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Starting Point

Setting form and technique aside, let us focus on content and reaction. Since 2008, Josef Bolf has been recognized as a successful painter. For a country that has never been so pleasant to live in as now, this implies the popularity of a painter whose work features various catastrophes, moments of despair, depressing images of human solitude, and scenes of universal horror. Transcending common taste, he is attracted to horror - his work draws from comics, pop culture and even kitsch. These are strange preconditions for success and a strange face of culture, unless we believe that we most long for that which we lack, even though it may disrupt accepted values. In periods of prosperity, our civilization, like its historical predecessors, has focused on its dark side, morbidly relishing death and decay. Bolf can be placed in the tradition of artists, poets and rock stars who provide us with works of full of anxiety, destruction and perversion. Haunting and poignant, he is attractive. Sometimes he is an emotional blackmailer freely forthright about his methods, and we contentedly give in.

As to the alluring power of Bolf's recent work, his spectators empathize with the artist's urge to dissect his own trauma, not only his personal demons, but those with which many spectators can also identify. Bolf does not so much speak for himself, as he does for an entire generation.

The Danger of Stereotypes

I first saw Josef Bolf's paintings in one of his first studios, on Wenceslas Square, in a disused printing house occupied by a number of artists in the late 1990s. With dust, black walls, sloppy paint pots and stacks of paintings in various stages of completion or demise, Josef's studio was more chaotic than the others. The prematurely graying artist spoke in muted tones, and seemed similar to the overgrown creatures in his own drawings. Although word-of-mouth had pegged him as a self-destructive melancholic, he beamed as he showed me his paintings, always curious to observe my reactions. He pulled out his painted plastic tablecloth works - already distinguished as among the most outstanding works of Czech contemporary painting - that had been carelessly folded together and tossed somewhere in the corner. Unfolding the work, the painter started to make excuses; in fact he didn't remember in what condition they were in, they might be quite charred, he apologized.

It was like in a bad film. The cliché of the doomed artist, however, was only partly attributable to Bolf's own actions. The building was in a critical condition long before he moved in. The charred paintings were not the result of any fit of madness or artistic doubt, but of a recent fire at the Richter Villa at Prague Castle, where they had been exhibited. Bolf's later studios were marked mostly by a rigorous approach. Regardless of their size, he was always able to fill them with new pictures. Clearly, apart from painting, there is little else that is of such importance to him.

Very little has changed in Josef Bolf's works over the past decade - there has been no dramatic development in his art form. He knew where he was going early on, even though he sometimes adopts external impulses from new models or technical and material painting possibilities. He sometimes experiments with other media and art forms, but he doesn't invent much. His subject matter has changed even less - his world is always depressed. He forms shades of hopelessness or effectively invokes horror. No matter how enduring and unbearable it may seem, his work's general mood is permanently dark and desperate.

Tasteless Mutations

As Ján Mančuška has written and said in interviews, Bolf's success began back in school. I do not know exactly what he meant by that. It might have been some murmur among close friends, but certainly not because of Bolf's mass popularity. Since childhood, people would praise him for his drawings and give him crayons. He drew animals for the most part. He studied at a secondary art school and then was accepted to the Academy of Fine Arts in Jiří Načeradský's studio. There he worked on large figures in dramatic poses with existential gestures. Later he moved on to the studio of Vladimír Kokolia; and then to study under Vladimír Skrepl, whose studio was more open to contemporary art discourse.

Bolf's school work was unhappily split into drawing and painting and only much later did he find out how to connect the two (he did this simply by drawing paintings). He benefited from the work on collages and assemblages that he was making at that time; indeed, he made hundreds of

them. He was certainly the most emotional of the *Bezhlavý jezdec* (Headless Rider) artist group, founded in 1997.

His "Tasteless Mutations" series from 1998 may have seemed quite tasteless at the time. People accustomed to the elegant abstraction of Ivan Vosecký or Petr Pastrňák could consider Bolf's flat background and coloring to be only a feeble imitation, or perhaps parody. For Bolf, however, it was not about intuitive, content-rid design and happy colors. It also was not his intention to limit himself *vis-à-vis* the period's painting. In his abstract expression he was preoccupied with unhealthy organic shapes and their poisonous proliferation, and more generally with the hidden meanings of the visual message. To apply paint, he borrowed an airbrush from Tomáš Vaněk, or used a squirt gun. Bolf was attracted by the clash and juxtaposition of different painting approaches: careless template painting and quick spray, the collation of comics-like figures on an abstract background, or even real yarn pompoms affixed to the canvas. Sophisticated abstraction was led to the very edge of tastelessness, as if somebody were to realize František Kupka's "Solo of a Brown Line" via artistic lines on a gym floor.

