

Sea, foam and sky

When involved in inevitable debates about writing prologues and catalogue annotations, which is not always an easily resolvable task, I often stress how thankless it is to write about the production of artists whose career path I did not have the chance to follow over a longer period of time or in whose case I did not have an insight into at least a few of their exhibition projects. This is precisely the reason why it is a more than fortunate combination of circumstances the fact that I have the opportunity to write about Vinko Šaina's work for the first time now, seven years after my first visit to his workshop and after a number of ambitious exhibition projects on which we collaborated, which was even more important for getting to know each other. While working and spending time with Šaina, I gradually became familiar with Šaina's abilities that make him a very capable and active promotor of Labin's and Istria's art life, with his cosmopolitan ambitions, but also with his human and artistic traits. Before this exhibition I would have been more inclined to think that the painter was, sometimes even unfairly, under the shadow of the gallerist. However, on this occasion we are witnessing an exceptionally fortunate coalescence and a newly discovered harmony between what were so far two separate poles of Šaina's complex personality. In the isolation of his atelier, this systematic and pragmatic promotor of cultural events underwent the process of transformation into a representative of a rather irrational poetics.

Boris Toman, a very knowledgeable interpreter of Šaina's art, describes the origin of this poetics as a "tradition of a lyrical and abstract landscape" rich in "elements of metaphysics and surrealism", accompanied by – and this is the crucial part where his and my point of view concerning Šaina's recent artistic production coincide – "an energy directed towards the real things and values". A similar shift in terms of the description and depiction of reality has been noticed by my immediate predecessor, Mladen Lučić, in his attempt to offer a catalogue presentation of Šaina's artistic production in this millennium. He describes the author's transformation of the Istrian landscape as follows: "At one point, landscape rose above the Istrian soil and started a long cosmic journey during which it will continue to flow while meeting, on its way, new worlds full of mystery and mysticism". Toman and Lučić refer to Kubrick's cult film "Space Odyssey", which is not a fortuitous reference since the first associations I had while I was having a glimpse of the initial works from this cycle were focussed on lunar landscapes. However, I think that Toman was the most accurate in the definition of Šaina's key stylistic features, through the recognition of a composition scheme based on "pure vistas of water, sky and earth".

It is precisely this kind of a three-element iconographic thread of a painting that can be recognised in the present cycle "Pjene" (Foams), within which, it must be said, the third element, the dominant one, is foam and not earth. The origins of this simple, but very remarkable three-element principle of structuring a painting is noticeable in the works like "Osamljenost" (Loneliness) (1984) from the cycle "Tišina" (Silence). However, at that point the painter was not yet ready to build out of this invention an entire system – that is, his own artistic distinctive mark – with the intention to focus first on atelier research and experiments, which lasted almost two decades. Thanks to that decision, and the painting experiences derived from it, the cycle "Foams" offers not only a simple and an easily recognisable basis, but also a potentially infinite series of variations, most of which can be interpreted as a result of the two decades in which Šaina painted "levitation, nostalgia and infinity" (B. Toman). The most noticeable stylistic feature, present in almost all periods of Šaina's painting activities, is the high eye level, together with "figurative reductionism and thematic syncretism" (G. Ostojić-Cvajner). More specifically, the monochromatic blue paintings carefully measured out through textual modifications and graphic elements are divided into three fields, which evoke the sea, which is either peaceful or foaming, and the horizon. As is the case with Gliha's dry stone walls, Šaina's "foam walls" can be seen more as a diagram than as a copy of reality, which is particularly visible in almost abstract small-format paintings with repetitive dot-like structures which are reminiscent of Gliha's calligraphic use of felt pens in the most imaginative variations with the theme of dry-stone structures "Gromača". The same freedom Gliha managed to obtain after being faithful and dedicated to the same motif for years becomes visible in the case of Šaina already on the

occasion of the first gallery presentation of his most recent cycle of paintings. However, we certainly do not want this cycle to be heralded as the final point of Šaina's painting metamorphoses or as a radical rejection of all the workshop experiences acquired so far. It is exactly the opposite: the mentioned possibilities of numerous permutations – and this exhibition offers a vivid insight into some of them, like macro views and micro views, joining and dividing into triptych and diptych (and even installations), “zooming in” and omitting one or even two components of the “foamy” triad – allow nothing less than the ideal synthesis of the various experiences and methods related to the creation of paintings characterised by an almost unlimited number of modifications of the iconographic variant, which, so far, has been the best candidate for Šaina's distinctive mark, announcing its candidacy in the most serious and the most systematic manner.

Darko Glavan

Zagreb, December 2003