

INTRODUCTION

The following catalogue accompanies the solo exhibition of works by Edyta Hul, winner of the Grand Prix of the 46th Painting Biennale Bielska Jesień 2023 (*ex aequo* with Karolina Jarzębak and Adam Kozicki). The jury of the competition described her paintings as “suspended between mesmerizing abstraction and pulsating representation of flora.” The award-winning set of works: *Giant*, *Silver Night* and *Species Mythology* reflect fluid transformations of organisms beyond the laws of nature that are present in the artist’s work. The curator of the Biennale, Ada Piekarska, thus described the award-winning paintings:

Edyta Hul focuses on various shapes of the natural world, giving them an almost abstract appearance. The pulsating and dense structures, painted with industrial enamels, entice the viewer with the sensation of vibration and flow.

Something’s in the Water is Edyta Hul’s first solo exhibition at Galeria Bielska BWA. The organisation of the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue constitute an award granted by the gallery director Agata Smalcerz to the Grand Prix winner.

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Come closer and I will show you the object of your desires

The conditions that obtained when life had not yet emerged from the oceans have not subsequently changed a great deal for the cells of the human body, bathed by the primordial wave which continues to flow in the arteries.

The exhibition combines painting with sound, smell and movement, which situates the work of Edyta Hul in the context of contemporary inter-media practices. The simultaneity of sensations, from visual horror vacui to the proliferation of sound, puts the viewer in a near-hypnotic state. The expression *Something’s in the water* has an highly evocative effect and, when used during hypnosis, leads the subject to a visualisation in which she immerses herself, passing into a trance-like state. The alteration of brainwaves leads to a weakening of alertness and an increased susceptibility to access the gradually opening subconscious. The visualisation of plunging into the dangerous depths of water can be viewed as a metaphor for discovering one’s innermost desires. As she enters the exhibition space, the subject becomes exposed to Hul’s paintings, unaware that what she sees is only a delusion. There are recurring motifs of fish tails, snakes and vipers whose shapes resemble arteries, and clusters of disturbing sound flow through a bundle of cables. The exhibition space has been divided into zones defined by the architectural fixtures and the paintings therein. Canvases

and cables wrap around pillars and walls, grow from the floor or hang from the ceiling. Wet, enticing representations of the leafy floor, influenced alternately by light and darkness, play out ceremonial choreographies for the unpredictable elemental forces. The title of the exhibition *Something's in the Water* evokes dangers associated with the bottom of a deep reservoir. The depth, barely scraped by light, is a place of confrontation with unfamiliar formations which fluctuate sensuously in the twilight, giving in to the pleasure of morphing. The alluring humidity of the silt allows them to take on new shapes. In the dense primordial world, undirected desire expands in all directions under the influence of unsettling, organic sounds. Something unknown and feared lurks beneath the tranquil surface of the water: the flickering of slippery fish and slimy snails, mud, drifting bits of bark and branches. Boulders and small stones emerge with the pungent scent of petrichor. Winged insects examine the dead tissues, while a hissing snake with its tongue extended, a spiralling symbol of mystery, guards its territory. The skin in contact with the bottom conveys conflicting impulses of desire and disgust. Through heightened senses, smell and painful abrasions, intimacy becomes profoundly seductive. Trembling is ambivalent, trembling from fear is an atavism, trembling from desire is a trajectory of affect directed towards attraction. Are we being watched by the animate and inanimate objects we are looking at?

The sweltering, indeterminate forms featured in the paintings *Sunrise* and *Bouquet* by Edyta Hul are characterized by intense saturation, leading to fiery passion. The vivid greens and blues of the thick stems, fleshy roots and taut leaf veins depicted in *Serpentine Sisters* heighten the pleasure that the viewer derives from devouring the work, layer by layer, with their eyes. Roland Barthes, the author of *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, encapsulated this state with the words: "delight exceeds the possibilities envisioned by desire". The artist rejects mimicry in an attempt to conceal something and obliterate meaning. By avoiding literalism, the paintings tempt both internal and external matter. Edyta Hul perceives the creative process as a ritualistic trance, an intoxication and an attempt to transcend the limitations of the body. Meditative ecstasy assumes control over dexterity – a dexterity that reflects an affective impulse expressed by the varying intensity of touch balancing between free pleasure and gestural precision. The ribbon-and-plant motifs in the untitled paintings are arranged without beginning or end; together with mythical representations, such as *Pegasus* which occupies the central part of the exhibition, they form an organic whole. Alluding to ancient wall paintings, architectural details and illuminated manuscripts, the artist exploits the potential of ornament. Leafy capitals and dry frescoes depict creatures from medieval bestiaries. Pegasus, chimeras, dragons and winged fish with heraldic arrangements are inscribed in multi-banded, palmetto-like stems. Peacock feathers form rainbow-coloured arches with stems sprouting from the tree of life piled above them. It is difficult to discern regularity in the concentric compositions. These configurations symbolize life-giving forces saturated with moisture, soaked in sweat, spit and spilled liquid. Extended traces of paint, ecstatic bends and predatory gestures are determined by instinct. In the painting *Burning*, an uncontrolled chemical process brings to mind invasive destructors absorbing the surface. Up close, one perceives something surprising, unrecognized and seductive. The etching solution, bubbles, saliva, tears and dried substrate droplets are immersed in the saturated substrate.

