

AGATA NOWOSIELSKA *MASSES* (2004-2007)

MASSES

We should always remember that the work of art is invariably the creation of a new world, so that the first thing we should do is to study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new, having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know. Only after we've studied this new world closely, then, and only then may we examine its links with different worlds, other branches of knowledge.

I have quoted the words of Nabokov, as they might be an essential clue to the often asked questions on the sense of art and the alternatives of its receiving. These words might appear especially important for those who still desire the contact with art. However, they may as well be addressed to people who have not yet decided to avoid exhibitions.

The airtight circle of people serving art successfully defends the access to art itself against the wider range of recipients. It is not because they dismantle museums and galleries, neither is it because they select at the entrance those thirsty and hungry long-time enthusiasts or patriots making their way with a sabre. It would be a plain injustice to blame artists and critics for animosity or indifference towards art. It is not their fault –rather the modern world's, of which art constitutes often misunderstood or resentful image. Jeanette Winterson tries to explain this dramatic situation: *I am sure that if as a society we took art seriously, not as mere decoration or entertainment, but as a living spirit, we should very soon learn what art is and what is not art.*

The American poet Muriel Rukeyser is the author of words worth remembering: *There is art and there is non-art; they are two universes (in the algebraic sense) which are exclusive . . . It seems to me that to call an achieved work 'good art' and an unachieved work 'bad art', is like calling one colour 'good red' and another 'bad red' when the second one is green.* To put them simply: the one who shows their anger at stupid, nihilistic, boring, recycled or accidental art should sigh with relief as there is nothing that would prophesise revolution. Unless we wrap ourselves up in kwef so that the problem of all classifications and differentiations will solve itself on its own. Taking the advantage of historical freedom I lurk from one worldly mirror to the other. The many reflections I sometimes notice do not abandon me for long. It has been the case with the photographs of Andreas Gurski, in which I find an apt commentary to my presence in this strange world. The thing that rivets the sight and causes anxiety is the image of masses. It forms a taiga of lifted hands or rows of paper heads, faces of hundreds and thousands of people, lives which inevitably begin and end their functioning in the enormous factory of life and death.

It was the very concept of the human mass that made me try to depict it. There is some truth about us, people, in the concept of mass. It is the truth of each of us being unique and authentic, yet disappearing in the crowd of those alike us in appearance, behaviour, opinions, abilities, skills and aptitudes, others equally exceptional individuals.

It is a tale of a particular paradox of man losing autonomy when juxtaposed against an anonymous set of people.

I am primarily concerned with the issue of community as opposed to individuality. Because of the wide contextual field rising within the submitted topic, I shall describe the levels of meaning of the chosen phenomena and matters, which are the basis for developing my artistic statement.

The human figure, being over-functional at present and at the same time cementing the represented form of my works, is close to the formats suggesting a specific semantic frame.

It is not my intention to illustrate specific issues concerning the human literarily. All I intend to do is to suggest these issues using a range of various forms, so that they become suggestions themselves and provoke the receiver's associations. Promoting my intentions as an author, they should simultaneously provoke the receiver to formulate interpretations concerning him/her at some points.

COMMUNITY AS MASSES

The every-day observations of reality which we are all somewhat drowned in have made me interpret it as a field of contrasting signs at some moments: individuality vs. community, the value of unit vs. impersonal masses, numbers or quantities. In terms of such interpretation I read the concept of collectivity and masses through observation of objects, phenomena and tracing the plots of events. For instance, beginning with looking at an ordinary crossword where fields, clues and words coincide into mass and multiples of clues and their meanings; moving forward with the interpretation –an ordinary observation of the architecture, generally speaking, of the former communist states, where the characteristic blocks of flats hit the observer with their impersonal character. At the same time, keeping to the architectural example, I can distinguish between the two levels of the meaning of masses. The primary meaning is nothing more but the very visual influence, that is the design, the shape, the form, the quantity, for example, of windows and balconies, which multiply in the eyes of the observer while simply travelling through the city and provoke the impression of mass buildings repelled of their original, individual character. The second level of meaning concerns people directly. Saying to my friend ironically “Listen, that block of yours is magnificent in some sense. When it comes to its wave-like shape, you won’t find anything similar in any Polish town or city”. Then I hear a reply: “Yes, but living in it is a mistake”. Both levels, the visual and the social one, constitute a major stimulus for my interpretation of the concept of masses, which when confronted to the idea of individuality creates a meaningful context. While searching for an artistic solution of the concepts mentioned above, I tend to show the human figure in spatial relation to the suggested forms, i.e. blocks of flats which marked presence would work as an association with the existing buildings and bring the dual contextual meaning, the social level where the inhabitants are strange to each other and everyone of them having been imprisoned inside the cages of their apartments etc.

