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Face Substances. The rhetoric of Kapists' self-portraits: between self-reflection and confession

*I'm painting, still on the self-portrait.
Maybe I'll succeed, but not right away.
Each canvas is a different story,
It cannot mix with the previous ones...*¹

JAN CYBIS

Abstract

Self-portraits are specific kinds of pictures where the subject's experience is closely combined with the act of painting. Such works constitute a mixture of internal iconic power with external reality, e.g. the artist's body, his thought, and theory, etc. This applies in particular to self-portraits painted by the members of the Paris Committee since the idiomatic nature of painting was the primary quality on which they based the language and poetics of their art.

This paper analyses selected self-portraits by Józef Czapski (1896–1993), Zygmunt Waliszewski (1897–1936), Piotr Potworowski (1898–1964), Artur Nacht-Samborski (1898–1974), and Jan Cybis (1897–1972). The focus on the strategy of incorporating physiognomy into the matter of painting stems from the fact that on this particular level the intensification of the relationship between the author's image and his painterly gesture gains the strongest self-reflective potential. This allows for a reading of self-portraits as developing the artist's reflections about art and himself, included in theoretical writings and intimate journals. Analyses presented in this paper can, therefore, be defined as an attempt to recreate rhetoric of the painterly trace on the basis of choices particular for given work. In this optic, crucial are these aspects of painting that manifest a form of the author's subjective investment in artistic activity: from emphasising the distance through which the painting presents itself as a code offered to the viewer to decipher (as in Nacht-Samborski's work) through to declarations to blur the boundary between the artist and the work, which results in an almost organic communion of the body and the matter of painting (Cybis).

¹ J. Cybis, *Notatki malarskie. Dzienniki 1954-1966*, ed. Dominik Horodyński, Warsaw, 1980, p. 258 [trans. Maria Maklakiewicz]

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Place of self-portraits

Self-portrait as a portrait's subgenre occupies a separate place among the works of particular artists. Paintings of this kind are saturated with a double bodily reference to the painter: through a representation and as a direct trace of his artistic activity². Thus, they address straightforwardly the complex relationship between the work and the life of their author. The analyses of self-portrait images are often greatly indebted to biographical references. The following readings do not reject this weight, aiming rather at taking advantage of the emerging opportunities to understand the artist's images. However, it should be emphasized that paintings fully come to light when the external commentary does not contradict their visual qualities and accepts the challenge that lies in the matter of paintings.

A self-portrait *happens* where the order of a subjective experience intertwines with the painting act. It is a kind of border area in which the rhythm of life slides towards the iconic forces of the image. Capturing this potential intersection of the painting's inside and outside, different for each work, is the proper subject of self-portraits' analysis.³

The above remarks concern especially own images created by the members of the Paris Committee group, for whom the idiomaticity of the painting medium was the quality that shaped the language and poetics of their art.⁴

2 The interpretation of a self-portrait as a bodily trace of the activity of painting is based on Jacques Derrida's analyses, published in the catalogue of the exhibition devoted to artists' portraits. See: J. Derrida: *Mémoires d'aveugle - l'autoportrait et autres ruines*, Paris, 1990. For a detailed discussion of this approach see chapter "Self-portrait and the blind spot" in: Ł. Kiepuszewski, *Obrazy Cezanne'a. Między spojrzeniem a komentarzem*, Gdańsk, 2004, pp. 16-51.

3 The above research thesis is a conclusion stemming from reading the most recent literature on the subject of self-portraits in painting: O. Calabrese, *Artists' Self-portraits*, New York, 2006; F. Cazzola, *Im Akt des Malens: Aspekte von Zeitlichkeit in Selbstporträts der italienischen Frühen Neuzeit*, Paderborn, 2013; M. Fried, *Manet's modernism, or, The face of painting in the 1860s*, Chicago, 1996; J. Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History*, London, 2014.

