

Agnieszka Maria Wasieczko

THE LIMITS OF IRMINA STAŚ'S PAINTING

Irmina Staś has always been interested in liminal states and the thin line separating life, growth, rebirth, and thriving from death, transience, atrophy, and decay. She has been attracted by the ephemeral and impermanent qualities of life and a sense of uncertainty about being in the world, resulting in an enchantment with corporality and a premonition of its end. Narrating about the liminal, Staś affirms life and the diversity of the world, consisting, as it does, of an infinite number of organisms, remaining in constant flux. As she admits, she has always been impressed with the “heterogeneity and richness of organic forms, as well as their constant transformation and transitoriness”.¹ Fascinated with the inner world and the phenomenon of cyclicity, she explores nature, painting imaginary plant and animal tissues. The works from the *Organisms* series (2012) were “biological landscapes”, numbered according to the order of their making.² They consisted of bones, flesh, blood corpuscles, hair, leaves, flowers, stalks, or roots, which she had “imported” from various “environments”.³ She looks at them through the prism of personal experiences and feelings, synthesizing elements of the visible reality into more or less simplified forms and abstract concepts, which means that they no longer represent concrete objects, but still retain their echo.

The artist has hidden the mystery of human existence in biological shapes. Karl Jaspers, whose philosophy has informed Staś, has developed the concept of existence entangled in a “web” of relationships, torn by contradictions, antinomies, indecisions, which unfold in confrontation, interdependencies, “on the boundary” of the different forms of existence. The German philosopher, for whom existing, understanding the essence of life, and experiencing “liminal situations” yielding a complete picture of the world and oneself meant one and the same thing, has written that any human being can become a “material for codes”.⁴ According to Jaspers, a “code,” or “cipher,” is a particular “speech,” “script,” or “‘response’ of transcendence to the ‘call’ of existence”,⁵ which means that any product of nature can contain a hidden meaning. Using images, we are able to create an interpretation-requiring “specific speech,” a “cipher language.” The latter – necessarily ambiguous, according to Jaspers – serving to objectivize and communicate the subject’s inner endeavors – is a token of existence and makes manifest the most essential dimension of reality, which for man remains an impenetrable mystery.⁶ This is a concept that Staś has long sought to explore in her works

about a world consisting of structures, tissues, finished objects. That is why she has been developing a universal alphabet of meanings, a symbolic vocabulary that she uses to speak out on existential issues. However, Staś's artistic language has subtly changed. Her *Cross-Sections* are a continuation of *Organisms*, and, at the same time, a "bridge" that has led the artist to the most recent body of work, the *Ornaments* series. The paintings have become simpler in terms of the number, variety, and appearance of the elements represented; today, it is orderly, symmetrical compositions that dominate in her work. She often selects a single synthetic sign, which she multiplies. She has started filling the pictorial space with "cross-sections," that is, halves of stipulated entities. She allows the uniform elements, the symmetrical-axial corpora that have formed an ornament, to enter into various configurations and relationships, to touch, turn, attract, and repel each other, to approach and recede. Some forms seem to remain in a state of perpetual and irreversible division, others in one of temporary partition, and still others to be returning to integral completeness. Their interiors and exteriors interpenetrate. Some body-halves are sealed up, others bear traces of their former scission. This "pattern thinking," evocative of fabric pattern designs, will induce the artist to find a new medium for painting – cloth – and to "expand" it into three-dimensional space.

In her latest works, Staś moves at the intersection of abstraction and figuration. She uses the multiplication of singular elements, painting oils on canvas and watercolors on paper, and sewing large-format textile objects. In them, she arranges a "bodily ornament" with fragments of the human body. Densely arrayed on a flat surface, they resemble wallpaper or textile design patterns. This reference to repetition-based, "design" arts is integral to the concept of the new works. By embracing monumental formats, Staś references mural painting, which has so frequently used ornamentation as a means of expression. Accompanying us for ages, the ornament is considered a decoration of architecture, handicraft objects, or illuminated manuscripts, but Staś is interested in its deeper meaning. Although the concepts of "decorative art," "decoration," or "decorative motif" are semantically close to that of "ornament," and are sometimes used interchangeably, Prof. Wiesław Juszcak argues that they cannot really be equated.⁷ *Décor* denotes handsomeness, decoration, beauty, and grace, while *ornamentum* stands for adornment, equipment, attire, or jewel. An "ornament," therefore, carries greater generic weight than a "decoration," which is added to a thing it

