

## FIGURA OBSCURA

The Figure. Adored and ignored, elevated and damned.

The *FIGURA OBSCURA* exhibition presents a selection of established Slovak and Czech artists illustrating dark tendencies in contemporary figural painting. Authentically and innovatively they reveal the inverse sides of mankind and reflect with urgency on the problems of the contemporary consumer society. They hold up an unforgiving mirror in which they observe and examine themselves too. In sombre scenes of the decline of society, human blindness and suffering, they at once criticize, escape, and then seek their path back. Their work illustrates specifically this road back, as they try to bridge the chasm between the given order and an individual vision towards the creation of new contexts and new identity.

Mankind has always had a strong desire to understand his essence, to examine his face in the mirror. Thanks too to its social dimension, figural art has never faded away. The depiction of the human body is a means of communication with the external world, from the very first cave paintings, through the portrait period in the courts of kings, right to today's new media cultures. The human figure remains a constant theme of artistic exploration. Without figural art, we would not know the creators of our history, the faces of emperors, philosophers, priests and artists, not neglecting everyday people. Despite the foretold fall of figural representational art in the face of photography, film, and the deviations of 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde painting, the figure is still with us. In fact, it is enjoying a fresh renaissance. Younger and mid-generation painters are returning 'figural' to their artistic lexicons, thus confirming its sustained significance. Exactly what is it reflecting today?

The artists - Matej Fabian (SK), Martin Gerboc (SK), Jakub Janovský (CZ), Jakub Matuška/Masker (CZ), Marek Ormandík (SK), Erik Šille (SK), Adam Štech (CZ) a Lubomír Typlt (CZ) – show us the destructive reality which conceals within itself deep distress, uncertainty, and the feeling of a moral and values crisis.

The euphoria following Czecho-Slovakia's Velvet Revolution of 1989 and its consequent progression into various political/economic groupings beckoned an expansion and entrenchment of limitless liberty. Then the sobering began to set in. Crises of spiritual values, consumerism, globalization and a dependence on the new electronic media brought back new avenues of freedom's restriction. Alienation, spiritual vacuity, identity issues, violence, plus the latent fear nurtured by the mass media, imprisoned the individual more and more in a web of 'voluntary' illiberalism.

The *Figura Obscura* exhibition plays its part in reflecting this image of the modern period. The isolated and lonely figures on the canvases wander in odd time/space continuums without their own storylines, meanings or directions. The viewer feels himself in an evil, absurd dream which interweaves with reality until they become undecipherable the one from the other. Authors pose unsettling questions on the psyche of the threatened individual, on failure, on impotence and unchangeableness. Horror, tension, bestiality and death, despite opposition, become new esthetic categories both fascinating and repelling.

These thematic boundaries encompass the exhibiting artists who, with added hyperbole, absorb these ideas into their own suggestive works. Thanks to their rich resources of inspiration, a strong pictorial sense and technical virtuosity, they discover dynamic and progressive methods for the illustration of the new figurality. The directness of their artistic expression stabs into the core of the human soul, into its most secretive, most shadowy, corners. Even though the darkness of the works itself is exhibited in diverse thematic and stylistic approaches, the *figura obscura* remains for each of them individual and human.

The visual bestiality of scenes reinforced with a strong expressive language, plasticity and dark colourity is clearly represented in the paintings of **Matej Fabian** and **Jakub Janovský**. Suggestions of wildness and the spontaneity of Art Informel, Neo-expressionism, the inspiration of German Expressionism, and also mythology and alternative cultures are all there to be found in their work. Gesticularity, colour experimentation and a brutality in the depiction of the human body (sometimes bordering on the abstract) lend strength to their themes of repugnance and estrangement. Similar painting tendencies are also observable in the spontaneous and impulsive creation of **Marek Ormandík**. The rawness and gesticulation of his artistic statements, reminiscent of the Art Brut tradition, reflects his unconventionality and strong emotion. Through references to ancient mythology, the Christian tradition and contemporary issues, he focuses on the human/sinner searching for a meaning of life and for salvation. In contrast to the 'dirty' art of these authors stands the visually attractive work of **Erik Šille** and **Jakub Matuška/Masker**. These two artists present a seemingly positive and captivating world, yet one full of grotesque and surreal plots. In deeper examination beneath the rational expression and shining colour, however, lie piquant irony and unsettling anxiety. The authors in their paintings combine Renaissance and modern tendencies such as contemporary street art, comic books, computer games, graffiti and graphic design. This newly-emerged fusion of absurd motifs speaks to informational attack and today's world's moral and values crises.

Inspiration from emotions charged by German Expressionism, Baroque dramatization and the playfulness and absurdity of Dadaism unites the work of **Adam Štech** and **Lubomír Typlt**. Their gesticular figuring illustrates a world of complex emotions, fear, internal terror and failure. Isolated and restless figures appear in strange time and space contexts. Here too the artists pose urgent questions about the dehumanization and contradictions of contemporary globalized culture.

The dark and inverted side of humanity, enriched by references to philosophy, literature, the Romance painters, German Expressionism, subcultures and even more, marks the field of **Martin Gerboc's** interest. Depressing scenes of the decline and suffering of humankind press the viewer to the borders of esthetic perception. Not only do these works bring forth issues of vanity, vacuity, death and acceptable evil, they also question the meaning and mission of fine art itself.