Remembering Godfrey Reggio’s “Koyaanisqatsi” where the entities of particular individuals have been put into frames and emerged from the vibrating masses of big cities, it seems that I have been using a similar endeavour –I put the human being into space-time continuum that can be either

landscapes of buildings or any other forms which my subject might be read through. The standard film frame where the viewer's sight is focused on a crowd of people rushing to every-day activities constitutes a collective icon and brings forward simple association with an anthill where life runs constantly. That may be why a sudden blow to the anthill and an unforeseen destruction causes temporary disintegration. The tragedy of the Asian countries suffering from the Tsunami wave is an example of clashing of the signs of masses -thousands of human lives and the individuals, i.e. the stories of those people who survived the cataclysm and have already been approached to with cameras by the world.

The concept of community may also be found in the works of others as a series of signs, merely patches, either spots arranged horizontally like in Pierrette Bloch's works or rectangles creating an illusionary city in the works of Maria Vieira da Silva. That is only thanks to the creative activity of da Silva's that I build up my statement with greater conviction. The architectural hints I plot in my pictures are but a form of talking about the world people have been sentenced to.

"There is no more a clear distinction in political life, between war and peace, between sovereignty and slavery, between invasion and liberation, between equality and despotism... between art and buffoonery, between knowledge and ignorance. From the world where all those words revealed and identified certain objects, qualities and situations arranged into opposite pairs, we have moved to the world where contradictions and classifications, even those most basic ones, have been withdrawn from circulation". Quoting Kołakowski's statement I have explained, in some way, the selection of motives which I juggle with on my flowers-objects (see: appendix). They constitute an additional commentary built upon the margin of painter's statement. Their fairy character is connected with the function of occasional gifts they sometimes fulfil. The selection of announcements placed on the objects express my relation to the story cited as well as to the presence consisting of contradictory elements. Out of the corporate character of the world, its complexity and impossibility of defining it, I choose minute units which I am able to tame it with.

(Nina Witoszek-Fitzpatrick): "The New Renaissance is a vision offering a rebirth of human in an incapacitated society, a return to the ancient perfections and ideals of truth and honour, and to reflection over strength of the powerless. Just like their predecessors, the Eastern-European authors, they propagate the emancipation of an individual and delivering from dogmas in politics, religion, historical awareness and ways of experiencing the world. Similarly to the founding fathers, they talk about the present day through the return to the ideals of the ancient times, they rediscover the concept of sacrum and they remind us about the necessity of distinguishing between civilization and barbarity". This short text by Mrs. Fitzpatrick, a fragment of her book about the New Renaissance, opts for values acquired by the individuals. Therefore, coming back to the topic of community versus individuality, the vision of the present day where an individual establishes and fights for universal values is but a vision of reality where the proportions have long been unequal. On the other hand, the meaning of individuals forming communities can be seen well when we look upon the individual with a close-up. That may be the reason for justifying the denouement in plastic arts –approaching the figure and distancing the remaining matters and space.

In culture, it may easily be observed that anthropocentric and sociocentric tendencies clash with one another. It is confirmed in the statement of Georg Simmel: *The whole history of society is reflected in the conflict, the compromise, slowly won and quickly lost, that appear between adaptation to our social group and individual elevation from it.(...) it is always one and the same fundamental form of duality which is finally manifested biologically in the contrast between heredity and variation. The former of these represents the idea of generality, of uniformity, of inactive similarity to the forms and contents of life; the latter stands for motion, for differentiation of separate elements producing the restless development of one individual aspect of life into another.*

Within the context of the totalitarian systems of the 20th century, the conflict of collectivity and individuality is interpreted anew. The times we live in seem to create a reality where the individual fulfil their purpose. It appears to me, however, to be an illusion only. The conflict which led to the destruction of one world created new reality, deformed and chaotic, filled with new wars, which inevitably leads to a downfall. I want to back myself up with passages by Simone Weil, who as a witness of the birth of Marxism and all the following totalitarian systems, expressed her anxiety concerning the endangered values (...)