Polyethylene Breakthrough

In 1999, Bolf started to paint on polyethylene plastic tablecloths as an approach connected with his interest in installations based on used materials and waste. The tablecloth paintings look as if Bolf was trying to unlearn all that he was taught at the Academy. He returned to scrappy pencil cases, drunken inscriptions on bus stops, figures inspired by children's comic-books and desperate messages scratched out in elevators. The decorative background of the tablecloth, the most banal possible undercoat, served Bolf's organic forms which resembled the motifs from "Tasteless Mutations". These increasingly approximated real body organs or artless bodies and strange figures. Onto such "painting" layers, he applied drawings and writings reflecting his periodical frustration with life. Many of them are in the form of a diary, some containing memories of childhood, and children's book illustrations, appearing as narcotic visions and unnatural creatures. A painting on blue plastic, entitled "You Look Like Me," is like a depressed masochist's notice board that records his most obtrusive visions, paranoid speculations, and bits of overheard conversation. Logically, but perhaps purely accidentally, the work was finished only after the space was completely filled up.

The drawings have the concise, yet distinctive hand of an artist who works with no pre-conceived plan, but rather is inspired by what simply emerges from his pencil or pen. He uses automatism, which enables him to overcome restraints and to achieve self-reflection. Bolf draws caricatures, grotesque animals endowed with human qualities, or characters combining human and animal features. There is the sweet and naïve Pako, with his elephant head; girls with fox or cat faces; strange characters with multiple faces, heads and bodies expressing internal pressure by way of clouds spewing steam. More than traditional gallery art, his pieces resemble the chaotic results of personal therapy.

It is through these plastic polyethylene and collage techniques that Bolf discovered a straightforward way of telling a story with his paintings, without having to use methods of traditional narrative painting. Yet they connect several aspects of Bolf's work: drawing, painting, text, a radio play attempt, and assemblage from secondary materials.

Comics

"Yeah, and sometimes I have dreams, where I am a horrible monster and chase little children ... Well ...pretty often... But it doesn't matter... Maybe next time ... though... it's quite fine," admits Pako, the main character in Bolf's comic-book "Chtěl bych sbírat kousky tvého srdce, až ti jednou pro někoho pukne" (I would like to collect the pieces of your heart, after it has been broken by someone). From his speech, it is not clear if the chase is enjoyed only by the monster or by the little children as well. The chase, in and of itself, may be quite pleasurable.

Comics enchanted Bolf long before he realized the importance that they would play in his future work. An avid reader of *Pif* magazine as a child, he closely followed the comics of "Rahan" and "Ztracená výprava" (The Lost Expedition). Czechoslovakia was not rich in the genre during the 1970s and '80s - in contrast to the West where they were everywhere - and during the normalization period in socialist Czechoslovakia, they really had to be sought out. But even before this time, several children's books affected Bolf so strongly that he speaks of their substantial influence on his aesthetics to this day: Helena Zmatlíková's illustrations in "Honzíkova cesta" (Johnny's Journey), with characters whose heads were so large and top-heavy that they threatened to unbalance the body, snap at the neck and smash to the ground. There was also the touching and ugly outsider, Pinocchio, and the ghostly mechanical beings of Květa Pacovská. These visions lurked, submerged in Bolf's memory, only to suddenly resurface much later in his artwork.

Bolf's comics, whether or not this is the artist's intention, are a mere play on comics, a rendering of the comic-strip process. He started to write "I would like to collect the pieces of your heart, after it has been broken by someone" sometime after he made the painted plastic tablecloth works. It combines personal experiences with reactions to various popular culture genres. His narrative is built on the intersection of the real world and a parallel reality. It is like the imaginings of someone, high on marijuana and beer, who has been watching TV continuously for eight hours until all the films begin to blend together into one. The comic-strip contains a classic bird's eye view of an American city and a scene from a Prague pub. The story is set in a dystopian future, with an excellent episode about an idealistic leftist's visit to a Czech suburb. Its atmosphere resembles films such as "The Matrix", "The Fifth Element", and also the totalitarian "Vzpouza mozku" (Revolt of The Brains). Among the various characters we can recognize is one resembling Lisa Simpson, or perverts from David Lynch films, as well as the degenerate Pinda from the Czech comics' series "Čtyřlístek" (Four-Leaf Clover), who becomes a killer.

Midway through the story, the sci-fi elements disappear, along with the linear comic strip format. We are taken beyond the story border and follow loosely connected drawings in an open composition. The main character is overwhelmed by how much love, and pure existence, can hurt. He is a person honestly paralyzed by what is happening to him. The pain is so strong that he blows his own brain out into a new dimension. He appears on the way between life and death, encountering various guides, which all finally climaxes into a kind of personal apocalypse.

