



WILHELM SASNAL IN AMSTERDAM

The Evil Premonitions of Madame Matisse

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A century as a pigsty: The Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam shows the historical pessimism of the Krakow artist Wilhelm Sasnal.



It was January 1, 2020, when Wilhelm Sasnal and his wife Anka came home from a New Year's Eve party in their car and stopped in front of the gates of Auschwitz II-Birkenau. The artist from Krakow photographed Anka and then painted two pictures. In one, she is shown in profile, staring straight ahead through the windshield, framed by the pitch-black lining of the car. Her face is shadowed, not particularly charmingly rendered, probably as a result of a short night on New Year's Day. In the other picture, Anka turns her head outside, in the direction of the former concentration camp at the end of those notorious tracks that run towards the gatehouse in a cynical, school-like central perspective. Her hair is as black as the interior of the car. A watchtower appears in the outside mirror.

The concentration camp watchtower in the rearview mirror

The two pictures now hang at the beginning of a solo exhibition by Sasnal in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. To the left is a portrait that immediately looks familiar from classical modernism. It is "Mme Matisse" by Henri Matisse from 1905, also known as "The Green Stripe", but what is on display is not the original; Sasnal painted it without seriously attempting the bright chords and chromatic finesse for which the French Fauvist is praised. Sasnal's copy also does not look loving and meticulous, as the American Elaine Sturtevant imitated her role models. Compared to the original, his Madame Matisse is

dryly rendered, matter-of-fact, flat, one might almost say a little dull. As if all the traumatic experiences that the twentieth century still had to face in 1905 had been inscribed on her face as a premonition.

A mental balancing act between the eras

With just 25 paintings, the exhibition in the central hall of the Stedelijk Museum draws a line from the present back to the modern era, in order to capture in images that diffuse unease that links the eras then and now almost fatefully. If you pay attention, you will notice that a few works are framed with black strips. Sasnal had painted these pictures for a film adaptation of Robert Walser's 1908 novel "The Assistant", which he made with Anka Sasnal and which is due to premiere soon. Hence the strange-sounding title of the exhibition, "Painting as Prop". In the film, the copies of the canonical paintings hang on the walls of the villa of the notoriously unsuccessful inventor, who takes out his bad mood on his assistant. And in whose emotional world a fatigue and a certain pessimism typical of the time are reflected.

But you don't need to know the novel or the film (which is not part of the exhibition in Amsterdam either) to be able to understand the incredibly dense display of images. To immerse yourself in it and to understand it means to follow associations and leaps of thought between images or to make connections yourself - and thus to perform the constant mental balancing act between the eras. This means entering a time machine of painting that is completely current and contemporary, since the comparison of the present with the Weimar twenties is one of the reflexes of today's political self-examination, however robust it may ultimately be.

Time as a medium of expression

At least in this respect, the 21st century is far ahead of the beginning of the previous one: that we know what concrete consequences can result from contempt for democracy. Based on a photograph from 1942, Sasnal paints an everyday scene with two men on a handcart in his typical, illusion-free black and white; the photograph of Rudolf Dodenhoff in the Polish ghetto of Tarnów was commissioned by the "Institute for German Eastern Work" as part of a study on "race and ethnicity research". Next to it, Sasnal places a

painted clock that clearly dates from a later period and therefore cannot really serve as a warning sign. At the time shown, 3:28 p.m., the painter's children come home from school. And yet the theme of time runs through the entire exhibition. Sasnal, who was born in Tarnów in 1972 and is one of the most important painters of his generation, constantly provides personal and biographical pictorial narratives with historical depth.

He leaves no doubt about his contempt for the enemies of open society. He portrays the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán – alongside the French right-wing populist Marine Le Pen – as a grim, downright ugly figure; Sasnal paints the former Polish Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński and the Minister of Defence Mariusz Błaszczak at the border fence with Belarus completely faceless and covers their heads with black brushstrokes. Apart from that, however, he does not indulge in polemics, but rather creates surprising formal connections between canonical works such as a still life by Georges Braque and a construction site somewhere in Greece; paints the flowers on the dining table at home following the example of Édouard Manet and Gerhard Richter, or the afterimage of the view into the sun following the example of his compatriot and avant-garde painter Władysław Strzemiński (1893 to 1952), who also painted “Afterimages of the Sun” but also left behind shocking works about the Holocaust.

Art as a political tool

Seldom is the unease about the present and an uncertain future, which is palpable everywhere in Western civil society, summed up in such a prosaic, unemotional way in an exhibition of paintings - and linked to a history that is guaranteed as a canon and yet has remained ineffective in the face of the hostility to freedom. For two decades, Sasnal has repeatedly developed the existential instability of contemporary history from the perspective of his personal everyday world. His painterly trademark, the sobering black, sets the tone in numerous pictures. The motif is the feedback between the individual and society, for which the Kraków artist has developed his own skill.

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In the Amsterdam exhibition, he consistently confronts the experience of current reality with modern painting in selected pairs of pictures. This is how one finally understands why the large, if incomplete copy of Matisse's "Dance" and the picture of two pigsties hang opposite each other on the front walls of the room. They encircle and compress the exhibition: as an expression of euphoric joy and unprecedented catastrophe, because the two stables are arranged as precisely as the barracks of Auschwitz.

Wilhelm Sasnal: Painting as Prop. Stedelijk, Amsterdam; until September 1st. No catalog.

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