4 Following is literature devoted to Kapists, relevant for this article: Gry Barwne, Paris Committee 1923-1939, ed. Stefania Krzysztofowicz-Kozakowska exhibition catalogue, National Museum in Krakow, 1996; A. Hałata, M. Lachowski, D. Seweryn-Puchalska, eds., *Pankiewicz i po... Uwalnianie koloru*, exhibition catalogue, Lublin Museum, 2016; J. Chrzanowska-Pieńkos, T. Sowińska, eds., *Jan Cybis 1897-1972*, exhibition catalogue, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, 1997; J. Pollakówna, *Czapski*, Warsaw, 1993; Z. Kępiński, *Piotr Potworowski*, Warsaw, 1978; *Piotr Potworowski 1898-1962*, collective work, exhibition catalogue, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, 1998; M. Gołąb, ed., *Nacht-Samborski 1898-1974*, exhibition catalogue, National Museum in Poznań, 1999; H. Bartnicka-Górska, A. Prugar-Myślik, *Zygmunt Waliszewski*, exhibition catalogue, The National Museum in Warsaw, 1999; W. Włodarczyk, *Przeciwnicy*

Kapists and the matter of the portrait

In 1923 these artists, as students of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, went to study in Paris. After they returned to Poland in the 1930s and took over the magazine "Głos Plastyków" ("Artists' Voice"), their extensive exhibition and educational activity began. Their undertakings achieved both artistic and institutional success, exceptional in the history of Polish art. Paintings of many group members entered the canon of Polish painting, and the painters themselves became professors at leading art academies.⁵ The impact they had on the Polish art scene extends into the 1970s and in the case of Józef Czapski, we can talk about a slightly shifted, yet discernible reception even in the 1980s and 90s.⁶

Although all of the KP (Paris Committee) members defined themselves with respect to the program developed in the 1930s by Jan Cybis, it should be emphasized that this group was formed by diverse artistic personalities. Moreover, the ways and biographies of many of them diverged, especially after the war.

The Kapists willingly wrote about themselves and their art. These publications include: Czapski's extensive writings and a large volume of Cybis's diaries; slightly more modest in quantity, however qualitatively excellent, are the notes in Piotr Potworowski's sketchbooks; Zygmunt Waliszewski and Artur Nacht-Samborski left the smallest number of comments.⁷ This need for self-reflection also penetrated their paintings; in particular into self-portraits. Individual paintings can be interpreted as a thinking process about art and oneself. This does not mean, however, that self-portraits merely illustrate linguistic discourse; their analysis is intended to bring out the dialogue between the word and the image. The artists raised an important issue of transposing a motif into an independent painting structure. Their artistic strate-

kolorystów, in: A. Gogut, ed., *Sztuka lat trzydziestych*, session materials of the Art Historians Association, Niedzica, April 1988, Warsaw, 1991, pp. 79-98.

5 This process took place right after the war: J. Cybis became a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw (with a break during the first half of the 1950s); Nacht-Samborski: first at the College of Fine Arts in Sopot, later at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Piotr Potworowski between 1958 and 1962 at art schools in Poznań and Sopot; as well as Hanna Rudzka-Cybisowa (whose works are not discussed in this article) at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow. The detailed course of artists' careers in the monographs above.

6 It is demonstrated by a large number of expositions in Poland, publications and a monograph: J. Pollakówna, op. cit.

7 Below are the most important collections of writings and comments by selected group members: J. Czapski, *Patrząc*, selection and afterword by J. Pollakówna, Krakow, 1986; B. Toruńczyk, ed., *Wyrwane strony*, annotations and comments by M. Nowak-Rogoziński, Warsaw, 2010; J. Cybis, *Notatki malarskie*, op. cit.; D. Jarecka, *Z notatników i szkicowników Piotra Potworowskiego*, in: J. Słodowska, ed., *Piotr Potworowski 1898–1962*, exhibition catalogue, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 1998, pp. 90-102; W. Waliszewska, *O Zygmuncie Waliszewskim. Wspomnienia i listy*, Krakow, 1972; J. Stajuda, "Artur Nacht-Samborski" (I) i (II), *Miesięcznik Literacki*, nos. 9 and 10, 1977. References to other publications and statements by these artists are provided in the footnotes to the analyses of their paintings below.

gies regarding the subject of study differed significantly; still, everyone faced the challenge posed by the portrait and self-portrait for the modern painting language.