What Simone Weil wrote about sixty years ago, has already come to being. I might support it with a lot of evidence; take the hegemony of any corporate companies as an example. I reckon our civilisation will undergo even more significant alterations and it is difficult to hope that these changes will benefit the individual, who stands upon a new conflict of modern times.

How current and up-to-date are the words of Simone Weil: *Only fanatics are able to set no value on their own existence save to the extent that it serves a collective cause, to react against the subordination of the individual to the collectivity implies that one begins by refusing to subordinate one's own destiny to the course of history. In order to resolve upon undertaking such an effort of critical analysis, all one needs is to realize that it would enable him who did so to escape the contagion of folly and collective frenzy by reaffirming on his own account, over the head of the social idol, the original pact between the mind and the universe.*

I believe that it is exclusively the matter of individual people to decide whether they will submit their own lives to the dominant course of history. The nonconformist attitude is no longer popular nowadays, thus defending one's own rights is a difficult matter. The indignation of the Islamic world resulting from a recent utterance of pope Benedict XII, wrongly interpreted and cited out of context, divided society into these defending the truth and those too afraid to oppose the aggression and

hatred of Islamic fundamentalists. There is the group fear and lack of responsibility for our own civilisation

Nikolai Bierdayev speaks of the antipathy to the voice of majority and the expression of shapeless human mass: *I have never agreed on the average level of human life. The feeling of alienation sometimes making me suffer authentically, was caused by each gathering of people, each event of life. Inside myself there is a lot that's strange to me. Indeed I have been absent even when I was active in life. Alienation in me has never become indifference. I am rather active than passive. I am not too social, I'm antisocial, so to speak. Because of my character I am feudal, I am sitting in my castle with my drawbridge up and I'm shooting back.*

In the collectivity based on a clear suspending structure, individual value is depreciated. Jeanette Winterson writes of an "official life" suggested by governments and public education and promoted by the mass media. She mentions powerful agendas convinced of their own importance and neglecting individuality. Free choice becomes an empty slogan, whereas the only aim of social institutions is the total homogenisation of collectivity. In reality drawn by J. Winterson those who think on their own are difficult to control; what is even worse, in a culture dominated by money they might be sceptic of the advertisement of various goods. *Because our economy is based on a consumer-driven capitalism, we ought to be naïve and passive. We ought to believe that we want to earn money to purchase goods we do not really need. The education system is not focused on creating individuals who think and this is exactly our field of action. When we get home tired of idiotic work we can relax in front of a television screen showing idiotism. This scheme, highlighted with such events as birth, death, marriage and purchase new car is offered to us as real life.* Martin Buber defined relations as social (not interpersonal) wherever individual existence is incorporated into and embraced by a group being. Between the one and the other members of the group there is no personal relation. *There, where the collective element dominated entirely or only just outbalances, a human being feels to be drifted by collectivity.* Henryk Elzenberg recognizes social contents as depleted of any values: *Themselves, as collective (...) are they, at the most sympathetic interpretation, rather a poor impletion of our hollowness.*

When juxtaposed to the above beliefs, Paweł Althamer's project of "Bródno" appears as an extremely interesting project. During its realisation one person, the artist, influenced the collectivity and collective perception and encouraged the inhabitants of one of the blocks of flats to switch on or off their lights at home in order to visualize the number of the year 2000.

The concept of net society forms a totally new meaning if dominated by an individual. The net character of the society is clearly visible in many of its spheres: economy and globalising marketing,

culture, politics, new social movements as well as in the various dimensions of social relations. The egocentric personality domination in modern societies, combined with the individualisation of labour and fragmentation of the work process, cause the individualism to become a dominating type of behaviour. Jean-Claude Kaufmann writes: *These are not the social bounds anymore that define an individual; it is the individual who chooses their own social bounds. It causes a change of form. Bounds, previously written into a general and binding area, begin to divide thus creating a wider and more diversified net managed by an individual.*

THE CROWD

There were several reasons to the appearance of a headless crowd - says Magdalena Abakanowicz. – The belief in art not being decorative yet a challenge, confrontation, warning. A horrifying awareness of the crowd which like a headless organism destroys or worships following orders, so Hitler, Stalin and leaders of many countries ruling their nations and gaining their obedience to iniquitous slogans. During my life humanity tripled its quantity. We are still observing how instincts and emotions shape behaviour without the contribution of consciousness. Those crowds made of canvass, bronze, cast iron and concrete stand in museums and public collections in many countries. They constitute a sign of lasting fear. They confront the quantity and themselves. They are a spell of an existing crowd in which I introduce my own still one.