Edyta Hul's trademark is working with a large format to create multi-layered areas. The visual effect is achieved through the use of dense industrial enamels spilling over the taut

canvas. The perception of the painting requires stepping outside the habit of looking for recognised forms; from afar, we observe only the indistinct outline of what lies beneath the surface. A close and careful gaze at the morphing forms reveals the sensuality of the successive layers of the painting. The artist's new works include cycles that are the result of explorations that allude to the intersecting varieties and species of animals (as in the painting *Tree Creatures*, plants tangling in the water and fleshly tissues. Similar to the cycles of *Cruel Summer* and *Battle*, organisms wither in order to re-ignite the seeds of new life within themselves. The most important role in this circadian process is occupied by water. Everything seems harmonious, rotting processes lead to a renewed flourishing, and carrion ensures the survival of other species feeding on dead matter. The swamp inhabited by the title *Thunderbirds* is distracted by a screaming call for reproduction, contributing to the soundscape.

Licking the outer surfaces

In Edyta Hul's work, paint becomes a substitute for language, which glides across the canvas like a labyrinth representing the naked body of a lover. The skin, as the crust in the painting *Heart puncture*, allows no deeper penetration. Saliva consists mainly of water, which has an important function in this intimate experience: it moistens and heals wounds. The most discernible elements in saliva are epithelial cells and mobile bacteria, which coalesce to form a viscous substance (as in the painting *In the smoky water*).

The canvases, which taste like sweat-salty flesh, have an intoxicating fetor, leave the hands glued together from the paint, and the membranes that form between the fingers allow movement on land and in water. The thick paints, whose layers are like viscous resin, introduce subtle shades and a luminous effect of reflections. Water also takes on the state of other glandular secretions, such as the watery substance in the eye. When moved, the lacrimal glands secrete puckered droplets and the sipped tears transform into pearls. Hatched from the milky epithelium, *Veils*, still in the larval stage, are in a struggle for survival. The cruelty of all creatures is characterised by ruthlessness and territorialism. As the authors of the book *Stories of Touch* wrote :

This is how a pearl is formed. A foreign body, a small parasite, sand, shell fragment, enters the clam and irritates its interior. In order to protect itself, the clam produces a calcareous substance identical to that of its shell, and gradually surrounds the intruder.

A snake's tongue splits into two distinct tines at the tip, which allows it to navigate its way and sense from which direction a smell is coming. The scales covering the beasts of the deep provide protection from parasites. Protective plant moss retains moisture, and the tusks of some predator species can be used during mating rituals or a fight for dominance. Bacteria-contaminated water can lead to insanity and loss of senses. The dangerous state of loss of consciousness triggers what we did not know before. A deeply hidden fear lives within us as closely as what we desire.

As French philosopher Georges Bataille argued, desire is fuelled by horror. The author of *The History of Eroticism* pointed out that 'horror is an essential factor in erotic attraction,' and 'the desire for the senses is the desire to lose oneself utterly'. According to Sarah Ahmed, a feminist writer and independent researcher, psychoanalysis allows us to see that emotionality involves associations in which feelings lead us through different levels of meaning, not all of which can be accepted in the present. Ahmed calls this the 'rippling effect of emotions' (',rippling effect of emotions') Through associations from the past, there is then a repression that leaves its mark in the present experience. The researcher notes that the term 'emotion' comes from the Latin 'emovere' referring to movement. In other words, emotion is something that moves us deeply. At the same time, emotion cannot be separated from bodily sensations. We become aware of it in the moment of intense feeling.