In this classic painting genre, the composition's critical place is the model's face. Among various aspects with which this distinctive portrait's feature is associated, it is worth paying special attention to the issues of complexion. A twentieth-century colourist undertaking this type of painting confronted, to a greater or lesser extent, the classic *topos* of painting face shades⁸, which recognized this activity as a special challenge for the painter. It is well illustrated by Denis Diderot's statement, among many modern texts:

It is the complexion that is difficult to convey, that full, even whiteness, not pale and not matte, this mixing of red and blue tones, barely perceptible; it is blood, life, and they drive the colourist to despair. He who has gained the sense of complexion has made a great step forward; in comparison, the rest is nothing. Thousands of painters died without understanding what the body is; a thousand others will die without understanding it.⁹

The Kapists, emphasizing both the faithfulness to the pictorial tradition and the need for its post-Cézanne "modernization"¹⁰, did not directly accept such mimetic beliefs. Even if in practice they struck a chord with their painting instinct, revealed in certain images. In their optics of quality, the subtle matter of body had to be integrated with the superior and comprehensive image order. For this reason, some poetics adopted by the Kapists sought to weaken facial features and expressions by overly focusing and breaking the organic structure of the painting.

Nevertheless, the significance of what was being painted was not completely indifferent to them. It is demonstrated, among other things, by their view on abstract art and the discussion with its assumptions. The motif of the painting was not only a pretext and, especially in the mature works of these artists, it became a considerable element. The subject of study became even more crucial for the painter if it was his head.

Mask and rhetoric of trace

Problems that appear in the painting practice of the Kapists should also be seen in a broader perspective since the painting study leads to a special recreation of the model's face. The human face, as Hans Belting has recently emphasized, is already

8 Cf. M. Rzepińska, *Historia koloru w dziejach malarstwa europejskiego*, Krakow, 1983, pp. 182-183.

9 D. Diderot, "Essai sur la peinture. (Mes petites idées sur la couleur)", in: *Salons*, vol. 1, Paris, 1821, p. 423. Cit. after M. Rzepińska, op. cit., pp. 393-394 [trans. Maria Maklakiewicz]

10 This specification of the Kapists' place in history stems above all from Czapski's writings. See: J. Czapski, *O Cézannie i świadomości malarskiej*, Warsaw, 1937. Reprinted in: idem, *Patrzac*, op. cit., pp. 66-74.

a certain image created for one's and others' needs.¹¹ In this sense, the portrait he shaped according to the European imagery tradition, is an interpretation of this image that is a result of physiognomy. This opens space for describing such works in relation to the concept of mask, in which natural and artificial, individual and social aspects exist inseparably.¹²

The portrait mask can also be considered as a visual message, in which the content that goes beyond merely recalling the presence of the model, is deposited. In this respect, the staging of the image situation in which the face appears is certainly important. Then, spatial conditions of the face come into play, including the body pose and relation to other motives. The plane features of this motif gain a key role in the Kapists' paintings. In the Kapist imaging strategy, there is a strong link between the face's projection and the properties of the image's surface treatment. In modern painting, this relationship can be observed in artistic practice and traced back to Manet's times.¹³ In this image register, the face presents itself as a kind of mask made of pigments.¹⁴ This means that the face of the portrayed person is created primarily due to colour modulations, which are articulated with (often numerous) layers of paint. The face then gains its meanings not as much through facial expressions or similarity as through the way it is created. It gains its voice by being shaped by particular artistic language operations and being made of variously characterised painting traces.¹⁵ In other words, the image that the painting illustrates is determined by the nature of the gestures of the hand with a tool, made by the painter over the canvas.

The focus of subsequent analyses on the strategy of incorporating physiognomy into the image's matter is due to the fact that it is at this level that the density of the relationship between the author's image and his painting gesture gains the greatest self-reflective potential. In this sense, the following considerations can be described as an attempt to recreate a kind of rhetoric of the painting trace. The layering of coloured pigments on Kapists' canvases is not only a technological aspect of their art but a crucial register that determines the depiction and constitutes the true dimension of the artistic message.¹⁶

11 H. Belting, *Faces. Historia twarzy*, trans. Tadeusz Zatorski, Gdańsk, 2015.

12 Hans Belting presents literature on the subject and suggestive analysis of the relationship between mask and portrait. See: Ibid..