It was this very sculpture that inspired me the most. The characteristic works of Magdalena Abakanowicz, which undertake the subject of hostility and anonymity of crowd, together with Anthony Gormley's installations have shown to me a world infested by mass insanity. Ryszard Kapuściński, quoting Erich Fromm and the experiences of Hannah Arendt, shows the mass world: (All of them) *try to understand this amazing world which has attacked them from everywhere; they want to investigate, understand and define it. In other words, the key in describing it is the adjective of "mass". Thus, there is the mass culture and mass history, mass taste (or actually lack of taste) and mass insanity; mass enslaving and finally, mass destruction. The crowd is the only character on the world's stage and its only virtue, the only virtue of this mass, is anonymity, impersonality, lack of identity, facelessness.* Crowd deafens and stuns, becomes impersonal. It was noted by Martin Buber extremely vividly: *Then the already formed procession moved and after a short while I completely forgot of the conversation with acquaintance, walking thoughtlessly with the crowd, totally busy with*

movement; the same must have happened with others, with whom I had just exchanged the human word.

When I think of the collective form, my first association is a picture of “human mass ornamentation” seen in the stadiums or processions worshipping Mao-Ze Dong. Paradoxically, the art of the Chinese artist Yue Minjun, as one of the few in fact, is the derisive and sarcastic view at the phenomenon of a collective man. Monica Dematte, when on coverage from the 48th Venice Biennale, described the art of the Chinese painter: *The relationship between the title and work serves as an emphasis of the feeling of absurd.* The technique he uses takes from the style of commercial and propaganda posters: sharp contour and colour fields, thanks to which the pop-art effect is achieved. In his latest works, much simplified human figures are dressed the same and painted with narrowed palette of colours: very pretentious skin rouge, red lips and disproportional large mouthful of blackness. Mouth ajar, cover a half of the face and significantly contrast with strongly clenched eye lines, making it impossible to see anything.

The power of influence of Y. Minjun’s works has been created, apart from their sizes, through a rich composition. Figures, dishonestly cheerful, very often follow the pattern of Christian iconography or Chinese popular art: the lacerated body of Saint Sebastian becomes a jolly scarecrow together with the unimpressed bird flocks sitting on its arms. Yue Minjun refers freely to motifs that shaped the visual heritage throughout the years, especially to an obvious element of this heritage, which is to the enforced optimism of the revolutionary realism’s figure.

A similar ironic vision of the human anonymous crowd, though not that jovial anymore, can be discovered in the arts of Jake and Dinos Chapman. In one of their installations, entitled “Hell”, the artists refer directly to the tragedy of Holocaust, yet the format of their visual expression acquires a universal tone –the executioners and their victims find each other in mass graves.

Even more symbolically anonymous mass death is shown by Marina Abramovič in her work „Balkan Baroque”, where she places herself on the pyre of bones torn from flesh and skin.

Henry Darger’s drawings refer to the idea of collectivity traps. A recluse and hermit, he created an utterance exceptionally original. Through images of fleeing girls and soldiers suffocating them, he showed a world of anonymous suffering, which in interpretations refers not only to wars.

On the other hand, Andrzej Wróblewski’s paintings, one of my most inspirational painters’ works, refer to the individual itself. Anda Rottenberg speaks of him in the most interesting way: *The artist does not make reference to the experiences of the whole humanity; he does not try to ascend*

above his own war and artistic experience. The heroes of his canvas are individual people. Abrupt from the hecatomb of war, participated by the anonymous crowd, they face the viewer in extremely personal, even intimate situations. Most of the paintings from the "Firing Executions" series show the victims only: incomplete human shapes ripped of life, like empty clothes, wear but a memory of bodies they used to cover.

To read the masses

"A work of art should work like a device. Sculpture uses the forces of Physics to show the spirit, weight to show weightlessness, light to be able to refer to darkness, its viscosity to refer to something one cannot notice (...)

Through objects one can understand the world as they live within him, the body allows to put experience into plastic form because I live in it (...)

The viewer fills and in a sense becomes the work of art through a reflexive action of joining and associating the work of art with the world."

