27cm x 27cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
10. 17cm x 24cm, *Untitled*, Watercolour on Cotton Paper
11. 30cm x 20.6cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
12. 25cm x 25cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
13. 24cm x 16cm, *Untitled*, Watercolour on Cotton Paper
14. 30.5cm x 20.5cm, *Untitled*, Watercolour on Cotton Paper
15. 30.5cm x 20.5cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
16. 32.5cm x 26cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
17. 24.7cm x 30cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
18. 34.5cm x 29.5cm, *Untitled*, Collage, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
19. 37cm x 24.5cm, *Untitled*, Watercolour on Cotton Paper
20. 30cm x 25cm, *Untitleds*, Watercolour on Cotton Paper
21. 29cm x 24.5cm, *Wolves*, Watercolour on Cotton Paper
22. 33cm x 28cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
23. 35cm x 25cm, *Untitled*, Collage, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
24. 35cm x 25cm, *Untitled*, Collage, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
25. 30cm x 36.5cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
26. 30cm x 42cm, *Untitled*, Collage, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
27. 40cm x 30.5cm, *Untitled*, Watercolour on Cotton Paper

28. 50cm x 40cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
29. 30cm x 25cm, *Untitled*, Watercolour on Cotton Paper
30. 40cm x 32cm, *Night Pool*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
31. 36cm x 33cm, *Untitled*, Watercolour on Cotton Paper
32. 49.5cm x 35cm, *Untitled*, Watercolour on Cotton Paper
33. 50cm x 40cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
34. 50cm x 40cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
35. 50cm x 40cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
36. 53cm x 45cm, *Untitled*, Watercolour on Cotton Paper
37. 47cm x 37.5cm, *Untitled*, Oil on Panel
38. 46.5cm x 36cm, *Doom Pool*, Watercolour on Cotton Paper
39. 30cm x 26cm, *Untitled*, Watercolour on Cotton Paper
40. 46cm x 40cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
41. 50cm x 41cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
42. 54cm x 45.5cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
43. 46cm x 40cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
44. 58cm x 48cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
45. 47cm x 41cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
46. 55cm x 43cm, *Untitled*, Watercolour on Cotton Paper
47. 50cm x 40cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
48. 36cm x 40cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
49. 52cm x 46cm, *Untitled*, Watercolour on Cotton Paper
50. 57cm x 46cm, *Untitled*, Watercolour on Cotton Paper
51. 56cm x 47cm, *Wood dork*, Collage , Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
52. 52.5cm x 43cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
53. 156cm x 47cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
54. 160cm x 53cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
55. 149cm x 50cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
56. 147cm x 58.5cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper

57. 64cm x 59cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
58. 78cm x 57cm, *Untitled*, Collage and graphite on cotton paper
59. 75cm x 62cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
60. 80cm x 70cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
61. 70cm x 88cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
62. 70cm x 100cm, *Glupi Man*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
63. 109cm x 62cm, *Untitled*, Collage, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper
64. 77cm x 103cm, *Untitled*, Gouache and Watercolour on Cotton Paper

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Title: *Czarne Światło (Black Light)*

Medium: Oil on Canvas

Size: 2 020mm x 1 630mm

The first painting in this body of oil paintings does not reflect the ideas of the squid man and the caravan. It is closer to my earliest watercolours, and was painted before other themes became apparent. In this work I was trying to gather the leftover resources of my undergraduate works. The black cloak is a stage, an area in which to place these elements. The figure in this cloak is the figure of the boy from Fig.3 in which Darksied disappears. The only other figure who is essentially an illusion is the piano player, an apparition floating in the gloom of the cloak. In the watercolour Fig. 3, the boy is a seeker of things; his presence is ambiguous; he has come out of interest in seeing what there is to find in this imaginary world, but he is also part of it, so his presence on the cloak is necessitated by that aspect of his nature. In the painting's sky there is a faint imprint of the ectoplasm. Its presence is meant to indicate the development of the new fictions.