13 Cf. M. Fried, *Manet's modernism...*, op. cit.

14 Cf. Cezanne's self-portrait analysis, Ł. Kiepuszewski, op. cit., pp. 16-51.

15 For more details on the issue of trace in self-portrait practice see: Ibid..

16 Attempts to decipher the articulation of the painting matter affecting the presentation appeared primarily in connection with Titian's art. See: D. Rosand, "Titian and the Eloquence of the Brush", *Artibus et Historiae* 1981, no. 3, pp. 85-96; D. Bohde, *Haut, Fleisch und Farbe. Körperlichkeit und Materialität in den Gemälden Tizians*, Berlin, 2002; J. Cranston, *The Muddled Mirror: Materiality and Figuration in Titian's Later Paintings*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010.

Czapski – taking the “power” from the master

Let us first take a look at Józef Czapski’s early self-portrait from 1933 (Fig.1).¹⁷ This image was created almost in parallel with articles on Paul Cézanne published between 1934 and 1937, the cycle of which was crowned with a separate brochure containing a program text entitled “On Cézanne and Plastic Awareness”.¹⁸



Fig. 1. Józef Czapski, Self-portrait, 1933 (black and white photograph of a missing painting).

In this article, Cézanne’s art is deeply saturated with personal meanings. An important part of the article refers to Polish artistic youth from 1924-1930, who was “infected” by the French master’s attitude.¹⁹ Czapski, recalling his experience, encourages other painters to also “plunge into the world of Cézanne” and peculiarly absorb his art.²⁰

¹⁷ This painting has not survived, we only know it from black and white photography. Elements of the analysis presented in this section were earlier included in the article: Ł. Kiepuszewski, “Czapski wobec Cézanne’a. Znaczenia autorytetu”, *Quart* 2013, no. 2 (28), pp.71-79.

¹⁸ J. Czapski, *O Cézannie i świadomości malarskiej*, Warsaw, 1937. Reprinted in: idem, *Patrzę*, op. cit., pp. 66-74.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 68.

²⁰ Ibid.

The “recap” of the loner’s from Aix-en-Provence art – apart from the fact that here this vision’s features are of an almost mythical recreation of the painting principles – assumes the need to practice one’s perception of the world through the prism of that painting language. A broader project is included in these texts, formulating a special relationship with the indicated pattern. It also means a constant confrontation of one’s artistic practice with the light of the master’s paintings – filtering one’s view in the optics of the admired artist’s self-portraits.

Not only does Czapski not show a “fear of influence”, but on the contrary: he recognizes that this “influence” should be accepted with open arms.²¹ There is no question of an agonist confrontation with the predecessor, and submission to the protagonist’s art is expected. This closeness to the source has a lot in common with a love cycle, in which the path to a true, own artistic subjectivity leads through the creative subjectivity of the precursor.

It seems that the 1933’s painting can be read in the context of the above threads of Czapski’s writings. It is also worth contrasting with Cézanne’s *Self-portrait with Palette* from 1888-1890 (Fig. 2) because it will bring us to the realisation that self-portrait presentations may, in a special way, problematize inter-picture relationships. The general self-portrait convention is not the only frame for the image of



Fig. 2. Paul Cézanne, *Self-portrait with Palette*, 1888-90, Foundation E.G. Buhle, Zurich (Wikimedia Commons).

²¹ I refer here to the title of a famous book by Harold Bloom devoted to a rivalry between masters and their followers. See: H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, New York, 1973; 2nd edn, 1997.

one's own identity, but so are also more specific references. The path to one's image, apart from a mirror reflection, includes also other intermediary patterns that allow organizing or constructing a self-portrait.

