

Text for the exhibition catalog

Spodní proud / Undercurrent - Jiří Straka, Martin Eder, Jonathan Meese, Josef Bolf

Galerie Rudolfinum
7. 5. 2009 - 16. 8. 2009

by Petr Nedoma

What to do, where to go, how to escape from a difficult situation, how to overcome fear, where to hide, where to find shelter? Extreme scenes full of burning containers, bleeding wounds and crunching glass swarm with existential questions. The etched black surface on underlying luminescent violet is a reverse flipped world, an artificial civilization soaked in the cloying fear of an irresolvable impasse. To the outside observer, sometimes perhaps paradoxically a place of refuge and safe visual cage in which to store his own frustrations. Toying gently with extremes and slipping them into the world of children or, vice versa, planting situations creating the impression of "the day after" in a child's world, this is a game playing on the delicate kitsch of emotion for those pitiful little creatures who, however, we know will never actually find themselves in such an extreme situation and will take it in their stride. If it comes to the worst, the film can be stopped and the apparatus switched off.

Ten years after completing his studies, Josef Bolf is a prominent Czech artist, meticulously continuing the tradition of figurative painting which does not sacrifice narration. From the outset, he immersed himself in a topic which seems rife among his generation. The quest for resources, incentives and inspiration in one's experience, veiled in the wispy nostalgia of the past, where only one's own childhood can be considered a credible and highly personal source of productivity and emotional self-fulfilment, appeared on the horizon like a bleary-eyed, cloyingly furry cloud perhaps sometime around the turn of the millennium. But those mature children had no difficulty combining fairy-tales with thrillers and, of course, computer shoot-em-ups. Older and more educated, they were later keen to add horrors from a previous age, and complemented the resulting mix with comics of both Western and Eastern provenance and music in line with their collective identity. We can expect this generation, then, to tackle more general problems by thematizing only purely personal, subjective experiences and feelings generated in a union of place and time from this set of resources, and these are generalized only to the extent of broad generational pooling and common dissemination. Yet the basis and source of generalization is not an attempt to elevate a particular idea in the sense of the will to transcend everyday banality into intellectual or even spiritual qualities, but is merely a consequence of the existence and networked interlinking of a large set of individuals where a basal sense of nostalgia for lost childhood, established as a generational issue, is shared. Regardless of what sort of childhood it was. Childhood is no longer a vanquished phase of development, returning to which meant overcoming a certain shame derived, perhaps, from a sense of imperfection, blunders and aberrancies. What young Werther experienced as a heroic tragedy is now a plush pink figurine of a girl with the head of a dog. The blurred darkness of bleary eyes, tinged with death metal in the midst of unprecedented prosperity, is symptomatic for a period separated from the last major European conflict by over 60 years. However, it is noteworthy that, at least in the case of Josef Bolf, this theme has roots and rationale from before the revolution, a time which is not viewed in a particularly idyllic light today. Or, conversely, was that quality used to intensify the dark background to the theme?

In the past two years or so, a large collection of extremely powerful, impressive images created by means of an etching technique has appeared in Bolf's work. A negative, sharply contoured and cut dark picture boldly underlines the shadowy current of depressive themes of cataclysmic situations to which children are exposed. The settings of these dusky Baroque dramas are mostly housing estates, school yards, the interiors of high-rise flats, the metro, closed-off areas, the world of the 1980s. Of course, it is extremely tempting to use an arsenal of Freudian-Jungian truths and practices to come up with an interpretation. In fact, it is enough to draw on the plain fact that many scenes are set in a completely real, directly identifiable environment, that the artist himself points to the details indicating self-

projection, and that much of what is depicted has a real basis in authentic emotions, situations, and obsessions of the period. It was not only in the United States that a generation was fed propaganda about the threat of nuclear conflict, and not only there has this ideological kneading and occasional drills with gas masks left frequently deep scars in the delicate psyche of children. The link to the real, the experienced, the actual, intensifies the effect of otherwise seemingly fanciful and highly distressed projections. Bolf does not work with chance, with an uncorrected stream of associations; he does not let matters settle according to their own, otherwise uncontrolled laws. On the contrary. Every detail of an image, perhaps every stroke of the brush or each etched line, is largely controlled; everything is constantly examined in the complexity of relations and considered from different angles. Perhaps that is why each image projects a precisely tuned atmosphere of suspended time in between what has already happened, the consequences of which we can see, and what is clearly and inevitably around the corner, but what we can only imagine. In terms of form, some critics talk about storyboards, others about comics, which is an area the artist really has focused on. Given the frequent inspiration from film and its device of creating tension through the use of specific processes to unwind the story, I believe it would be most accurate to talk about a cutting, a still. Bolf is very familiar with horror and thriller technology. The scene is all the sharper in a painted image, where, unlike in film, impending disaster can be suspended at the most intense moment - indeed, where it is possible to capture the suspended numb spleen of the irretrievability of childhood in the middle of a fire at night! Where it is possible to therapeutically commit all childhood fears to a picture and leave them there for good.

The latest set of paintings, created specifically for this exhibition, is a progression from earlier work; these pictures soften and refine the structure of tension by developing supremely pictorial techniques. Bolf's basis is a specific school on an estate he himself once attended. First, he carefully passed through and photographed key parts of the building - the entrance, a classroom, the dining hall, the gym, the cloakroom, etc., so that, later, he could work with subtle shifts in these real places in the "shots" - his pictures. Sometimes the perspective is distorted, sometimes there is a slight deviation in the position of the walls, other times elements or motifs from two different places are combined. The main protagonists of these silent dramas are, again, children. Exposed to situations following violent incidents, fires, smoke, injuries, moving over shards of glass from broken windows between the wings of horror scenes full of blood and human body parts. The children are lonely, each rooting for himself, engrossed in a complex situation, at first glance with no links between them. The position of each figure - an actor on stage - is carefully thought out, pre-tested in various versions, proportional relationships, gestures and meanings. The topic is again uncertainty, alienation, ambivalence, obsessive care for their own injuries or the wounds of others as a cure for their own uncertainty and volatility, emotionally tense situations in the timelessness of silence after a menacing disaster, the consequences of which have still to be addressed. These are quite sensitive moments, which, however, take place mainly in the heart of the viewers; they are the product of empathy with the seen and the felt, an emotional bonding with the actors in the depicted scenes. The sense of threat is tangible, but, now the dramatic nocturnal atmosphere of the negatively inverted image has disappeared in favour of surfaces replete with highly sophisticated painting techniques. This set of images, guiding us through seemingly unrelated ground-floor scenes, specific rooms with different purposes, without apparent reason, increases suspense in exactly the same way as a film up to the point where all the pieces of the jigsaw are usually snapped into place to uncover the hidden reason, the riddle generating constantly rising tension, the darkly anticipated unravelling of the plot. It is precisely at this moment that Bolf's paintings deviate from their film archetype. The emotionally expressive narration, the undercurrent of this set of pictures, has no plot, which is replaced only by changes of scene. But there is no unravelling because none of the images captures the moment of denouement, the catharsis, which the artist leaves up to the viewer, a practice that is deeply ingrained into the subconscious with an extremely long subsequent effect.