Anthony Gormley

"Our respect and admiration for painting is a consequence of a long process of adaptation, the process lasting for centuries; and of reasons which often do not involve art or mind. Painting has created its own recipient. Generally, it's a conventional relation."

(Gombrowicz to Dubuffet).

Jean Baudrillard asks to what extent the painting-recipient relationship will function in the era of uncompromised criticism and commercial madness. Will art possess the right to the second enduring existence thanks to the cultivation of its own myths?

I am using Baudrillard's text because his essays compiled in "Art Conspiracy", drafted in the middle of the 90s, aptly show a situation in which art is created nowadays. Baudrillard's words are especially close. Why?

Is it because the modern art lost the need for illusion? And quite the opposite –it professes the aesthetic cliché, becomes transaesthetic?

Baudrillard, asked if the art of the second half of the last century did not demand for itself the rights to change life, answered that art becomes more pretentious, it wants to be life.

“Hegel’s prognosis is the end of art one day. Marx prophesied the end of economy or politics, as there would not be a place for them taking the numerous transformations into consideration. The destiny of art is to outrun itself, to become something different –and life? Art swapped with life thanks to common aesthetic which led to ‘disneyfication’ of reality. Instead of the world there is a Disney-like form that can dissolve everything through changing everything into Disneyland.”

I am referring to Baudrillard keeping the problem of form in my mind. It is the problem of the entity of art. I express certain ideas, thoughts using painting as media. According to many opinions, it is a sort of ‘taken out or permanently submerged in naphthalene’ media, deprived of its future. Gerhard Richter, when asked whether he thought of painting as of a weakly progressing form, answered:

‘It does not matter what media someone uses. It is enough to believe in the sense of the given form to be convinced of it.’

Baudrillard says that we live either happily or not in times when one cannot foresee what is going to happen in the future which does not exist. All future has been led to the past, to memory. Present time is a form of readymade. Art has become a mere quotation, a re-appropriation, it resurrects its own forms. Art does not believe in its destination anymore. A setup of a scientific machine is created, which works on its own account. A sort of a hermetic world referring to itself. Most declare cliché and the dominating reflection, ‘politically correct’, is to talk about decay, preservation of nothingness in terms of aesthetics.

Metamorphosis, reversal or seduction are now the persistent forms it still believes in.

According to Marshall McLuhan, all of us have become aware of the possibilities of forming a work of art from everything that surrounds us. We live in times of transaesthetics where there is no room for aesthetic judgements.

We are characterised by indifference, triviality, a sort of transsexuality; after liberating from all desires we got rid of illusions and were left with an overload of images.

Baudrillard calls it the “Xerox culture”; we copy only ourselves. There is no object nor its vision only the lack of the object’s vision. Since the creation of Leni Riefenstahl’s “Olympics” as a form of

documentary through turning aesthetics upside down thanks to Warhol's fetishism, we are standing at the point after the explosion of modernistic orgy. After the avalanche of images and the explosion of visions.

Art may head to pure technique, craft, eventually switching with electronics, or to a ritual in which all matter can serve as an aesthetic gadget, where art will be a universal kitsch.

'(...) and the difference between Warhol and all others who encounter permanent crisis is that together with Warhol the crisis has passed.'

There are two ways to avoid the trap of 'imagining': ceaseless deconstruction where painting, for example, must face permanent reflections or ignoring meanings and definitions.'

The overabundance of forms and fashions, such as fascination with reality shows and the voyeuristic tendency, aggrandise the distance between the recipient and the area of art. It seems to me that for the viewer the present layout of forms and representations is more often less legible; yet, he agrees, despite all, to watch it.

Intuition is my language of representation. I interpret reality on the basis of suggestions. Painting is a sort of a suggestive code of associations. I want the recipient to 'read' the paintings by means of associations. When I recall Hopper, his affirmance appears there:

- *I do not paint loneliness or seclusion, alienation. I only want to show the light falling onto the wall in a room (...)'*

Marco Titchner's statement:

'Be enraged but do not stop breathing'