embellishes, while the former is integrally connected with it. *Decoratio* is basically an “embellishment,” unconnected with the word *ornamentum*.⁸ Polish-language dictionaries define “decoration” as an “artistic adornment,” and “ornament” as a “system of repeated decorative signs.” According to a definition quoted by Juszcak, an “abstract quality, resulting from the rejection of the illustrative element and embrace of pure form, is inherent to the ornament. An ornamental motif is usually obtained through a strong stylization of an actually existing form, which, thanks to repeated and proper arrangement, loses its individual character”.⁹ Like art, the ornament can be contained within the bounds of neither “symbolizing” nor “mimetism,” nor reduced to an “abstraction.” The researcher conceives of the ornament as an “emanation of the shape, function, content, and meaning of a thing,” in which a secret message has been encoded. Animal- and plant-world biological motifs, composed into ornaments, have been approached by Staś as a “dictionary of symbols” that yield to particular interpretations. The artist slowly sought a way to simplify her painting language.

In 2016, she started executing the *Bouquets* – conical compositions of bones, tree branches, and leaves, inspired by natural ones, but here simplified to oblong forms. Dramatic expression and compositional affinity suggest a link with Tomasz Tatarczyk’s *Piles*, but in the *Bouquets*, sharp edges have been softened. Besides large-format oils on canvas, Irmina Staś is also an author of watercolors on paper, depicting the natural world in constant fluctuation and transgression. Rendered in delicate, fuzzy tones, forms levitate against a white (neutral) or black (dramatic) background. Confronting each other, partly overlapping, they arrange themselves into constellations and fractals, yielding connecting and disconnecting shared parts. In *Cross-Sections* (2018), Staś has effected a formal simplification, painting shapes familiar from nature, but without representing their details. Reducing the number of elements to halved eggs or cylinders (the “cross-sections”), the artist has focused on exploring their structure and the dialogue they conduct with each other and with their surroundings. Color has become even clearer; in use are yellows, greens, and reds, but also fleshy, near-natural tones. The oval forms have been placed on a white or black background. Executed with rather flatly applied oil paint, they resemble an ornamental textile pattern or a paper cutout collage. Thinking about the composition of her paintings, Staś could have used digital tools, but she has preferred to avoid mechanizing the design process. Instead, she has relied on her intuition,

permitting chance, error, and surprise to play their role as well. Arranged on a uniform background, the egg-shaped forms obscure each other, overlapping. Constructing her canvases with densely packed silhouettes, woven with ornamental forms, Staś seems to be drawing on “fiber art,” which also uses rhythm, repetition, pattern. She arranges similar shapes along the edges of the painting, producing an ornamental, decorative border. The biomorphic forms that the artist shows in profile or from above have something disturbing about them. Reminding us that life and death are inextricably connected, Staś touches upon aspects of both the will and joy of life, and of the fear and resignation to dying, which equates all beings of the organic world. That is perhaps why she has combined the vital colors of her paintings with ambiguous, unsettling forms that don’t let us forget about liminal situations. Sometimes Staś destroys the oblong forms, rupturing the continuity of their contour. She also blurs the open section surfaces; they ooze trickles of paint, like sap or juice, making us think of the dynamics of biological processes and the fragility of life.

Cross-Sections anticipated another series of works, *Ornaments* (developed since 2018), which mark a turn towards reality. Here, thinking about form and color has been combined with attention to ornamental values, where strandiness, recurrence, rhythm, spacing, and scale play the main role. Elongated rectangular formats have helped to make the paintings similar to a frieze, decorated, as if with an ornament, with repeated fragments of the body. Those are, represented in a more or less simplified manner, breasts, fingers, nails, eyes, or teeth. Derived from reality, they gain an attractive appearance. The forms intermesh, flock together, filling empty spaces and building over the background in a delicate structure, a semi-biological tissue. Thus the artist composes her paintings, consisting of multiplied shapes in a white or black pictorial space. Moving away from the literal, she has synthetically shown anatomical details. Variegating the forms and spatial volumes of the represented motifs, she has produced a rich play of tones. The use of glaze has allowed her to combine a whole gamut of lighter and darker shades, to saturate one fragment of a body part and embrighten another. By relinquishing opaque white, Staś has achieved the transparency of watercolor in oil technique, and through the gradation of strongly diluted tones, a rhythmical play, an optical vibration of the motifs. The shapes pulsate, twinkle, flicker. As a result, the artist has brought out an ornamental rhythm of pattern-arranged shapes, which bring to mind decorative embroidery or textile appliqués.