As a by-product, Bolf created several paintings depicting the main characters from these comics. The inconclusive ending of the comics, connected with his personal crisis at the time, was followed a few years later by a project called "The Incredible Story," which was published in installments in *Umělec* magazine. Though the work is presented as a comic-strip about a journey through space, it is in fact a free sequence of drawings supplemented by text. It is like a manual for a person coming to terms with depression, psychic illness, or the consequences of drug use, which metaphorically also provides travel between parallel spaces. The ending points towards appeasement, however, nightmares from the past remain.

Faces

After his initial work with comics, Bolf discontinued working with longer narratives that combined drawing and text. In fact, he did not continue with anything at all. If there ever was a break in his work, it was at this moment. At the outset of the millennium, he observed his colleagues moving away from traditional art forms and towards conceptual art. He, however, lacked this impulse. Rather than following the artistic avant-garde, he gravitated to a subculture associated with Rock music and Street art and sought new ground for his artistic expression by returning to drawing. Over the course of the next several years, he began drawing comics-book type characters that could be divided into several categories according to format, form and time. These portraits - faces - which border between living toys, humans, and animals, look like standby characters for some new comic-strip story, a cast of actors and extras in a horror/love story about mutated animals or humans. Combinations referencing toys, teenage culture and its cruelty, idle depressions, physical handicaps, and autobiographical trauma are all intertwined to craft a narrative field that serves him to the present day.

Bolf's drawings, during this period, are intentionally as primitive and straightforward as possible while still retaining forms that capture specific personalities. He made a gallery of characters (the gallery feeling was reinforced by repeated installations whereby the drawings covered the walls from top to bottom) that evoke both feelings of sympathy and aversion: their eyes bulge, their heads are covered with cuts and sores, and others carry the self-satisfied smiles of losers unaware of their wretchedness. We find furry creatures lurking in the darkness with wild and aggressive beasts; however, for the most part, they are young creatures, many with over-sized heads and eyes arousing tenderness, who are somehow aged, abused and stripped of their innocence - as if created by a children's book illustrator under the influence of Larry Clark's and Harmony Korine's films. In addition to the pure "portrait" drawings from this period, we also find in Bolf's work scenes from a melancholic and damaged dog's journey into space, and other sketched-out stories. These reflect Bolf's fascination with sci-fi films and literature, as seen in the sinister and silent atmosphere of his illustrations for the "Vlak do pekla" (Train to Hell) anthology from 1976. Outer space lends a mood of total solitude to his drawings - the interstellar vacuum embodies distance from home and other living beings. Mostly depicting characters in moments of emotional distress, these drawings are immersed in intensive sorrow and solitude - potential interactions are doomed to absolute alienation, but at the same time there is a profound need for communication for the purpose of self-discovery.

Abstract and Signs

The outset of the 21st century in Czech art is noted not only for the onset of conceptual art, but also for objective painting. Bolf has been more oriented towards manifestations of various subcultures that have no ambition in the art world; those which sincerely reflect the emotional states of their creators as opposed to up-to-date creative trends. He has at times even mocked the elements of the fashionably creative language, and it can be said that he is completely against novelties. His approach recalls the drawings and texts of David Shrigley- they do not go beyond the form of a simple pub scribble, preserving the possibility of openly commenting on the art world.

A far echo to Bolf's comic-strip period can be seen in the short interval of abstract paintings made in 2004, which were preceded by paintings containing nothing more than shapes evoking empty text bubbles from comic books along with bubbles or comic characters in various stages of birth. The direct impulse for this wave of abstract works from 2004 came out of the material he had at hand at the time - self-adhesive plastic film. He could draw on it, cut out various shapes and stick them onto the canvas or board, and also paint the surface using a solution of alcohol and shellac - he clustered the properties of mainly synthetic materials into a single chemical composition. References to the human figures were nowhere to be found. The backgrounds of the paintings evoke biological shapes similar to those already seen in "Tasteless Mutations," but these are overlapped with a plastic layer of drooping "sausage-like" lines. The painted shapes and forms look like hair-covered intestines, squirmy blood-filled sausages filled with toxic chemical colors - clearly an intentional reference to the organs of the body. Bolf's hand let itself be led by its own volition, which, just like the hands of graffiti artists, tends to plump, membrane-like, continuous shapes. What we see inside them depends how we are made up internally: three-dimensional lettering, severed insect legs, spare parts for comic-book characters, inflatable dummy ejaculations, phosphorescent outer-space excrements...

The surface of the canvas is fully loaded with an "all-over" composition. This might be the result of preliminary layouts, but especially the intuitive need to mindlessly fill the given format from edge to edge. There is a shared trait with Pollack's drip technique in these paintings - the vague belief, or rather hope, that through automatism we can express the deepest layers of the human psyche. Here, ambiguity is the answer to the complexity of life. We are looking only at a tiny slice of an infinitely thriving tissue, a detail of a complicated and elegant body, but we know nothing of its complete form or even character.