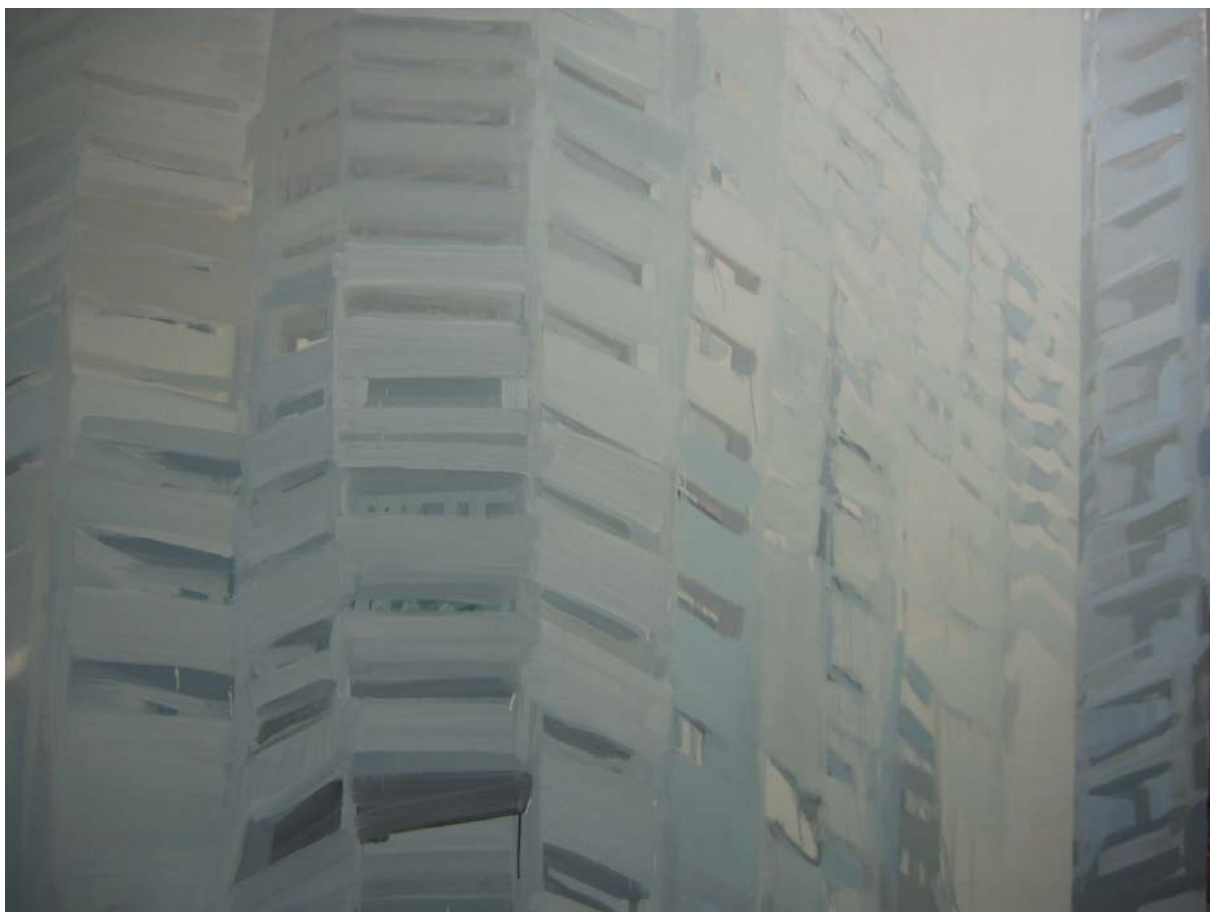
is for me a kind of motto. It allows me to create distance to art.