Staś's exploration of her own corporality, her reflection on the organicity of colors and shapes, and multiplication of gender-marked body parts raise questions about a possible feminist subtext of her art, reminiscent of the work of women artists such as Maria Pinińska-Bereś, Alina Szapocznikow, or Erna Rosenstein. Maria Pinińska-Bereś was an author of soft, sensual sculptures made of pink fabric, evoking notions of corporality and eroticism. Alina Szapocznikow, who long suffered from a terminal illness, had developed a unique artistic language focused on bodily issues, particularly pronounced in the series *Stomachs* and *Tumors*. Using colored synthetic resins, Szapocznikow made casts of her own mouth, face, arms, breasts, endeavoring to preserve her own biologicality in the face of a destructive illness. Erna Rosenstein, who was fascinated by the mysteries of nature and its endless transmutations, produced mainly textural, color-pulsating abstractions of organic, whirling, agglutinating and dispersing, almost "exploding" forms. Her embrace of those biological shapes, which she depicted floating in empty space or in cosmic landscapes, was motivated not only by her feminist views and preoccupation with corporality, but also by the surrealist foundation of her art. And it is Erna Rosenstein's attitude that seems to resonate most closely with Staś. The latter says that her own orderly compositions imply notions of identity, mutual attraction and repulsion, relationships and their fragility, precarious living, the need of affection and intimacy, as well as tension between bodies, poles, and genders. The way she contains organic forms within a geometrical composition makes one think of the work of Anni Albers, who created a successful synthesis of a traditional craft – weaving – and the language of modern art. Informed by her painter-teachers – Paul Klee, who studied form and color, and Josef Albers, an abstractionist – she combined an interest in geometry and organic forms. The use of patterns and multiplication of motifs are tropes that also connect Staś's work with the art of Agnes Martin, renowned for her minimalist paintings, marked by delicate pencil lines and washes of translucent paint. Her experiments included biomorphic abstractions as well as compositions of bands and grids.

In 2019, Irmina Staś started a series of disturbing paintings with the motif of multiplied teeth, rendered as "signs" "suspended" in the space of a black background. She took advantage of the anatomical structure of teeth, with their typical irregularity, to make the compositions more dynamic. In selected works, turning the teeth root up, she brought them closer together, placing one between the other. This has produced a rhythmic pattern that seems to be

vibrating in the viewer's eyes. Having made the bands similar to jewellery chains, Staś connotes the DNA chain, which carries the genetic code, in which information about the uniqueness of every living organism on Earth has been recorded. In other compositions, the teeth, arranged quite freely on a black background, resemble artefacts "thrown up" by the ground – the subject of an archaeologist's or anthropologist's scrutiny. Owing to enamel – the hardest tissue in the human organism and the only one that doesn't decay – teeth survive long after we die. The paintings with the tooth motif have been inspired by reflection on the climate crisis, caused by the anthropocentric model of civilization, man's consumerist lifestyle, and his over-exploitation of the natural environment. The artist references the "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12) to express her anxiety about her own and mankind's future in the face of an impending ecological disaster, inevitably leading to the utter destruction of all life on Earth. All that will be left of us then are teeth.

While painting invariably remains the point of departure for Irmina Staś's practice, she has nonetheless made attempts to transgress the limits of the picture, to "spatialize" it and go beyond its bounds, confined by the size of the frame. She argues that its surface doesn't have to be restricted to canvas or paper. In 2016, at the Zachęta Project Room, Staś realized a project called *Metabolism*, where, with the public's active participation, she transferred motifs from her canvas paintings to the space's walls and ceiling. She let their dynamic structure fill all available surfaces, enabling the viewer, both literally and figuratively, to enter the picture. Textile works are the latest result of Irmina Staś's artistic explorations, and an important step in her approach to the discipline practiced. They are in fact, an attempt to find a new language for art. The large-format pieces are prime examples of sartorial art. The artist has used stiff denim, soft cotton, viscose, threads, and a filling used in duvets and pillows. The works resemble mid-sized duvets, but Staś has got them rid of the ballast of the "utilitarian" and "practical," endowing them instead with spatial-haptical qualities. They are fleshy, warm, pleasant to touch, and "dialogue" with the surrounding space. Calling them "soft painterly objects," Staś doesn't let us forget that we are still dealing with painting. Made of cotton scraps, biological, oblong elements have been arranged in rows, in a manner reminiscent of the *Cross-Sections* and bodily *Ornaments* (breasts, fingers, teeth). Staś has shunned literal depiction here, and endowed the compositions with an ornamental-relief look. Before actually sewing the soft pieces, she sketched them in 1:1 scale on paper or canvas. The means of