Besides a general typological community of Cézanne's and Czapski's self-portraits – a waist up a presentation with a palette and brushes, a “studio” character of the light background – there is a similarity in the approach to the main motifs defining the images as the artist's own. Particularly noteworthy is the way of holding painting accessories, as well as the, indirectly related, type of character's reference to the situation in the image area: Cézanne's perpendicular easel was in Czapski's self-portrait replaced by a vertical shadow falling on the wall, placed in the same location. The fundamental and particular analogy is, however, revealed in the glance – the main element of the model's self-definition. In both works, the eyes of the presented figure have close artistic characteristics, consisting of a similar depiction of the eye and eyebrow shape with the contour line. Such reminiscences can also be found in many other self-images of the French painter (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Paul Cézanne, Self-portrait, c.1882, Pushkin Museum, Moscow, (Wikimedia Commons).

The artist's glance in the painting is not only a reflection of the mirror but also a reflection of Cézanne's self-portraits. In general, it could be concluded that Czapski's self-portrait reveals in this inter-picture dialogue, the pressure of a suggestive and imposing model, that his image undergoes. In this case, the power of artistic and personal authority is imprinted on the body image of the painter, the disciple.

This analogy, however, indicates not only the entanglement of shaping one's pictorial self-description but also a more detailed ambivalence. Eyes, the organ of the painter's vision, are at the same time a motif which contains a symptom of conflict defining the subject's individualisation mechanism of the artist. This detail tackles an issue dear to Czapski: achieving own creativity by identifying with Another. It is a path that also implies violating identity boundaries, taking on external optics, leading to its almost literal incorporation.

This mechanism undoubtedly contains a narcissistic moment, because identification implies the possibility of seizing the power from the Master. As a consequence, the authority's attributes and its achievements are passed to the one who follows his footsteps.

Waliszewski – the pressure of things

Zygmunt Waliszewski's art was even more entangled in inter-picture dialogue with canonical works of the past than Czapski's.²² Nevertheless, the self-portrait of our interest, represented by this painter, who – let us add – created most own images out of all Kapists, does not directly refer to known patterns but rather emphasizes the presence of the mirror in the painting process. Waliszewski's self-portrait "Display Cabinet" from 1931 (National Museum in Poznań) (Fig. 4) was analysed by Joanna Sosnowska²³ in the context of the artist's biography and Buerger's disease, which the artist fell ill with at the age of 28. As a result, the artist lost both legs after amputations (in 1927 and 1930) and died in 1936. Sosnowska stresses that these dramatic facts did not leave too many traces in his art, emanating "the joy of life".²⁴ This self-portrait is one of the exceptions.

The painting shows three stacked shelves of a glazed piece of furniture. In their background, one can see the figure of the painter. The order of the shelves and the movements of mirror doors breach the integrity of the "fragmented" figure that appears there.

While other painter's self-portraits can be called narcissistic: he often shows himself as a dandy, it is through this painting – believes Sosnowska – that the artist has expressed his physical incompleteness. "Between the reflection in the mirror and the viewer's gaze there are various trinkets, cups and glasses, it can be said that the artist's physical body was placed between what is fragile and needs protection".²⁵

The above perspective on the painting can, however, be stretched further and by moving slightly the optics, it is possible to capture other issues regarding Waliszewski's work inscribed in it. First of all, let us pay attention to the fact that on

22 See interesting publication about it: J. Suchan, „Dwa modele intertekstualności: Waliszewski i Janisch”, *Artium Quaestiones*, vol. XII, 2002, pp. 75-109

23 J. Sosnowska, „Choroba”, in: idem, *Ukryte w obrazach*, Warsaw, 2012, pp.135-143.

24 Ibid., p. 138

25 Ibid., p.142 [trans. Maria Maklakiewicz]

each of the three shelves, the items are carefully arranged. As a result, we obtain a multiplied order of three still lifes located one above the other. In this context, it is also important that the artist's face is squeezed between the objects, and its features are elaborated like the ornament on the neighboring vessels.



Fig. 4. Zygmunt Waliszewski, *Display Cabinet*, 1931, National Museum in Poznań.

The painter not only offers us a view of himself through a still life filter but also, taking into account wider analogies, e.g. the relation between an enlarged rounded shoulder and a bulky vessel, the relation between the spacious vases constituting the composition's base for the arrangement's stability and the lower parts of the painter's body, he also suggests self-projection on things. Thus, it is not only a confession regarding body defects but also a demonstration of striving for self-restoration through still life. This creates a suggestive existential metaphor: art (that is still life) becomes a body prosthesis; it replaces a body deficiency and provides support.