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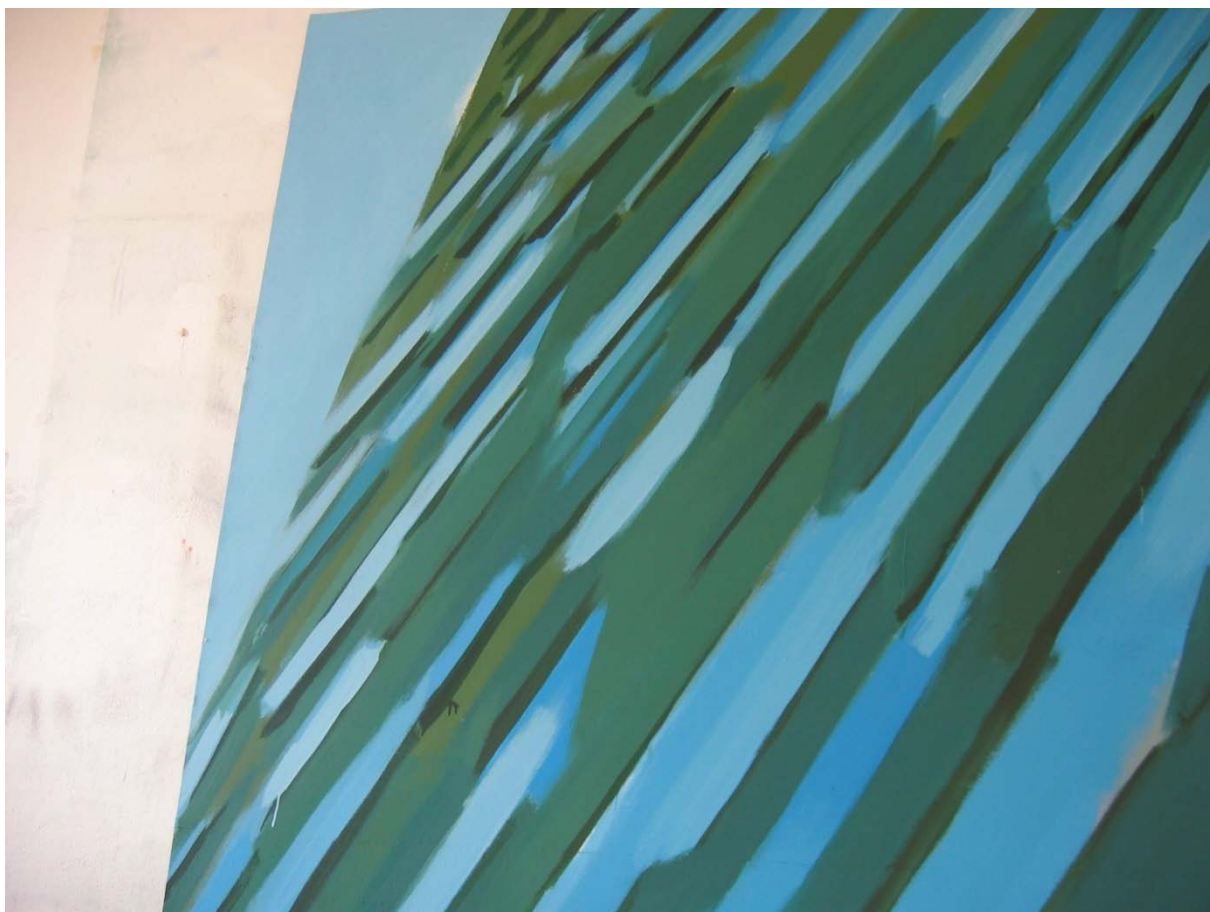
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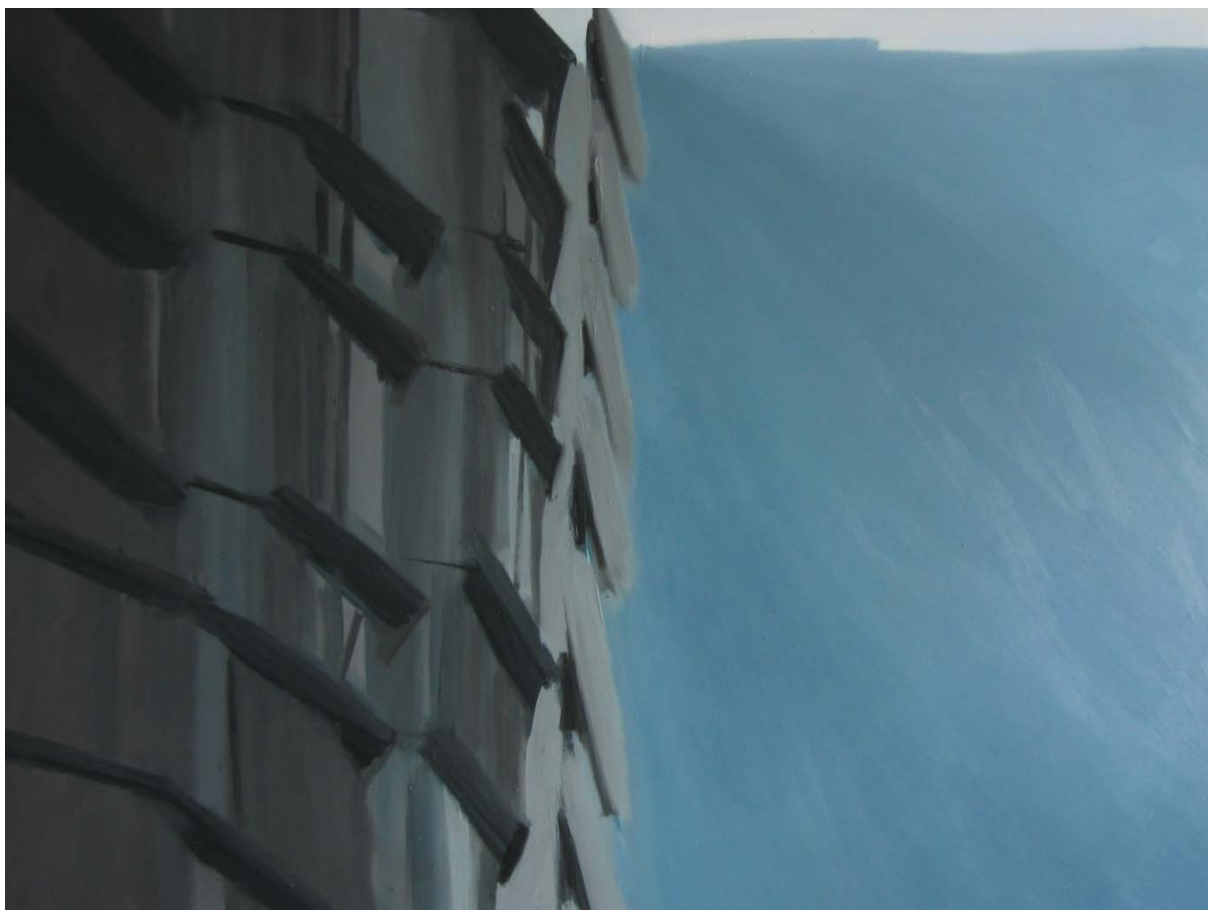