expression employed, i.e., pure spots (in this case, instead of a brush, applied with pieces of cotton or viscose) and a background (of cotton denim instead of canvas or cardboard), belong inherently to the painterly language. Using sewing threads, Staś reproduced the preliminary drawing on a thick fabric; being sewn-through, it shows outlines of the forms on the reverse as well. Staś, therefore, makes “pictures” and thinks the “painterly” way. Conceiving of her works, she contemplates form and color first, and the necessary tools and materials only later. Though the method has changed, she still practices painting. The latter, she says, is first and foremost a way of thinking rather than a choice of techniques traditionally “appurtenant” to the medium.

Irmina Staś’s “duvets” are highly sensual, ductile; they can be touched, hugged, wrapped around. The textile medium is enticing in its softness, texture, and color, stimulating the imagination, inviting unhurried contemplation. Its uniqueness is determined by its physicality, an undeniable valor. Accompanying people from birth till death and connecting with the immediate surroundings, the textile medium – like a “second skin” – carries also the quality of “intimacy.” Encouraging the viewer to enter into sensual, intimate contact with them, Staś’s works connote the basic needs of warmth, closeness, shelter. In this context, it is worth harkening back to the textile experiments of two women painters from the circle of The Kraków Group [Grupa Krakowska] – Jadwiga Maziarska and Maria Jarema – who have also had an influence on Staś. Maziarska’s oeuvre, spanning painting, photography, and textiles, consists of “cutouts, collages, photo-sketches, paintings, reliefs, objects, creations, sculptures, appliqués, micro- and macro-structures, shapes, frames” arranging themselves in various rhythms and formations.¹⁰ Employing the technique of appliqué, she also used scraps of fabric, and in 1949, at the 1st Exhibition of Modern Art in Cracow, showed two compositions of joined textiles. One resembled a patchwork, the other was comprised of softly cut-out forms. Jarema designed costumes and theater backdrops. In 1956, she made a patchwork curtain for Teatr Cricot 2. The object inspired a contemporary American artist, Sarah Crowner, who in 2012 produced a stage curtain resembling a huge “sewn painting”.¹¹ She had combined large pieces of colored linens, obtaining a geometric patchwork object. Like Irmina Staś, the American has proved that the lesson of painting can be particularly valuable, and the multitude of its formulas and the contexts in which it can function is virtually inexhaustible.

¹ „Niekoniecznie ostatecznie. Irmina Staś interviewed by Kaja Werbanowska,” Kmag, no. 95 (2018/2019), p. 30.

² „Staś i Matyszewski: Grzebiemy w tematach związanych ze śmiercią.” Irmina Staś and Paweł Matyszewski interviewed by Michał Jachuła in connection with their exhibition Digging In at Le Guern Gallery in Warsaw, 2017: <https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/stas-i-matyszewski-grzebiemy-w-tematach-zwiazanychze-smiercia-wywiad>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Karol Michalski, „Karla Jaspersa metafizyka transcendencji. W trzydziestą rocznicę śmierci filozofa,” Edukacja filozoficzna, vol. 29 (Bensheim 2000), p. 351.

⁵ Czesława Piecuch, „Metafizyka egzystencjalna Karla Jaspersa” (Kraków: Universitas, 2011), p. 237-238.

⁶ Janusz Jusiak, „Karl Jaspers”, online article: www.ptta.pl/pef/pdf/j/jaspersk.pdf

⁷ Wiesław Juszcak, „Fragmenty. Szkice z teorii i filozofii sztuki” (Warszawa: ARX REGIA – Ośrodek Wydawniczy Zamku Królewskiego w Warszawie, 1995). Cf. The chapter „Występny ornament”, czyli o napięciach między sztuką a kulturą, p. 151-168.

⁸ Ibid., p. 166.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Barbara Piwowarska, „Atlas wyobrażonego,” in: Jadwiga Maziarska. Atlas wyobrażonego, exh. cat., curator: Barbara Piwowarska (Warsaw: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, 2009), p. 120.

¹¹ Sarah Crouner, *Theater Curtain (after Maria Jarema)*, 2012, color fabric, canvas, 600 x 260 cm, 2 panels, Nordenhake Gallery, Stockholm. The work was first presented in Poland in the exhibition *The Splendor of Textiles*, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 9 March -19 May 2013, curator: Michał Jachuła.