Waliszewski's "Display Cabinet" can also be viewed in the context of the special role that still life played in the artist's *oeuvre*. One should remember that a still life had a key position in the Kapist genre hierarchy as a form of independent painting.

According to Cybis's thesis: a still life unmasks. It cannot be national, religious, folkloric, nor of the working class. To a poor painter, it shows his weakness bluntly.²⁶ Waliszewski accepted this assumption, which was also a sort of an ethical principle, to some extent under the group's pressure. In practice, he often "broke" this rule: narrative images, mythological and grotesque scenes are a significant part of his work. In them, he returned to the habits of his early youth and from the period before joining the group, when he indulged in the pleasure of dialogue with the canon of European figurative art. This conflict is visible in some of Waliszewski's letters and sounds particularly interesting in the sentences directed to a stage designer, Tadeusz Cybulski, a practising painter to whom the "Display Cabinet", as the inscription on the canvas states, was given.

In 1931, in the painter's letter to a friend, we read: "Please, tell me what you are doing and if you are not worrying too much about the models, from my own experience I warmly recommend you to focus completely on 'natures mortes', where the results are easier, calmer to obtain and more fruitful".²⁷ And also in another letter: "There is a lot of truth in what you write, that you have to approach painting step by step, and not jumping, unfortunately, because of my nerves, I often make this mistake, it is so difficult these days to find in our work this calmness that the old craftsmen knew so well, and that led them to get such great results".²⁸

Waliszewski confesses like sin, succumbing to temptations that move him away from studying subjects. This tension between the adopted program and the artist's inclinations took a visual form in the self-portrait. In the highest, third area of the painting, the artist's face emerges from the background directly beside the dominating figures of a man and a woman, probably made of porcelain. The figural scene located on the axis of the arrangement, pressing against the face of the painter studying still life, represents a constant presence in his imagination of matters that go beyond the order of the table and furniture. The set in a wheelchair painter, trying to focus his effort on pure painting, reveals the complex reality of his desires.

Potworowski – surroundings

Piotr Potworowski's self-portrait from the 1950s (Fig. 5), created after the war in England (owned by the artist's family in London), also seems to touch upon the issue of artistic choices and the genre characteristics of its author's works. Potworowski's image, created using the gouache technique, contrasted with the pieces discussed earlier is sketchy and shows a much more casual type of expression. Portrait

26 Statement from 1934; cit. after P. Piotrowski, „Wielkie kwestie i martwa natura”, in: idem., *Sztuka lat trzydziestych*, op. cit., p. 5.

27 From letters to Tadeusz and Róża Cybulski (7.10. 1931, Krzeszowice) in: W. Waliszewska, op. cit., Krakow, p. 203. [trans. Maria Maklakiewicz]

28 From letters to Tadeusz and Róża Cybulski (11.10.1931, Krzeszowice) in: W. Waliszewska, op. cit., Krakow, p. 205. [trans. Maria Maklakiewicz]

paintings are rare among his landscape-dominated works. Despite its modest form, this study problematizes the general issue of the relationship between the painter and the surrounding space, which is important for the artist's stand.

Although the face is designed in a way that does not exclude that the piece was elaborated based on a mirror reflection, there are no elements there that would let determine the circumstances and the place of the study's creation. However, the absence of any identifiable elements does not mean that the surrounding space is neutral. It is not a background, but an intense yellow surround for the character.



Fig. 5. Piotr Potworowski, Self-portrait, the 1950s, in: Family collection in London.

The key relationship of the painting takes place between the painter's face and the painter's illuminated naked body. The face and the eyes are one of the darkest spots in the image, which suggests that the glance, as a place of eye contact with the closest reality, remains hidden in the shadows. This central zone is here dominated by the light of the surroundings, which rules over the piece's surface. The way of applying water-based paint to the surface of the paper causes that the separation between the painter's figure and the surrounding space is weakened, and his silhouette, which is a modulation of the surrounding colour, is overexposed. We can understand it as follows: the artist is making a careful observation while studying his image, but at the same time he absorbs the environment with his undressed body.

