



ROZA

The Chosen One

An interview with Róża Puzynowska

Realized 19 December 2013; published Winter 2013/2014.



Le Sacre First Act

Witold Wachowski: How did Stravinsky and Nijinsky find their way onto your paintings? Was it a commission, a proposition? Or, perhaps, the original idea was yours?

Róża Puzynowska: For three years I had been working at the Costume Painting Department of the Grand Theatre - National Opera House in Warsaw as an assistant, responsible for patterned elements of stage costumes. Once we received an enormous pile of 270 pairs of ballet shoes and 360 ribbons to paint at our studio. It was Nijinsky's/Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* as reconstructed by Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer - world renown reconstructors of old and new ballets.

I mention these astronomic numbers for a reason. Just try to divide all this work among three people and imagine that you have only a few months to paint all the individual elements, by hand! All the lines have different colours and all elements have their own proportions.

Having worked day after day on the same elements, I had dreams about these mountains of ballet shoes and their ribbons. The plot of the ballet captivated my imagination and in my dreams I ran away from an avalanche of ballet shoes that tried to trample me. In Nijinsky's work, the Chosen One dances herself to death, but I was trampled by shoes.

I decided that the only way to free myself was to have my own take on the subject in the most honest and intimate way possible - and that was to paint it all.

As it happened in the succeeding season, the theatre commissioned the Costume Department to prepare full costumes (before we only had to do the ballet shoes). As a member of a three-person team, I spent over a month trying to understand the patterns to be recreated on the tunics, trousers, hats and headbands. I described pictures of other realisations of the costumes by comparing the Polish version with the English one, I numbered the colours I used. It took about another two months to create those colours from a 136-colour palette! Then followed months of hand painting the costumes, it was truly painstaking.

In April 2012, I presented the idea of my paintings cycle. Both the reconstructors of the ballet and the director of the Polish National Ballet, Krzysztof Pastor, reacted enthusiastically. It was time to choose dancers that would pose for my paintings, all of them agreed.

... that's how it all started.

The paintings are a result of an internal, burning need. My initiative, my love.



Work in the Theater

A hundred years ago, the premiere of *The Rite of Spring* created a cultural earthquake, more or less. This a phenomenon characteristic of our nature (and culture) that an original and precise, well-thought-out work of art is initially deemed to be a cacophony, a vacuous mockery of the audience. On the hand, the world of popular art is guided by the rule that “people will enjoy what they already enjoy”. What was the reception of your pictures from the series, exhibited after all on the walls of well-respected institutions?

In general, the reception was very, very positive. But just like the original ballet stirred up emotions, with a smile on my face, I recall even the negative opinions. I was told that the idea is derivative and the execution kitschy and mediocre. I am happy to hear also this kind of views. I can't help but take it as a compliment when both positive and negative reactions are strong - that must mean that I have hit a nerve. If something is really insipid and poor, then it is easily forgotten, it fades from memory and does not influence the viewer enough to elicit any comment at all. In my case, the biggest disturbance was to paint the dancers in suggested nudes. For me it was the only right way to do it.



Work in the Theater

You have immortalised the actual dancers of the Polish National Ballet. How was it to work with them? How long did it take to finish this undertaking, taking into account the number of these relatively large paintings?

Yes, my paintings are often multiplied portraits of the dancers of the National Ballet, life-size in the poses from the original choreography by Vaclav Nijinsky.

In March 2012, I compiled a list of my thirteen “chosen” dancers. There were mails, telephones, meetings, photo shoots, selections of photographic material, propositions of compositions and finally the painting itself. All intense... It was about a year of sleeping for 3-4 hours a day. A real marathon, but such a beautiful one!

I think that for most of us ballet is actually an amazing world. For me, it is a world of super- humans. Unrealistic characters, almost untouchable. My project was a wonderful opportunity to get to know the human aspects of this world. With the so called blood and sweat, fear and truly astonishing power of character. Every single one of my “chosen ones” from the ballet company is exceptional. Each person draws the eye of the viewers and doesn't allow them to blink. That's what I call a real force! It was a purely beautiful experience to be able to talk to them on the sofa, drink tea and, although we are from two different worlds, have a laugh about similar problems.



Atelier

In what technique the paintings were made? Could you say a few words about these and other particulars of your painting methods?

I use oil paint with glazing, which means that I apply several layers of more or less transparent paint and binder in the same place. I start with a draft of the composition that I already see in full in my head. There's no coincidence in my painting.

Due to the subject of the cycle and the unquestionably decorative character of the original *Rite of Spring*, I decided to use flakes of real gold and silver. These interact with the light and the walking viewer, in this way they emulate the movements on stage.

When I am done with a composition, I apply the flakes, polish them and secure their surface. After these preparations, I work on the rest of the painting. First, I need to choose what elements should show through the main colour layer and what shimmer to add. Then, gradually, I cover the canvass with different colours, one after the other, trying to retain their particular transparency which contributes to the final effect of fleshiness and depth. For instance, the brown that I use is not a colour from the tube. It is layers of reds, blues, oranges, sometimes ochre. It all depends on the temperature of the target layer. One painting may have as many as 20 to 30 layers in different spots. There is no place for mistakes. If I apply the paint too thickly and destroy the depth, the only solution is to paint the place over with white and start all over again.



Work in the Theater / Atelier

Owing to the technique I use, finishing one painting may take from one to three months. The process of drying cannot be accelerated without damaging the layering, so one can only wait in-between the layers. That's why I paint three to five canvases at the same time. While one is drying, I move to the next one and so on.