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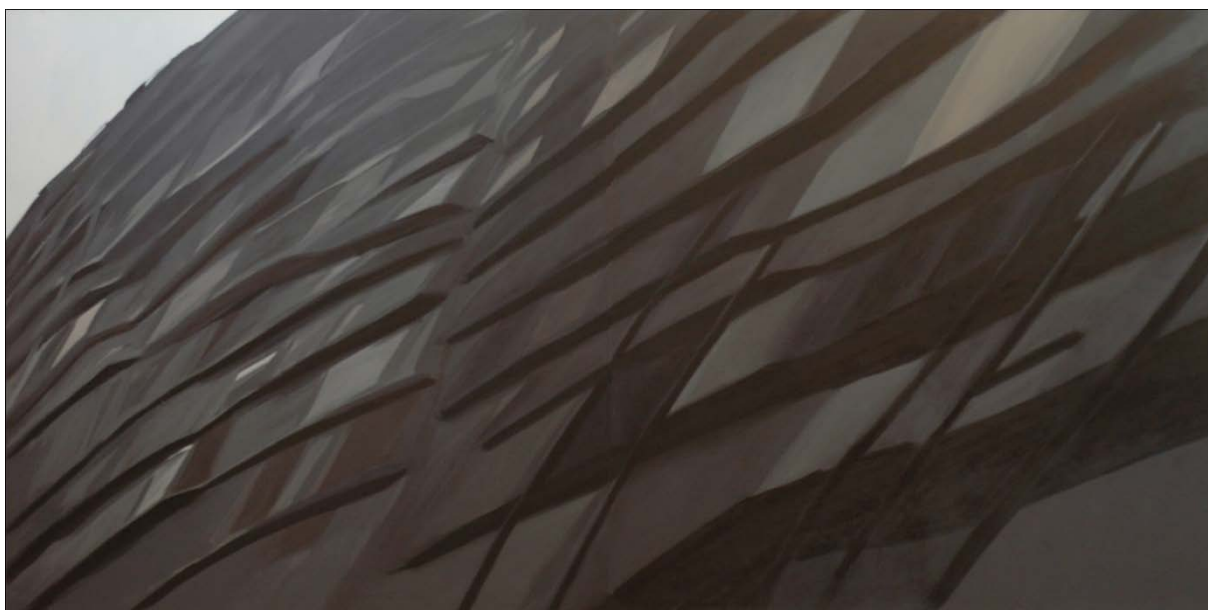
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