In a self-reflexive reading, this image of the artist at work can be read as a testimony of sensual and synesthetic contact with space, which is also made below

the threshold of vision. This aspect is present in the notes in Potworowski's sketch-books:

The next stage is limiting the visual aspect of the picture to such an extent that it stops concretising before the eyes as a whole, but penetrates with its elements into the deeper layers of the subconscious and begins to concretize just there. [...] ²⁹

I have to depict my waterfall with paints, so that it is heard and smelled, without using any means of imitation. [...] ³⁰

Everything that my whole body absorbed from a given emotion of the visual world (piece). I need to create with my hands a machine that works on people just as I want. ³¹

Potworowski's goal is to capture the synesthetic continuity between the experienced place and the temperature of the colour tone on the painting's plane. In the light of these statements, the analysed self-portrait presents a specific model of the relationship between the subject and the landscape, which is both optical and physical; for the gouache presents this moment of painting when the artist is being absorbed in the surrounding reality. The artist "sinks" into the luminous matter of the landscape and his body becomes a sensor that receives data from the environment.

Nacht-Samborski – from the face to the face of a painting

Artur Nacht-Samborski, unlike Potworowski, portrayed himself in an identifiable environment. Let us take a look at a painting from around 1955, from the National Museum in Poznań (Fig. 6), showing the painter in front of an easel, turning our way as if to welcome a guest visiting the studio.

What strikes in this painting is an exceptionally detailed portrait shot, which, oddly for Nacht's art, conveys the model's features. Compared to other, simultaneously created portraits of women with various attributes, or men characterized by certain exaggerated physiognomic features, this painting is distinguished by a fairly "thorough" relation, as a sort of a neutral report on his image.

Moving from one side of the picture to the other, we can track the appearance of new qualities: on the left, subdued value and tonal relationships, smoothly modulating the image, play an important role; on the right, behind a border marked by easels, what becomes evident are spontaneous brush strokes, which gain freedom, colourful voicing and brightness. It is also important that the constellation

29 Cit. after D. Jarecka, *Z notatników i szkiców Piotra Potworowskiego*, op. cit., p. 94. I presented a broader analysis of the artist's relationship with the surrounding landscape in the article: Ł. Kiepuszewski, "Szyfry miejsca. Proces twórczy Piotra Potworowskiego i Nowa Fenomenologia", *Quart* 2018, no. 1 (47), pp. 47-57 [trans. Maria Maklakiewicz]

30 Cit. after D. Jarecka, op. cit., p. 98 [trans. Maria Maklakiewicz]

31 Ibid., p. 101 [trans. Maria Maklakiewicz]

of patches formed there, representing a canvas placed on an easel, allows one to recognize the presence of characters on it. A bright oblique streak crossing the canvas on the easel is of special quality, as it is a visual accent with its autonomy and mysterious identity.



Fig. 6. Artur Nacht Samborski, Self-portrait, 1955, National Museum in Poznań.

By emphasizing the contrasts between its parts, the painting introduces the viewer to a complex play between different levels of the represented reality. The reproduction of the artist's image in this painting, places it on the threshold of art, in confrontation with the area in which the transposition of colours into a new quality is yet to take place. Nacht's gaze invites us to enter the picture, moving our eyes from the face of the painter to the face of the painting plane, whose specific properties come to the fore in the right part of the composition.

In this depiction, Nacht indicates the differences and the moment of the distance between the artist and his art. This way he emphasised the distinctness of the world created for instance by the artist himself, on numerous canvases portraying characters in different expressive masks. In these terms, in the Nacht's self-portrait, we would see a show of transitioning from the "ordinary" of the face to reality, which becomes available only through the mask of art. The painter's work in this context is a process of obscuring the obvious on the way to revealing what is unusual in the very appearance of the human face.

In the portrait from 1955, the bridge between its parts, contrasting in terms of painting study, is the arm – a faded stain which thus becomes an intermediate being

between the painter's body and the easel, and the painting inside the painting. If we were to situationally capture the entirety of the action enclosed in this painting, one could say that the artist presents himself as an illusionist who invites the viewer to closely follow the performance of a *trick*.