In one of the interviews, you describe your attitude to realism in modern painting. It seems that realism may often serve as a motivation for accusations or shame. Is it really so bad in the world of art? Does “realistic” automatically implies “not modern”?

I do not know whether “realistic” is the same as “not modern”, but that's how it looks like from my perspective. I often heard the view that realism is cheap and currently so not Polish. To plain, literary and decorative... about nothing. That I believe is not true, as the same can be said about the so called “dot on the canvas” or a black hole on a bare stretcher painted with fingers. Is this art? So what actually is this “art”? A craft or an idea? And why not a symbiosis of both?



Atelier

I came across the view that there is no reason to paint like I do, because with Photoshop you can work much faster and the effect is similar, a sugary print on a canvas. I am not ashamed of anything. Neither of my subjects, nor of my aesthetics. I am honest in what I do and how I do it. Still, it should not be forgotten that the honesty of emotions is not synonymous with literal autobiography. In other words, the fact that once I painted a self-portrait with male genitalia does not mean that I actually have them.

In my case, realism is a tool that I use to create the impression of universality and intimacy that is difficult to achieve by other means. I also use nudity, scale, colours and dreamlike light. There is a lot of room for interpretation. And apart from that, what a challenge it is to execute such a work! Each new painting is a challenge to the trust of both sides, the models' and mine. After all, I paint real people, not fantasies. It is amazing to feel the trust of a stranger, I love it, I experience euphoria and want to do more paintings.



Atelier / with Millicent Hodson & Kenneth Archer

The figurative qualities of your work do not diminish their expressivity and the fact that these paintings keep the viewers several feet above the ground or pull them into spaces of marvel rather than realistically plant their feet on the ground, glued to the floor. These dynamic figures are shot through with light; sometimes the light even partners them. I think I now ought to ask you about your inspirations and favourite painters.

I am happy that you view my work in this way.

Everything can be an inspiration. The art of others as well as the surrounding world: the sun trying to get under heavy eyelids, a queue in the shop, someone singing at the bus or a smiling stranger on the subway. It may be a feeling or a stray word, an accidentally overheard conversation, a thought-provoking article, a book, a film, fashion, nature etc.

For the last couple of months, I stayed in New York. I spent at least three hours each day on the train. I always had a book with me, but I could not focus on reading, because the surroundings were so interesting. I literally soaked up everything with the same passion as watching Old Masters at the Metropolitan Museum. Nevertheless, whenever I travel somewhere, I always try to find the works of Holbein, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Klimt, Caravaggio, de La Tour, da Vinci, Courbet, Goya, Velasquez, Bosch, Memling, van der Weyden, Brueghel, Monet, Mondrian, Pollock and Kahlo. As you can see, I have a rather extensive "collection" of the painters that I like. Each one teaches me something different and I admire every single one of them.

If one takes a look at other paintings of yours without certain refinement, some of them may be seen as shocking. You turn out to be a controversial artist, fascinated by human corporeality to such an extent that you include experimentation with it in your art.

Yes, physical aspects are beautiful and universal. Still, it should be remembered that without a soul, the body is only an empty shell. This is what happens when we label or pigeonhole it and we all do that, often unknowingly and automatically.

I am not fascinated by the corporeality itself, but only in relation with the spiritual. What are we without our emotions, belief, love or passions?

I think the package is never as important as its contents, don't you?

Four years ago, you said that you oppose art about nothing. Bland reception of art included, it could be added.

I like to ask questions in my art, or simply push the viewers to ask these questions themselves. I always say that good art should leave a stigma on the viewers and follow them around, entice a dialogue. It should help to get to know oneself, to develop internally, to enrich. All reaction to art is good. No reaction is a description of mediocrity that should be fought off with all might, regardless of whether we are talking about art, interpersonal relationships, private or emotional life.

For me honesty and quality are some of the principal measures of reality.



Le Sacre Second Act

ROZA is a painter and costume designer, representing art filled with symbolism and hyper-realism giving us an inviting flirtatious wink. RÓŻA PUZYNOWSKA – ROZA Born in 1984 in Warsaw. Diplomant of the International School of Costume and Fashion Design (Warsaw). Graduated in 2012 from Costume Design under supervision of costume designer Zofia de Ines; diploma: "Persona. Angels & Demons" awarded with distinction. Graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts (Warsaw). MA diploma 2009 in the field of Painting from the workshop of Professor Krzysztof Wachowiak; diploma cycle: "Stereotypes vs Identity" earned with the Rector's distinction. In 2007 she studied at the University College of Falmouth - BA Hons Fine Arts course (Cornwall, UK). Inter alia she took part in: International Audio-Visual Workshops "Moving Districts Budapest" (EUSshorts festival, Budapest), costume realizations for music videos and theatrical performances, numerous exhibitions of paintings, interviews and discussions about art. From 2010 she co-operates with costume realizations by working on commission for Costume Painting Department in the Grand Theatre National Opera (Warsaw). In 2012 she joint the team of lecturers of the International School of Costume and Fashion Design and became an assistant to one of the most interesting Polish fashion designers - Mariusz Przybylski. At present she is a student of National Academy School, NYC. Her paintings can be found in private collections, mainly in Poland, the United Kingdom and the United States. She realised an art project based on Nijinsky's "The Rite of Spring" [more – in the interview].¹

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