Bolf had a lot of plastic self-adhesive film and continued to use it for the series of his long horizontal paintings entitled "Signs". Inspired by music - or at least they appear as if they were - song titles or album names and slogans the author heard in passing on *Radio1*. These are not optimistic songs, but dark opuses by bands considered by many the cause of the increasing suicide rate among youth. The graffiti font resembles inflated balloons, violently twisted into the shapes of letters that threaten to pop at any second; they then transform into animal heads that, due to unknown internal pressures, are threatened by the same.

Girls with Skulls

Following his abstract intermezzo, Bolf returned to figural compositions. Already in 2004, he began applying the plumpness and rotundity of the previous works onto scenes painted with a spray gun. The color pink played a very important role and the size of the canvases had also increased. The simple shape of plump Fifinka, lying curled up on the ground, is over two meters wide, and her soft flesh with its raw pink, sensitive skin fills up most of the canvas. The gun in her mouth is so stylized that one could mistake it for an inhalator or another medical device. She could be demonstrating a way to commit suicide, or an unusual application of the feeding instinct, the irresistible and addictive longing for death.

A formal shift can also be found in his next cycle of works, "Suicide Girls." Here we see a conscious return to portrayal the mutated human body. Some of the paintings even required him to work with a model due to their anatomical complexity. The positioning and spatial orientation of the bodies, seemingly serve to express the symbolic meaning of a self-destructive character. The way in which the girls with skulls (instead of faces) point their guns at each other has a beauty and elegance embodied in the shape of the gesture itself. Skulls, death, devil horns, move from personal confessions to the possibility of mere decorative elements.

We have already mentioned the importance of the stylistic impulses that Bolf appropriates from comics, books, music and film. He is an artist formed by surfing the internet, able to connect seemingly "unpatchable" elements. Petty formal mistakes combined with shifts in meaning create interesting frictions. World subcultures behave alike - girls in Japan dress up in Victorian era

dresses. The symbolism of motorcycle gangs does not differ whether you are in Australia or Ukraine, each simply uses the specific local mythology of power and independence. Universal elements of horror culture are adapted to one's needs according to locality. The shape of the Suicide Girls' pistols, or the box-shaped cars (first appearing in Bolf's paintings during this period), have their origin in the computer game "Return to Castle Wolfenstein" and its simplified, somewhat unreal perspective.

Witches

I think something snapped in Bolf at the beginning of 2005. Over a period of just a few months, he managed to turn out dozens of paintings of new and ever deepening power. Not only were they large works, but their composition was also much more involved, and even though there are so many, it seems apparent that he must have spent a long time working on each one. His source now was not only pop culture, but also the artistic tradition in painting - thus the result is somewhat more traditional. What now had become much more powerful, however, was the dark atmosphere and even the artistically given narration. A new painting concept can be found in four untitled paintings, which together form one entity. According to the artist, he first began to distribute his favored organic abstract shapes onto the canvas. At a certain phase, though, he decided that he would paint expressive eyes, noses and mouths into the ovals and circles. The vague backgrounds, where his figures had previously floated, became landscapes. Instead of indistinct shapes, we now saw definite objects and details, though perhaps in unusual forms: a two headed snake with dog heads, a fire-breathing dragon, a coffin and a ritual stake set on fire. Everything including the sun and the moon is alive and interconnected into one whole.

When interpreting Bolf's paintings, it is important not to forget that his mind is most of the time intoxicated with music. It is a changing but continuous entourage that lends even common situations a completely different meaning. Bolf listens to Indie-rock, Avant-garde metal - bands linked to specific subcultures. He connects the four-part painting with the song "There Is Always Room on the Broom", by the New York band the Liars. It comes from a record inspired by witchcraft and was influenced by the band's stay in a secluded rural part of New Jersey. Josef Bolf found himself in a similar setting when painting while listening to the Liars. He drove out to an atelier in Únětice, a village near Prague, a place deserted at night and surrounded by forests, where the theme of witchcraft holds a special meaning. Coming out with witchcraft at the beginning of the twenty-first century might seem like a strange anarchism, yet the phenomenon of witchcraft is not a foreign product but a creation of our own culture. It embodies our own dark irrationality as well as the dark methods of fighting it. Mystics and witch props can be thought of as a sign of avoiding a positive perception of the world, however, today, if we want to discover any spiritual values then all that is left is the negative spectrum connected with fear and terror. Although apparently improbable, films like "The Blair Witch Project" succeeded in creating an authentic feeling of dread and have been enthusiastically received by movie-goers. Bolf cleaned up his expressionist techniques and made them much simpler in a new series of large scale drawings of acrylic paint on paper. His figures, combining human and animal elements, are graced with an elegant monumentality. Bolf's collage of styles gained one more element - the figures lined up next to each other evoke Roman fresco paintings. But rather than Christian themes, they bring forth symbolic or even decadent scenes: deathlike girls, seated on forest deer with human faces, and a black forest hiding mysterious rituals of satanic heretics.