This trick is indeed visual because it takes place on the painting plane and concerns the transformation from one state of painting matter into another. This process of incubating visibility from a chaotic configuration of condensed traces seems to be an enigmatic phenomenon. Nacht - Samborski supposedly said: You can't say too much in a painting because you will kill it; you have to leave something to the viewer.³²

Cybis – immersion

The last self-portrait of Cybis was created between 1964 and 1972 (Fig. 7), which is when numerous and systematic entries in his "Dziennik – notatki malarskie" ("Diary – the painting notes") come from.³³ The long process of the painting's



Fig. 7. Jan Cybis, Head (Self-portrait), 1964-1972, Muzeum Śląska Opolskiego in Opole.

³² J. Stajuda, „Artur Nacht-Samborski (1898-1974)”, *Projekt* 1975, no. 2, p. 8.

³³ Some of the following considerations appeared in my article: Ł. Kiepuszewski, „Od Notatek malarskich do autoportretu Jana Cybisa”, *Zeszyty Malarstwa* 2015, no. 11, Kraków, pp. 55-63.

creation is noticeable in the complex qualities of the painting surface. The tonally and textually diverse field was created as a result of layering many versions of the image. Individual phases of painting activities performed at different rates and characterized by different dynamics of traces intertwine here, creating a complex cluster of colourful substance.

The activity of the surface qualities of the canvas means that it is not only the colour range or a sophisticated colour tone but its material structure that individualizes the painting. It is mainly due to various hand operations, whose trace is visible on the painting plane, that a separate tone of space of light is created, in which the painter's face is presented. The skin tone is a result of a suitable colour modulation not only in the face area, but it also results from the coexistence with other areas of the painting. First of all, the portrayed image is associated with the tone of the vertical object on the left, which can be both a painting or a window. In its light, the face appears merely as a reflection of the field, because the optical intensity of this element imposes the way of perceiving physiognomy. In the viewing experience of this dialogue between the body and the rectangular painting (window), the basic subject of the representation is defined. In this Cybis's self-portrait, as in no other of his portraits, the facial physiognomy is ruled by the quality of the colour tone of the whole and blended into the painting matter of the paint. The spatial qualities of the represented reality cause that the frame of the painting becomes a sort of container in which the person's image is immersed. This lets us understand, interpreting the work literally and using the rhetoric suggested by the Diary's terminology: here is a painter "immersed" in painting, or even more literally – in paint, the basic medium of his art.

The painting, which strikes with its organic connection between the artist's body and the painting matter, is a manifestation of a desire to eliminate the difference between them. In this sense, Cybis's self-portrait is a declaration about the nature of trace, which allows achieving one's image solely based on the internal and idiomatic logic of the painting process.

The attempt to bring equality between the painter and his material, the body, and the matter of his efforts, saturates the image with a pompous tone. This kind of pathos was frequent for Cybis, which numerous passages from his diaries indicate: "Truth through paint and in paint. Act through paint and in paint",³⁴ "In painting, as I understand it, there is man as a whole with everything that is inside him".³⁵ If the "Diaries" text suggests the artist's way of thinking about his painting, then the self-portrait gives us his image.

Conclusions

The attempts to reconstruct the painting logic individual for each self-portrait allowed to treat the image matter as a special medium of expression. It seems that sig-

34 J. Cybis, *Notatki malarskie. Dzienniki 1954-1966*, op. cit., p. 266 [trans. Maria Maklakiewicz]

35 Ibid., p. 351 [trans. Maria Maklakiewicz]

nificant are those of its aspects that manifest the various forms of the author's subjective involvement in his artistic activity: from emphasizing the distance through which the image retains features of a code presented to the viewer, to declarations of striving to blur the difference between the creator and the work, resulting in an almost organic melting of the body and the painting matter.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the attempt to read the painting traces in the light of painters' statements cannot aspire to reconstruct the theory of Kapist art; the aim was rather to point out the intriguing moments of a clash between the text and the image and to draw attention to some rhetorical mechanisms that bind them. It cannot be forgotten that, although these painters were eager to express their views, in principle they were all convinced of the superiority of practice over the discourse of ideas.

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