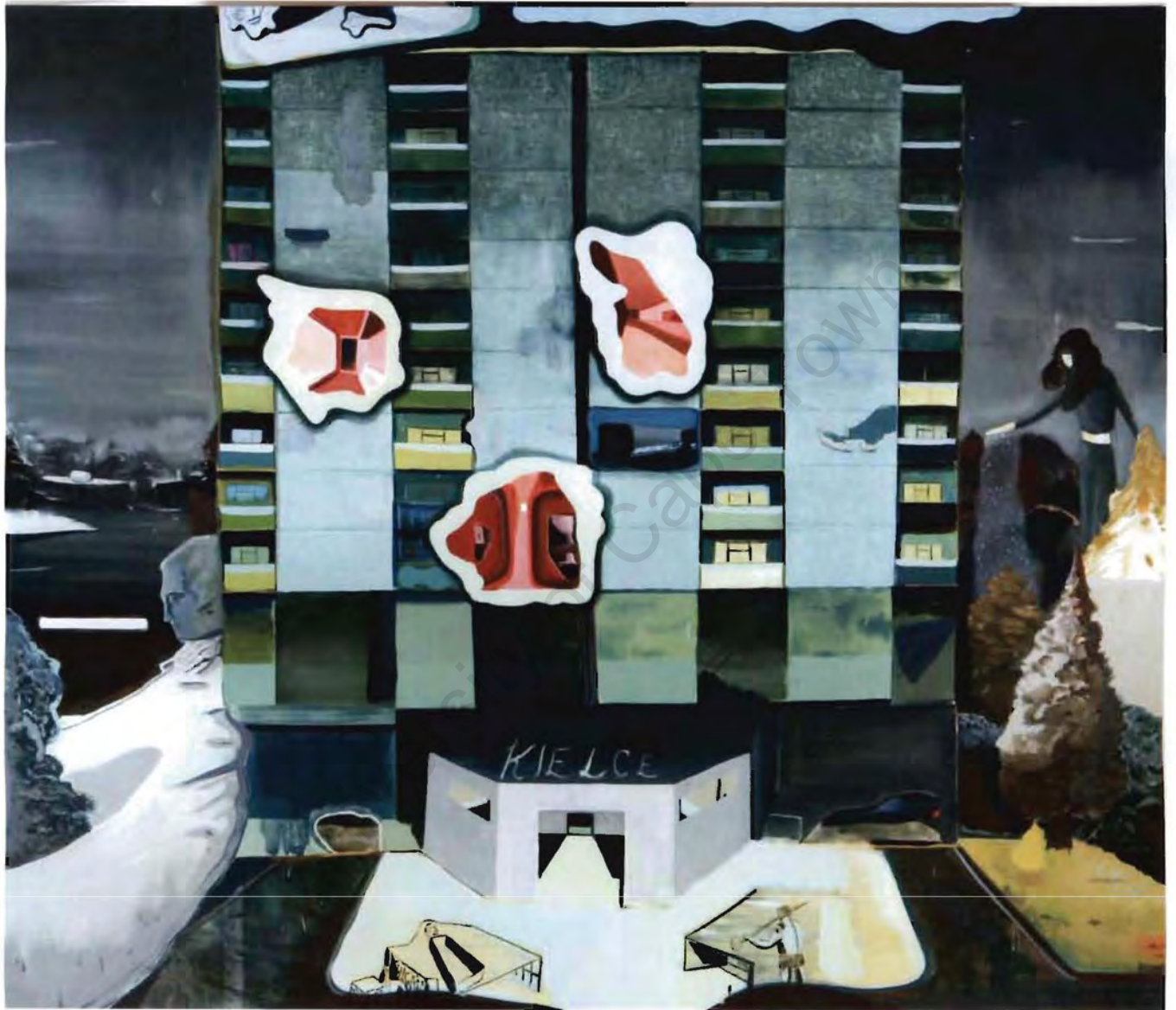
Title: *Wieżowiec (Block of Flats)*

Medium: Oil on Canvas

Size: 2 200mm x 1 902mm

Kielce, the city where I grew up, is full of blocks of flats. This painting is a study of my perception of these building blocks. These blocks are unusually big, bigger than most similar structures in Cape Town. The one I lived in had 600 apartments in it. The block depicted in this painting is not as large as the ones in Kielce, but it is the largest structure in the painting and it dominates the centre of the composition. The panels on either side of the central block are full of various activities. The block itself presents a strangely manifested space, particularly the forms which appear to float in front of the block; these appear to function as direct windows into the spaces concealed behind the walls of the block of flats.