Everyone You Love Will One Day Die

This was the title of Bolf's work presented at the 2005 *Jindřich Chaloupecký Award* exhibition held at the Prague City Gallery in the Municipal Library in Prague. He exhibited an installation made up of twenty drawings, four three-meter paintings, a life-size stuffed figure, and a couple of hundred wool pompons he had made himself. The installation and the paintings captivated the viewers at first sight with their ambitious technical elaboration and possibilities for interpretation. Bolf added a combination of paintbrush, airbrush, and stencil work to the basic layout of the paintings. The base color is pink with expressive black shadowing, thus creating an apprehensive, twilight filled atmosphere, bred with a psychedelic color scheme and dusted with black soot, as if on a bad trip. Perhaps this is how the Hippie artist Peter Max would have painted them if he'd run out of anti-depressants. Pink human-like dogs melancholically move through a post apocalyptic world where there is no escape from their dark fate. On their travels, Bolf demonstrates the pathological trait of the human psyche that is always able to see everything through bloodshot eyes. Paintings of futile wanderings depict closely the post socialistic hangover from a world suddenly opened up. You can sit in a car and go anywhere you wish: to a half secluded disco in the closest

regional town; to forsaken mountains, which you will reach just as the sun rises; to Germany, unless you run out of gas far from the last gas station. But efforts to escape one's own self lead nowhere. You might as well put the pedal to the metal and crash head first into the nearest tree or a river, maybe even light the car on fire to just make sure and then blow out your brains. But death will not change a thing; it is not the end, just a shift of the human tragedy into the twilight of the underworld. A follow-up to the inconclusive atmosphere of the series "Everyone You Love Will One Day Die" can be found in the drawings exhibited at the Moravian Gallery in Brno in the exhibition entitled "Death Is Not The End" (the title again is a reference to music). Here Bolf puts to use an excess of themes and figural types that did not make it into the previous paintings for lack of space. A hurried and, unlike in the previous paintings, uncomplicated brush-stroke technique produces a raw and urgent impression - Bolf's defense against sliding toward academism. The painting "In the Forest", from 2006, which closes up the previous year's work, is exactly what we could call Psychedelic Academism. The well balanced composition and color consistency of the paintings, the larger than life figures flowing from an indistinct mythology, this all evokes a dark variation on the end of the nineteenth century salon painting. Bolf has achieved a combination of the high and the low - pop culture with avant-garde ambition. The figures could be characters from an animated series but the painting itself looks like something by Vojtěch Hynais, it has the atmosphere of Josef Váchal's woodcarvings and we can even imagine it as a cover of a rock album. Bolf proved, by intuitively building a collage of styles and meanings, that all these expressions are akin both in form and meaning.

A special case is the "Pink Eyes" series, which originated in two parts. In 2001, Bolf was experimenting with painting on velvet surfaces; he was trying to paint on the velvet, but because he felt the need to apply the colors in thick layers, which wasn't working as he wanted, these experiments reached a dead end. He later returned to the velvet paintings in 2007, and this time he began drawing figures onto the layers of paint, this resulting in some kind of remixed painting. He then applied another layer to the base underlay years later. This conscious situation of returning to an older artwork might be the cause that even the figural layers evoke a return to Bolf's characters and motifs of the past five years.

Soft and Pink

Josef Bolf was born in 1971. This means he grew up in the bleak period of 1970s and '80s. Of course, at the time, he could not know these were unhappy times, but he might have sensed it. It was all he knew and he was just graduating from high school when it came to an abrupt end. Today, two decades have passed since 1989 - a whole generation. Bolf's contemporaries have never really woken up from the shock that they can now speak openly about their lives, about their childhoods, nurtured in an era at the height of *Husákism*. A sea of opportunities have since opened up for them, but they had to acknowledge that their childhood had been an abnormality. This generation was so taken aback by this life lesson that they mostly preferred to keep silent about it.

What makes Bolf's paintings so understandable is not their authenticity, or even the autobiographical aspect of the depressive motifs, but their ability to speak about generational frustrations in a common language. Success, adventure, love, and spiritual enrichment are all within the reach of this generation, but they are still unreachable. There is no objective force that holds this generation back from reaching these goals. There is no longer anyone to blame - liberalism states that all of our failures are our own fault. Success is slipping further and further away from us. Adventure had been degraded to tourism, silly fun or drug addiction, love turns into mechanical sex, which in turn becomes impotence. And spirituality is the most banal category of the present times.

The paintings from the "Soft and Pink" series are like a dictionary of the traumas of this generation. For the first time, explicit references to the environment in which we live appear - references to architecture and to the objects that surround us. In each painting, we find ourselves in the most terrifying places and in the most depressing situations that our contemporary consumer society has to offer: a cadaverous supermarket; the emptiness of rational and barren architecture; the loneliness of the internet world. This is where history ends. We can compete in spending money, the most ambitious of us can continue in the race for individual freedom, which, once reached, leads to deadening passivity. Nothing has to be done anymore. What are we left with apart from insincere and absurd self-destructive games? Logically, the themes of culture, more and more often, become failure, pain, boredom and terror. This does not come from the outside but directly from us satiated individuals, endangered by nothing, taken aback by our own well-being. We listen to what is coming out of ourselves, and the things we can distinguish most of all are the sounds of horror. We exaggerate our own sick perverted thoughts, we long for longing, or at least fear. The word on the street is that these could pull us out of our weariness. The interior scene from the

painting "At Home" can be read as a horror version of Richard Hamilton's iconic Pop Art collage "Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing" from 1958. We feel as if we are in a negative version of the world, and not only because of the dominance of black. Day is redeemed by night; everything here is familiar only unusually twisted. The furniture is no longer new; it bears the marks of various accidents and crimes. The world of technical engineering and leisure time has become transformed into a nightmare, purchased goods into horrifying props controlled by a nameless robot without a face, flames burning behind our windows.

Bolf used his original scratch painting technique for the first time in this series. In this technique, Bolf first covers the canvas with a base layer of tinted wax, and then with a second layer of black ink onto which he then scratches out the drawings and images, through which the original - most often pink - base-layer shines through. He himself says that he adapted this technique from what he had learned in elementary school. The resulting dark, gleaming artworks find themselves at the border between drawing and painting. Many defects and unexpected mistakes, which the artist himself hopes for, happen when scratching the black layer with knives and sharp tools, supplying the result with a unique urgency.

Rooms and Accidents

The power of simple artistic lines led Bolf to depicting perspective architecture and interiors repeatedly. The cycle "Rooms", though painted rather than scratched, share a similar type of space: most frequently closed spaces in which the characters hide from the outside world, while at the same time being imprisoned by them. The surfaces of the walls and furniture are sharp as knives, ready to slice the inhabitants' soft bodies, and restricting their movements. Bolf's depiction of the conflict between the figures and their limited space is existential, and symbolic in a Central European manner, but the reference, again, is not only exclusive to this region. Even Gregor Samsa was essentially just an *otaku*, whose subconscious longing to never leave the room earned him an unwished for physical transformation. Bolf's characters find their last refuge in their rooms. The familiar furniture and its surroundings are disturbed only by the unpredictability behind the window and television screens - both are on the same level of unreality.

Everyone who owns a television knows that calming sense of security it provides. Each and every evening, millions of people attentively gaze at the flooded cellars of more than twenty families, or a car hugging a tree by the highway with everyone inside dead. Petty catastrophes are sometimes substituted by a great one - perhaps some unimaginable threat: mosquitoes carrying malaria or madmen putting razors in baby food. It is as if our civilization always requires new reasons to live in fear, constantly looking for scenarios of possible catastrophes. We are keen observers of distant misfortunes, comforted with a passing sense of security brought by the daily news.

Bolf's paintings of accidents and crashes once again use the scratch painting technique. The city setting is underlined - a complicated world of architecture and engineering, leaving feelings of claustrophobia in its inhabitants. It threatens to smash anyone not well hidden inside their rooms, cars or trains. Bolf puts uncertain motifs and figures he has been consistently returning to in the past years next to each other: puddles of unknown liquids on the floor; grown children in school uniforms and in hoods made of buffalo heads; inconspicuous skull and bone symbols; a girl who doesn't know what to do with a severed animal head sitting on her lap. Similar images do not have definite meanings. The child-heroes might appear here as an expression of a longing to relinquish responsibility, or an impulse to return to old traumas. The accidents' situations portray adult responsibility suddenly laid at the feet of child actors. They have to deal with situations that they are completely unprepared for. Twisted car wrecks and soaring flames contrast with the right angles and rationality of the pre-accident world - they are monuments of chaos and unpredictability. The child victims experience an intense time of dramatic moments that seem to take place in slow motion. Every detail of what they witness is carved into their minds - strange phantom-like situations with a significance they cannot understand.