In the left panel, far in the distance, is the first appearance of the caravan, a structure which implies a moving space, one which moves between my paintings and is a key witness to their events.



Title: *W Środku (Inside)*

Medium: Oil on Canvas

Size: 1 695mm x 1 892mm

interior of the caravan with props from some of my other paintings.

The original intention of this painting was to depict the interior of the caravan, The interior of the caravan was to be an interpretation of my own interior world, a place like the gloaming where the other images come together. The objects inside this space were meant to be parts that appeared in my other paintings. The male figure in this painting is a component of the original theme although during the working process, my objective has changed. Now I see this piece as a part of the narrative of the squid man. This painting opened up the inclusion of the squid man narrative into my oil painting. The female figure in this painting echoes a watercolour in which another female figure holds a squid man in a similar way. The painting retains from its original motive the focus on an interior space – the central caravan window is dark, revealing only the slightest presence of an outside world. This painting also retains some of the ideas that reflect my creative process, for example the root in the right hand side of the composition is the result of an early idea to fill the



Title: *Na Dworze (Outside)*

Medium: Oil on Canvas

Size: 1 665mm x 1 880mm

This painting captures a scene outside the caravan window in which an exchange between two figures, the female figure in the caravan from *W Środki* and a man that has not been seen before. In this painting the pink squid man from *W Środki* is now apparently dead – its essence has been transmuted into the black oily manifestation that links the man's and woman's arms. The fact that the squid man appears dead in this painting establishes a narrative structure between the two works. The first, an interior painting set in the dark and the second, an exterior set in the day.



Title: *Hunters in the Snow*

Medium: Oil on Canvas

Size: 2 435mm x 1 610mm

Unlike my other works, this piece began with a direct reference to another art work: Pieter Breughel's painting *Hunters in the Snow* (1655). I was struck by this work's title and its dramatic composition. The title of the work made me think of my caravan, a small vehicle moving through the snowy terrains of my paintings. I realised that the inhabitants of my caravan were hunters themselves. Unlike Breughel's hunters, who are portrayed as hunters in the literal sense, my hunters are hunters of knowledge; they seek to make sense of the surrounding world. I wished to imprint my own reality upon Breughel's painting and present it as a contemporary version of the original landscape. The original village has disappeared in my rendering, and the landscape has been remodeled. The only familiar feature is the jagged mountain peak on the right hand side of the composition. In the foreground the original buildings have been replaced by caravans, the closest of which is snowed in, packed into the corner of the painting by a slumped and cut down tree. Behind it is another

distant scene featuring a hillside with trees and another small caravan. The original painting shows a group of hunters and dogs returning to a small village. The hunters are the foremost figures in the painting, while the other figures of townsfolk and children are positioned upon the distant ice and snow of the composition. The hunters are on the top of a hill leading downward into the composition. I have set the primary themes of my composition on this space. The figures in my painting are sitting among two fallen trees, studying their tree rings. The first figure who is sitting upon a felled tree is reminiscent of the slumbering giant in *Wieżowiec*. The other figure draws on the skull boy figure from *Czarne Światło*. I have come to consider this painting the final work of the series and have used this composition as signaling the completion of the skull boy's search. The act of removing the mask and finding his identity marks the completion of the understanding of one of many journeys.



Pieter Breughel. *Hunters in the Snow*. 1655

SECTION IV

Conclusion

To my mind the desire to make art is synonymous with the desire to engage with an experience. In my case this desire stems from personal experience, from my childhood, and specifically from my emigration from Poland. My own experiences are conditions for my art making; they inform the peculiarities of the experience I strive to place before my audience, an experience that speaks from difference. As an artist I am aware that the conditions on which I draw are the materials for my imagination, for the particular deformation. The changes I apply are meant to assert a sense of dislocation to my pictures, as if they came from somewhere strange but also to make the viewer feel that in order to understand these works they may need to travel there themselves.

It has never been my desire to make work in such a way as to concentrate my formal decisions as a means to explicate my intentions to the viewer. My intention is the evolution of a process of storytelling. I feel a sense of

accomplishment when I learn something new, discover a fresh means of incorporating painting and storytelling. This process has always thrived on the creation of inventive scenarios which stimulate my imagination. Its continuation necessitates constant change and evolution but also repetition. Often the strongest elements of my art are the ones which are retrievable in new forms and conditions as time goes on.

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