In addition to the scratch paintings, Bolf still regularly returns to traditional painting. "What if you could travel back in time and change all these hours of pain into something better?" - This series of paintings directly references the American cult film "Donnie Darko." A sad young man with mental problems is being constantly followed by a giant rabbit. It brings him troubling news about the future of the world, which really comes about at the end. This end-of-the-world theme, in its visual form, fit so well into Bolf's aesthetic that we could hardly speak of inspiration but rather a coincidental connection and overlapping of two art worlds, though Bolf was surely inspired by the perspective of the camera, the details of the heroes and the dramaturgy of the scene's lighting in the movie. The question suggested by the long title of this series refers to another theme from

Donnie Darko that resonated through Bolf's own mind - is there a way to erase the time spent suffering, is there a way to return to the past and live life differently, better?

The formal shape of Bolf's paintings settled on realistic painting, revealing a fan's continuing obsession with certain kinds of marginal fine arts: Art brut, Manga and various authors' work presented by the magazine *Juxtapoz*. But similar intrusions only revise Bolf's own artistic language. Its form and its eventual modifications are not established by an impulse for playful and aimless versatility, but by a need to express the same tale of human ruin as emotionally as possible.

The well known characters of girls and boys in school uniforms from the skull and bones private school have been transferred to the traditionally painted cycle "Bad Side". They attempt to preserve the fiction of normality, and act as if nothing has happened, but the world around them certainly is not alright. The housing estates are crawling with hairy creatures with human faces, bringing to mind scenes from the film "Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger". Animal-head hoods are worn as a symbol of an undefined stigma. They are cut, bleeding and wounded, their various wounds often opening up again in times of mental strain. It seems as if they are more concerned that they will get blood on them, than by the wounds themselves. Their biggest fear is that they will never again be happy.

Infants vs. Robots

It is logical that a dying society, where the number of senior citizens is rising at an astronomical rate, is obsessed with youth and children. People want to be young for as long as possible, adults dressing in clothing belonging to a completely different generation. Children are a special interest group, given certain privileges while still depending on a higher authority. They have limited options to express their own will.

The way Bolf uses his child-like characters in his paintings might be unappealing to some. Bolf shares his fascination with the children's world and its shift into a traumatizing or even a horrific form with other personalities who move between street and fine art, such as Yoshimoto Nara or Mark Ryden. The reasons for this fascination lie in personal and historical conditions. For Bolf's generation in the Czech Republic, any positive nostalgia about their childhood would be perverse. If he continues to return to his childhood, it is only as an anti-social, frightened teenager in the midst of uncontrollable forces. He grew up in the Cold War period, with memories of the euphemistic battle for peace escalated by the fear of nuclear war buried somewhere deep inside of him. He lived, alongside thousands of other children, aware of the fact that the world around them can be destroyed, with such ease, in a matter of a few moments. He even participated at school in confused training drills of how to act during a nuclear Armageddon. This exceeded the wildest fantasies of science fiction literature. The irresolvable catastrophes, that the children in Bolf's paintings live through, are a reflection of these traumatic memories - a reliving of suppressed perceptions about the end of the world. Again, this was not only a Czech experience. Other historical and cultural contexts have very similar outputs. A direct inspiration for Bolf's "Infants vs. Robots" was the Japanese horror comics "Drifting Classroom". This is a story of children whose school was suddenly ripped out from its usual world and thrust into some dangerous parallel universe. Bolf stylizes his school-children as uniformed, clean-cut private school students. But the battles between the children and the cylindrical robots take place in the setting of a typical Czech residential elementary school - an environment derived from the reality of Prague's *Jižní město* (South City), a housing development on the outskirts of the city. The children won this battle, with the disarmed robots burning with cold flames. The exhausted winners look after their wounded and bandage their wounds. Their serious faces suggest that the next battle will not be as easy. This sci-fi set in an intimate place could reference the Beslan School tragedy, or a different irrational explosion of violence against children. But the aggressor is missing; all we see are the victims. Bolf's characters are most afraid that someone else will unexpectedly hurt them, thus they will often rather wound themselves just to end the insecurity and the wait. To feel something they must cut themselves, just a little in the direction of the veins. Nothing really hurts, but still there is blood. There is the option to set oneself on fire demonstrating the need to engage, otherwise it does not really burn.

Great Expectations

Rarely is Prague the subject of utopian visions. On the contrary, the city inspires most of its artists toward dystopian visions of ruin. The concrete housing developments of the 1970s partially form the background of Bolf's paintings, but not for the purposes of political or social commentary; it is just that this is where he grew up and still lives - it is a place he knows by heart. These residential areas, in 2008, are not a homogenous space but an unusual mixture of historical layers.

Prefabrication, unification and an open urban plan reference the architectural avant-garde; the realization, however, references the miasma of the communist era. Cars by foreign manufacturers are parked on these streets and clothing with fashionable labels hang-out to dry on the narrow balconies. Behind these concrete houses is where the hip-hop youth gather, the shopping mall belongs to an international corporation and everything is plastered over with layers of advertisements. A psychedelic effect spontaneously creates itself in this clash of various symbols - a materialization of nightmares of diverse generations. Over the last couple of years, Bolf has been taking photos of various surroundings, which he then transposes into his paintings; in particular we find the dark corners of the block housing areas - subway and bus entrances, highway overpasses, garbage can pens, a cemetery. These are no longer only sets where the battles between "Infants and Robots" take place. Those who now flock these lands are more reminiscent of war veterans of a fight with themselves rather than an external enemy.

In his latest works, Bolf has shifted from the housing estates to the place and time of the apartments in the old city - with interiors dominated by heavy dark furniture, paintings of appropriate sizes, bookshelves and tilting shelves. The archetype of the living room evokes illustrations from children's books of the 1960s or their latter adaptations by Russian conceptual artists. The ordinary familiar place of everyday life here is filled with the silent terror of unknown tragedies, which left spilled blood and severed heads as trails. Bolf then retreated from the living rooms, into the corridors and hallways. He created a series of views, adapting the film shot, looking down hallways which narrow in perspective. The alcoves and doors on the sides of the corridors, which we have to walk through, hide unknown surprises or aggressors. We know that the corridor is the setting of a bloody drama. What we don't know is if it has already taken place, or if it will happen when we are just passing through it. Bolf uses a horror technique implying that the worst is hidden around the corner, just waiting for us to pass by.

He thinks through and produces situations that his characters have to contend with. In addition to the influence of comics and illustrations, Bolf's approach also has something of the stage setting, or a cinematic character. Still, he didn't shoot his first film "The Living Room" until 2008, which picks up on his previous work with a radio and comic books. Not only does the film let him work with movement and sound, but it primarily allows him to tell a tale over time. We could simply say that "The Living Room" is a marionette-puppet film based on the motifs from his summer 2008 paintings - a dark stage with a background of lit-up paintings, in the middle of which a boy and girl move back and forth between a couple of props. Here, the protagonists also have to deal with the existence of a severed animal head that appears on their table, as is the case in many of Bolf's paintings from the past three years. The bloody head could be evidence of some crime, which it is necessary to conceal. It is not certain that the crime has been committed by the boy and girl, or if they might not even be its victims. Hiding the evidence is in fact a symbol of suppressing and displacing your own mental wounds. As the loop of the story shows, these wounds will return in one form or another, we can't just simply tuck them away and hope that they will heal themselves.

Burst Pipes

Bolf's painting is expressive, decadent, and imaginative, with a strong focus on the scenario and narrative, employing stylized collage and pastiche and whatever else it takes to achieve the strongest emotional effect. He is not afraid of simple and effective comparisons and their seemingly needless repetition and apposition. In his works from the "Burst Pipes" series, we find ourselves in the subterranean rooms of an apartment block in the middle of an emergency situation. A child stands in front of burst pipes gushing forth water. Seemingly oblivious to the domestic crisis, the child is fixated on the streams of blood pouring forth from its own wrists. This fascination with the copious and decorative streams of blood becomes the central motif in Bolf's series of ceramic figurines of schoolchildren with slashed wrists, which were made around the same time as these paintings. The transparent parallel between the broken pipes and the living figures is not a result of the author's lack of skill, but his redundancies open up room for an analysis of its effect. Why is it that this kind of improbable scene from the apartment block cellar can carry such a strong emotional impact? The embellished combination of injuries and kitschy tears also plays a similar function in Bolf's work. We find them emotionally touching and disturbing at the same time.

Meanwhile, we can't expect a happy-end. Josef Bolf continues to ingeniously come up with new scenes of ruin and horrors that neither he, nor the viewer, will be able to avert. The artist never actually gives us any direct indication of what caused the accidents and disasters portrayed in his works. They seem to stem from a combination of apprehensions from past, from the future, and from the collapse of the world as we know it today. As it has already been noted, the evoked fear

and catastrophic situations could be a part of a need for some personal or collective therapy. But horror doesn't need to have some neatly defined purpose, in the same way that real disasters do not need to have a clear cause, or even culprit. Horror can simply be incomprehensibly noble and beautiful in and of itself. Perhaps this can best be seen in Bolf's drawings, which were created as preliminary studies to his paintings. His simple sketches from the 1990s have transformed into finished works that now stand on their own. Their Poussin-esque elegance and classical restraint makes even their harsh topics attractive. The viewer becomes astonished at the creators ability to externalize his inner world. Art may be imperfect, but it continues to be the most effective way to give shape and form to our thoughts and imagination.